

# The Lay of Imladrien and Tinúvion

April 27, 2008

## 1 Geekster Reflections

### Imladrien Tarathorn Suttankankul

It's been a while since I last heard Gildharain's piping in my dreams. I wonder what's happened because ever since the peace treaty among the Tuatha, I'll hear him at least once or twice a week either in my dreams or in the wind. Vincent and Ivan also reported the same thing. Perhaps the connection between here and the Veil is weakening and it's a hint for us to make our decisions soon or maybe there's something really weird going on. Captain Greywolf and Galka are just as confused and Galka's gone so far as to make a brief trip back to Pelda to see if the Elders can enlighten her. I wonder what Vincent, Ivan, and I will end up choosing and thus end the Calling and the sporadic epidemics of Tehanu Syndrome. Will we spend the rest of our days as mortal colleagues or will we be scattered among our respective kindred or will we all take orthogonal paths that are unlikely to cross again? And will Vincent and I spend the rest of our days together or will our roots and decisions separate us?

I'm a bit worried about Vincent sometimes with the kind of pressure he's under with those two crazy advisers of his. Dr. de Salvo and Dr. Song are reasonable, but I sometimes wonder if Dr. Nunnelley and Dr. Velasquez are pushing him too hard because he is so eager to work hard and learn. I also wonder what kind of academic experiences those two had to be so obsessive with pushing Vincent (and their other students extra hard). I guess they're trying to make their drive in the quest for knowledge a lot more contagious. Their Ghetto Institute of Technology idea is a great one, definitely, and I'm hoping the rest of the country catches on because they really make the physical and quantitative sciences a whole lot more fun and reachable! I guess Captain Greywolf did allude to a few things about both of them when they were younger because she went to school with them. I can't help but notice a bit of sadness and regret from her whenever she talks about Dr. Nunnelley, even if it's obvious that her heart is only for Robby, who's probably a were-bear or something. (Side note: All that hair everywhere's really gross to me but the Captain's a weird one and eats things that even Ivan won't touch.) Apparently some scars never fully heal, but the Captain certainly carries them gracefully! Should I heed her story as a warning or an inspiration to me?

In the meanwhile, I'm just hoping that this batch of samples won't clog up the ICP-MS like it did last time and hopefully Oleg didn't end up using all the helium and argon for analyzing his decaying fungus and athlete's foot skin samples. His project is sound because the post-Rift biogeochemistry did generate some new elements and apparently some new species of various organisms. I remember seeing some strange-looking spikes on the H-NMR

and C13-NMR from preliminary fungal samples, even if they were accidental readings. I guess the best findings are often accidental! I'm also really curious to see what elements are involved in those soil samples I've been taking lately and what's causing a lot of these plants to suddenly grow silvery leaves like the ones I saw in Mag-na-Oige and the ones Vincent and Dr. de Salvo described about Dúnhèasa. They seem to share both organic and inorganic properties as well as quirks that defy everything I've learned up until recently in chemistry and physics. What implications will they have on the biochemistry of the world? Are we going to have to revise the periodic table of the elements? I also should check my computer to see if it finally finished running that genetic algorithm to fit all those parameters into the model that Captain Greywolf and Dr. de Salvo developed for Post-Rift carbon dynamics that incorporates the ICP-MS data. I think we need to go back to simpler models like the ones she was obsessed with when she was younger. Either that or we need to seriously improve on computing technology!

And for some really strange reason, I keep having that dream again, that one of the heavy-set older man with a bow. Sometimes he's dark haired with a recurve bow, sometimes he's fair-haired with a compound bow. Strange thing is, I haven't shot in a while. Who knows what the frequency is going on though. It's really creepy when aspects of my life parallel the Captain's life that closely!

### **Eöl-Tinúvion Vincent Zhong-hua Gahan**

Apparently I'm not alone. The three of us have stopped hearing Gildharain's piping. For a while I thought maybe it was a sign for me to take up my Sidhe roots, but after hearing that Ivan and Tarathorn were also affected, I'm not so sure now, given that Tarathorn is of Alfar roots and thus closest to Gildharain. I still dream of Cylithera just watching me ever so vigilantly and have nightmares of having to re-live that flight to Pelda with Legoregebb, which is somewhat odd. My stomach still hurts at the thought of flying to Pelda in Legoregebb's claws, I think I'd rather eat Caltech undergrad dorm food than repeat that experience! Is this some kind of warning?

In the meantime, I really need to talk to Tarathorn, get some things off my chest and listen to the whispers in my heart. I'm scared yet excited and I think I'm doing the right thing in what I want to do. I haven't mentioned this explicitly to anyone yet, not even Ivan, although Mom has dropped hints that I should do this and has been pushing me to do this for the last year and a half after she found out that Tarathorn and I are more than just friends. I wonder though if Tarathorn's parents will ever accept me considering I also have Tuatha blood and that I'm what they see as both "effeminate" (but not as much as Ivan) and an "impure" being because of Dad's "Euro-trash" and "Latin" ancestry. I just hope things re somehow going to work out in the long run. I miss Tarathorn way too much even if we visit as often as our duties and funding allow us. Not even Lin, the seductively beautiful lab-mate who could literally have her pick of just about any male could distract me. Tarathorn's existence and my showing signs of my commitment to her weren't enough to deter her unsuccessful attempts at me. I'm just glad Ivan was there to help me out there and convince her that there's ulterior reasons for me rooming with Ivan, although I now seem to be on the receiving end of many O-Zone, Village People, and Erasure posters and allusions. I'd rather be the butt of jokes than have to constantly shoo Lin away though. I know Tarathorn appreciates that too!

Speaking of lab stuff, I don't know if that proposed reaction really worked. The H-NMR

and C13-NMR both jammed really badly on the samples I synthesized. Sure, James and Efren gave me some really good ideas for how to create more of that weird stuff Joanne found at one of her sites, but they only gave me theoretical mechanisms, not actual synthesis procedure. That's where I come in I guess, actually making the molecules. Trying to recreate these organic acids with all these para-ketone group attached in odd locations and strange metal centers is one hell of a challenge. I should be getting some pretty strong carbonyl and aromatic group readings all across the board, but nothing's showing up so far. I know there's more para-ketones than anything else based on readings we got originally but re-creating them is frustrating as all hell. I might have one more thing to ask Tarathorn actually, have her run some of Joanne's samples on her ICP-MS to see if she can identify the metal centers. Or convince James or Efren to get a newer ICP-MS machine that won't crash every ten minutes and require that Keck labs be rebuilt every two or three weeks.

### **Oroszlan Ivan Andrej Sîrbu**

I don't like feeling of this. Gildharain seems to have vanished, at least none of us have heard his piping as we normally do either in dreams or wind. Not even Galka knows what's going on and it has been pretty quiet and dull without her around because she went to investigate further what happened to Gildharain. I need to finish dissertation soon before Dr. Kuo runs out of funding for me. I don't know which way to go yet either but Galka's been pushing me to follow her and succeed Legoregebb. What's really bothering me is I'm starting to get scaly again but nowhere anyone looks unless I swim or wear tight Latin dance costume. I really hope Vincent and Tarathorn can find happiness together somehow, mortal or Tuatha. Vincent's been acting a bit funny too, I might have to talk to him if he doesn't open up soon, I know he misses her more than ever and there was aggressive lab-mate who pursued him until we set her straight. There's too much tension and I wish we had closure.

My research makes very little sense now. I can see why Dr. Kuo had to take time off from his school. But I enjoy the math and developing an alternate coordinate system that incorporates fourth and fifth dimensions to try to explain Rift boundaries and travel. Maybe it's time for me to talk to more physicists to help me devise mechanism for Rift dynamics. Galka explain to me before and it makes sense but for some reason equations don't work out. At least I am almost done and just need to revise as recommended by my committee.

Then maybe I can either go back to Pelda with Galka and learn more about my skill with wind and fire or continue working here at Caltech on both research and Geekster music. My interest is shifting a bit towards nonlinear models and applying them in non-traditional fields because they are fun. I didn't like them when we had Dr. Hong many years ago but Dr. Tan convinced me they can be much more useful to everyone. Maybe I can also explain Sarkany powers with nonlinear models. We should do another tour of Geeksters and write some music. I can't write anymore because I'm very hungry now.

## **2 Banished**

"So it has come to this," sighed Aeondar, a wiry but muscular youth with short jet-black hair, deep brown eyes, and tanned skin. He watched from the tree he sat in as the coyote-clad warriors began chanting in a circle. "Gildharain, where are you? And where's Imladrien? Why me of all possibilities to pick as a successor should things go truly awry?" Nervously,

he tugged lightly on the sheathed short-sword to make sure it was on his belt securely. On his back was a bluish silver-wooded bow with thick limb tips and a set-back handle.

Not far below, he could see several of those who remained loyal to Gildharain despite Kiora and Taxadus' urgings to rebel were tied up in the center of the circle. "Either join our cause or be forever banished, stripped of all that is Alfar!" snarled Kiora, a stocky, powerful girl wearing a coyote-like clay mask and a coyote pelt as a cloak. In her hand was a blood-stained spear and on her hip was a dagger, also covered in blood. "Gildharain has failed us and he allows the Sarkany to invade our borders to corrupt our kindred with their fires and obsession with order! It is time for us to fight back!" None of the ten prisoners accepted Kiora's terms as indicated by them spitting at her. Furious, Kiora motioned to Taxadus, a heavily set badger-like boy, to drag the prisoners over one by one to her. Once he dragged the prisoner over to her, she half-chanted, half-growled incoherently and drew her dagger, ready to stab.

He couldn't bear to watch anymore and he drew forth his bow and blue and white feathered arrows. Firing down at the circle and breaking the bonds that held the prisoners, he shouted, "By Gildharain! I won't allow this to happen any more!" After firing two arrows, he leaped down from the tree into the circle and drew his sword. "You will have to challenge me first before you do anything to them!"

Kiora merely bared her teeth, revealing fang-like canines, and called out, "Aeondar is mine. Nobody intervene!" With that, she drew her scimitar and returned Aeondar's blows. For several moments, it seemed neither would give the other an opening. Aeondar would dodge or block Kiora's savage swings while Kiora would deflect Aeondar's more nimble thrusts away from her. Both prisoners and victors watched mesmerized at the dance of life and death between the two of them. Knowing that this would only lead to a stalemate, he willed himself to float above her, in hopes of out-maneuvering her. He never considered himself to be a particularly proficient flyer like many Alfar, but long practice and experimentation inspired him to use tactics few of his kindred used effectively. Granted, those who gave in to their rage couldn't even fly at all because a significant portion of the ability to fly came from both innocence and happy thoughts, of which they no longer had.

"It's Kiora or me this time," he thought as he sheathed his sword and willed his bow and arrows back into his hands. He quickly nocked an arrow and prepared to fire from high above. Then Kiora let out a blood-curdling howl that made those faithful to Gildharain buckle over in intense pain, unable to move. Aeondar fell from the air like an elephant and struck hard ground. He let out a groan of pain and he could feel some of his bones breaking, especially his jaw. She grabbed the helpless, injured youth by his tunic and glared into his slightly glazed eyes.

Aeondar looked nervously at the fierce girl in the coyote-pelt cloak, who drew her blood-stained dagger again, which now shone darkly with the symbol of a panther's paw with scimitar-like claws superimposed on a longbow. "From this day forth, I strip you of the name Aeondar and you are now forever banished from Mag-na-Oige for violating the Law of the Land." With that, she made a cutting motion in the air with the cold blade that glowed menacingly in the fading sunlight. "Traitor, you will now return to mortality, stripped of all that is Alfar, never to return and forever cursed to be foul of form, never to know joy again." As soon as she finished her curse on him, the youth found himself sucked into the tar-black rift she cut into the air. He didn't even beg for mercy or scream as many others did when Kiora, the merciless one, banished those she perceived as traitors to Mag-na-Oige, the land

of eternal youth, or if things continued as they were, the land of cold-hearted slaughter. If there was anything he was determined about, it was to deprive Kiora of that one pleasure of hearing him cry for mercy.

He drifted through what felt like empty space and he could feel the pain of his injuries flaring through him. Blinking in and out of consciousness, he felt as if coyotes, panthers, and badgers were threatening to take him apart. Flashes of rainbow colored lights appeared in his field of vision and he wondered what was happening, where he was, who he was. Struggling to think clearly enough to figure out what to do next, Aeondar could only recall the names "Imladrien" and "Gildharain". Then he felt hard ground below him after floating through etherealness for some indefinite time and all went completely dark on him.

### 3 University Life

"Dr. Suttankankul?" asked the short and slightly stocky undergraduate with thick Coke-bottle like glasses and an especially inquisitive expression as she turned in her final exam. "Is everything all right?" She looked concernedly at the young post-doc. Tarathorn Suttankankul, or Tara as almost everyone preferred to call her, stared into some unknown point and her hip-length black hair seemed to stand up on its own accord while her dark eyes seemed to glow with a feral light.

Shaking her head at the sound of the student's voice, she said, "Oh, yeah, I'm ok. Something that happens every now and then with Tehanu Syndrome survivors." Her normally cheerful expression darkened and took on a very fox-like cast for a split second. Then she started to sort the pile of blue books that several other students had placed on the table in the meantime. "And Christie, it's Tara or Tarathorn, not Dr. Suttankankul. Yeah, I have a PhD, but I'm barely older than you and calling me 'doctor' makes me feel old!" she added with a warm smile.

Christie Nguyen persisted at standing next to Tarathorn while the last of the students turned in their finals. There were only three other students in the class of fifteen students in the cramped classroom. Finally, Francis, the last student to finish the ecological simulations final turned in his heavily-scribbled upon blue book. Some strange groaning noises escaped from his throat as he slinked away in defeat. "Well, looks like someone didn't like your test," joked Christie before resuming a serious expression. "Tara, mind if I talk with you for a bit about your research?"

"Sure, I'd have you come with me to my office, but I think I'm going to spare you from Oleg Krummenstank's samples and a rather odd habit of his."

"Samples? And what does he do to be so unpleasant?" laughed Christie. "Besides constantly singing off-key in German or Romanian, having a really bad runny nose, and neglecting personal hygiene that is?"

"Fungus. Decaying fungus. And he microwaves his socks whenever they get wet or sweaty."

Christie wrinkled her nose in distaste as she followed the young post-doc down the winding hallways and down the stairs. "So, what's this about the forest hydrology work you mentioned in lecture?"

"Basically I'm looking for a motivated undergrad to help with some in-lab chemical

analyses. So there's been some recent findings that there's some odd chemicals in the water and soil, especially at the old University of Florida site. We're not sure what these chemicals are, but they may be new elements, and we're trying to characterize them."

"You mean where Joanne de Salvo fought off Senator Mathers and where all those strange monsters came out from?" asked Christie, amazed.

"Exactly. There were already a few that have been characterized as odd organics, but now there's some that don't appear to be organic in nature based on what we've found so far, so I suspect that they may be new elements. The problem is trying to isolate them from each other and from normal materials as well."

"Just from what you told me, I'm on!" said Christie excitedly. "I remember seeing some bluish-grey material there once. Did anyone ever find out anything about it?"

"Not yet, my adviser, Kao Saephan, has been tearing out his hair over that too. My colleagues at Caltech are also confused. There's a team of chemists and ecologists who did identify lots of para-ketone groups in some of the samples but many of our traditional analysis techniques just choke on them. I think it might be a metalloid based on the crystal structure, but it's a strange material that keeps changing its properties. If you want to join this project, you have my thumbs-up because I saw how you handled the class project and I can already tell you'll do well, but it'll be up to Kao whether or not you get hired."

"And one more thing, Tara, it's about Tehanu syndrome," added Christie, lowering her voice. "I was diagnosed with it before this semester and I was in a coma for a week before coming out, but I've been having some odd flashbacks."

Tarathorn's dark eyes suddenly flashed intensely again at the mention of the illness. "What have you seen?" she asked, trying to keep the nervous edge out of her voice.

Shaking her head, as if to clear painful cobwebs in her mind, Christie closed her eyes for a moment. "Visions of a pair of fierce, angry women, one with dusky skin and the other looking like a stereotyped engineering student from China, but both with scimitars. The darker one didn't look quite human, she had red eyes, pointed ears, and silver hair, and she could turn into a panther. Except for her pointed ears and hawk-like expression, the other one looked pretty normal. And they were talking to this girl in a coyote-pelt cloak..."

"What else did you see?" she pressed on.

"And I saw another fierce-looking woman with a bow and scimitars. She looked like she'd bleed ice water, if she'd even bleed and she just glared at me before I returned to consciousness," continued Christie, shaking in fear at the memory of the woman.

"Cylithera Eaglestrike. You do realize the significance of Tehanu Syndrome, do you not?" said Tarathorn, keeping her voice as level as possible.

"It's just a genetically-based autoimmune disorder from the fallout from the Rift, right?"

"I wish it were that simple. Suffice to say that there is indeed a genetic basis and something has activated the genetics, something known as the Calling, where anyone manifesting any Tuatha ancestry is being called to return to the Veil. In other words, we're not fully human. But unless you notice really strange things happening to you or around you, I wouldn't worry too much just yet. Just make sure you don't make any rash decisions," replied Tarathorn. "Think things through and you'll be all right. And by the way, I'll put in a good word for you to my adviser, I really liked the way you did the bootstrap-style validation on your simulation. Don't worry too much about the Tehanu flashbacks, even if I got a bit nervous and I'll see you next week!"

"Thanks! I'll keep that in mind, and I'll talk to Dr. Saephan about the project," said Christie, looking more at ease as she headed out.

Alone, Tarathorn slowly walked back upstairs to her office, pondering over what Christie had told her. She sniffed the air as she approached her office. No sign of Oleg or his filthy microwaved socks, even if the entire hallway did smell of stale, decaying fungus and used kitty litter. Gathering her books and notes in the cluttered office that was covered in bookshelves full of musty, dusty books, her mind drifted back and forth between her data, Christie's vision, and someone she wished were by her side.

Vincent Gahan. She tried not to think about the handsome young man who was finishing up his PhD in chemistry at Caltech, but at the same time, she could feel her heartbeat quickening at the thought of her boyfriend. Once, she saw him as a brother after years of friendship and a slight crush, but after returning from the Crossroad, something just happened. Her mind quickly conjured up the athletic, raven-haired youth with the beautiful voice that could bring tears or smiles depending on what he was singing. She could see his expressive almond-shaped brown eyes and that oddly exotic mixture of both Chinese and European features looking back at her. "I really miss you," she murmured to herself as she visualized him standing next to her.

You've been much more than a thought,  
I see you in my dreams so often at night.  
Never I knew that you were the one I've sought  
Until that day I journeyed far beyond sight.  
If only there was a way  
I could feel your tender warmth right next to me  
Or hear your voice whispering my loneliness away,  
A tiny fragment of blissful memories  
Left behind in the name of higher duties.

Will I ever find balance,  
Between my heart's desire  
And my academic fire?

Almost unconsciously, she began to sing, allowing her clear, child-like soprano voice waft through the hallways. A few ears belonging to young students perked up in the hallway, listening intently to the post-doc. It was always a pleasure when one of the regular Geekster "guests" would put on a mini-performance. Then she looked up from some paperwork she had been working on and noticed that two of her undergraduates from the simulations class were peeking in.

"Uhh, Tara, we got some late homework that ya said we could turn in late so we could work on Conclave," said the twins simultaneously. They were both about six feet tall and wiry with light brown hair, and patched overalls. "And if ya'll ever have another concert again, could ya get us some tickets?" they added. "We promise to do better on our homeworks and tests!"

"Thanks Zach and Abe," she said, taking the two packets. Both boys were looking at the pictures around her desk, including ones of the Geeksters and the rest of the Caltech and the Cal State LA gang. Even after nearly a semester of coming to her office for help with

the course material, they still looked very disappointed whenever they saw the pictures of her with Vincent. At least Zach and Abe, the two mischievous pranksters in the department were content with looking. After they stepped out of her office, she let out a small sigh. "If only the photographs were real," she whispered to nobody in particular.

Twenty-five year old Vincent Gahan fidgeted about as he pondered over lesson plans for the organic chemistry recitation section he was supposed to teach. Looking at his research adviser's notes, he grumbled, "James, how the hell am I supposed to do my work when you already freakin' broke it down to something already easily digested with your Ghetto Institute of Technology project?" As his mind drifted away from his lesson plans again, he thought of the tiny yet energetic and driven Thai girl who was now in Ocala, Florida as a post-doctoral scholar to investigate the effects of the Rift on the regional biogeochemistry. "Tarathorn... I wish I could see you again. It's been so lonely here," he murmured. Absently, he went to his notebook, a large spiral-bound music book with several pen and pencil scribbles.

Where are you, my brilliant shining star?  
I look up to the skies but I can't see you.  
The silver moon looks down at me from afar  
And weeps for one she can't have just as I do.

I feel the strings tugging deep inside my heart,  
Always looking for you, are you looking for me?  
Will there be a time when we'll no longer be apart,  
Or was that dream of life together never meant to be?

While Vincent pondered over the song and was ready to start scribbling away again, a scratching at the door interrupted his thoughts on his song. "Vincent? You ok?" asked Ivan Sîrbu, his roommate and best friend. "You've been kinda quiet the last few days, even for someone who's stressed out from trying to finish dissertation."

Looking up, Vincent rubbed his eyes slightly. Apparently a few tears had sneaked out while he was struggling to work on the song. "I was thinking about Tarathorn again. I really miss her," he replied sadly.

"So do I," said Ivan, hugging Vincent. "It's too calm without her. But I guess you miss her a whole lot more. How's the long-distance going?"

"Hard to say, but considering she and I are talking almost every night, well, I guess it's going. But it's still no substitute for having her around," replied Vincent, hugging his roommate back.

Later that night, when Vincent was getting ready to sleep after writing up his lesson plans for the organic chemistry recitation section he was supposed to teach, he heard a scratching at his window. Thinking it was only one of the many local feral cats, he ignored the sound and lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling absently. "Will I ever really share my life with you, Tarathorn, not just as colleagues and buddies, but even more? How would I know if you were indeed my soul-mate?" he mumbled to himself. Suddenly, he reached out for his spiral-bound notebook and a pencil and began to scribble hastily:

Even if the golden sun should fade away and die  
Or the world explodes in an apocalypse of fire,  
I'm thinking of you, shining star of my eye  
Whose keen wits, drive and smile will always inspire!

Content with the last verse of what he knew would be a song that he and Ivan would be working on soon, he closed the book, put it on his night-stand and turned out the lights. As sleep began to overtake him, the wind grew stronger, causing the nearby live oak tree's branches to shake violently and rattle against his window. He tried to sit up, but he felt a large weight pin him down. Swatting nervously at it, his hand found nothing to make contact with. Then a white mist began to solidify over him and the window shattered. In flew a silver-feathered hawk that keened angrily at him, while the mist took on a feline shape.

Frightened and relieved that he was wearing a pair of brown pants, he struggled against it again, this time feeling something solid. He did wish for a bedpan or a porcelain seat, but the brown pants would have to do. "Oh fuck! I shouldn't have read all that R.A. Salvatore! Damn books in the Avery library! Now I've got Guenhwyvar sitting on me, about to kill me... and all because she's under the control of some evil monster," he thought as he wiggled against the gigantic feline shape.

"Eöl-Tinúvion. Embrace mortality or we will provide it for you," roared the panther. Shifting slightly, the panther took its mighty paw, revealing its wickedly sharp claws. "Here's a little taste of what you will face if you do not embrace mortality." Vincent felt the claws tearing through his shirt and across his chest. The hawk merely watched with a glare that made Vincent feel as if someone had poured liquid nitrogen onto him. The youth could feel his warm blood coming out of his chest, warming what would've been a wound that could've frozen him. Before he could do anything else, besides watch the hawk and panther in his room, darkness overtook him.

## 4 In Dreams They Came

Tarathorn looked through her notes on the old University of Florida in Gainesville site, as well as some of the notes that her colleagues sent her. She shook her head as she typed in all of the notes into her computer. "Why can't they type in their own notes? We really need to standardize the data, Dr. Claudio was right when she gave that talk all these years ago! What ever happened to SpecNet or NCEAS?" she grumbled. Then her eyes widened when she looked through a tattered pile of papers that Oleg had given to her.

It has become dangerous going through what was once University of Florida. There are rumors of a madman living in the woods, a man described as an archer and survivalist with no parallel. The accounts describe him as a tall masculine humanoid figure with undetermined features and always wearing a cloak, but the descriptions are few and far between. He was not always there, perhaps having settled in within the past year. Already, several researchers have come back with arrows in them, many of whom have been killed. There have also been reports of unnaturally

intelligent beasts, namely that of coyotes and panthers, and they are suspected to be trained by this man. The rivers, too, have grown dangerous, particularly the new segment that developed between the Santa Fe and Ocklawaha Rivers during the Rift era, the one known as the Eagle's Wing. All attempts to find, identify, and capture the madman, referred to as the Haiduc, having last been spotted by a Moldovan exchange student who likened him to the historical haiduc, the Robin Hoods of the Balkans, have been in vain. If the Haiduc continues to be a threat to our research teams, we may have to abandon our efforts at the site of the University of Florida.

"Crap," she groaned. "If that stuff is true, then that explains all the weird stuff." Then she paced around briefly, trying to purge that thought from her mind. Then in the fading sunlight, something glinted slightly from her closet. She walked into her closet and pulled out the source of that little glint – her longbow, slightly taller than she was, a three-piece dark-wooded weapon inscribed with silver runes on its slender limbs. "Undómë," she gasped. Next to her longbow were her back-quiver full of deep brown-stained wooden arrows with white fletching and red cresting. Instinctively, she took her longbow, fumbled around for her stringer, and strung her bow, although it took most of her strength to do so.

As she tested the draw on her bow, she could feel the strength returning to her. "Whew, that took a lot out of me and I'm only drawing about twenty or twenty one pounds on this thing!" she huffed. "How the heck do Joanne and Helen draw back over fifty pounds with no problems when they're barely bigger than me?"

She analyzed data on her computer for the rest of the evening and cursed whenever Oleg's handwriting became too messy for her to decipher or when his English would degenerate into an amalgam of English, German, and Polish. "Data standards!" she groaned. "We need to revive SpecNet! Helen needs to drop the Captain Greywolf thing again to bring back metadata and data quality control back!" Exhausted after several hours of working on the metadata system, Tarathorn finally crawled into her bed and tried to sleep.

*There was a tall (but then again, almost everyone was tall to her), somewhat heavy-set man with brown hair and a crooked jaw sitting alone. Next to him was a camouflage compound bow with a blue and orange set of cables and strings, as well as a black leather quiver filled with arrows. Surrounding him was darkness and all she could see a faint light surrounding him. He looked around for a moment before picking up the quiver and the bow. His facial details were somewhat fuzzy in the dim light, but she saw a pair of blue eyes and a resigned expression. Who was he?*

The loud buzz from her cell phone (please don't let it be Oleg with another pile of papers or Kao with a random, half-baked idea that's ten times more clunky than necessary!) shook her from sleep. "Hello?" she answered groggily.

"Tarathorn, you won't believe this, but I got mauled by a panther that just showed up from nowhere. Don't worry, though, Ivan took me over to the ER and had me checked, nothing serious," said Vincent, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

"Panther? What the frequency?" she almost shrieked. "Was it Tuatha related?"

"I think it was Tuatha. It knew my Tuatha name, it addressed me as Eöl-Tinúvion. The Tuatha have been acting up quite a bit. Galka's been giving Ivan a lot of grief lately about this guy who's been coming onto him, Heike from ACM."

"Let me guess... Galka ended up lecturing Ivan about honor and duty again," said Tarathorn, trying to find humor in the situation.

"Worse. Much worse. She accidentally manifested her true nature during the Dance of the Roses competition. Basically what happened was douche-bag Pierre kissed him right before the pre-champ Latin and Galka saw that. Let's just say Galka got arrested for attempted assault. Nearly all of the judges and the MC passed out in terror," said Vincent. "And it only gets better. Brown gym is being repaired too after she breathed fire. The one judge who didn't pass out got burned pretty badly, that kinda wimpy atmospheric professor from UCLA who also plays the saxophone and moonlights in theater and poetry."

"Crap. Will Galka be all right? She's pretty cool, aside from what happens when someone finally does tick her off," said Tarathorn, trying to imagine what happened. It wasn't a pretty image with Galka turning into a dragon-like creature and bursting through the gym ceiling before burning it down.

"Not sure, but Ivan and I are trying to bail her out. We're not too keen on having Galka take on a new form, finding a new job, and leaving some creepy mystery. Galka's pissed about human form as it is. Let's just say frickin' Pierre is now avoiding us like the plague too after Galka's little manifestation, he's even quit the ballroom team over it and Diana is fuming over it."

There was a loud crashing noise from the phone. "What the hell?" asked Tarathorn.

A higher pitched voice responded. "Tarathorn! It's me, Ivan. Vincent told you all about Galka, didn't he?"

"Yeah. Anything new?"

"Not really, just got a new and rather disgusting office-mate who doesn't understand the concept of metadata or personal hygiene and a very promising student who might be able to help me out in the field."

Two days later, Tarathorn packed her longbow and arrows into her car along with her field equipment and notebook computer. "If Kao is going to send me to the Gainesville Woods, might as well have some fun while I'm at it!"

After making the three-quarters of an hour drive from Ocala to Gainesville Woods, her phone went off yet again. "Tara, I got call from Kao. He fell off ladder again in lab. I can't make either, I hurt ankle again in football. Can you handle by yourself?" asked Oleg in his high-pitched annoying voice.

"I can do it, I'm just taking a few soil cores along those transects," replied Tarathorn, irritated.

When she arrived at the trail-head that led into the forest and eventually to the transects where she took her soil samples, the sun was growing brighter. She pulled out a small, round device and pushed a button. "Ok, PAR of about 1400," she wrote in her notebook. "This is going to be one bright day if conditions hold up. Maybe that'll cause some of the weird stuff in the new minerals and elements to do something," she mumbled. "Or just more junk Kao wants me to process." She then pondered over the benefits of strip cruising versus fixed point sampling. Had she been tall enough to see over the underbrush, she would've considered using a factor ten prism and done a horizontal point sampling. Theoretically, strip cruising would've been a two-person operation, but that was for taking detailed tree measurements, plus it was a fixed transect that had been well-marked. All she was doing was soil core work and thus was able to do it solo.

While she walked along the transect that Dr. Saephan had set up before her arrival, she continued to take notes that her portable data-logger couldn't take, such as notes on any changes in the surroundings since the last trip. "That slash pine suddenly dropped all of its leaves. No sign of any obvious disease, will need someone from plant pathology to investigate. And that saw palmetto's leaves have taken on a silver tinge and the veins are glowing with a similar light. Odd. And time to take another soil core in another ten meters... and then I can get a bit of time to myself."

Twenty soil cores later, Tarathorn loaded the full and rather heavy cooler into her car. She pulled the bow from her car as well as her quiver of arrows. Attaching the quiver to her belt, she looked around at the two paths her predecessors had marked. One was near the transect she had just taken the soil cores from, the other led further in the forest to a much more secluded archery range. Opting for the quieter range, she strung her longbow and began to walk down the trail. Thorns and brambles had threatened to choke off the trail, indicating that nobody has been on this path for quite some time. She deftly leaped over some of the larger vines that intersected the trail before raising her voice in a song she remembered from her days with the Geeksters.

I walk down a thorny trail,  
Perhaps to tell a tale  
Of adventure and derring-do  
Or to sing a song of my longing for you.

Alone I trek, save for my songs  
For you, to whom my heart belongs.  
Tell me, if I ever hurt you,  
Know that my love is forever true.

Oh the winter may pass and the spring may die  
The summer may fade and the years may fly  
But I'll return to you, my love  
By the sun above  
And the shining stars, I promise you

I may be trapped in hell below,  
Or slaughtered by a mortal blow  
But nothing can silence this tune  
Even if we depart all too soon.

You alone are my guiding light  
Through the dark and stormy night,  
My hope that shines across the sea  
Only your love can set me free.

As she sang the song aloud with her high, almost flute-like ethereal singing voice that floated above the humid air, images of Vincent came to her mind. "I can't wait to see you again," she thought as she continued to hike down the trail. "Vincent, you don't know how much I miss you," she murmured softly. She hoped that he would be able to finish his PhD

at Caltech soon or that she would be able to secure a professorship closer than the other side of the country to him, where he would be able to join her later on.

Slowly the dense undergrowth gave way to a clearing with several targets at various distances. For some reason, where the trail had been un-maintained, the targets were in pristine condition aside from gaping holes in the center of the bulls-eyes. "Someone really good just coming in and not maintaining the trail?" she asked herself. The bright sunlight made her breathe a sigh of relief after going through the thick canopy with little light. In one corner of the well-kept range was a pair of white marble statues with glowing blue veins of some mysterious mineral that she had never seen before.

Curiosity overtook the young post-doc and she approached the statues. Although the faces seemed to have been eroded beyond recognition, she could tell that one statue was of a small, delicately built female but with a significant bulge in the belly, while the other was of a heavy-set male, apparently a hairy one judging from the details. "Eew," she thought, disgusted at the accurate depiction of all the hair that stuck out from the semi-open shirt. The statues were also joined at the hand. Examining the details further, she noticed that both had runes, very similar to the ones on both her bow and Vincent's bow scratched into them. "What the heck?" she asked herself. Deciding to ponder the questions further, she walked over to a ten meter marker.

She nocked an arrow to her bowstring, took a close look at the white center that was on a black background, and then drew the bow, taking care to anchor at the corner of her mouth. As soon as she settled into full draw, she loosened the fingers holding the string and the arrow flew straight into the target. It was slightly above the bull's eye in the black part of the target. Trying again and following the exact same steps but taking aim slightly lower, she struck the bull's eye.

While she was about to draw her third shot, her eyes registered movement from behind the statues. Assuming it to be a bird or a falling leaf, she resumed shooting, concentrating on the target. Her nut-brown hand trembled slightly, causing the arrow to fly far to the left of the target and just barely striking cardboard. Then she felt something watching her from behind and she whirled around, crouched in a defensive stance. At the same time, she nocked an arrow to the string just in case.

She spotted a tall, fair-skinned heavy-set man with a moustache and a neatly trimmed brown beard. By her estimate, he seemed to be in his early to mid thirties, but it was somewhat difficult for her to tell in the bright light and by the fact that he was wearing a cap on his head that shaded most of his features, although his crooked jaw still showed up clearly in her eyes. "Hello, sweetie," he said with a heavy Southern accent. He winked and then smiled flirtatiously at her. "What's your name?"

"Hello, sir. I'm Tarathorn," she said somewhat nervous. She could feel energy building up in her, tiny electric shock-like sensations that ran up and down her entire body. "Are you the one who keeps this place so nice?"

"That I am. By chance, you're not married, are you?" He grinned at her as he eyed her up and down. "And by the way, you're an excellent shot," he added, noting the arrows.

"No, but I do have a boyfriend." She trembled nervously, wondering what she ran into. Her muscles tensed up and she tried to force herself to stay calm despite the fact that this strange man also intrigued her.

"Where is he?" he asked, stepping slightly closer to her.

"Pasadena, California, out in the Los Angeles area. He's finishing up his PhD in computational organic chemistry at Caltech," she replied nervously. For some reason, he looked very familiar to her. Where had she seen him? There was something about those intense gaze and grace in his movements that struck her as odd. Slowly, she back-pedaled away from him.

"I still want to invite you over to my place..." he started before the post-doc suddenly bolted down the trail. "After all, you do only live but once..."

Running as fast as her legs would allow her, Tarathorn darted on the trail, dodging errant vegetation. Her tiny hand still clutched onto her dark-wooded longbow that Vincent had given her so she could join him at Pasadena Roving Archers, the one she had dubbed Undómë. She ignored the cuts and scratches from the unforgiving thorns and brambles that threatened to trip her and she could only think of making it to her vehicle and driving away as fast as she could. Finally, just as her legs felt like they were giving out, she saw her navy blue car and bolted in, stuffing everything into the back and driving out as fast as she could. She did glance back to see that the man had almost caught up to her as she sped off. He merely smiled at her before walking back into the forest.

"What the hell?" she asked herself as she drove back to her apartment in Ocala. "And why did I run like that?" Then she remembered the dream. "Darn. It's that dude I saw in the dream."

*He walked with her on the trail, now brightly lit by the full moon. On one side of the trail was a stand of redwood trees, while the other side overlooked the rocky shore and the turbulent sea. Tarathorn leaned into him as the cold winds blew harder. Vincent could feel her tiny hand in his and even through the thick clothing, he felt every curve on her. After walking further up the trail towards a secluded bluff that allowed them to view the sea from three out of four directions. High above them, there were still a handful of stars that were able to keep up with the brightness of the full moon. Clearing a comfortable spot for them to sit, Vincent motioned to Tarathorn to sit with him to look at the sea and the stars.*

*As Tarathorn settled onto the log next to Vincent, he took the young post-doc into his arms and embraced her. She leaned into him and her dark eyes met his before she pulled him closer for a soft and gentle kiss. Vincent ran his hand through her hair and then took her tiny hands in his own hands. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you for a while..."*

*She looked up at him and her tanned face blushed slightly. "Yes, Vincent?" she whispered softly.*

*Vincent fumbled around in his pocket and then plucking up his courage, he gently stroked Tarathorn's face with his free hand. "Tarathorn, will you marry me?"*

*He could feel both his heart and hers racing. Without hesitation, Tarathorn whispered back, "Yes, Vincent." She looked intently at him, smiling. "I was about to ask you myself," she added softly.*

*Eagerly, he pulled out a small box from his pocket and opened it, presenting the ring inside of it. It was a small silvery ring that shined in the moonlight and had a shimmering bluish stone inset into it. He pulled the ring out of the box, took her hand, and kissed it before placing the ring on her ring finger. As soon as he placed the ring on her, the ring began to glow slightly, as if in response to the joy they both felt.*

Vincent mumbled, "Tarathorn... I've also wondered if you want to... you know..." As he murmured and gently caressed the cover of his organic chemistry book, Ivan shook him

awake, causing the chemist to bolt up in confusion. "Huh?"

"Sorry, Vincent, I know you had nice dream but I also remember you told me that you have to get up early to cover for Dr. Nunnelley and Dr. Velasquez in organic chemistry lecture," said Ivan, sighing.

"Thanks... You saved me from getting kicked out of the Ghetto Institute of Technology program, even though that was such a sweet dream. Ivan, do you think Tarathorn and I will ever get married?" Vincent continued to rub his eyes and kept the blanket over himself.

Ivan looked his roommate and best friend in the eye. "I wish I could say that you would, even though, well, you know how I felt back at Cal State LA. I've never seen you two as happy as when you two got together. I'm sure Tarathorn feels the same, wondering if she'll ever marry you. I've seen it in both of you, that kind of love that goes beyond anything else."

Slowly, Vincent crawled out of his bed and got himself ready for the two hour organic chemistry lecture that his adviser had prepared for him. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw James' thorough notes, even if the professor's handwriting left a bit to be desired. At least his childish handwriting was large and legible, unlike Tarathorn's ultra-neat micro-printing or Ivan's chaotic scribbling. Despite the fact that he knew the chemistry fairly well and tutored many students, he always marveled at his adviser's super-intimate knowledge of all of the mechanisms and synthesis processes.

At the end of the long lecture, which also involved several pairs of eyes paying more attention to him than the overhead slides that Dr. James Nunnelley had prepared for him to use, Vincent tried to slink out of the large lecture room in Gates Hall. He quickly made his way to the library in Crellin Hall, just upstairs from the lecture hall, but a familiar figure was standing in the doorway. The short, squat middle-aged man with the greying samurai-style ponytail was none other than Dr. Efren Velasquez, a quantitative organic synthesist with a focus on developing cryogenic compounds safe for human use. "Vincent, mind if you take over my office hours for Chem 41a?" he asked, grinning. "I know you just lectured and want to work in there, but I've got some crap to take care of."

"Uhh, sure. In here, right?"

"Yeah. Just make sure Jean-Carlo doesn't come in to SN-2 you!" laughed Dr. Velasquez.

A giggle escaped from Vincent at the thought of the biochemist who apparently made both of his advisers uncomfortable in their undergraduate days. Jean-Carlo was a tall, slender man who still retained a youthful and somewhat effeminate look with his crisply pressed foppish shirts. "Tarathorn would kick his ass," he joked. "Or if Tarathorn doesn't, Ivan will," he laughed.

The professor merely snickered and ran off after dumping a pile of papers for Vincent to grade. "By the way, grade this stuff too, James forgot to give them to you. He called to tell me that you have some quizzes to grade."

An hour of questions and being ogled at by everyone (or so it seemed to Vincent) later, he found himself alone in the library. "Please don't let anyone else frickin' come in," he grumbled, mildly irritated at having to grade the extra papers and spend extra time in office hours. Several graded quizzes later (darn, there's two hundred students registered for the class and everyone actually took the damned quiz?), Vincent began to feel his mind drift off. He closed the large, heavy doors of the library and paced around before resuming grading papers. "Damn you, James, why can't you use multiple choice exams like the rest of them?" he growled as he went through papers with next to illegible handwriting and mechanisms.

It was his stomach that distracted him next. It growled so ferociously that the mechanisms on the papers blurred before him and he could only hear his stomach. Only ninety more papers to go, but his hunger was getting the better of him, and it was almost sunset. Packing everything up, he glanced around the library that several professors had indicated was haunted. A chill wind blew in the library and he heard a faint, almost ghostly and ethereal keening in the room. Whirling around to look for the source, he only saw Dr. Velasquez opening the door. "You saw a ghost, didn't you?" joked the older professor as he stepped in. "I'll take any papers you have left. I didn't realize how hard James made the quiz until I took it myself and even Julius and David had trouble with it and they taught me and James the really good stuff in o-chem."

"Thanks. Hey, did you feel that cold wind or hear that ghostly eagle or hawk?" asked Vincent, visibly shaken and a few shades paler from the sound.

The older chemist nodded. "I heard it. What we tell you? That library is fuckin' haunted! Helen could tell you all those stories too!"

After passing the last of the papers to be graded over to him, Vincent began walking back to his apartment on the western end of campus. It was already growing dark, but the sun was still peeking over the western horizon and turned the sky a fiery orange that gradually attenuated into a deep blue to the east. As he walked on and constantly reminded his stomach that food was not far, something glinted from the grass. He walked over to the grass and saw it was a silver ring with a tiger's head on it. It glowed with a slightly fiery light from the setting sun and without a second thought, he picked it up and placed it on his right index finger. A small burst of energy passed through him and the ring flashed for an instant but nothing else happened.

As he reached the door of his apartment in the Catalina complex just west of the Caltech campus, he heard Galka's voice. "Oroszlan, we must return to Pelda soon. The Eldest is reaching the end of his days. Unlike the Sidhe or Alfar lords, the Sarkany lords do have a finite life-span yet we always return, much as the birds you call phoenixes."

"How soon? I just have to turn in dissertation after I make last edits," replied Ivan. "Although if situation calls for it, I can leave behind."

"Hey guys," called out Vincent as he stepped in.

Galka's intense dark eyes widened when she saw the silver ring on Vincent's finger. "That ring is infused with the power of the Sidhe," she said, almost threateningly. "If I were you, I'd be very careful with it."

"It looks like Dr. Claudio's ring," commented Ivan, remembering her wolf's head ring that she always wore on a silver chain. "And you heard what it did to her when she was our age."

All the while, Vincent was more interested in eating the salad and sandwich he pulled out of the refrigerator. As he eagerly devoured his dinner, he merely grunted in acknowledgement at what Galka and Ivan had said. "Something really weird happened in Crellin library, that one that Efren says is haunted. I felt an unusually cold wind and I heard a hawk or an eagle in there."

"It may even be Cylithera herself or worse yet, her lieutenant Firianna Celethorn. She has two lieutenants who seek your death, as you may or may not know. While I was enjoying the hospitality of your justice system, I received word through the Eldest that they are back in pursuit after escaping from their imprisonment," interrupted Galka. "Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon and Firianna Celethorn apparently were seeking your death at their hands but

were thwarted up until now by a collaboration between the Eldest and Gildharain. With the Eldest fading and Gildharain's disappearance, those two escaped."

"That panther... holy shit," exclaimed Vincent. "But it told me to embrace mortality if I wanted to live." He then bared his chest before Galka to reveal the marks it left on him.

Ivan had already seen the wounds but he still couldn't help but gasp at the sight of the long claw marks that marred his roommate's slender yet muscular chest. Galka also let out a gasp as she examined the marks on his chest. "That is odd considering her reputation as an efficient killer. Combined with Gildharain's disappearance, unrest in Mag-na-Oige, and the sudden changes at the site of the Rift, I have to wonder what is truly happening. Perhaps it is time to come to a decision with respect to your calling," she said, looking especially closely at Ivan, who turned red. "And Vincent, be extra careful with that ring! You know what the Sidhe can be capable of!" With that, she led Ivan out of the apartment.

## 5 Kidnapped!

Two days later, Tarathorn paced about nervously in her apartment, wondering about that strange man who had approached her in the forest as well as the two statues she had seen. Part of her wanted to stay out of the forest knowing that he was there, yet she was also curious about him. There was something about him that piqued her attention. Why would she even dream about such a man and why didn't she have any visions of Mag-na-Oige of late? So many questions rushed through her mind about recent occurrences. And then there was Galka manifesting and Vincent getting mauled by a panther that knew his Sidhe name. Then she recalled Christie's description of a fierce panther-like woman.

*"Visions of a pair of fierce, angry women, one with dusky skin and the other looking like a stereotyped engineering student from China, but both with scimitars. The darker one didn't look quite human, she had red eyes, pointed ears, and silver hair, and she could turn into a panther. Except for her pointed ears and hawk-like expression, the other one looked pretty normal. And they were talking to this girl in a coyote-pelt cloak..."*

While she was pondering all she had heard recently, a pale light shimmered at her window. Instinctively, she quickly strung her bow and put her quiver on, ready to shoot on a second's notice. The pale light slowly materialized into two humanoid shapes, a short, delicate one and a taller, almost skeletal one. Both were wearing robes and as they grew more and more solid, one was an ebony-skinned woman with silver hair, deep violet robe, and a noble bearing, while the other was a pale-skinned elderly man with a blood-red robe and a stooped posture that spoke of great age and struggle with long illnesses. The window opened by itself and expanded to fit both the man and the woman. "Who the heck are you? Tell me before I accidentally shoot you!" shouted Tarathorn, plucking up her courage.

"Please, we mean no harm," said the woman in a soothing, melodic voice. She smiled at Tarathorn and added, "Pardon our rude entrance, but we must speak with you." The old man merely coughed and mumbled incoherently. "And Baelnorn, please try to be a bit more polite!"

"Damn rheumatism and arthritis," grumbled the old man irritatedly as he hobbled about with his staff that glowed at the tip and had a huge claw on the top of it. The smell of rotten eggs, mint, and other savory herbs surrounded him. He also let out a loud, noxious burp

before continuing to mumble under his breath. All the while, he also farted continuously and very audibly, emitting what Tarathorn visualized as clouds of yellowish-brown gas. She wasn't sure if she wanted to take a shot at him or to open up the windows first. She coughed.

Tarathorn eased up on her shot, although she kept her arrow nocked to the bow. "Sorry about being rude myself, too much weirdness has been going on."

"We have all forgotten our manners, but I will start to correct things. I am Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon, the University Defender of Secrets. This is Baelnorn Clawstaff, the University Headmaster," she spoke in a musical voice, pointing to the old man with her staff, a stately-looking stick of dark wood with a violet glow at the tip. "And Baelnorn, do try to hold it in. I know Ilithara hasn't brought any of the herbs in for a while." Even she coughed a bit. Tarathorn was relieved knowing that even stately wizards felt the same as she did about the smelly flatulence.

Walking up to shake both of their hands, the post-doc replied, "I'm Tarathorn Sut-tankankul, a post-doc at the Institute of Environmental Science at Ocala, Florida." The woman's hand, though delicate, sent a shock up her arm, while the old man's hand was so frail and bony that she was afraid that she'd break it with her naturally powerful handshake, something she learned from her colleagues. "So, what's bringing you here of all places?"

"I wish it were under happier of circumstances, but we seek one touched by the Alfar to counter a rising champion of the Sidhe, the prophesied Stellar Tiger..." began Tanilthara before Tarathorn interrupted again.

"What?" squeaked Tarathorn.

Still belching, coughing, wheezing, and farting enough for Tarathorn to discreetly scoot over to the window to open it, Baelnorn said, "We seek a champion of the Alfar, for it has been said that the Stellar Tiger will not only be the bane of the Eternal Huntress herself, but destroy the boundaries between Mag-na-Oige, Pelda, and Dûnhèasa as well as the barriers between the Veil and Palindor and reopen the Rift in this world."

"Crap... So what exactly am I supposed to do?" demanded Tarathorn, putting her hands on her hips and looking frustrated at the two visitors. Before either one could answer, Tarathorn felt herself hit the ground with the alarm clock ringing. There was no sign of the visitors from the night before and she looked around for any hints of what had really happened. All she could think about was that she was probably dreaming again. There was a hint of rotten egg and mint in the air. The window was also open.

The phone then rang and reluctantly, she looked at who was calling before responding. It was her adviser. "Hello?" she answered, trying to take the grogginess and frustration out of her voice.

"Sorry if I wake you up but got call from Ana-Marie saying she can't check the tower today. Is it ok if you check the flux tower in Gainesville Woods?"

"Sure, I'll work on that," replied Tarathorn, groaning inwardly at the thought of returning to the field site. Two hours later, Tarathorn arrived in the forest with her data-logger, an extra battery pack, and her bow and arrows. If there was one disadvantage about her project, it was the fact that it was severely understaffed, especially with the large number of researchers favoring modelling approaches over field work. Not that she blamed them with the entity known as the Haiduc on the loose and the fact that it was so overgrown despite all the trail maintenance. If Christie ever came out of that Tehanu Syndrome-induced coma, she would pressure Kao to hire her and she'd advertise for more students to work at the site!

As she slowly walked down the fairly well-beaten path to the flux tower that the global

change team had placed, she suddenly noticed that the path looked less and less well-maintained. "Huh?" she asked herself as she took care to carry the equipment further into the forest. The flux tower was still within sight and it was probably another ten minutes to get there with all of the batteries and the data-logger weighing her down.

*Imladrien...*

The young researcher stopped with a start at the sound of her name being called by an ethereal male voice in the wind. Her keen ears quickly honed in on the direction it was coming from and she looked back and forth between the flux tower and the dense undergrowth. An involuntary shiver passed through her when she looked further into the forest.

*Imladrien, drop the field equipment...*

Shaken at the sound of both the voice and the wind, she started to hasten her pace towards the flux tower. "No, I'm just imagining things after that last time," she said to herself. Then she pulled out her cell phone from her pocket and began to dial for help until she noticed that there was no reception. "Crap, forgot this is a singularity for Cingular!" A few choice epithets later, she pushed herself to at least get to the flux tower and make the adjustments and do routine maintenance. "Why me?" she asked herself. "What is it with epic quests and tasks from hell?"

She was finally at the flux tower, where the weight of the equipment was starting to take its toll on her tiny frame. For some reason, she felt as if cobwebs were forming in her mind as she examined the wires on the heavy data-logger. Assuming it was dehydration and lack of food, she pulled out a granola bar and a bottle of water from her pockets. Although her stomach felt somewhat happier, she still felt the cobwebby sensation in her mind. The wind continued to blow and that ethereal male voice continued to haunt her mind. No coherent words formed in the breeze.

"Darnit!" she finally screamed in frustration. "As they say in the old Dragonlance books, curiosity cured the kender!" With that, she wired up the data-logger to the computer that was at the base of the flux tower and followed the source of the voice as her mind best remembered it.

*I wait for you, Imladrien Tarathorn Suttankankul. Why are you so afraid?*

Slowly, Tarathorn began to walk away from the flux tower with only her longbow, arrows, and water bottle. She listened to the wind and looked around. As she went further away from the flux tower, the vegetation seemed to grow denser behind her and a bit less dense in front of her. Where was she going? Based on the shadows and the sun angle and her knowledge of where north was, she noticed that she was heading towards the hidden archery range. She hesitated at the thought of seeing that strange man again, but for some reason, her feet insisted on moving forward to follow the wind, which seemed to be pushing her from behind. Out of curiosity, she then dug her feet into the ground, only to feel the wind blow harder behind her. The cobwebby feeling in her head became much stronger and she could feel her legs start to loosen against her will.

The next thing she knew, she was walking inexorably forward as the vegetation yielded before her and closed up behind her. Focusing her mind to try to stop herself, she found that her mind would not focus on anything. Nervously, she nocked an arrow to her bow and tried to look around but her eyes went back to looking forward. As she continued, it felt as if she were walking through water and fog surrounded her, obscuring her view more and more. Time became an abstract concept to her as well in the swirling mists that slowly enveloped her. The last thing she could remember was sprinting through the forest into the

light under a relatively open canopy that revealed a deep blue mantle studded with bright stars...

Institute of Environmental Sciences at Ocala, FL post-doctoral fellow missing for a week. Her field equipment was found at the flux tower, which measures micro-meteorological data as well as gas exchange over the canopy. All attempts to contact her have failed and Levy, Alachua and Marion County police are searching for her in the Gainesville Woods. Authorities remind everyone to be extremely careful when entering the Gainesville Woods and to travel in groups and to leave behind contact information. It is believed that the Haiduc has claimed yet another researcher and even the state officers are considering increasing funding for field work to prevent yet another such incident due to insufficient funding for field researchers, often forcing them to work alone at understaffed stations. Tarathorn's research adviser, Kao Saephan, comments, "It's a shame to have to send her alone, but what can we do when we're always short? And it's so dangerous now. What do we do without the resources to even keep our researchers safe?"

Ivan and Vincent's eyes widened as they read the morning newspaper over breakfast. "Holy crap... Tarathorn!" both cried out.

Galka, who was stretching in the next room, called out, "She is alive. But that is all I can sense of her. Let us hope that Iliiryana and Firianna have not reached her."

Suddenly, a column of silver light materialized before the trio and instinctively, Vincent mentally summoned Lhîndôme and his quiver of arrows to his hand. Quickly, he nocked an arrow to the bow and drew, ready to shoot whatever it was. Galka also sprung into action, dashing in with serpentine grace and speed.

*Eöl-Tinúvion. It is time.*

As soon as Vincent heard his Tuatha name spoken, he froze in mid-action, unable to move. The light instantly solidified into a tall female figure with a longbow in hand. Her piercing sea-grey eyes fixed onto Vincent, who stood as still as a statue, then with only the slightest of movements in her hand, Galka stopped in mid-stride, while Ivan found himself pressed against the wall with the lamp threatening to fall on him.

Fighting the paralysis in her muscles, Galka let out a wordless cry and a ball of fire formed in her hand, which she hurled at the stranger. "Cylithera! Release him!" she hissed. The fire merely dissipated when it struck her.

Cylithera merely smirked and her free hand began to glow with a cold blue light. She pointed at both Galka and Ivan and the icy ray fanned out to strike both of them. With a roar of defiance, Galka's human form vanished in a flash of golden light, shattering the ceiling and some of the nearby walls as her human form expanded and became draconian. "Damn, where'd I put brown pants?" groaned Ivan before struggling against the force that held him against the wall. "Or porcelain chair," he added mentally. Galka inhaled deeply and glared at Cylithera with her glowing golden eyes before opening her mouth to let out a cone of what looked like concentrated sunlight.

For a moment, Cylithera hesitated, covering her eyes, but her free hand quickly found an arrow, which she nocked to her bow. Trusting her instincts, she took aim and fired a runed grey-wooded arrow straight at Galka's chest. With a loud, anguished roar, Galka diminished back into human form. Screaming in anger and terror, Ivan suddenly bolted forwards, ignoring the lamp that fell on him and the fact that his skin was becoming scaly and that wings were sprouting from his back. "No!" rang Ivan's voice about three octaves above where it should be. He snapped at Cylithera, who merely shrugged and pointed at him. In a few heartbeats, he was back to human form and clutching at his crotch in pain.

While Galka lay bleeding and Ivan effectively disabled, Cylithera approached Vincent, who was struggling to free himself. She smiled at him despite his obviously panicked look that his roommate and a good friend were both severely injured by her. Trying to break the paralysis that kept him rooted, he twitched and finally said in a cracked voice, "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"You'll see," said Cylithera, smirking at him before making a fluid gesture with her hand. "In the meanwhile, Vincent Zhong-hua Gahan, or rather, Eöl-Tinúvion, rest well." Vincent struggled yet again to free himself, but he felt light-headed and the room began to spin before him.

"Ivan! Galka!" he called out before Cylithera struck him with the flat of her scimitar in the solar plexus.

"Vincent!" moaned Ivan, still clutching himself in pain. Cylithera and Vincent were both enveloped in a bright silver light before vanishing. As soon as archer and graduate student disappeared, the pain in Ivan's crotch disappeared as did the arrow in Galka's chest. The bleeding, too, stopped, and Galka's complexion went from deathly pale back to its usually coppery-tanned self. The only thing that did not disappear from her chest was a jagged, somewhat flying eagle-shaped scar from where the tip had struck her.

Ivan crawled over to Galka and examined her for signs of injury. "Galka?" he said, gently touching the scar in the center of her chest where her shirt was torn by the arrow.

Her eyes quickly surveyed the mess in the room before responding. "Not too bad for being shot by the Eternal Huntress herself. Once we both regain our strength, we must journey to Pelda to speak with the Eldest. The situation is much worse than any of us ever thought," she said.

"What?" asked Ivan, puzzled. "You mean Cylithera behaving strangely, Tarathorn disappearing, and Vincent getting mauled?"

She looked at Ivan in the eye, took his hands, and said, "That and more. The end of the Calling draws near, yet chaos still increases. Come with me to Pelda, so we can consult the Elders."

## 6 Boot Camp in Dûnhèasa

*The water grew more and more viscous until he realized that it wasn't water he was struggling to wade through, but some kind of black ooze that clung onto him. "Ivan! Galka! Roberto! Katie! Tarathorn!" he called out, hoping for one of his friends to hear him. The six of them had gone on a camping trip together in the Angeles Crest Forest and it rained on them heavily to the point where it flooded. Vincent had fallen into a huge lake that suddenly formed from*

*the flood, and he had lost track of the others.*

*Then he saw Tarathorn on the shore and he ran as fast as he could to the rapidly deepening lake of sludge. "Tarathorn! I'm over here!" he called out. As he drew closer the tiny post-doc extended a hand as far as she could. Vincent tried to reach for her deceptively delicate hand, but he was just short. Hastening his footsteps as much as possible, he tried again, while Tarathorn came as close as she could without falling into the sludge. Finally, his hand connected with hers and they clasped as tight as possible.*

*Suddenly, when Vincent looked up at his beloved, he saw her features warp bit by bit until her face gradually became more feline and piercing. The hand that clasped his became larger and instead of cheerful dark brown eyes, he found himself looking into a pair of glowing red-gold eyes that nearly froze his heart. "And now, I will finally have the pleasure of destroying Eöl-Tinúvion and upholding the honor of Dúnhéasa!" roared the creature that Vincent recognized as Iliiryana. With that, her nails turned into claws and she hurled him back into the sludge before fully transforming into a panther and lunging at him.*

*A blast of deep blue light struck the panther, but she merely locked her jaws into his throat, choking the life out of him. "Let go of him!" shrieked Tarathorn's voice.*

*"You ain't goin' after him, baby! I'm keepin' ya safe," roared a man's voice and in the fading shadows, Vincent could see a silhouette of a tall, heavy-set man grabbing Tarathorn, who struggled in his powerful grip. "I'm not lettin' ya throw your life away like ya nearly did in the woods!"*

*Two bolts of fire also struck the panther, but to no avail. "Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon, by the fire and wind within thee, I command you to let Tinúvion go!" clanged Galka's voice as her human form vanished and was replaced by her normal gold-scaled draconian form. For a moment, the panther's jaws loosened at the Sarkany's command, but she resumed her relentless attack even as a pained expression showed in her feral eyes. Then just as abruptly as Galka transformed, a huge burst of the mire that Vincent was trapped in enveloped her. Roaring angrily, Galka struggled against the thick ooze that only seemed to constrict her further.*

*By then, Ivan, Roberto, and Katie had leaped into the sludge to pry the panther off and kill it if needed to be. "Fuckin' cat, let go of him or I'm gonna beat you shitless!" swore Katie, a muscular woman whose expression spoke of constant defiance and drive, hitting Iliiryana's head savagely with an improvised cudgel. Unfortunately, Katie's swings were not particularly coordinated and she managed to hit Vincent hard on the head, although her efforts were not completely in vain. The panther then let go of Vincent's throat and roared defiantly before charging at the insolent students.*

*"Where's my brown pants with the yellow front?" screamed Roberto, a stocky, muscular man with a parakeet tattoo on his left bicep and the Navier-Stokes equations on his right bicep. The panther had pounced on him and he lay prone on the ground before she then charged after Katie and Ivan.*

*Vincent tried to get up, but it grew cold and he could feel his warm blood spilling over his body and into the sludge. The sludge began to envelop him in a strange warmth and the stars began to spin before his eyes. "I'll save you guys once I get out of this crap!" he mumbled. Then he felt someone or something shaking him.*

*Vincent woke up to the feel of a cold wind, a splitting headache, and someone shaking him lightly. He looked up through slightly blurry eyes to see a deep blue sky strewn with brightly glowing stars and a crescent moon. "Holy crap, what the hell happened?" he said*

in a cracked, dry voice. The cold, aquiline face that looked back at him made him wish he was wearing a pair of brown pants.

"You were dreaming," said Cylithera in her cold, yet melodic voice.

"But Tarathorn... is she all right?" he gasped. "And what about Ivan and Galka?" He bolted upright before his dizziness forced him to lean back in the hammock that Cylithera had apparently placed him in.

"Rest, Eöl. When your strength returns, your training will begin. Tarathorn is in danger, yes, but she is also safe," she said.

"Where is she? What happened to her?" demanded Vincent despite his weakness. Cylithera eyed him curiously and for a split second, her sea-grey eyes flared an angry scarlet.

Then her cold demeanor returned and she replied, "If you must know, she is in Gainesville Woods with someone who is protecting her from Iliiryana and Firianna. Let us not speak of the Alfar who may shatter the balance nor of my traitorous lieutenants who have openly disobeyed me." She then placed the back of her hand on Vincent's forehead. The grad student winced at the coldness of her touch. "The fever has at least passed. An unfortunate side-effect of bringing you here against your will and using the power of your Tuatha name against you."

Drowsiness began to attack Vincent's mind again and as everything began to blur, he said, "Let me go!"

Later on, Cylithera shook him awake, sending a wave of cold electricity through him. It was still dark although there was a faint hint of gold in the eastern sky. "Wake up and eat and drink," she whispered, almost literally lifting the grad student up single-handedly.

Groaning in pain, Vincent followed her on unsteady feet, tripping over rocks and roots. Finally, she stopped her rapid walk and motioned brusquely for him to eat. On the ground was a small cloth-wrapped packet and a water-skin. Opening up the packet, Vincent found some pieces of dried meat, bread, and dried fruit. Eagerly, he ate it after his stomach reminded him that it had been a while since he had last eaten. "Make haste," said Cylithera, watching his every move.

After he had his fill, she led him to a set of targets. "Shoot at each of them," she instructed. "I want to see you shoot." She handed him his bow along with a quiver full of arrows.

The young man studied the targets and for some reason, they seemed to be a bit blurry and in motion. Was he that sick? He guessed the closest target to be about twelve yards away and the farthest one was about fifty yards. Going for the closest target, he took a grey-feathered cedar arrow from the quiver and nocked it to the string. Drawing back until he anchored at the corner of his mouth with his middle finger, he then focused his eyes on the center of the nearest target and lined up the tip of his arrow to where he knew corresponded to twelve yards. He loosed the arrow and it struck close to the center. For the next five targets, he repeated the process, each time taking the time to line up the tip of the arrow and adjusting the gap between the tip and the center of the target. He could just barely see where his arrows struck but he could tell they were all within a six inch radius of the center.

All the while, Cylithera remained silent until he finished his shooting. "You shoot like a Sarkany. You need to learn how to trust your instincts, let the hunter in you guide your shots. The Sarkany method of shooting works for inanimate targets and those not shrouded in illusion." Her steely eyes locked onto Vincent, who shivered nervously. Suddenly, Vincent empathized with his friends Katie and Roberto, who had both attended various martial arts

and archery boot camps to improve their techniques.

That night, while Cylithera was away to find wild game, Vincent looked up at the sky and searched for any familiar constellations. High above, the stars blazed with frosty lights and he suddenly felt the chill wind biting at him. Then he thought about Tarathorn being held prisoner by some crazy survivalist in the woods and about how he missed her ever since her academic path sent her to the other side of the country. Just thinking about her warmed him up and the wind didn't bother him so much. Unconsciously, he then began to sing, his smooth baritone voice filling the night air.

Just you wait my little one,  
I'll come and rescue you  
Even if I must journey past the sun  
And pass through Tomboctou.  
Nothing will ever stop me  
I'll do whatever it takes to set you free.

Hang in there my dear,  
I'll come and take you away  
From your worst ever fears  
Maybe I won't reach you today  
But be not afraid,  
I haven't gone astray  
Just very much delayed!

If anyone in Dùnhèasa heard him sing, he didn't really care, but he did hope that his voice would carry out to Tarathorn, whether on the same wind that bit him or in her dreams. He vowed that as soon as he could, he would go and find her.

For the umpteenth time, Vincent tripped over a root as he sprinted through the forest with the chains around his ankles and the weighted staff across his shoulders. Staggering up and regaining his balance again, he continued to run as fast as he could through the forest path. His muscles still hurt from the last several days that Cylithera had forced him to do this exercise before she allowed him to eat lunch. By his estimate, she had him run three or four miles through the dense forest with these darned heavy weights and obstacles that kept tripping him.

"Tarathorn... I'll come and save you from that piece of shit trailer trash!" he thought this time. "And Ivan and Galka, I hope Iliiryana and Firianna aren't giving you too much trouble."

Once he finally returned to the cave that Cylithera had given to him for shelter, he saw the soup and vegetables set out for him. It was cold, but as far as he was concerned, it was still good food and he ate it eagerly. The cuts and bruises from tripping over everything started to flare up again and he could hear his joints creaking in protest from exertion, but he ignored it as he ate. He then looked at the fingers on his right hand and noticed the calluses that had developed on his fingertips despite the protective leather glove he wore. His sore back and chest muscles also reminded him of the intense archery training he received.

"You'll get used to it soon," said Cylithera, her cold voice ringing in the cave. "You'll no longer need that glove and your body will cast the mortality out of it by the time I'm done with you."

With only a groan, Vincent followed her out of the cave. Mentally, he willed Lhîndôme into his hand and wondered what could hurt next. His left hand gripped the dark-wooded longbow nervously at that thought, while his eyes wandered to Cylithera's longbow, also made of a dark, almost black, even-grained wood that had very fine silver streaks and runes in it. As they walked to the clearing with the targets, Vincent noticed that Cylithera's piercing sea-grey were fixated on his movements.

"Cylithera, why are you doing this?" asked Vincent nervously, knowing that angering her could get him killed or worse.

"You will know soon. For now, you are doing this because if you do not, Iliiriana will slay you, or if not her, then one of her allies," she replied. "And now, I want you to hit the center of the nearest target."

Vincent squinted slightly. That target was thirty yards by his estimate and the center was perhaps two inches in diameter. He knew a compound shooter with a decent sight and some practice could hit that consistently, but him, even with a fair amount of practice and coaching from many excellent archers (including Cylithera, he noted) and an enchanted bow like Lhîndôme? He gauged the distance a bit more closely in his mind and then he pulled out an arrow from his quiver and nocked it to the string. Slowly, he raised his bow-hand and began to draw back as smoothly as he could while still concentrating. His eyes never left the tiny spot and as soon as his right hand found its anchor at the corner of his mouth and his left hand found its spot to aim for the target, he loosened his fingers and let the arrow fly. Swiftly the wooden arrow flew through the air and hit the white center right at the edge.

"Close," muttered Vincent.

"But you must be perfect. Try again until you can consistently hit the center in the center. That would have killed a deer or a boar but a little bit off and you will lose your prey. And once you perfect your shots from stand-still, I will teach you how to shoot and still remain fleet of foot," said Cylithera, barely allowing a smile on her face.

Uncountable shots later, Vincent's fingers began to hurt and he felt a blister forming on his right ring-finger. His left arm ached from holding up the bow and aiming even after she had broken him of his habit of gap-shooting. Involuntarily, he let out a groan as he drew the bow yet again and took what he was hoping would be the last shot of the day. The bow dropped as it started to feel like lead in his hands and he unconsciously plucked the string. "Can't do this much more," he whispered, removing the glove and examining his finger. Sure enough, there was the beginning of a blister on the tip of his forth finger where the string rubbed most.

"You have grown much, Tinúvion," commented Cylithera. "But you have much to learn still and you must still develop more trust in the hunter inside of you. Now that your shots have gotten better, there is something else I want you to develop." She handed him a pair of scimitars similar to hers. Both weapons glowed with a cold silver-blue light and were inscribed with runes up and down the blades. "Nobody who learns under me will go without the blade for long."

Vincent hefted the two blades that Cylithera handed him and despite their balance, they felt incredibly heavy in his weary hands. "Both?" he asked, puzzled.

"Yes. Now, let me see your skill with two blades," she commanded. With that, she drew

her own lightning-sheathed blades and swung at the stunned graduate student, who raised his right blade to block her.

Adrenaline began to surge in Vincent's blood as he swung the blades at Cylithera. His haphazard swings never came close to the Eternal Huntress, who either blocked his swings or dodged them gracefully. She finally whirled around and sent one blade high, one blade low at Vincent. Unsure of what to do, Vincent dropped both scimitars and he felt her blades strike between his legs and his chest. He had expected something to slice into him, but instead he felt something blunt hitting him. It didn't hurt any less as he visualized the big purple bruise that was going to form soon. "Oww!" he bellowed, falling over in pain and clutching himself. He still admitted to himself that his luck was still better than Ivan's, who just seemed to rack up all the attacks in that one spot.

Laughing, Cylithera walked over to the prostrate chemist. "Not all is lost, even if you would be dead by now in a real battle." She grabbed his hand and lifted him up despite his groaning protests. "I want to show you something now that I've hit you with my blades. Hold out one of your scimitars and place your free hand over the blade. Then speak the word *Kharadh*."

Vincent held out the sword in his left hand and placed his right hand on the blade just above the hilt. "*Kharadh*," intoned Vincent as commandingly as he could. A faint blue glow surrounded the blade before fading, leaving only a vague outline that Vincent's eyes could barely register. "What did I just do?" he asked, staring at his sword.

"Test it," replied Cylithera. "Rub your finger against the sharp edge."

Reluctantly, Vincent touched the finely honed blade with his finger, but instead of his finger getting cut, he felt something almost rubbery before he could really reach the cold metal. "A word of shielding, then?" he asked, surprised.

"And now that you know, expect to have the mortal weakness beaten out of you," she said, never taking her eyes off him. Vincent groaned at the thought of the rigorous training Cylithera would put him. What else could she train him in?

Many sore and painful muscles later, Vincent could barely step outside to look up at the skies, as was typical for him. Even the chill wind that threatened to make his muscle cramps worse couldn't discourage him from singing, hoping that maybe Tarathorn could hear him, wherever she was.

Once again, I stand and wait here,  
Wondering what will finally be.  
The moon is shining right above me,  
But it's not the same as having you right here.  
I'm always searching for you,  
A sign that you're still thinking of me  
And somewhere under the sky so blue,  
I'll hear your voice so sweet  
And that once again we'll meet.

And underneath the silver moon  
I ask when we'll be together once more  
I hope that you'll come back to me very soon  
Before we've forgotten each other.

I think about all the joys we shared  
And the how your love keeps me warm  
But in this silence that leaves me bared  
The wind keeps blowing, threatening me harm  
Will our bond survive?

In dreams you always come to me  
Arms outstretched anticipating  
I await you at the very end of your journey  
So we can continue our lives interrupted.

And underneath the silver moon  
I pray that we'll be together once more  
I hope that you'll come back to me very soon  
Before we've forget the joys we've shared.  
In dreams you always come to me  
Arms outstretched anticipating  
I await you at the very end of your journey  
So we can continue our lives interrupted.  
I want to guess that we'll be back together  
Before all we've built up has been forgotten.

While Vincent was singing outside of the cave, Cylithera listened, almost mesmerized by his hauntingly beautiful baritone voice. She had to admit, if anything could move her to tears, it was his singing. There was something different in his singing though, something not quite there. What was it? There was still no denial that his voice rivalled even that of the gods and the greatest singers anywhere, but she could sense something creeping into his singing. He continued to sing softly, almost incoherently, afterwards, and the whole time, she merely watched, wondering what was happening to him.

Vincent never felt so tired or heavy as he did that night. His head buzzed painfully and his muscles almost refused to obey him, even to eat a warm dinner of vegetable soup, venison, and bread. "Cylithera, I can't do it. I can't transform even after concentrating," he groaned.

"You're not trying hard enough. You've done it before," she replied coldly as she ate her share of the food. "You have the innate talent to do everything I have instructed to do, but you lack the focus and discipline. You also lack the drive."

Looking around nervously, he countered, "But I am. I'm doing exactly what you told me."

Standing up and walking up to him from the other side of the table, she said, "No. I can see it in you." She waved her hand with a flourish and a ball of light formed in front of Vincent. "Perhaps this might help you. Behold the events as they unfold."

In the rapidly solidifying ball, Vincent looked into see Tarathorn standing in a grove of gnarled oak trees. She held a compound bow with a full set of long stabilizers similar to what he had seen Dr. Claudio and her friends from her graduate school days use for major tournaments. Next to Tarathorn was a tall, heavy-set man, who eyed her lustily while she

focused on her aim before she exploded into action and released the arrow. Little Tarathorn let out a cheerful whoop and the man wrapped his arm around her before kissing her on the cheek. Her tanned face turned a bright red and then the image from the ball faded from sight.

For the first time in years, Vincent suddenly felt cold fire in his blood and he let out an incoherent growl. "No!" he roared, clenching his fists. "Tarathorn, I'm going to save you from that lump of redneck trailer trash!" As he screamed, his nails began to extend into claws and a faint red-gold glint passed through his eyes before his nails and eyes reverted back to normal.

"Remember that image and you'll be able to do it again," said Cylithera, allowing a distant smile on her face as she watched Vincent's transformation. "Give in to the fury to fully tap into your innate strength."

"I've got to go to Tarathorn before he hurts her!" growled Vincent. "Cylithera! You've got to let me save Tarathorn!"

"In due time. But hold that thought, that man who seeks to corrupt Imladrien. Visualize yourself falling into bloodlust as you rip the life from him," said Cylithera even as she allowed a tiny sigh escape from her. While Vincent sat there stunned, Cylithera stepped out, still leaving the ball of light before him. The image began to blur before his already tired eyes and he suddenly started feeling even more sluggish and elastic.

*There was a small girl in a long, frilly dress with long, raven hair and sea-grey eyes. Her attention remained fixated on the foreboding woods that surrounded her and her family. The mother was a tall, delicately built woman with fine, patrician features, long raven hair, and sparkling blue eyes and a pale complexion that spoke of being sheltered. Her expression was serene and would've been mistaken for porcelain had she not been breathing. The father, like the mother, was tall, delicate, and finely featured, and carried an air of refinement and knowledge. Both parents had soft, smooth hands and had never known labor until they made this journey far to the north, away from the noble circles of the empire they were born in.*

*The girl merely continued to gaze into the woods longingly, as if communing with someone or something in there. "Enladriel, come back here!" called out the mother. "Only a few more days, and we will be in Arnor." Then she reached out with a porcelain-like hand and pulled the doll-like girl in. "When father regains the favor of the Emperor, we can move back to Xindenganor and we'll find you a proper prince to marry so you'll be properly cared for."*

*"Mother, is there no other path in life besides just sitting around and being pretty and gossiping?" protested the girl, apparently named Enladriel.*

*"Enladriel, remember, we are noble-born Eldharin of Xindenganor and part of being noble-born is to display your natural beauty. You'll understand when you're older and besides, the greatest adventure in life is to use your refined manners and beauty to find the one who will give you children," said the father.*

*While Enladriel sulked next to her mother and looked longingly into the forest, three shadowy figures surrounded the family and their horses. A muscular woman with a clay mask and a dark wolf-pelt cloak howled before charging into the unsuspecting family. A pale-skinned man with a shaved head and a panther pelt for a cloak roared defiantly as he leaped onto the white horse that the father was sitting on. The woman with the clay mask seized Enladriel, who cried out in protest and struggled.*

*The mother leaped off the horse, only to fall onto the ground with a twisted ankle. Without a second thought, a tiger-like man merely mauled her before hacking her body apart with a*

pair of scimitars. "What of the child?" he growled at the woman with the clay mask.

"The child is ours," said the woman, holding onto Enladriel tightly. "She will live." Enladriel's eyes widened in disbelief at the woman's declaration but no words formed in her mouth. She merely sobbed uncontrollably in her powerful grip. "And she will be the one who will lead the remaining Sidhe to triumph over these encroaching mortals. Tindarien Dalithariel has spoken to me, this child will play a pivotal role in restoring Dûnhèasa and undoing the blemish known as Eventhrel Thorondarien."

"This little spoiled princess? I say we offer her to the Eternal Huntress as a burned offering!" growled the tiger-like man. "She wouldn't last a day among us."

"Chevarthien! Do you dare question my authority?" roared the woman, brandishing her scimitar at him.

He let out yet another growl, a muffled one that he barely restrained. "All right. I will accept this... Eldharin child. But don't blame me if the child dies or if She pours her wrath upon us."

Turning to the frightened girl, the woman said, "Child, what is your name?"

"Enladriel Aranwè Il-Alqualondilë na-Kanan," replied Enladriel in a trembling voice, trying not to cry.

"Then today the Eldharin princess known as Enladriel Aranwè Il-Alqualondilë na-Kanan is dead. From this day forth, you will be Cylithera Toel-Ul Thorondarien of the Sidhe. Now, speak your name," said the woman, removing her clay mask to reveal a copper-skinned face with a cold, feral wolf-like expression.

Stuttering, the girl replied, "En- no, Cylithera Toel-Ul Thorondarien."

Vincent almost fell out of his seat when he saw and heard what had happened right before his eyes. Cylithera was once mortal, an Eldharin of noble birth and apparently more related to Tindariel than anyone would've suspected. "Holy crap, no wonder she's so messed up," he thought as he continued to watch the events unfold.

Cylithera, now a youth just barely stepping into womanhood, had charged straight into an older woman with a resigned expression. The older woman appeared to be in her sixties or seventies and carried a very eagle-like expression and air. While it was obvious that she was born human, the slight cold glow in her eyes revealed her to be at least part Sidhe. In a flurry of action, Cylithera hacked at the woman with a pair of scimitars, while the woman merely accepted the attack despite being armed with a pair of cold lightning-sheathed scimitars herself. She merely dropped her blades onto the ground.

"Please, child, live," said the old woman even as darkness overtook her.

"Give in to your bloodlust. Remember, you are Sidhe, not Eldharin. If you fall back into the Eldharin ways your parents tried to force you into, you will face the same fate and worse," growled a male voice nearby.

As the old woman lay dying from numerous wounds, Cylithera continued to slash at her. Finally, when there was no sign of life, the blood-covered youth dropped her own scimitars to pick up the lightning-sheathed blades that now glowed with a cold menacing light. "I dedicate myself to Tindarien Dalithariel, the Eternal Huntress!" she cried out in a harsh voice, holding the scimitars up proudly.

"Cylithera, I can't. You know that my heart belongs with Tarathorn. I'm not one of those guys who can have multiple females," started Vincent.

"Are you so certain? Maybe you have the loyalty in her, but will she?" whispered Cylithera. "Behold this." Vincent gazed into the small silver basin of water Cylithera had prepared.

*"I just got that fourteen on that javelina," called out Tarathorn, peeking through the binoculars after shooting a tiny charcoal-grey arrow from her bow. "You just got the bottom of the twelve."*

*"Danged right you did, you pin-wheeled it! What did you shoot it for?" said Steve, smiling.*

*"I shot it for forty seven," replied Tarathorn. "You?"*

*"Forty five. It was forty seven," said Steve. "You're shooting better than me. You're a born natural at this, you were meant for compound. To think you were struggling with twenty six pounds and could barely control the bow, but now you're shooting nearly forty five with a back-tension release and outshooting me!" exclaimed Steve, pulling her close and holding her. "You don't know how much I've been wanting to really do this," he started.*

*Instead of flinching or protesting, she leaned into his hug. "I know this is wrong, but I'm starting to feel a bit attracted to you," she admitted, blushing. "I still miss Vincent, yet I'm starting to wonder if it was really meant to be. I don't know what it is, but I've been having dreams that there might be someone else, that his path and mine are diverging. I want his path and mine to converge again..." she continued before Steve kissed her on the lips. Much to his surprise, she kissed him back and put her slender arms around his broad form.*

*Reluctantly, Steve broke the kiss and smiled at her. "So, how ya think Vincent and your buddies gonna take to you runnin' off with a thirty-five year old redneck, when they all thought you done got yourself killed in the Gainesville Woods?" When Tarathorn only squeaked something incoherent, he continued, "Like I once said, ya only live once, so you've got to enjoy what you can."*

*"No, I can't believe it," cried Vincent, ready to strike at the image of Steve.*

*"Like it or not, that girl is Alfar, and as well-meaning as they are, they are inclined to stray. You do have the heart of a Sidhe to remain true no matter what and try as she might, her Alfar blood will consume her loyalty to you sooner or later. And even then, it is better to be with one of your own kindred," said Cylithera, her voice no longer so freezing or intimidating.*

*"I know it's been a long time and all, but how could she? She may be Alfar but she's also human," said Vincent, tears streaming from his eyes. "Oh, why, oh why?" he groaned. Then the image shifted again and Vincent's tears began to dry off as he felt his blood grow cold and hot at the same time. Without pausing, he felt sparks of energy flowing through him and he found himself on all fours, roaring defiantly and lashing his tail.*

*Cylithera's piercing sea-grey eyes merely focused on Vincent as he transformed into a mighty tiger. "Yes, give in to your rage, feel the power within you," she said. "Your time will come soon and Dúnhèasa will return to her full glory once we finally defeat the Sarkany and the Alfar." Several heartbeats later, the tiger faded back into the slender but muscular young man.*

*Vincent fell to his knees. "No, I can't."*

*"Imagine this, then. You can avenge yourself upon that man, get him back for what he's stolen from you," insinuated Cylithera, putting her hand on his shoulder. "He's appealing to her Alfar blood, that urge to live for the moment regardless of the consequences later on." Energy began to crackle inside of him again as he felt both rage and jealousy building up*

inside of him. No words passed from his mouth as he roared in fury.

Vincent's sides heaved with raging jealousy as he began to foam at the mouth and lightning passed through his veins. He could feel his canines grow into long fangs and his small fingernails lengthen and sharpen into claws. He roared again, even more loudly, before falling onto all fours, his tail whipping left and right. He sniffed the air and padded away silently, intent on his prey. Later that night, he looked up at the sky again.

Rage burns deep inside my soul  
Why does it hurt when I think of her?  
Something tears a growing hole  
Nothing can silence the furious roar  
Of a jealous spirit.

He realized as he trailed off that it was growing more and more difficult for him to sing. It seemed as if his voice was becoming shy and muted even as he was able to transform more consistently and that he was now able to hold his own well in both melee combat and archery against Cylithera. His throat seemed to constrict whenever he tried to sing and it just didn't feel right. What was happening to him?

## 7 Compound Problems

Steve Barton carried the young woman back to his cottage deep in Gainesville Woods. He looked closely at the woman, obviously a field researcher and a proficient archer based on her gear, then he smiled. She was still unconscious, having finally succumbed to the enchantments he set in the deeper parts of the forest. "Tarathorn, I wish I didn't have to use that spell on you, but you didn't come willingly and there's strange things pursuing you. And let's face it, you're too pretty for me to not want!" he whispered to her longingly with a very strong Southern accent. She was so light in his arms and his pace quickened now that he found her. As the sun grew low on the horizon and the sky grew red and gold, he hastened his steps.

The forest grew thicker, denser, and the pines and palmettos gradually gave way to a mixture of oaks and maples, although these trees' leaves took on a silver cast even in the light of the dimming sun. The fading filtered light gave rise to shadows that danced about, as did the light breeze that passed through the canopy. In Steve's eyes, the shadows reminded him of care-free, playful figures that frolicked in the rapidly cooling evening air. His own shadow even looked long and thin, concealing his heavy-set build.

Finally, he reached his home, an abandoned cottage made of bricks but with vines surrounding it. He waved his hand before the door, which opened for him to reveal a tidy front room with a stove in it and a pair of doors in the back. One door led to a dark room that was only occupied by a bed and a lighted candle, while the other room was filled with various tools, arrows, and a several compound bows, mostly camouflage-colored, but also brightly colored. In the front room was a blue couch with several pillows and a blanket on it. Gingerly, he placed the tiny post-doc on the couch, covered her with the blanket and then went into the room full of archery equipment to resume working on a black and silver split-limb compound bow with blue and silver strings.

*A giant coyote with reddish fur on its chest and a massive panther with glowing eyes both loomed over her. Tarathorn struggled against both beasts and the panther began to claw at her fiercely, while the coyote's jaws locked onto her throat, allowing her to breathe, but just barely. She could feel cold fire spreading through her as the panther mauled her chest and arms. With a wordless cry, Tarathorn gathered her ebbing strength for what may be her last struggle to survive. Electricity crackled through her body as she focused to the best of her ability.*

*Her mind strained against the pain from being mauled and being choked but she held her concentration. As the energy crescendoed inside of her even as blood loss threatened to surround her in darkness, she quickly focused her mind on a line that went through both the panther and the coyote. She released the energy but at the last instant, darkness began to her and the energy fizzled inside of her, releasing only a tiny bolt of blue light that only singed the panther's fur ever so slightly.*

*"Imladrien, know that if you leave Gainesville Woods, we will return for you and devour you," growled the coyote, biting slightly harder and drawing some blood.*

*"Embrace mortality or Eöl-Tinúvion will die," roared the panther. Then both faded away into the shadows, leaving Tarathorn confused, wounded, and weak.*

The next morning, Tarathorn woke up to find herself on a couch in what looked like a fairy-tale style cottage with the stove in the corner and the very simple, almost minimal decoration. On the dark-wooded table not far from her was her longbow, now unstrung, along with her quiver of arrows. "Did someone just redecorate the lounge?" she mumbled to herself. Then it struck her that the student lounge she occasionally napped in didn't have a stove, nor did it lead into a room full of archery equipment. Once she realized she was not in her familiar haunts, she rubbed her eyes and then stood up on slightly unsteady legs. "Oh heck," she said, foggily remembering that she was out doing field work in the Gainesville Woods.

"Good morning, Tarathorn, and I just realized, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Steve," said Steve, coming out from the back room, just out of Tarathorn's sight. "Are you feeling better?"

A lump formed in Tarathorn's throat when she realized it was that brown-haired heavy-set man she had seen the last time she was in Gainesville Woods. "What the heck?" she gasped. "Why the frequency am I here? What the heck happened?"

"You're here because you're now my prisoner," replied Steve. "But don't worry. As my prisoner, I'll see that your needs are met," he added, eyeing her lustily.

Defiantly, Tarathorn stood up on still slightly unsteady legs and said, "I'll not let you touch me!" She could feel energy starting to well up in her, but it fizzled before she could focus it. Her next instinct was to bolt, which she attempted, only to find her feet attached to the ground by invisible weights. "What is the meaning of this?"

Steve merely stood in front of her and only continued to observe the graceful post-doc. "If there was a better word than prisoner, I'd use it. But you will remain here with me or the enchantments of the forest will take you. And if the forest doesn't take you, then there them fixin' to kill you. It is for your safety I want to keep you here. Please, trust me, I don't wanna hurt you!"

Tarathorn paused for a moment and considered what he said to her. Then images of a gigantic coyote and panther came to her mind. "The coyote and the panther..." she gasped involuntarily.

"Yeah, I saw them when I was out hunting and they asked me if I had seen you and what I knew of you. Before I could shoot at them, they dissolved into mist," he replied. A shadow passed over his pale face as he mentioned the coyote and the panther.

"Vincent! I need to warn him!" burst out Tarathorn all of a sudden. "He's seen the panther, but the panther was accompanied by a hawk."

Steve's blue eyes lit up at the mention of Vincent even as a dark shadow passed over his face yet again. "Boyfriend?" Trying to remain calm and knowing that her voice would crack, she merely nodded. He merely grinned, then he motioned for her to look at the black and silver compound bow that he was working on. "For you, by the way," he said, leading her towards it.

"Why?" she asked, her voice cracking slightly, puzzled over why he'd give his prisoner a weapon.

With only a smirk and a shrug, he replied, "You'll find out soon enough." Then he picked up the bow and a handful of grey carbon arrows with white vanes and handed the bow to Tarathorn. "Come outside with me so we can get it fitted to you. I'm damned good at setting up bows, but there's some things I still need the shooter to do for me!"

Reluctantly, Tarathorn followed him, bow in hand. The grip was strangely comfortable to her even if it was a bit smaller and narrower than what she was used to on Undómë, her longbow. She recalled the time she had handled her friends' compound bows and they were extremely heavy, and this one, like the ones she had handled before, were painfully heavy to her. He led her to a set of targets just outside in a clearing in the pine-dominated forest. "Draw the bow until you feel it stop," he said gently, pulling out a tape-measure.

After nocking an arrow to the string, Tarathorn took a long, deep breath and then as she inhaled, she tried to pull back on the blue and silver string. Summoning her strength, she tried to move the string, but it barely even moved even as her face turned scarlet from exertion. "I can't move it," she groaned.

"I'll fix that," he replied, taking the bow and pulling out an allen wrench. He loosened the screws on the limb pockets and then loosened the screws on the limbs before re-tightening the limb pocket screws. "Try this, it should be a lot easier for you."

With a determined expression, she nocked the arrow back on the string and started to pull back. Even with her glove, the string bit into her finger and it began to move after she focused her efforts. Just as she thought her strength was going to give out when her draw reached her chin, she finally reached the corner of her mouth and the weight suddenly disappeared, allowing her to hold it with little trouble. Then her left hand began to tremble as she tried to hold the heavy metal bow in her hand. She let out a small squeak as her arm began to protest at having to hold up such a heavy object.

Steve whispered reassuringly to her, "Don't worry baby, I can back the weight off a bit more and you'll get stronger." Then Tarathorn shuddered a bit when his large, pale, callused hand approached her face but he merely adjusted the little round washer-like object embedded in the string. "I'm just adjusting the peep sight to it'll line up with your eye. Can you see the whole sight window now? And by the way, it's easier if you closed your left eye, sweetie."

Adjusting her eyes and then closing her left eye, she looked through the metal peep. "Almost, needs to be a bit higher," she said, praying her arm would hold up. He then tapped the peep sight upwards until Tarathorn said, "Perfect. I see it all."

"You can let down or fire now," he said. Right as he finished that, Tarathorn's fingers

gave out, sending the arrow on an irregular flight into the target. "And I'm putting you on a release, you little finger-shooter!" With that, he winked at her before taking the bow back into the room.

Out of curiosity, Tarathorn followed Steve into the archery room, where he had pulled out some string and started wrapping it on the bowstring close to where the peep-sight was. "Security?" asked Tarathorn, watching him closely.

"Yup, but if necessary, you can move things a smidgen," he replied, busily wrapping the serving as tightly as possible on the string. "And soon, you're gonna wonder why you only shot that little stick-bow of yours. It's a damn pretty one, but nowhere as pretty as you." At that comment, Tarathorn felt the blood rushing to her face. Steve merely continued his work with a little chuckle. "I reckon nobody's said that to you," he joked. Once he finished tying down the peep-sight, he pulled out a lighter and singed the ends of the serving. "There, now this ain't gonna ever come out. Now that the peep's secure, we're sightin' you in and teachin' you how to shoot one of these. First, we got to find you a good caliper release for your tiny little wrist and hand."

After rummaging through several drawers in the neatly arranged room, Steve finally pulled out three caliper releases. "One of these should fit you nice," he started, looking intently at Tarathorn's tiny wrist. "You're so tiny!" He handed the first one to her, a black one and silver one with a velcro strap.

Fumbling, Tarathorn tried to put it on her right wrist and strap it down. She had the caliper head facing away from her hand and as soon as Steve saw her struggling, he motioned for her to let him help her. Placing the caliper release on the workbench, he then took her right hand and placed it palm-down. Gingerly, he closed the velcro and then said to her, "Just like that. You might want to play with the fit, some people like it really tight, some like it a bit loose. Let's see how it feels with you firing it. I'll show you first."

He led her back to the target, then he brought his own bow, a camouflage-colored weapon with orange and blue strings and cables. In his hand was a well-worn black caliper release that strapped to his wrist. He clipped the head of the caliper release onto the string loop. All the while, Tarathorn watched him closely, taking mental notes on his movements. Drawing back gracefully and smoothly, he closed his left eye, and placed his hand against the back of his jaw, anchoring it firmly. His index finger then uncurled and settled onto the trigger while he focused on the target and moved ever so slightly to put the air bubble in the level in the center and line up the brightly colored fiber with the target. Once he was content with how the fiber lined up with the center of the target, his finger slowly squeezed the trigger, releasing the arrow and striking the target. His hand then moved backwards in a continuous line, while his bow fell forward from the weight of the long stabilizer in front.

Tarathorn then stepped up to the marker and paused for a moment. Her eyes focused on the center of the target, then she raised her bow hand and was about to draw with her fingers until she remembered that Steve had put the release on her. She clipped the release onto the bowstring, then grabbed the part that connected the head to the wrist strap and started pulling back. At first, she thought her muscles were going to go on fire, but she began to inhale slowly and the string moved in the direction she pulled. After what felt like an eternity to her, she felt the weight disappear and she slowly moved her right hand to the back of her jaw. "You can do it, hon," whispered Steve, watching her closely.

As she lined up the pin with the target, her left arm oscillated, shaking the bow. Her right hand, unaccustomed to the feeling of her hand being pulled at the wrist, also began to

tremble. Instinctively, her index finger made its way to the trigger and pulled it in a jagged motion. The arrow flew out of the bow on an unsteady path and struck the target face. "Oops," she said.

"You did good and you'll build the strength soon," said Steve soothingly. "When you've rested, try again. This time, squeeze the trigger slowly so that it's a bit of a surprise. And let me back off the weight a bit more so you won't have to struggle so much." With that, he picked up the bow from Tarathorn and began to make the adjustments again. "In the meanwhile, rest up a bit."

While Tarathorn let her arm recover from holding up such a heavy bow, her mind drifted off to Vincent. How was he holding up? Did the panther or coyote get to him yet? She examined her cell phone, which was now dead from not having been charged for nearly a week. And what did Steve really want of her? It was certainly obvious to her that he lusted after her, but at the same time, there was something that seemed odd about him, but what? Her dark eyes then focused back onto her bow, which was getting some more draw weight removed from it. "How many pounds can you bring it down to?" she asked, breaking the awkward near-silence.

"I brought it down as far as I could, probably around twenty five pounds or so. I can measure it for you if you want, nerd!" he replied slightly teasingly. He took it over to a hanging scale in the room, where he took the peak weight. "Twenty six. You should be ok. This thing will go up to fifty pounds, but that'll come with time. I actually had you started at forty-five and the last time I reckon was about thirty five."

He handed the bow back to the post-doc, who nocked an arrow to it and repeated what she had attempted earlier. At twenty six pounds, it still took a fair amount of effort for her, but she didn't feel anything wanting to burn or fall apart. Once she reached her anchor and placed her hand against the back of her jaw, she then tried to line up the pin with the center of the target. "Aim hard and be the spot," said Steve soothingly as he stood close to her. As the target oscillated less and less (or was it her left hand?), she squeezed the trigger with her right hand, slowly at first but she yelped and leaped up when the trigger released. The arrow landed far left and slightly below the center of the target.

"I think I need a few more data points," said Tarathorn, wincing and rubbing the brand new red mark on her left fore-arm. There were a few droplets of blood on her arm as well. "And maybe I should use an arm-guard."

Steve let out a sigh then pulled out some bandages from one of his pockets. "One thing that'll help is rotating your arm so that your elbow is facing outwards and then adjusting your hand to fit the grip. But you still did good. I think I already know where to adjust your sight, but I'll let you take another shot or two."

Taking Steve's advice, Tarathorn made sure her elbow was facing outwards slightly and bent it ever so slightly. She then drew the bow again, anchored, and aimed. The bow was still felt like a leaden weight in her left hand compared to Undómë but she held it as steady as she could once she found the center of the ring. Focusing as hard as she could but still trembling somewhat, she then placed her right index finger on the trigger and squeezed as slowly as she could until the caliper jaws opened and loosed the arrow straight into the target, just slightly below and left again.

"Feel better?" asked Steve.

"Yeah, but it's so heavy!" replied Tarathorn, panting slightly from the effort of holding up the bow for what felt like an eternity to her.

"And now, this is how you adjust this basic fixed pin sight. When you get more comfortable, I'll have you on something a bit better," he said, taking the bow from Tarathorn and tapping the sight case a bit lower and then to the left. "These don't give you near enough accuracy but it'll help you get some good habits." Then he handed the bow back to her. "Now try and remember, aim hard, baby. Only focus on the shot and nothing else."

This time, Tarathorn found herself wobbling greatly as she aimed and her left arm, if it could speak, would've cried out several curses. Instinctively, she removed her finger from the trigger and placed it behind the trigger before letting down the shot. "Uggh, that felt awful," she said, rubbing her sore right shoulder after putting the bow down.

Steve placed his large hand on her sore shoulder and began to rub it gently. "You did the right thing, sweetie. If something feels wrong, let the shot down, rest, and then try the shot again." When he saw Tarathorn tensing back up at his touch, he said, "Don't worry, girl, I'm not going to do anything that'll make you uncomfortable. When you're ready, try again. We've got plenty of time."

Silently, Tarathorn took yet another shot, this time with much less shaking as she anchored and aimed and the arrow flew straight into the center of the target. "Whew, still feels weird," she commented. "I still like having all the weight at full draw and not having to line things up."

"And now we repeat this procedure at twenty, twenty five, and thirty yards," said Steve, smiling at her. "By the end of today, you'll be shooting all X's!"

"My poor arms and wrist!" thought Tarathorn at the prospect of spending a long time shooting a compound bow.

Tarathorn's eyes fixated on the distant target that Steve had placed in the tree. Drawing her compound bow and anchoring exactly as she almost always did, she positioned the slightly rounded tip of the bright green fiber on the distant white dot. Holding steady, she gradually squeezed the trigger on her release. The arrow sailed gracefully into the target, striking just tangent to the center white dot containing the X.

"Three o'clock, might be a hair off," said Steve, looking into his binoculars. "Very good, sweetie." He placed a large hand on Tarathorn's tiny shoulder and then added, "Try again. Your form was excellent." This time, the arrow struck a bit more to the left right next to her first arrow.

"I got an X on that one." Tarathorn smiled knowing that she finally got an X at eighty yards.

"Now let's see if you can get dead-on inside the X. I know you can do it, baby," he whispered into her ear.

Again, she focused as hard as she could and gently squeezed the trigger once she settled into her anchor point and was satisfied with her aim. The charcoal-grey arrow flew swiftly and gracefully, this time striking in the center of the X. "I got it this time," she said proudly, smiling.

Looking over at the target, Steve put a muscular arm around Tarathorn. "You most certainly did. Now, I want to have you try something a bit new. You've gotten really good with the fixed-pin sight so I want you to take the next step," he said, pulling her closer.

Trembling uncomfortably, she wiggled out of his embrace. "No, I can't give you what you want. As I've told you before, I have another."

"But remember, you only live but once," he said, still eyeing her intently. "And as long

as we're careful, he won't know. And you never know, he might be in the arms of another. Perhaps an aggressive lab-mate or someone who's been waiting for the right moment to strike. Or even that roommate you describe, that gay math guy."

"No," she replied firmly, glaring at him. "I will remain true to Vincent and I know he will remain true. I trust him and he trusts me. I won't violate his trust."

Sighing, Steve stepped back towards the room he kept all of his archery equipment. "I won't force you against your will, but just keep in mind, you and Vincent are both human and humans are just animals that are really obsessed with tools. And animals have but one objective, to reproduce, which requires certain actions. I really want to make you feel good, but that'll only work if you live for the moment and free yourself from strict thinking." Tarathorn merely stood still before nocking yet another arrow to her bow and taking aim at that distant target. While Steve rummaged about in the room, he heard a shattering sound from the distance.

"I think I just killed another arrow."

"That's a good girl," called out Steve, walking out of the room with a field sight, a long grey rod, and a pair of shorter rods mounted to a V-shaped piece of metal. "And now we're going to put you on a field sight and a set of target stabilizers and a back-tension release."

He handed her a small black object that looked like a loop of metal with a beak-like hook on it and a trigger or switch on the opposite side. "You hold this in your hand and press down on that safety," he said, helping her figure out which end was which on it.

"So how does this work?" asked Tarathorn, momentarily forgetting her discomfort at the large man touching her. She squeezed on the trigger with her thumb before looking at it, trying to figure out where the mechanisms were.

With a smile, Steve pulled an identical-looking object from his pocket. "Watch me and put your hand on my back between my shoulder blades. This is a back-tension release and this one doesn't need any manipulation, just pull through your shot with that muscle there." He attached the beak-like part onto the loop on his bowstring, then pressed down on the trigger with his thumb. "And be sure the safety's down before you start drawing because it'll only go off when it goes past the holding weight you set it up for."

"Which means?" asked Tarathorn, mentally analyzing the mechanism. Apparently there was some kind of spring inside of the thing that determined the breaking weight that would cause the thing to release.

"Let me shoot and I'll have you shoot it yourself, you don't need to go analyze every single thing," laughed Steve, drawing his compound bow gracefully and with authority. "And put your hand between my shoulder blades."

Reluctantly, Tarathorn put her hand between the large man's shoulder blades and wondered if it was a ruse to get closer to her. She could feel his powerful muscles even through his clothing and what she thought of as that insulating layer of fat that gave him his barrel-like shape. Her eyes fixated on Steve, focusing on his hand and the release in it. At first, nothing seemed to happen but she could feel the short muscles in his back tighten and the arrow loosed. Steve's release hand just moved backwards slightly in a straight line and his bow kicked back, then fell forward slowly and gracefully before he grasped the bow once again with his bow-hand. "Your turn," he said. "Remember which muscle that was, I know you can do it, sweetie. Same anchor, but your index finger is gonna go against the back of your jaw."

Tarathorn paused, then picked up her bow. Nervously, she grasped her release, squeezed

the safety mechanism, and hooked it onto the string loop. Slowly, she drew her bow, tense and afraid that the release would fire prematurely. Finally after what felt like an eternity, she found her anchor point and she could feel her finger anchoring onto her jaw exactly as Steve told her. "This feels awful," she groaned.

"You'll be fine," he said. "Pretty soon we're gonna have you wondering how you shot that little stick bow." The whole time, he eyed her intently, although the post-doc noticed that his eyes were fixated on more than just her form. "Now, drop the safety and start pulling through. Don't worry about aim just yet."

Trembling a bit, she let go of the safety mechanism but nothing happened. "Pull through," whispered Steve, nuzzling up to her. She then tried to pull through the shot by pulling her hand back, but she only felt resistance and the bow didn't fire. "Remember that shoulder blade muscle," he said, rubbing the area between her shoulder blades.

An involuntary shiver passed through her and concentrating as hard as she could, she contracted the short muscles between her shoulder blades. She could feel the tension in her upper back and suddenly, the release snapped open and the bow fired off. Her heart pounded wildly and she gasped. "Whoa! That was hard!" she groaned.

Smiling proudly at her, Steve said, "And now, I'm going to have you do some blind-baling until you get used to this and it becomes second-nature."

All Tarathorn could manage was a faint "Ouch!"

"I just got that fourteen on that javelina," called out Tarathorn, peeking through the binoculars after shooting a tiny charcoal-grey arrow from her bow. "You just got the bottom of the twelve." She marked the scores on the little black notebook on her quiver.

"Danged right you did, you pin-wheeled it! Whatcha shoot it for?" said Steve, smiling at her.

"I shot it for forty seven," replied Tarathorn. "You?"

"Forty five. It was forty seven," he answered. "You're shooting better than me. You're a born natural at this, you were meant for compound. To think you were struggling with twenty six pounds and could barely control the bow, but now you're shooting nearly forty five with a back-tension release and outshooting me!" he exclaimed before pausing and concentrating. "You don't know how much I've been wanting to really do this," he started.

She leaned into his hug, although she was pretty sure it was because she stumbled into him. "I know this is wrong, but I'm starting to feel a bit attracted to you," she admitted, blushing, still wondering how on earth she could've stumbled into him that way. "I still miss Vincent. I don't know what it is, but I've been having dreams that there might be someone else, that his path and mine are diverging. I want his path and mine to converge again..." she continued before he kissed her softly on the lips. To her own surprise, she kissed him back very shyly, starting to think that maybe he had some other secrets up his sleeve. Electricity built up in her blood yet again, but she held back, certain that he was more than capable of using more powerful enchantments if she did attack.

Reluctantly, Steve broke the kiss and smiled at her. "So, how ya think Vincent and your buddies gonna take to you runnin' off with a thirty-five year old redneck, when they all thought you done got yourself killed in the Gainesville Woods?" When Tarathorn only squeaked something incoherent, he continued, "Like I once said, ya only live once, so you've got to enjoy what you can."

For a moment, Tarathorn thought that Steve looked a lot more slender and wiry and

even had a slight fox-like cast. She blinked and she also noticed that his hair was slightly redder. "I wish he were here," sighed Tarathorn. "Even if I'm starting to take a bit of a liking for you in that way. But I still won't let you touch me like that."

His face also turned slightly reddish when Tarathorn glared at him accusingly. "And yes, I did use a minor enchantment. By my honor though, I ain't usin' that again, just wanted to test you. You're a strong one, not many would've done resisted that one as well as you did."

"Pervert," mumbled Tarathorn, still glaring at him.

"Yes. Very much so," agreed Steve. "And even if I wanna do that again, I dun think it's gonna work, only works once, if at all."

Tarathorn sighed again. From what she knew of enchantments based on what Joanne and Captain Greywolf had taught her, he was telling the truth. It certainly caught her by surprise this time, but she could already feel energy flowing through her veins, almost like a sense of protection growing. "Immunization?" she pondered.

Several nights later, Tarathorn bolted up from sleep and clutched her pillow. "Vincent!" she squeaked. "It can't be!" she sobbed.

"Imladrien. It is true. See how easily he gave himself over to Cylithera without any thought for you," whispered a vaguely familiar male voice. She looked up to see a short, stocky youth with a dark ponytail and a badger-like expression. His clothing, too, reminded her of a badger, and despite the fact that he was transparent, she still poked at him to see if he was real. Her finger felt resistance as she poked at the ghostly figure.

"What the...?" she trailed. Then she recalled the youth's name. Taxadus, the same boy she had seen on her first trip to the Crossroad. "Why are you telling me this?"

"To return a kindness," he replied cryptically. "And to thwart a back-stabbing attempt from both Pelda and Dûnhèasa. Cylithera and Legoregebb are working together to conquer Mag-na-Oige, but Cylithera also seeks to destroy Pelda after weakening the Sarkany. Eöl-Tinúvion is the key to her success. That man must be destroyed if we are all to survive."

Pondering Taxadus' words, she merely glared at him in confusion. "Yet, my heart tells me that Vincent is true and that there's something wrong with that vision I just had. I just don't see Cylithera doing something like that, trying to, well, try to do things to him or have him try to do things to her."

Taxadus shrugged. "You never know for sure because the heart does lie to you sometimes, or at least sees things in distorted light. And think of what it means to be an Alfar, you once showed it to Gildharain himself."

She leaped up in surprise at his words. "To find the small joys every day..." she whispered before looking up again. Taxadus was gone and it was still dark. "Only a bad dream," she mumbled before curling back up with her blanket, only to feel a strange urge to jump back up.

Unable to sleep, she absently wandered around in the cottage. In the next room, she could hear Steve's heavy breathing that occasionally let out some light snoring. He stirred restlessly in his sleep and muttered incoherently before turning around and facing her, eyes still closed. Maybe it was the moonlight that trickled into the room through the half-shut window, but it seemed as if Steve looked a lot more wiry and slender. His moustache and beard were gone and many of the lines of care had faded from his face. There was a slight fox-like cast to his face and his breathing became calmer, lighter.

"Steve?" she gasped. "I know there's a secret you're hiding," she thought.

Still asleep, Steve began to mutter quietly without any hint of his strong Southern accent. "I can't. No. The Stellar Tiger will not have her, nor will she... I need to protect her."

Looking closer at him, Tarathorn noticed that he looked like someone she knew, but who? She racked her memory but nobody quite came to mind. Then her memory went back to the statues that were at that secluded archery range. In the moonlight, his frame matched that of the statue and his compound bow, which he usually kept close by, looked much more like a horse-bow with the way the handle was set back and its sweeping curves towards the ends. Before she could dart away, Steve began to stir and mumble softly. She then blinked and in her sleep-deprived eyes, Steve's form flashed in a blast of silver light.

Then she rubbed her eyes to see Vincent curled up in the soft glow of the moon and stars. She resumed rubbing her eyes, certain she was dreaming or hallucinating. "Tarathorn?" whispered Vincent's voice to her.

She let out a small squeak of disbelief. "I'm not just dreaming, am I?" she asked, staring at him, wondering if it was Vincent or Steve.

"Maybe you are, maybe you're not. It's all a matter of perspective," he replied, smiling at her as he reached over to pull her close.

Still looking at him closely, she said, "No. I still can't let you touch me. I want to believe that you are indeed Vincent Zhong-hua Gahan, but my heart has misgivings. Visually, yes, you are him, but deep inside, I know you're not. Who exactly are you? You say you're Steve Barton the redneck bow mechanic, but there's more, I can see that."

He shook his head sadly and replied, "I once knew, but my memories are dim after a fight with a dark figure. It might've been a Sidhe or a Dhaerow, but in the flash of darkness, it was very hard to tell. I saw a scimitar shimmering in the darkness and a pair of red cat-like eyes. I took a painful hit to the head and woke up here with little recollection. I don't remember my own true-name but oddly enough, I know yours, Imladrien." For a moment, Tarathorn could only stare at him. Vincent's athletic form faded away and Steve's heavy-set self slowly returned before her eyes.

"And yet I never told it to you," began Tarathorn, trying to figure out Steve.

"Does Vincent even know your true-name?" he asked slyly.

She glared at him and then said, "Yes. And I know his as well."

Steve approached her a bit more closely, but he kept his hands to himself. "For some reason, though, I sense that you're the one who can help me find my true name again," he admitted with a sheepish grin.

Tarathorn shrugged, wondering what was going to happen next. Whose else's true-name would she know besides those of her closest friends? Then while she racked her memory, there was a loud rumbling that surrounded the house. Without even thinking, she felt a surge of energy flowing through her and her surroundings grew larger. She fell onto all fours and she smelled blood all around her. A coyote or a wolf howled and a large cat roared nearby. Bellowing in sudden pain, Steve lurched forward before collapsing in front of her. A large coyote was mauling the heavy-set man and would've broken his neck in its powerful jaws had Tarathorn not leaped up onto the coyote and bit as fiercely as she could. "Leave my friend alone!" she shouted, although all that came out was frantic yapping.

The coyote's focus then went to the tiny black fox and she snapped at her, easily dislodging the much smaller fox from her leg. Stunned, Tarathorn could only look helplessly as the coyote pounced on her and locked her mighty jaws onto her throat. Fire passed through her

as the air got cut off from her, but amidst the flashing pain, she saw an explosion blue-silver light and air returned to her lungs. The coyote let out an anguished howl and Tarathorn could feel something lifting her up, cradling her gently and murmuring softly into her ears.

*"Imladrien, please live!" murmured the voice, which sounded a lot like Steve.*

*"Before you return to the living, perhaps you should witness this," spoke another voice, a sultry-sounding female voice with many notes of urgency.*

*Tarathorn tried to focus amidst the brightly colored lights and shadows, then she saw Vincent standing alone in the forest with his bow, Lhîndôme. He focused intently on something in the distance before nocking an arrow and drawing it back. Then some of the rainbow swirls faded away to reveal a tall woman standing next to him and brushing her hand against his shoulder. Vincent loosed the shot and then his hand found hers.*

"No!" shrieked Tarathorn as her deep brown eyes flew open. She bolted up and clung onto Steve, who stood over her and was about to put another cold towel on her forehead. He stayed at her side all through the night and hoped that whatever it was would pass.

"I wish I could do more for you," he sighed, kissing her lightly on the cheek and holding her tiny hands in his. She merely stirred a bit but didn't wake up.

Softly, the sleeping post-doc murmured, "Vincent, I missed you so much." It was a long night for Steve as she began to shiver yet again despite the fact that she seemed to be burning up with a high fever.

Several nights later after the fever passed, after a particularly demanding set of archery drills in her quest to improve her accuracy and precision, Tarathorn was insomniac yet again. She tossed and turned on the couch through the star-lit night. Steve was nearby and apparently he was also restless judging from the rustling and stirring she heard. "No, that's not right," she thought to herself, still recalling that moment he had kissed her on the lips. "Vincent is loyal to me and he deserves no less from me."

Her keen ears then registered movement from the heavy-set man. Instead of coming towards her directly, he merely stood up and gazed out of the window for a moment before turning towards her. "Trouble sleeping too?" he asked, slowly approaching her. The post-doc clutched her blanket and covered herself a bit more even though she was fully clothed. He sat next to her on the edge of the couch and put his arm around her. She dropped the blanket and squirmed slightly at his touch. "Still uncomfortable?" he whispered to her.

"You should know," she said firmly, muscles tensing in anticipation of having to push the heavy-set man away.

"I do know, but you're also denying your own true nature, that of the human and of the Alfar," he replied, sensing the tension in her muscles. "Surely you enjoyed that kiss," he added. "A kiss ain't cheatin', 'specially not one of them innocent pecks."

She tried to remain as calm as possible even in the man's embrace despite the attraction she began to feel towards him. Unconsciously, her arm wrapped itself around Steve. The man responded by holding her a bit more closely and rubbing her back lightly. Part of her mind told her that it was safe, that it was a gesture of friendship, not too different from when Katie offered to massage anyone in their circle of close friends. Yet there was something else that was also running through her mind. There was an element of sensuality in Steve's touch that wasn't at all in Vincent's touch, despite the fact that she and Vincent had been dating for three years. It was true, there was never anything more intimate than a kiss or a hug or maybe crashing out next to each other after one too many long homework assignments,

but never anything close to what Steve was offering. It was very tempting, but thoughts of her time with Vincent kept her from thinking about giving in for more than a split second, which was long enough to disturb her, but not long enough for the rest of her to act.

The post-doc's mind wandered while Steve continued to rub her back, easing the tension and the knots formed from her nervousness. She enjoyed the feeling of his large, meaty hands on her shoulders and her tired back. Was there something that Vincent had been holding out on? She reflected on how people used to make fun of both her and Vincent for choosing to remain chaste. Then she thought about what her mother had always told her. *Wait until you're married before anything happens even if you have to wait a long time. If your half-breed girly boy really loves you, he'll respect you and also want to wait until you're finally married.* Although her mother never really liked Vincent and saw him as very effeminate, she never showed the same intense dislike as her father did. After all, Vincent was of mixed ancestry and her family prided itself on always keeping their bloodlines pure. And then there was his best friend Ivan, the one her parents referred to as "that effeminate abomination" and the Geekster project. Still, Vincent always treated her and her family with nothing but utmost respect and courtesy even if he accidentally started swearing in front of them early on. He quickly learned to watch his language a bit more after a few stern lectures from her parents.

By the time Tarathorn exited her reverie, she noticed that Steve's hands were still on her upper back and shoulders, slowly working out those tense knots in here. "See, even I'll behave myself," he whispered. "Feeling better there? You're more tense than them compounds there."

"I know, I'm tense, thank you for relieving the knots. Vincent's still very much on my mind and I'm still worried about my friends Ivan and Galka," she replied, relieved that Steve wasn't trying to do anything just yet. She leaned slightly into him.

He held her closely and kissed her lightly on the forehead before saying, "Imladrien, you know how much I want you, both in that way and for you to embrace your Alfar roots. Of course, to be an Alfar is to follow your instinct and do what your heart and instincts tell you is right."

Tarathorn could just barely gasp even while she still leaned back into his warm, muscular body. "Steve, explain to me who or what you are," she finally said. "I asked once but never got a satisfactory answer."

Steve released her from his embrace and faced her before bowing his head in both pain and shame. "I do owe you that," he began, his Southern accent instantly vanishing. His voice fell to little more than a whisper. "I've lost my true name when I was banished. Gildharain was going to name me as his successor if you chose mortality, which he was sure you would because of your bond with Tinúvion... then Kiora took over. I was hoping to find Gildharain again, but there has been no sign of him, not for the last year."

"I wondered too, why I suddenly didn't hear him piping in my dreams," she said. "I used to hear him so often in my dreams and even Vincent and Ivan would hear the piping every now and then. And then it was as if he vanished from all existence."

While Tarathorn and Steve contemplated the possible situations Gildharain may be facing, loud howling surrounded the clearing. The wind grew stronger and the lights gradually dimmed as the air cooled around them. Without warning, bright flashes of light materialized in the room. Instinctively, Tarathorn leaped up to her feet and for some reason, water-like melodic words formed in her mouth and electric energy began to flow through her, warming

her slightly in the chill air. The energy still remained in her, eager for release, and Tarathorn tried her best to hold the words back, but they continued to flow softly, causing more energy to accumulate in her tiny body. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see one of Steve's compound bows showing up in his hand and his quiver at his side. She heard Steve nock an arrow to his bow and draw it, not with his back-tension release, but with his caliper release.

In less than a heartbeat, the lights solidified into a horde of giant coyotes and badgers and a girl Tarathorn recognized. Dark-skinned like her but powerfully built with a clay mask resembling a coyote covering her grim features, she recognized this girl as none other than Kiora. Steve let out a groan before loosing the arrow into the nearest coyote, knocking it over and going through several coyotes before stopping in a wall. Bright blue fire flew out from Tarathorn's finger-tips, striking yet more coyotes and setting them ablaze, yet the fires did not consume them. Once again, Tarathorn felt energy building up in her as words started to form, while Steve's compound bow turned into a longsword.

"Imladrien, I see you are well," started Kiora, snarling at her viciously. "And you're starting to tap into your Alfar roots a bit with that fire." She then drew her scimitars and charged at the post-doc in a single fluid motion, howling and growling furiously as she did.

This time the urge to speak the fluid, airy words was even stronger and fire threatened to consume her veins. Instinctively, Tarathorn spoke the words and focused on Kiora, sending a blast of blue fire at her. Kiora continued her charge, heedless of the flames, only to find that there was a barrier surrounding the young post-doc. "Stay back, Kiora!" commanded Tarathorn, unafraid of the girl. While she held the coyotes at bay, her shadow took on a fox-like shape and her ears became long and pointed.

Steve watched Tarathorn in awe as blue, non-consuming fire continued to pour from her hands, restraining Kiora and the rest of the coyotes. The heavy-set man merely whispered to himself, "Imladrien Shadow-Fox, chosen by Gildharain."

Snarling in defiance, Kiora raised her scimitar and let out a blood-curdling howl. Tarathorn's blue flames faded but she focused on Kiora again and words tumbled from her mouth once again, this time releasing a silver-blue ray in her direction. Kiora leaped aside from the ray, but some of the coyotes remained in its path and they vanished from sight, leaving a few stray hairs. Tarathorn let out a gasp of shock, certain that her spell had disintegrated them. Energy still threatened to pour from her and more words formed in her mind, ready to emerge if necessary.

"If you want, destroy me like you did my companions, but hear me out first," hissed Kiora, trying to conceal her shock at Tarathorn's abilities. "Your nightingale has left you, he's embraced his Sidhe roots. He's intending to bond with Cylithera and she seeks to return to mortality, so intent on regaining a soul she is." Tarathorn shook that image, the one of Vincent being in the cold goddess' arms, then merely glared at the coyote-like girl.

Continuing to glare in disbelief at Kiora, Tarathorn said, "If Cylithera wants to regain a mortal soul, why is she even bothering to bond with someone with Sidhe roots? Aren't Sidhe effectively immortal? You're full of crap, Kiora!"

Suddenly, Kiora let out a hideous laugh, similar to that of a hyena but higher-pitched. She then waved to them, resumed coyote form and bolted out, leaving a trail of footprints, blood, and wisps of energy. Puzzled but determined to figure out what was going on, Tarathorn and Steve quickly ran out, following the trail she left.

## 8 Mortal Weaknesses

Kiora removed the clay mask from her tanned face before looking at the setting sun and planting her spear into the soft ground. It had taken her a while to fly from Scaetha to Mag-na-Dubh, the southwestern-most island of Mag-na-Oige and right at the border of Dûnhèasa. "Iliiriana! I am here!" she called out.

A large panther and a silver and gold-feathered hawk materialized before her in a small cylinder of light that emerged from the ground. "Has Gildharain returned?" asked the panther, gazing at her with glowing red-gold eyes.

"No. Has there been any sign of Gildharain? And has Imladrien been found or slain?" asked Kiora, forcing herself to maintain a stoic expression.

"Imladrien lives yet. She has been driven into hiding but we will soon flush her out. There is a powerful fey creature, possibly Tuatha, that protects her, but whatever it is cannot protect her for long. I sensed its power gradually waning," replied the panther. "And we were delayed. We had been captured by the Sarkany, but they have not learned anything yet."

The hawk added, "The Eldest is fading, as is his consort, Ereny, and Oroszlan and Galka have been found. Galka has been chosen to be Legoregebb's successor, and Oroszlan will be her consort unless someone can lead him astray once more. Oroszlan is unsure of himself but we must strike him while he is still weak and spineless. Our time in captivity was not in vain."

Watching the surroundings cautiously, Kiora nodded at the news. "So the Sarkany are indeed weak and in a state of transition, Pelda will easily fall at our hands. What of Cylithera? Has she considered the offer to instead maintain peace between us and instead take Pelda, which was also rightfully taken from us?"

"Funny you would speak of her that way, considering you had raised a faction against Gildharain to conquer Dûnhèasa a mere few years ago," laughed the panther sarcastically.

"And even more ironic that one of Dûnhèasa would seek help and give help to one from Mag-na-Oige," said Kiora. "Iliiriana, tell me, where are your loyalties? And same with you, Firianna. Are you seeking to usurp Cylithera from her place?"

"My loyalties are to Dûnhèasa and to Dûnhèasa alone. If Cylithera falters, then I shall do what is necessary," replied the panther evenly. "If she succumbs to the prophecy that a man with a pure singing voice and an even purer heart will bring her back to mortality, then I shall challenge her personally." With that, the panther bared her fangs to emphasize her point.

Kiora shrugged off Iliiriana's display of fury, then said, "No more than what is needed. Gildharain has also faltered and has not returned, and thus, I am now the leader of the Alfar. But be aware, Dhaerow and mortal-born Sidhe, if I sense you attempting to backstab me, vengeance will be painful. And that goes for you too, Firianna, former human of pathetic origins!"

A rustling in the brush alerted the three of them and Iliiriana crouched down, ready to pounce while Firianna's muscles tensed, ready to attack the intruder. Kiora grabbed her spear, ready to stab at whoever or whatever it was. The rustling continued until a stripe of black fur poked out. "Fear not, Kiora. It is I, Taxadus." A stocky, muscular boy with deeply tanned skin of about thirteen years emerged. He wore a cloak that resembled a gigantic badger and the expression on his face was one of perpetual anger and hatred.

Firianna, the hawk, glared at the badger-like boy. "Why are you here, Taxadus?" she demanded. Iliiryana let out a menacing growl at Taxadus as her eyes glowed an angry red-gold.

Standing still and showing no signs of fear, he said, "I have heard much and I wish to speak of some concerns. There have been schisms forming among the Alfar regarding Gildharain. There is a small faction that still believes in him and are trying to bring him and the prophesied Imladrien back."

"Imladrien. Tarathorn Suttankankul," hissed Firianna. "Perhaps we have a use for you." Iliiryana looked up at the hawk, perched high overhead. She tilted her head in puzzlement, as did Kiora. Firianna seldom spoke out on her own initiative with her own ideas. Ignoring her companion and the coyote-cloaked girl, she continued, "Imladrien is the one who will bring Gildharain back and it has been prophesied that Tinúvion is one who will destroy Cylithera if she succumbs to her mortal longings. What if we had Imladrien and Tinúvion slay each other? Iliiryana, did you not speak of Clawstaff and Tanilthara trying to find a champion to fight against the rise of the Stellar Tiger and that both will be destroyed in the fight?"

"So are you implying that the Tinúvion may also be the Stellar Tiger they fear so much?" asked Kiora. "And that the champion could very well be Imladrien?"

With a toothy grin and a mirthful greenish-gold glow in her eyes, Iliiryana laughed. "Firianna, I am quite proud of you, I never would have thought of that," she said sincerely. "And what better way to make both of them rise to the occasion than to attack both of them where they're weakest?"

"What weaknesses could they have that would leave them open? I tried to strike at Imladrien but could not bring myself to slay her," growled Taxadus, his expression turning even more feral than before.

Snickering a bit, Iliiryana said, "No, you cannot strike them directly. But they are mortal and are under a curse known as love, and there is no hurt greater than love betrayed and severed. Is that not right, Firianna?"

Wincing a bit, as if recalling a long-past pain, she replied, "Exactly. Humans are weak and I know that Imladrien and Tinúvion are very much in love to the point where they are both seriously considering sharing their lives. If we can convince both that the other has strayed and thus betrayed their unspoken promise, we can work further into their minds until only hatred for the other fills them."

Kiora's eyes lit up at the ideas Firianna and Iliiryana had put forth. After all, Tarathorn did interfere with her plans before. With an evil smirk, she offered, "I'll make sure to set those two against each other." Then after nods of approval from the two Sidhe, she added, "But what of the third one, the one known as Oroszlan? Surely there's somewhere we can attack him too!"

"I have a plan for him so he can't interfere or help his fellow Sarkany. As for Galka, she is much more of a threat, but with Oroszlan's fall, she too will fall to help him. And we will trap and destroy her," said Iliiryana, smiling.

## 9 Ivan or Oroszlan?

Ivan struggled to keep up with Galka, who flew with swift, powerful wing-beats through the dry air. Thankfully, the wind was behind him and Galka would periodically slow down to allow him to catch up to her. "We must make haste," said Galka. "I know you're not used to flying like this, but do what you can. If you must, return to human form and I will carry you."

His chest and back muscles burned with a dull, but fiery ache, and his wings felt like they would fall off if he kept flapping harder. Despite the pain, he continued to follow her. "I think I can do it," he groaned in a muted clanging voice.

After what felt like an eternity of hard flying, Ivan and Galka finally sighted the cave that Legoregebb dwelled in. Ivan was panting heavily, his forked tongue hanging out of his mouth and every single muscle in his reptilian body hurting. Even Galka was breathing heavily as her mighty sides heaved from exertion. "I probably should've gotten you accustomed to long flights first instead of spending so much time understanding mortals!" she joked, trying to keep her own spirits up.

Finally, they landed on the ledge that led into the gigantic cave. Ivan thought back to the time he and Vincent had ridden in Legoregebb's claws five years ago. A twinge of pain passed through him at the memories of the long, painful flight out of that strange University. His stomach started turning at the thought of facing Legoregebb again. It had been years since he had last seen the ancient Sarkany in the flesh, even if he had many troubling dreams of the Eldest. "They are fading, make haste, they wish to speak with you," clanged a deep, eerie voice in his head.

Galka and Ivan both ran in as fast as they could into the cave as they felt a sense of urgency pass through them. Wetness formed around both of their eyes, especially Galka's, and Ivan could see her sides heaving even more than when they had flown at full speed straight into the hot head-winds. In the vast opening lay Legoregebb on one side, his sides barely moving and his normally burnished gold scales looking dull and tarnished. Ereny lay on the other side, also barely moving and her cat-like eyes were only half open. "Galka and Oroszlan. Our time as you know us is nearing," said Ereny in a soft, muted clang.

"As you know, Galka, you have been chosen to lead the Sarkany. You alone have proven that you can not only unite our kindred, but also reach out to the other Tuatha and to mortals," said Legoregebb, coughing and gasping.

"While we still live, we wish to confer our blessings upon you, so that your union will last until the end of your days and produce many offspring," whispered Ereny, her voice sounding like a fading bell-chime.

Ivan's eyes widened at the mention of producing offspring and the thought of spending the rest of his days with Galka. He looked at Galka, then at the two ancient Sarkany. In the five years he had known Galka, he always saw her as a dear friend, much like Vincent and Tarathorn. Periodically she did remind him of his future duty, should he embrace his Sarkany roots, but that was an abstract idea to him. "O-Off-s-spring?" he stuttered.

"Yes. Our blood is thin, and you, like other mortal-born Sarkany, have the blood to renew our vigor. We expect you to soon cement your union."

Galka saluted both of the ancient Sarkany respectfully and poked Ivan with her tail to have him do the same. "The ceremony will be in three days," hissed Legoregebb. "Assuming, of course, that Oroszlan has embraced his true roots. I will let you and Galka resolve this

matter, but understand that this is not only a matter of strengthening our blood. It is also one of leadership and of stemming the rise of both the Stellar Tiger and the Shadow Fox, who threaten to destroy the balance.”

”Me? Lead?” squeaked Ivan nervously.

”Yes. It is deep within you, Oroszlan. Did you not summon and command the fires within?” said Ereny, eyeing Ivan with her cat-like eyes.

Had he been human, Ivan would’ve blushed, but instead his scales involuntarily shifted. Legoregebb let out a faint laugh at Ivan’s modesty before saying, ”When the time comes, it will manifest, as did your true nature. I have faith in you.”

*Tuz.* Ivan willed the flame into the hearth before looking at himself in the mirror. Next to him was Galka in her natural draconian form. ”Your human form doesn’t become you at all, if you ask me. I know you miss your friends, but perhaps under our leadership, the different races of the Tuatha may not have to be sundered.”

Smiling at the copper-scaled Sarkany next to him, Ivan said, ”Could be worse than this scrawny toothpick here. I do wonder what they’ll choose, knowing the tension between Sidhe and Alfar even after we got Cylithera and Gildharain to stop fighting.”

”I wish I could foresee what will happen with Eöl-Tinúvion and Imladrien, but their futures are beyond the vision of even the wisest,” said Galka. ”You know what to do, though.”

Focusing hard, Ivan looked at himself once more, then at the Sarkany next to him. He felt the fire in his blood growing stronger and with a loud roaring clang, he saw a bright flash of light. In a few heartbeats, he saw himself once again and could feel his long, scaly tail undulating slowly and his wings brushing lightly against the ceiling of the cave. ”Galka, I’ve decided,” he whispered. ”I know I can’t have Vincent and he and Tarathorn were made for each other no matter what they choose. I also hear the Calling in me and I have to admit, I feel a peace with you and the other Sarkany that I’ve never felt before.” With that, Ivan bowed down before her.

At that moment, a cylinder of green light appeared and solidified into a young man with handsome features and short, dark hair. ”Damn, he looks like a linear combination of Dr. Nunnelley and Vincent!” For a moment, he felt the fire in his blood change from elemental strength to lust and the urge to become human again started to nag at him.

The young man called out suggestively, ”Ivan, giving up so quickly? Conforming to something you don’t really want to do? You know you really want someone like me.” He smiled at Ivan and motioned for him to turn back into a human.

Galka tried to say something but no voice emerged from her though her jaws moved. ”No, I’ve made my decision. What I see in Galka goes further than what I see in you. I won’t abandon a dear friend who has been with me all these years for someone who tickles my physical lusts,” said Ivan firmly. ”I know some would say I should do as I please, but I also have my duties, not only to my friends, but to my kindred, the Sarkany.”

”What about yourself? Surely, you don’t want to be trapped in a situation forced upon you by honor when you can have your freedom! Just turn your back on honor and come to me,” cajoled the young man.

Ivan’s mind began to whirl at the man’s suggestion. Despite his attempts to stop the man from probing his mind, he still saw images of Vincent in his arms. ”It’s just a figment of my imagination. He belongs to Tarathorn and nobody else. Illusion, leave me be! I will

have the one who is right here before my eyes!" he roared and suddenly the strange feeling in him vanished. He no longer felt the urge to return to human form and put his arms around the strange young man.

"You've been tricked by that Sarkany witch!" protested the young man but his slender form warped into that of a humanoid badger.

"I command you to leave me and trouble me no more," clanged Ivan menacingly. "I admit to having my moments of weakness and accept that not everything will be perfect, but I will do what I can to fulfill my duties!"

The humanoid badger began to fade away at Ivan's command and despite its attempt to claw at the male Sarkany, it merely went through him. Slowly, as the badger-man dissipated, Galka's voice returned, first a tiny whisper, then her usual resonant clanging voice, though no words formed. Before fading completely away, the badger shouted, "Iliiryna sends her greetings to you, Galka. This should teach you to interfere with another's natural desires. Now, you'll be little more than a voiceless creature, a mere worm!"

A blue-grey cloud replaced the fading creature and surrounded Galka. Without a second thought, Ivan leaped in the way to intercept the cloud and opened his mouth to breathe fire at the cloud. Instead of fire coming out, he inhaled the foul cloud deep into his lungs. He felt as if a cold knife cut through his lungs and his throat ached with a freezing pain.

With the badger-man's disappearance, Galka's voice returned to her and she shouted, "Oroszlan! Fight it before it takes over you!"

Roaring in agony, Ivan tossed his head back and thrashed about in pain. Cold spread through his body and the fire in him dimmed until it was little more than an ember. Coughing and spluttering, greenish blood flowed from his mouth and his tongue hung out as he struggled to breathe. The greenish blood sizzled as it struck the ground, but gradually his blood took on a more reddish cast and his reptilian form diminished back into a humanoid shape. Ivan let out a faint hissing cry and blood continued to flow from his mouth as he coughed violently. His body began to convulse while he struggled to breathe and get the cloud out from his lungs.

Galka's voice clanged above Ivan's coughing and gagging. *Embar*. Her draconian form diminished back into a humanoid form. Quickly, she leaned over Ivan supported him as he gasped in pain. "By the fire and wind inside, cast the chaos aside!" she chanted, placing a dark copper-skinned hand over his heart. A fiery yellow-orange light surrounded her hand and poured into his chest while coughing wracked his body. She continued to glow brightly even as Ivan writhed about in pain and his face grew even paler than its usual paleness. Red blood poured out from his mouth and nose before he finally coughed up a pale grey-green cloud with streaks of red.

Upon coughing up the cloud, Galka pointed to the cloud with a yellow-orange-glowing hand and said authoritatively, "*Csendes*". The light surrounded the cloud but it began to fade as the cloud absorbed the energy. The woman's skin grew paler as she continued to focus, but the grey-green cloud remained unchanged. Ivan's face, though, began to darken again and let out a resonant, clanging roar. From his mouth poured out yellow-orange flame, which he aimed at the cloud that threatened to envelop Galka. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but gradually the sickly cold coloration faded from the cloud until it became little more than wisps of smoke that dispersed.

"Galka? You ok?" asked Ivan, hugging her tightly.

Slowly, her pale humanoid form darkened back to its normally copper tone. Gradually,

she returned to draconian form and leaned up against the slender male. "I will be fine. Just let me rest," she whispered.

## 10 The Clawed Fury Comes Through

Dr. Joanne de Salvo leaned back in her office chair after coding for several hours in R to develop an artificial neural network-based model to predict post-Rift climate change in the next several years if the planet continued to become more lush in vegetation. Just then, her radio began to go off. "And now, it's come down to the final show-down between our top three archers in the young adult division. Our first contender is a rookie in competition, Roberto Pichardo. He is a post-doctoral fellow in marine ecology at UC Berkeley but he's also one mean shot with that bright flame orange forked-riser Nightbird Dragonfly of his. Our second contender is Katie Castro, another rookie in competition. She is a post-doctoral fellow in biogeography at UC Davis and like her fellow Californian, is a real killer with her camouflage Hoyt Ultra-Elite. Our third and final contender is Matthew Tripp of Ocala, Florida with an experimental prototype he and his father developed together. He is the chief engineer and designer of Nightbird Archery and three-time world champion. Which of these three youngsters will win this year's championship? Will it be one of the Californians or will it be our defending champion?"

"Damn, I'm connected to all three of them!" thought Joanne, recognizing Robert and Katie as the two rather rough ones who hung out with the Geeksters and Tarathorn. She winced slightly at the thought of the last time she had to compete with Katie in jiu-jitsu and the time she sparred with Roberto in tae kwon do. Both of them nearly sent her to the hospital despite the fact that they indeed pulled their attacks and took it easy on her.

"So, who ya rooting for?" asked a male voice that Joanne recognized as her husband, Thomas. "I'm rooting for Tripp, but of course, he's also from close to my hometown!" The huge broad-shouldered man then pulled up a chair next to Joanne and hugged her. "You're not coding again, are you?" he groaned after seeing the monitor.

The radio announcer continued. "And in the senior division, we have two contestants remaining, but remember, anyone who makes it to the finals is a winner. The first contender is Helen Claudio, a tenured professor of biogeochemistry with a joint appointment at Caltech and the Institute of Ecological Sciences in Ocala, Florida. She's usually more associated with the longbow or hunting recurve, but also quite the killer with the compound. Our second contender is Tracy Tripp, Matthew's father and a co-founder of Nightbird Archery and ironically, Helen's old coach who got her from fearing and scorning the compound to enjoying and mastering it."

Thomas looked intently at the short, raven-haired Mexican woman as she clicked on the mouse once more and made the program run. She in turn, smiled at the tall, brown-haired man who once risked everything to save her life even after she had coldly rejected his affection. "I'm rooting for the Captain, but that's because she was my PhD adviser," said Joanne, grinning as she allowed herself to be lifted up by her muscular husband.

"That must be so damned fucked-up for both them," joked Thomas. "Coach against student and apparently a bit more than that! I guess it's better than a husband-wife competition if she had gone traditional and went against that bear-like dude, never remember

his name.”

While the radio droned on, suddenly there was a loud siren coming from the radio. ”Holy mother of god! Helen Claudio has just passed out in a strange glow of light just as she loosed that last shot, which was dead in the spot! And what’s this? A giant bird coming down from the sky and trying to lift her up? Paramedics are trying to revive her and keep the demon bird at bay. Has Tehanu Syndrome manifested in her as well, or is this some fluke from being so close to the Rift?”

Joanne exclaimed in a slightly shrill voice, ”Mierda santa! Cylithera Eaglestrike and Dûnhèasa.”

”Not again,” groaned Thomas, recalling how he nearly lost Joanne to the call of the Sidhe.

”Holy crap! Looks like Helen has turned into a giant grey and silver-furred wolf but she’s not doing anything violent. She’s just laying relaxed and calm at her opponent’s feet. What’s this? Some big, fat, hairy bear-like man is running down from the audience and hugging her and whispering soothing words into her ears like she’s a big puppy! Oh wait, maybe it has an effect, oh look, her opponent is also encouraging her to return to human form. And maybe there’s something weird going on because Helen is turning human again! Yes, she’s human again and looks like she’s not all bothered by the transformation and she wants to continue the shoot!”

Joanne then felt a sharp, almost shock-like pain pass through her and she felt electricity running through her harm. Feathers began to sprout on her arms and she could feel her toes turning into talons. ”What the hell?” she asked aloud.

Without hesitation, Thomas held her close, embracing her with his powerful, muscular arms. He continued to hold her close, stroking her feathered arms, lightly touching the silver feathers that threatened to take over. Slowly as Joanne struggled to remain human by taking long, slow, deep breaths and focusing her mind away from Dûnhèasa and the Sidhe. She leaned into him, reminding herself that she had already chosen to remain human, that she wanted to spend the rest of her days with Thomas, even with his odd quirks here and there. The huge man kissed her lightly and the feathers gradually began to recede until they completely disappeared. Exhausted from forcing herself to remain human, she collapsed into him, no longer the ferocious, powerful were-falcon who sought to enter Dûnhèasa, but the hard-working scientist that Thomas had fallen in love with many years ago.

Then the computer monitor began to flicker and the room grew painfully cold for both of them. ”Mierda santa,” mumbled Joanne, wondering what was about to happen next. The radio also spluttered and fell silent just as the announcer was ready to announce the winner of the shoot-off in the senior division.

The window in her office flew open and a coal-black raven with glowing red eyes and a red-tailed hawk with an unusually intelligent expression flew in. ”You know them?” gasped Thomas, suddenly feeling both weak and afraid. He suspected something was wrong with these two birds and painful memories of his time as a prisoner in the Sidhe compound many years ago flooded his mind. ”Fucking shit. Ili-whatever, that one that tried to steal your soul,” he swore.

Both raven and hawk alighted upon the desk and transformed in a flash of silver light accompanied by the sound of thunder. The hawk became a raven-haired woman with narrow, slanted brown eyes and an expression of persistent frustration. Her long, black hair swirled about in the winds that blew about in the room and she was wearing shadowy grey leather

armor that seemed to shift with the wind. On her hips were a pair of scimitars and on her back was a silver-grey longbow with what Joanne recognized as semi-static tips. The raven became a short, silver-haired woman with dark, dusky skin with a very faint purple tinge and glowing red eyes. She had a jet-black suit of leather armor and a pair of scimitars at her side and a black longbow on her back. Both women had the symbol of a panther's paw and a crescent moon on the chest-plates of their armor.

"Firianna, I see you got your arm replaced and made it in one piece after that battle," said Joanne, trying to stay calm. "What brings you here? I thought I was done with Dûnhèasa! Iliiryana, what the hell do you want? I thought we were finished!"

Iliiryana, the dusky-skinned woman, merely smirked at the couple and made a flicking motion of her hand. Unable to resist, both Joanne and Thomas found themselves kneeling before her. Thomas attempted to stand up again, but as soon as he tried, pain radiated from his knees all the way to his chest and he couldn't breathe. As soon as he followed the compulsion, the pain vanished. Joanne growled and feathers began to grow out from her arms again. "Bow down before me, mortals!" commanded Iliiryana.

Firianna merely stood, watching. "Accept your new goddess! Together we will restore the glory of Dûnhèasa and unite the Tuatha under Iliiryana the Clawed Fury!"

"You know, you do sound a bit like Senator Mathers' bunch," commented Joanne between grunts of pain. She mentally struggled to keep the feather growth in check, knowing that unlike Thomas, she still had a strong link with the Sidhe and was thus in greater danger of surrendering to the fury that grew inside of her. Pain threatened to send her into darkness, but she focused as hard as she could.

"No!" bellowed Thomas in agony suddenly as he collapsed onto the ground.

*He is nothing to you. He is at best a liability to you, come regain your immortality and complete your transformation into one of the Sidhe.* Joanne could feel Iliiryana's mental intrusions and her head began to hurt from the incessant probing.

*What do I have to gain from it and what do I have to do?* asked Joanne mentally.

*Do what you failed to do all those years ago. Slay this man and let his warm blood flow upon you.*

All the while, Firianna eyed the couple and Iliiryana, pondering why the newly born goddess would bother with those who denied her power. Granted, Iliiryana's mind worked in ways that a human, not even one who had transformed into a Sidhe through years of persistent training, prayer, and enchanted intervention, could fathom. Certainly three thousand years of experience would give someone insights that someone who had lived for scarcely half a century would not quite have. In her mind, Iliiryana was much more what she visualized the Eternal Huntress to be, but in the last few years, she was starting to question whether Cylithera or Iliiryana was the true Eternal Huntress.

More and more feathers grew on her arms and some also sprouted from her face but Joanne still concentrated as hard as the throbbing headache and other pains allowed her to. In her mind, she could see that day when she made that wish at the Pasadena Roving Archers range, the day when she had rescued the eagle who was none other than Cylithera Eaglestrike in disguise. *"I wish I could be somewhere without worries, where I don't have to be so overloaded in a land like Sildavia. I wish I could find Sildavia and go there and never have to worry about another SpecNet project or GIS class or dealing with Dr. Oechel over at San Diego State University or feeling the heartbreak of knowing that I'll soon have to leave Albert and just have the adventure of a life, where I can become Soronthrel Cuthalión*

*forever.*” Then her memories drifted to the moment she was about to enter Dûnhèasa and she lay dying after that epic battle with Senator Mathers. Iliiryana had allowed Thomas to return her heart to her at the last minute and bring her back to life as a mortal.

At that instant, Joanne felt a burst of energy surging through her, warmth that neutralized the freezing cold that squeezed her heart and threatened to yank it out. ”I won’t give in!” she shouted and fought against the bonds of pain that forced her to kneel before Iliiryana. With that, the feathers vanished from her arms and face and she grabbed a nearby chair and began to swing it at both Sidhe. ”I chose to stay with Thomas as a mortal and I will! Cylithera has no power over me and neither will you!” Thomas opened his eyes and let out a loud groan before rolling over to the side.

Iliiryana dodged the bulky chair and drew her scimitars in a single fluid motion. ”You dare defy a goddess?” she hissed. Firianna, too, drew her blades and both quickly turned the professor’s improvised weapon into shreds of metal and plastic.

”A rather sucky one if you ask me. A real god or goddess wouldn’t go around bullying people!” shouted Joanne, thinking quickly and grabbing another chair. ”Ever heard the saying you get more flies with honey than vinegar? You just gave us vinegar and pee!”

The hawk-like woman then reached over to slit the unconscious man’s throat with her scimitars. Quickly, Joanne ducked down in hopes of getting Thomas out of the way or at least deflect Firianna’s attack. ”You’ll be the first sacrifices to the Clawed Fury then!” shrieked Firianna, her expression turning even more feral and her eyes glowing bright red.

Dr. de Salvo merely held onto Thomas, knowing there was little she could do now that she had renounced her powers. ”Joanne, don’t worry about me, I’ll be all right,” whispered Thomas faintly in her ear. ”Save yourself and we’ll meet again in the future.”

”Such displays sicken me,” said Iliiryana. ”Let them be an example of those who defy me, Firianna!”

Just as Firianna was about to land a killing blow on both of them, an explosion of fire and sunlight sent both priestess and goddess flying back. ”Halt!” clanged a metallic, bell-like voice.

”You will not harm either of them!” clanged a second, slightly deeper metallic clanging voice.

Partially blinded by the flash of fire and sunlight, Joanne could only see two robed figures, one extremely tall and slender, the other somewhat shorter but more powerfully built. She muttered to herself, ”Sarkany.”

Thomas, also not quite able to see after the sudden bright light, whispered, ”Damn. That was close.” His huge hand found its way to Joanne’s smaller hand and held it.

The shorter figure with the more bell-like voice said, ”Iliiryana and Firianna, *Alyon rossz lelek!*”

Both Sidhe froze dead in their tracks, bound by coppery-red bonds that surrounded them. ”How could you?” demanded Firianna, struggling against the bonds only to find that they burned when she did. ”No mortal can stand up against a god!”

”Taxadus has failed us then,” hissed Iliiryana. ”But mark my words well, Galka and Oroszlan, Pelda will fall at my hands! I will restore glory to Dûnhèasa and make it what it truly was meant to be, not what Cylithera has made it!”

The taller man knelt down to help Thomas and Joanne up. The professor had little trouble standing up but her companion, still weakened from Iliiryana’s attack, almost fell down, had it not been for both Joanne and Ivan supporting him. While Galka stood before

the two Sidhe and watched them intently, Ivan knelt back down and placed his finely boned hands on Thomas' chest. In an authoritative voice, the Sarkany said, "*Gyogyitani*."

Reddish light flowed from Ivan's hand into Thomas. At first, Thomas groaned in pain and radiant heat filled the room, but soon he was able to stand back up. Joanne hugged Ivan, grateful that he had healed Thomas, then she hugged her husband, relieved that he was whole again. "Ivan, I mean, Oroszlan," she started.

Smiling shyly, he replied, "Ivan to you guys. Even if I'm now Oroszlan to Galka and the other Tuatha. I'm going to miss Caltech life, but I never felt so certain and secure until I finally embraced my Sarkany roots."

In the background, Galka commanded, "*Igazsag beszéljen*." Swirls of bronze and copper-colored lights surrounded Iliiryana and Firianna, still bound by Galka's earlier spell.

"I thought you absorbed Gildharain's divine energies and could overcome these Sarkany!" protested Firianna.

Her companion's eyes widened as realization dawned upon her. "Only a part of it," she corrected. "He must've foreseen this and vested some of his powers in others." Iliiryana spat at Galka and Ivan.

"Answer me," ordered Galka, looking at both of them intently. "What was Gildharain's fate? You spoke of absorbing his divine energies!"

Iliiryana started, "Nothing..." Then she felt the sensation of fire all around her and her mouth and throat grew dry. "No. I slew him near the interface between Mag-na-Oige and Dûnhèasa."

"And what of that band of rebels? Did you have a hand in this?" asked Galka.

"I incited Kiora to lead the rebellion against Gildharain," replied Iliiryana, gritting her teeth against the truth enchantment Galka had placed on both her and Firianna. Why was Galka so much more powerful than her? Had Gildharain sequestered that much of his powers elsewhere? And did Legoregebb and Ereny fade away and bequeath their powers to Galka and Oroszlan?

Ivan walked over to investigate Galka's prisoners after confirming that Thomas was strong enough to stand on his own and that Joanne was also in decent shape after her brief ordeal with the rebel Sidhe. "So, what are your next set of plans?" he questioned them in a firm, commanding voice.

Everyone's eyebrows lifted at the sound of Ivan's voice going from high-pitched and child-like to stern and powerful. Firianna replied, "I was seeking to start a following in this world for Iliiryana and give Kiora a hand with her attempts to locate Imladrien so we can set her against Eöl-Tinúvion."

"Vincent... Tarathorn..." whispered Ivan, losing the awe-inspiring presence and diminishing back into the effeminate math grad student who moonlighted as a pop star for a moment. "Why?"

"To remove the threat to Dûnhèasa, that one known as Eöl Tinúvion, and if necessary to seize control from Cylithera who is growing weaker and falling back into her mortal roots under that boy's spell," said Iliiryana, gritting her teeth and concentrating on trying to slip out of Galka's spell. "And then unite all of the Tuatha under my power."

Thomas and Joanne swore at the same time. "Someone, go warn Cylithera and Tarathorn and Vincent," pleaded Joanne to Ivan and Galka. Suddenly, Galka leaped back in pain and the light surrounding Iliiryana's head faded away. The light around Firianna's head also dissipated, although both were still bound by Galka's first spell.

Closing her eyes, the dusky-skinned Sidhe began to laugh maniacally. Despite the pain, Galka pointed to the coppery-red bonds surrounding the two Sidhe and spoke the words again. *Alyon rossz lelek!* The room temperature fluctuated from freezing cold to scorching hot as Galka and Iliiryana battled each other mentally. Ivan motioned for Thomas and Joanne to leave the crowded office. Without hesitation and knowing that this was a battle neither could do anything in, the couple ran out, hoping that the two Sarkany could keep the Sidhe in check.

*Sziv hideg, legy meg!* Ivan could feel the fire in his blood growing stronger, hotter and a ray of coppery light struck both of the Sidhe. Firianna let out a wordless cry while the crazed Dhaerow continued to grit her teeth, eyes closed. Sweat formed on both Ivan and Galka's brows, but neither was willing to give up as long as the savage woman was fighting back mentally. Then suddenly, Iliiryana began to laugh even more wildly and opened her eyes. The light that surrounded them faded away into smoke and in a fluid, graceful movement, she gestured once more and grabbed the semi-conscious Firianna. Stunned and with severe, pounding headaches, Ivan and Galka could only watch as their quarry vanished out of sight.

"I'm going to have to warn them!" wheezed Ivan, winded and holding his head.

"I will find Cylithera, you go and find your friends!" replied Galka, staggering about before stumbling onto Joanne's computer. "Even though she broke the spell early, I was still get enough of what they witnessed to have proof to deliver to Cylithera." Ivan supported her until she was able to stand up steadily.

Christie Nguyen let out a small groan as her eyes opened for the first time in ages. She registered the sterile hospital room with its dull off-white walls as well as all the probes that surrounded her. "What day is it?" she asked faintly. Everything still blurred a bit but at least she wasn't hiding from feral and possibly rabid wildlife with glowing red eyes. Then her eyes saw the calendar next to her bed with several crosses through the individual days. "Darn. It's been months," she groaned. She searched for the small red button that would call a nurse to attend to her. While she fumbled with the blankets and realized that despite her inactivity, she was still able to move relatively well, the sound of footsteps padding in caught her attention.

"Christie?" whispered a high-pitched male voice she otherwise would've considered annoying. "You ok?"

Ignoring the probes on her, she staggered off the hospital bed. The meters and other devices connected to her began to beep and blare loudly, thinking the patient had just died. "Oleg! Where's Tara and Dr. Saephan and the rest of them?" she asked, heedless of the mess she just caused. Even the reek of decaying fungus and dirty gym socks didn't bother her, at least not compared to the feral creatures that sought to kill her until she finally ran that last stretch through that waterfall.

Several hospital workers ran into Christie's room with a gurney, expecting a dead or dying girl, only to find she was standing up unassisted and generally looking well aside from being a bit reddish from her brush with Tehanu Syndrome. "How the...?" asked the lead worker, a heavily built middle-aged woman whose bones made it impossible for her to be anything besides stocky.

"Miracle," replied Christie, shrugging. "I guess I'm one of the lucky ones."

"Dang right. Just stay here and we'll get the doctor to check you out," replied the head worker before motioning to her crew to leave.

Shyly, Oleg said, "And uh, after doctor lets you out, want to get food?" His normally pale face turned beet-red.

Before Christie could respond to Oleg, the room began to rumble and the air grew several degrees colder. "Oleg!" she cried out. Her head began to hurt with a throbbing headache and her knees buckled from under her. The gangly graduate student's jaw fell wide open and all he could do was make sure Christie didn't fall to the ground into a heap. "I feel them!" she screamed. "The panther and the hawk!"

"What is it?" he dared to ask even as his own knees gave out under him and the sensation of icicles poking him covered his entire body. "I protect you," he promised even as he suddenly found himself wishing for brown and yellow pants and a change of clothes.

The door slammed shut as the wind grew stronger, more intense and a gigantic panther with brightly glowing red eyes and a red-tailed hawk materialized before their eyes. The hawk then landed at their feet and it transformed into a human-like woman, not significantly unlike Christie with her dark slanted, almond-shaped eyes, jet-black hair and somewhat dark skin except for her feral, hateful expression and glowing red eyes. All Christie could do was shiver in fear even as she felt her own blood run cold. "Firianna, you hold off the guards," said the panther. The hawk-woman then disappeared and several shrieks of terror filled the air just outside of the locked hospital room.

Turning to the frightened students, Iliiryana, still in panther form, said, "So, you thought you could escape us." She bared her fangs at Christie. "But I will not kill you or this other mortal-born Sidhe, pathetic as he is! At least not if you cooperate." With that, neither Christie nor Oleg could resist the overwhelming urge to bow down before her. Much to his surprise, he didn't even find the need for a pair of brown pants with a yellow front. As they bowed down, lightning and ice seemed to fill their veins and somehow, the thought of serving the Clawed Fury wasn't such a bad idea.

Iliiryana then whispered into Oleg's ear the name, "Borondir Herúromen." Oleg's groaned incoherently and his green eyes glowed red for a moment before he resumed his usual slightly mulish expression. On his left arm, the symbol of a panther's paw with extended claws superimposed on a longbow formed, all in silver before fading into a just barely visible mark. His shadow momentarily became skunk-shaped and he saw a vision of a large skunk with black and bluish-white fur before resuming its human shape. Overwhelmed by the flow of energy into him, he passed out into a heap on the floor.

She then did the same for Christie, whispering the name, "Berúthiel Maegliriel." Christie also let out a groan and her deep brown eyes also glowed flaming red for a moment and the air around her grew relatively warm to her although anyone standing nearby would've commented otherwise. Her left arm also glowed and the symbol of the panther's paw and longbow appeared on her arm before fading partially. Unlike Oleg though, the silver mark showed a bit more because she was darker skin than the pale graduate student. She could see her shadow shifting as well, but instead of a skunk or other mustelid, she saw her shadow become feline and she saw an image of a cheetah with bluish-grey fur with inky black spots. Like her colleague, she also fell to the floor, unable to handle the sudden influx of divine energy in her body.

"When you wake up, start spreading word of Iliiryana the Clawed Fury, the true Eternal Huntress," said Iliiryana, smiling at the unconscious students. "Together, we will restore Dúnhèasa to her true glory one world at a time. If you need help, seek Firianna, my Champion. I will return to you, but for now, I must attend to matters elsewhere. Go forth and

strengthen my armies!” With that, Iliiryana dissolved into silver-white mist and disappeared.

## 11 The Sarkany and the Sidhe

Cylithera stood at the ledge that overlooked the valley, longbow in hand. Vincent’s smooth baritone voice still echoed about her even amidst his roars of fury from his tiger form. A twinge of doubt began to flutter inside of her chest, a strange warmth that circulated through her. Three thousand years and more and she had never felt this before... until Eöl-Tinúvion came into being. Was there something beyond the life she had embraced from childhood, first following a frigid and angry Tindarien Daltharien as her Champion, then succeeding her upon her fall at the hands of Kestrel? She contemplated what might be eons and eons of being the Eternal Huntress, only until someone challenged and defeated her. Maybe her reign would be less than that. After all, Iliiryana had also eyed goddesshood but had been thwarted by Tindariel, Killer Parakeet, and Rusty.

Then there was the thought of life as a mortal and taking that journey that only mortals would ever take at the end of their lives. It took a mortal soul to take that journey that started at the Crossroads and ended somewhere very few Tuatha would ever behold. To get a soul, it required that a mortal with a soul give a piece of his or her soul through a union. She would have to renounce both her deific immortality and her Sidhe near-immortality for that to occur. Yet it would allow her to follow him on that journey and spend eternity with the one she was so drawn to, the one who gave her that soul.

The Eternal Huntress shrugged off thoughts of the possibility of spending eternity with Eöl-Tinúvion, the man who knew himself as Vincent Zhong-hua Gahan. Yes, she was definitely drawn to his beautiful singing voice and that odd blend of Sidhe focus and determination with innocence and humor. What was that feeling mortals felt? Jealousy? She recalled that feeling, but it was over the commoners who were allowed to run free outdoors and learn the ways of the land while she was sheltered in the palace with strict tutors. There was no such feeling she felt towards Imladrien even knowing that Tinúvion harbored ill feelings towards the man that held Imladrien captive. Sure, she’d rather have Tinúvion embrace his Sidhe roots so that she wouldn’t have to embrace mortality to be with him.

Her reverie was interrupted by a flash of light from the basin of water behind her. She quickly whirled and sprinted over to the basin of water. Next to the basin was none other than a tall, muscular woman in flowing brown and orange robes and long jet-black hair that radiated heat. “Cylithera, I wish to speak with you,” she said in a clanging yet bell-like voice. She crossed her arms in front of her as a sign of peace.

“What is it, Galka?” she demanded, ready to strike. “Speak and I may stay my hand. I have little patience for your kindred even if there is a promise of peace.”

“I seek to renew the promise between the Sarkany and the Sidhe to be at peace. The Eldest have fallen and thus Oroszlan and I are now ruling in their stead,” continued Galka, still showing the sign of peace to the fierce goddess. “I also wish to avenge Gildharain’s death at the hands of none other than Iliiryana N’Shad-Daermon. If you wish, I have extracted parts of Iliiryana and Firianna’s memories.”

Lowering her head out of respect for the Eldest of the Sarkany, she replied, “I am sorry to hear of their passing and hope that you and Oroszlan show even greater wisdom than they,

wise though they were. What of my High Priestesses?" For the first time in centuries, Galka saw that Cylithera's face showed a puzzled, confused expression. The Sarkany touched the water in the basin and then motioned to Cylithera to look into the water.

*Iliiryana took a deep breath before gripping her bow, a slender jet-black wooded longbow. She paced silently through the soft pine straw cover, focusing on the still figure in the clearing. Her prey, Gildharain, was clad in little more than a loincloth made from large maple leaves, but she saw that he had a belt with a pair of rapiers on the side. He knelt in the clearing, as if in either prayer or rapt meditation. The boyish Tuatha lord looked care-worn in her eyes and she wondered what had happened to him. Where his hair had been reddish, it appeared that the winter frost had kissed him and she saw lines of wisdom in his face where none had ever been.*

*Silently and deliberately, Iliiryana nocked the jet-black arrow to her bow. Focusing on where Gildharain's heart and lungs lay, she slowly drew back, taking care to let her instincts do the aiming. She anchored at the corner of her mouth, held her shot long enough to confirm and then loosed the enchanted projectile. Straight and true the arrow flew and penetrated through the youth's side. Frothy blood poured out and Gildharain crumpled to the ground, lifeless. Bright silver light poured from his body and flowed into the Dhaerow, filling her with energy. She approached the now-deceased Tuatha lord and touched his corpse. Lightning-like energy streamed through her body and she almost shrieked in pain as the sensations threatened to overtake her.*

*Firianna watched from her secluded spot, ready to shoot should Iliiryana not make the shot or if Gildharain survived and retaliated. She let down her shot after she saw that Iliiryana had succeeded in both slaying and drawing upon Gildharain's divine energies. "By the gods, Iliiryana's succeeded," she dared to whisper.*

*A few harsh-sounding words seeped from Iliiryana's lips. "Only partially. He's entrusted much of his energy to another. One known as Aeondar. We must find him somehow, and of course, that explains why we were able to track Gildharain so easily. His powers of disappearance have been entrusted to Aeondar. But that doesn't matter. I will find Aeondar and slay him too."*

At the sight of that, Cylithera lowered her head once again, this time in shame. "Iliiryana," she hissed. "Once you've corrupted the Alfar and destroyed the Sarkany, who next? Am I your next target because I no longer embody the Eternal Hunt in your eyes?"

Galka could only nod in agreement at Cylithera's assessment. "And she sent Kiora to start a battle between Eöl-Tinúvion and Imladrien, one that would result in both of their destruction. She also seeks the remainder of Gildharain's powers. The only reason Oroszlan and I survived her attack was from the powers of the Eldest channeling into both of us, but neither of us, not even combined, are powerful enough to stop her yet."

Steel-grey eyes met metallic bronze eyes as Cylithera looked Galka in the eyes. "Tell me, Galka, for I know Sarkany are as impartial as Tuatha can ever be, was it wrong for me to sacrifice my own ambitions and desires to protect my own kindred and followers in the long run even if they resent my decision?"

"I favor the long term decision, but I also understand the urgency of protecting yourself now given the volatile nature of some of your... kindred," replied Galka honestly after a long pause. For the first time, Galka also noticed that Cylithera did not carry her frightening aura that chilled the air surrounding her. "And I see something else bothers you, one that Iliiryana and Firianna perceive as a sign of you growing weak."

"And it's about Eöl-Tinúvion," admitted Cylithera. "I am drawn to him yet I'm torn between the very ideals I've come to embody and this new concept that I left behind when I took my vows over three thousand years ago. Yes, I slew Eventhrel Thorondarien thousands of years ago as part of my initiation to my predecessor's circle and to complete my transformation into one of the Sidhe, but now I ask myself if I might follow her fate at Iliiryana's hands. All for the sake of a mortal with Sidhe blood in him and a voice that brings back distant memories."

She nodded at Cylithera's confession to her. "Except Eöl Tinúvion's heart is with another, namely Imladrien. I see your dilemma. To pursue him would be make him break away from his Sidhe tendencies to be ever-faithful to one he has set his heart upon and has her heart set upon him, yet you yearn for him. Ask yourself this: Why? Perhaps in answering that question, you can answer your own dilemma."

Sighing, Cylithera merely nodded. "It's never happened to me before, I always thought I was immune to it, that I would be stronger than Eventhrel Thorondarien," she confessed. Then steeling her expression, she said, "But first we need to deal with Iliiryana and Firianna."

As they turned to decide on their course of action, the basin glowed yet again. Looking into it, there was an image of Kiora convincing a heavy-set man and Tarathorn to pursue her. As the coyote-like girl passed over a set of white stones, an image of Tarathorn and that man formed, although upon closer inspection, the false image had a significant bulge in her belly. Shortly after Kiora vanished with her pursuers, Vincent appeared in the image, eyes glowing red from fury and letting out a roar of anguish before falling onto all fours. The illusionary figures the corrupt Alfar had set up then embraced and began to kiss passionately.

"Iliiryana's set up a good trap," admitted Galka, realizing that Ivan was likely to also look for his life-long friends at the Crossroads and would be caught in any cross-fire between Vincent and Tarathorn, should a battle between them begin.

At that moment, the sounds of loud grunting and stomping made both of them look up. "Vladivostok giants again," hissed Cylithera, nocking an arrow to her longbow that materialized in her hand. "She's getting hasty." With that, she loosed her arrows at the blue-skinned brutes, dropping them at each shot only to find more appearing.

"I ask for your forgiveness in advance for damaging the land, but it'll be better than having it trampled by these beasts," said Galka before she let out a wordless cry. The robed woman was gone, replaced by a bronze-scaled draconian figure. Letting out an almost leonine roar, she then reared up her crocodilian head and opened her mouth.

The roar was enough to make most of the blue-skinned giants hesitate nervously, but the sight of a creature of wind and fire made them even more scared. A few in the back tried to prod their leaders into charging ahead, but the leaders merely dropped their spears and boulders and began to shudder. Then a massive gout of flame came out from Galka's mouth, setting several of the giants ablaze while the few that weren't on fire found themselves on the receiving end of Cylithera's deadly black and silver arrows. In little more than a few heartbeats, the burning giants became grey ashes that settled all over the burned lands. The few that didn't turn into ashes or pincushions screamed and fled in panic, where other archers scattered through the land dispatched them.

"Galka, I'll stay here and mobilize those still loyal to me to battle with the Vladivostok giants. You intervene at the Crossroads," called out Cylithera. "And perhaps we'll fight alongside once more!" With that, she darted into the charred forest.

## 12 Stellar Tiger and Shadow-Fox

Vincent sniffed the air and looked around to see if he could identify anything in the dark stellar mantle above him. He was out of the deep forests of Dúnhèasa but beyond that, he didn't know where he was. While pondering his course of action, he heard some rustling nearby. His ears perked up and he looked up towards the sea-shore. In the distance was Tarathorn, now looking a bit more muscular and a bit darker with longer hair. There was also a significant bulge in her belly and next to her was a heavy-set man, the same one he had seen in the basin. He had his arms around her and she leaned into him. Only thing though was that instead of light brown or dark blonde hair, he had raven hair and a full but still very neatly trimmed beard. As soon as he saw Tarathorn and that man kissing, Vincent could feel his blood boil in electricity and flame before freezing.

Fury pumped through his veins and he let out a roar that shook the surroundings before falling to all fours. The athletic young man's body sprouted black and silver striped fur and a long tail sprouted from the seat of his pants. Sharp claws grew from his hands and feet which turned into paws. The tiger then ran towards the traitorous girl, the one he had trusted despite Cylithera's warnings of her Alfar nature. It was too much for him to bear that the girl he wanted to share the rest of his life with would do that and now it was time for him to exact revenge upon her. Tarathorn and that bear-like man continued to embrace for another moment before they looked up to investigate the roaring. With a swift gesture, Tarathorn's form shrank into that of a black-furred fox and the man turned into a black bear. Both ran away at the sound and sight of the furious tiger that pursued them with blood in his eyes. The bear-man's blood will cover the ground by the end of tonight as well as Tarathorn, that sly little fox who gave into her Alfar roots.

The Crossroads, as always, was bleak and dry with a near-constant wind that stirred up the reddish-brown dust that covered most of the area. The only signs of life were the semi-transparent spirits that materialized before the large table-like stone that marked the central hub of the Crossroads, a greyish-white rock with veins of black. Radiating from the stone were several dusty paths that led in various directions towards the mountain ranges that contained the Crossroads. Thunder and lightning struck at the mountains and depending on which direction one went, there were different colored lights, suggesting that maybe something more or less hospitable was on the other side. High above and covering the Crossroads was an inky mantle with small, dim stars that never moved and shone with a weak light, suggesting that the emptiness of the Crossroads even sapped them of life.

"Not again," muttered Tarathorn as she descended slowly with Steve in front of her, sniffing the air and listening for any signs. It was getting difficult for both of them to fly. "Can you trail her any further?"

Steve concentrated on the particles in the air before following Tarathorn to the dusty ground. "Her trail ends here," he said resignedly after staring at the details. "For a while she was leaving quite the trail of blood, hair, and residual energy," he added. "And now, nothing!"

While the two of them looked around for further signs of Kiora, the sound of a large cat roaring filled the otherwise dead air that only had the occasional dry wind. In a few heartbeats, the cat emerged from the shadows, revealing it to be a striped cat, a tiger, with black and silver fur and intelligent, glowing sea-grey eyes. "Vincent!" cried Tarathorn,

running up to him. Steve tried to stop Tarathorn but the fox-like woman was too fast for him in that heavy-set form. Electricity flowed through her body and she could feel a tail growing from her and it seemed that every sound grew louder and clearer in her ears.

She could hear the fury in his roars and blood-thirst lit his eyes with that feral light. The tiger leaped past Tarathorn, knocking her to the ground before plowing straight into Steve and pushing him down. Stunned, Tarathorn staggered to her feet and ran over to where Steve was struggling to get the tiger off him. "Vincent! Stop it!" she screamed.

Amidst the growls, Vincent spoke, still in his smooth baritone, "Traitor! Thief! I will avenge myself! She was right, Alfar do stray!" He swatted Tarathorn aside when she leaped in to try to pry him off Steve. "And you who took my heart and shattered it with your treachery, I will deal with you after I kill this one!"

Shocked at Vincent's accusation, Tarathorn could only feel tears flowing down her face. "How could you?" she asked nobody in particular. Words formed in her mouth again and a surge of power built up inside of her. She pointed at Vincent and blue light struck him, sending him reeling back for a moment, giving a chance for Steve to try to fly or crawl away, but the heavy-set man merely lay there. Vincent charged again, pouncing on Steve and biting the back of his neck with his mighty jaws, sinking his fangs into the man.

Crying out, Tarathorn leaped onto Vincent's back, screaming incoherently. "No, you killed him in cold blood, he didn't do anything! Has Cylithera turned you into a killer?" she finally said. Vincent merely thrashed about and threw her off before pouncing on her and pinning her to the ground. A huge burst of energy formed inside of her, threatening to blow her body apart from the pressure. Instinctively, she let the power loose and right as his fangs connected with her throat, a huge jet of water emerged from her hands, pushing him off of her.

Nearby, Kiora motioned to Iliiryana to where the huge flood of water threatened to drown the otherwise parched Crossroads. "There he is, the traitor who incited the riot against us," said Kiora. "I have redeemed myself in your eyes, I hope."

"That you have. Wait here," commanded Iliiryana, running down to the fallen heavy-set man, scimitars in hand. Near the fallen one, she saw two raven-haired youths circling each other, one handsome yet feral young man and one almost ethereal delicate young woman. Orbs of navy blue light formed in the woman's hand and flew at the man only to dissipate. The man drew his dark-wooded longbow, the one dubbed Lhîndôme, nocked an arrow and shot at his opponent, only to have the arrow miss her.

Once she reached Steve's almost still form, Iliiryana quickly slashed his chest with both of her scimitars and grabbed him by his throat. Radiant silver light bathed her body even as his blood covered her. She could feel the energy surging through her and she stood up, facing Vincent and Tarathorn, ready to take them on. Kiora ran over to the triumphant half-Dhaerow. Smirking cruelly, Iliiryana allowed the eager girl to approach her before drawing her scimitars again and thrusting them into her, one in her chest, one into her stomach. "And that is your reward," she said, feeling the ecstasy of energy flowing into her.

Iliiryana then focused her attention on Vincent and Tarathorn again. "I stayed true to you both in body and heart even with Cylithera's warning," said Vincent. "I pushed her away for you. I even pretended to be gay to get Lin to stop flirting with me in my lab. But you betrayed me with that man. Was my love nothing to you?" he demanded, his lower body matching that of the tiger but his upper body still human.

"I didn't give into Steve's advances at all. Yes, I was affectionate with him, but it was

that of friendship. He offered himself to me but I also pushed him aside. Why did you slay him in cold blood?" she asked, trying to keep the tears from her eyes. She tensed up and her hands began to glow with navy blue again. "I thought you trusted me, that you did care about me and that you were more than just a creature of fury. Or if you no longer trust me because I slipped ever so slightly, at least hear me out."

No verbal response came from him. Instead, scimitars materialized in his hands and he charged at the tiny post-doc. Certain Vincent was beyond all reason, Tarathorn let loose yet another bolt at him, pushing him back. Then she willed her bow into her hand, except instead of Undómë the longbow he had gotten her, it was the compound bow that Steve had taught her how to shoot. Nocking an arrow into it, she quickly drew back with the back-tension release, anchored and kept the fiber-optic spot locked onto Vincent's heart. "This is to avenge you, Steve," she whispered. Then she hoped that the back-tension release would go off in time. Why did it arrive in her hand and why didn't her longbow arrive? *Be the spot and trust in yourself.* She heard Steve's voice echo in her mind.

Vincent stopped his run and drew his bow again. He nocked a black and silver feathered arrow and took aim at Tarathorn's heart before loosing his shot. *Let the hunter in you guide your shot.* He recalled Cylithera's voice in his mind. His fingers loosened and the arrow flew straight and true to the traitorous girl. At the same time, the release went off in Tarathorn's hand, sending her arrow flying straight ahead at the jealousy-consumed boy. In less than a heartbeat, about halfway in between the two combatants, a bronze-scaled draconian figure soared from a distance, hovering in the air and letting out a loud, clanging roar. As it paused, as if to intercept the arrows, both of them hit home in the dragon's vitals through his ribcage, puncturing lungs and heart.

Her keen eyes recognized the distinct bronze scales and the clanging roar despite the more authoritarian notes it contained since the last time she heard it. "Ivan!" shrieked Tarathorn, dropping her weapon and running to where the mighty creature fell. Tears clouded her eyes but she could see the reptilian figure diminishing back into that of the tall, gangly young man. Except he wasn't as scrawny as she remembered him to be and his usually wire-like hair was about shoulder length. Sure enough, both arrows were sticking out from his sides and frothy pink blood mixed with greenish blood poured from him. Vincent, too, had seen this and ran to Ivan's fallen body.

"Holy shit Ivan!" wept Vincent, tears also clouding his eyes. His claws and tail receded and he could feel himself returning completely to human form. He threw himself over his roommate just as Tarathorn did. The instant he brushed slightly against Tarathorn, a navy blue aura surrounded her, burning Vincent before the energy exploded into shards that struck him. Red blood poured out of his body, creating a stream in the water she had conjured up earlier. One particularly large, jagged shard struck Vincent in the jaw, dislocating and breaking it.

Next to Ivan, Vincent fell to the ground, also bleeding from the shards that Tarathorn had inadvertently released. "No!" cried Tarathorn, weeping at both friends, not noticing Iliiryana standing nearby.

"I couldn't have planned it better," laughed Iliiryana, smirking at the three of them. "And now Imladrien, you too will die with your friends so you can join them in that journey, if they can ever forgive you for your recklessness!" She had both blood-coated scimitars drawn, ready to strike. "Or you can bow down to me and all will be forgiven."

"I just led to the deaths of those dearest to me, what does it matter?" said Tarathorn,

hanging her head in shame before leaning back down on her dying friends.

Sneering coldly, Iliiryana shook her head. "So much like a mortal to feel such sentiments. It is unbecoming as one as powerful as you, Imladrien. They fell because they were weak. Come, join me and we can restore the power of the Tuatha. Leave them behind, forget them. I'll give you a few moments to grieve before you either join them or join me!"

"Ouch," wheezed Ivan faintly as one of Tarathorn's conjured shards struck him between his legs. Then looking up weakly to her, he said, "Iliiryana and Kiora. Gildharain dead." The heat that radiated from him began to diminish as more and more of his blood, both frothy pink and bronze-green, poured out and diluted in the shallow mixture of red blood and water that remained in the now-saturated ground. "Conspiracy to have this happen. I was too late to save you two." He then brushed his fine-boned, long-fingered hand on Tarathorn's tiny hand and an image of the coyote-girl, Firianna, Taxadus and Iliiryana in panther form filled her mind.

*"No, you cannot strike them directly. But they are mortal and are under a curse known as love, and there is no hurt greater than love betrayed and severed. Is that not right, Firianna?"*

*Winning a bit, as if recalling a long-past pain, she replied, "Exactly. Humans are weak and I know that Imladrien and Tinúvion are very much in love to the point where they are both seriously considering sharing their lives. If we can convince both that the other has strayed and thus betrayed their unspoken promise, we can work further into their minds until only hatred for the other fills them."*

*"Kiora, use your powers of illusion in whatever way possible and necessary to lure them to the Crossroads. I'm sure if they show up, the other sources of Gildharain's divine energy will follow Imladrien loyally to protect her."*

Then a second vision flashed through Tarathorn's mind. It was that of Kiora running up to congratulate Iliiryana on laying the killing blow on Steve. Instead of accepting the coyote-cloaked girl into her arms, Iliiryana merely stabbed and slashed her with her twin scimitars before leaving her for dead. As soon as the vision faded, fire began to flow through her veins. She stood up and faced Iliiryana, navy blue fireballs forming in her hand. "So, that's what you'd do to me? Gain my loyalty and slay me when I'm no longer useful to you?" she demanded, fury beginning to fill her.

Suddenly, Iliiryana began to cackle wildly before raising her scimitars. "Yes, give in to your fury!" she taunted. "You'll no longer answer to Cylithera the Fallen One if you do so! Succeed where Vincent failed, it's your opportunity to break free of the curse!"

As soon as Tarathorn hurled the balls of fire at Iliiryana who merely deflected them aside with her scimitars, she saw dark hair sprouting from her arms and face. The warmth in her blood also chilled and she saw a silver marking begin to show up on her left arm, one of a panther's paw with extended claws superimposed on a longbow. For a moment, Tarathorn felt a nearly overwhelming urge to direct bolts of energy at Vincent, but the compulsion reminded her of something that happened before. It was the same enchantment Steve had used on her when he got her to kiss him and now it had no real effect on her!

With a small growl, she whirled and turned at Iliiryana, whose face paled when she realized what had happened. "So he anticipated this, did he? Doesn't matter, you will either die or follow me!" she shrieked. Post-doc and mighty warrior circled each other in a dance of fury, neither yielding. For every bolt or ball of energy Tarathorn sent, Iliiryana would counter and for every swing she made at her, the post-doc would merely duck or dodge the attack.

Still struggling to hang onto consciousness, Vincent whispered to Ivan, "I fucked up, I should've trusted her, listened to my instinct instead of giving into my jealousy. And now I've lost the love of my life."

"I know she'll forgive you, if she hasn't already, or maybe it'll be a long time," replied Ivan, also trying to resist the darkness that was beckoning to him. Then summoning what was left of his strength, he said in an authoritative clang, "*Gyoggyitani!*" At the same time, he allowed his hand to brush against Vincent's chest.

Copper-red light flowed from Ivan's hand into Vincent and slowly, his numerous wounds began to close and the pallor began to fade from his face. Ivan, in the meanwhile, grew weaker and his breathing became labored, but he continued to will healing energy into his friend. More and more of the greenish blood flowed out of him as well, but he was determined to give Vincent a chance to live. Realizing that his friend was going to die if he continued to heal him, Vincent summoned all of his strength to roll away from Ivan and break the physical contact that allowed the energy transfer. Although far from whole, Vincent knew he was no longer in any danger of dying so he moved as far as he could from him. Just as he was about to pass out from the effort, Vincent also threw Ivan's hand onto him, hoping that maybe the spell would also work on the arrow wounds he and Tarathorn had put into him. "Thanks, buddy," he said faintly.

Ivan's hand landed somewhere that would've normally caused Vincent to laugh and he cursed inwardly at his poor aim. Nonetheless, copper-red light covered the dying man's body and the bleeding slowed down and stopped. Exhausted from the efforts to maintain the healing energy, he finally gave into the dark shadow looming over him, although he couldn't tell if it was the one to escort him on his final journey or if it was one to take him to the stochastic world of dreams. Nervously, Vincent approached the seemingly still man and examined him closely. At first, there was no movement at all, but a slight flutter in his chest and the tiniest escape of air from his mouth reassured him that he was only unconscious, not dead.

A yelp of pain brought Vincent back to reality. Tarathorn's high-pitched voice shattered the air and he looked in her direction. "Is that not enough?" cackled Iliiryana, taking yet another swing with one scimitar and stabbing with the other at Tarathorn. Red blood was spraying everywhere and Vincent saw a freshly severed tiny hand on the ground. Her right hand was a stump, bleeding heavily. Shocked at the loss of blood, Tarathorn grew dizzy and weak, unable to focus at all. "Either surrender to me, the Clawed Fury, the true Eternal Huntress, or I will cut you into pieces bit by bit until you either beg for death or forgiveness. Then I may show some mercy by letting you be a self-sacrifice to me!" The sight of Tarathorn about to be slain suddenly made his weakness drop from his body like a discarded pair of soiled underwear that suddenly got too big for him.

Even in her weakness, she said as defiantly as possible, "No. I won't follow a maniac like you even if it were to save my life!"

Vincent then stepped up and willed Lhîndôme into his hands. Without saying anything, he took aim at Iliiryana, noting that her hands were lined up. Hoping he would make the shot, he drew back and fired. The silent projectile went through both of her wrists. "Stop, Iliiryana. If I were you, I'd be careful," he said, looking her in the eye. "You've caused enough damage."

"So, the jealous nightingale comes to save the slut that cuckolded him until he saw the truth," she hissed. The wounds in her wrists closed, although the marks from his arrow still

remained.

"Vincent!" breathed Tarathorn, looking up to him. "Please forgive me!"

"Are you going to take that from her?" taunted Iliiryana. "She was going to leave you for a fellow Alfar. She fell for Prince Aeondar and was going to have both of you. She's a sly little Alfar fox, don't trust her!" Tarathorn's sharp ears perked up at the mention of the name. Was that Steve's True Name?

"I'll settle that with her later. But in the meantime, we've got a score to settle," said Vincent evenly, dropping Lhîndôme and allowing himself to resume tiger form. Fury flowed through his veins, igniting that spark again, but instead of chilling him, it warmed him, and it wasn't the raw fury and desire for vengeance that burned in him. He lunged at Iliiryana, who deftly stepped aside and sliced his face with the scimitar in her left hand. The blade in her right struck his lower back, exposing his lower vertebrae and breaking some of them. With a pained roar, he fell to the ground, unable to move his hind legs. The mighty feline warped back into that of the young man with a severely cut-up face and a broken back, blood pouring out of him once again.

Ignoring her own shock and weakness, Tarathorn howled piercingly and charged headlong into her, heedless of her own injuries and general inability to fight hand-to-hand. As she charged, a few primal noises escaped from her mouth and a blinding light exploded from her. Stunned and blinded, the warrior hesitated. In the brief time she paused, the tiny post-doc shoved her to the ground with strength only found in desperation. Another shriek escaped from her mouth and she punched as hard as she could into Iliiryana's chest with her remaining hand. Instead of bouncing off, her hand went through, frightening her. She immediately pulled her tiny fist out of the woman's chest to find a small bead that flew out as soon as she unclenched her fist to examine it. The bead grew from a tiny black object to a huge sphere of light that glowed with every color she could imagine. "Vincent, Ivan, please live," she murmured faintly. "And Aeondar, if that's your true name, Steve, I tried." What happened next, she had no idea as the exertion to let off those last two spells finally took their toll on her, sending her into darkness.

Iliiryana, too, wasn't sure if the shadowy mantle settling over her was going to be one that would lead her into an unknown journey or if it was one that would leave her with one hell of a headache. Yowling in pain and fury, she made one last mental effort to wrest whatever was left of the sphere of light back into herself. Even with the bit of light that returned to her, her eyes still closed and she let out an incoherent gasp.

## 13 Mierda Santa!

Joanne de Salvo leaned into her computer chair before loading up her e-mail client. Then her stomach felt a bit queasy yet again for the umpteenth time in about a week and she wondered if it was something she ate for breakfast or the night before. After all, her stomach never appreciated anything her colleagues prepared, but this queasiness was different from the kind she got from eating Captain Greywolf's quadruple spicy deer chili or James' rotisserie chicken with more lemon juice than she thought was humanly possible to digest. Then she had to reach for the nearest garbage can as her stomach finally gave in to the urge that constantly yelled at her and then she ran to the bathroom to clean up. When she returned,

she saw an e-mail from Ivan with the title "Update". Heart beating fast in hopes of hearing something about the two boys who mysteriously vanished, she opened up the e-mail.

Dr. de Salvo,

Sorry about no updates for long time. Vincent and I were out of e-mail contact, as was Tarathorn. Besides reassuring you I also want to invite you to and Thomas to wedding. Galka and I are getting married. It will be at interface between D\^{\u}nh\{e}asa and Pelda. Look for rings on your desk.

Regards,

Ivan and Galka

"Mierda santa!" exclaimed Joanne. "And all this time I thought Ivan was a fruit-cake!" Sure enough, there was a pair of rings, one bronze and one copper, sitting next to her keyboard. Both shone in the light and despite the clammy-looking fluorescent light, they glowed with a soft, warm light. A cool, refreshing breeze somehow snuck in through the semi-sealed window, making her feel a bit better. The computer dinged and beeped again. This time, it was a short article that her colleague in chemistry, James, had forwarded to her.

A new cult seems to have originated from Ocala, FL. There has been talk of a Clawed Fury and the return of a paradisaical place called Dunheasa. This cult to the Clawed Fury is an especially violent one and very intent on securing new followers, which is contrary to its dedication to isolating themselves in the wilderness. Survivors and witnesses of attacks led by cultists have described them as being cruel, cold, and often shape-shifting, although it is unclear if the shape-shifting is the result of shock and trauma. These cultists often use aliases derived from Elvish from J.R.R. Tolkien's novels. Example names of these cultists include Firiana, Borondir, and Beruthiel. Two standard names have also been identified, potentially as cult leaders: Oleg Krumpstank and Christina Nguyen.

The federal government has issued a warning against the Clawed Fury Cult. If you encounter any violent person with a silver marking of a big cat's paw superimposed on a longbow on their left arm, contact local law enforcement right away. The members of the Clawed Fury Cult are not to be trifled with and pose a genuine threat to national security. Do not approach members of this cult under any circumstances!

Sighing, she recognized Oleg's name as the collaborator who'd occasionally send her a fungus sample for her to run in her ICP-MS or in James' NMR machine. "Mierda santa!" she swore yet again. At that moment, her cell phone rang and she checked the caller ID. It was Thomas calling in. "Thomas?" she answered.

"Hey, hon. How're you feeling? Still nauseated?"

"Honestly, I feel like mierda," she replied as another wave of nausea passed through her.

His deep reassuring voice joked, "I told ya not to eat the Captain's cooking at dinner last night! Still wonder how the hell her man's still so fat with her cooking. Hey, I think we're gonna be in some deep shit soon, read an article about Ili-what's-her-name."

Retching into the garbage can again, Joanne said, "Sorry, dear, my stomach really feels like mierda."

"I'll come pick you up and take you to the doctor then," said Thomas quickly. "Let me just finishing welding this last thing for these pansy seniors."

"Sure, I don't think I'm gonna make any progress at this rate. See you soon," replied Joanne, wondering why she was feeling so awful. Then the smell of heavily spiced chili assaulted her nostrils and even more than ever, she felt nauseated. Instinctively, she ran as fast as she could to the kitchen to find Captain Greywolf at the microwave with a tupperware container full of her infamous deer chili with some corn tortillas. How did her digestive system handle all that spicy food?

Her cheerful and somewhat eccentric collaborator waved and after taking a look at the nauseated woman, "Joanne, you ok?" Without saying anything, Joanne merely pointed at the container of strong chili and held her stomach before retreating into the bathroom that was secluded in the kitchen/lounge area. Shrugging her shoulders, the Captain merely began to eat her lunch, not quite aware that it was the smell of her food that made Joanne sick.

After Joanne emerged from the bathroom, the food was gone although the aroma still lingered. "My stomach doesn't quite approve," she said, trying to be polite.

The Captain nodded. "Anyway, you hear about Ivan? I always thought he was, well, more interested in Vincent but I guess Galka got through to him. I guess Ivan was either in-the-closet straight or maybe bi or Vincent just has a way of attracting anything that moves, male, female or both," she laughed. Then on a more serious tone, she said, "And I think we're going to have to re-instate the Knights Errants because I don't think the president's gonna know what to do with how to handle Iliiryana."

"That we do," agreed the younger professor just as a second wave of nausea struck her. Captain Greywolf had just opened up a small container of candied anchovies with chili and sesame seeds on them. "I think I'm going to take it easy today, Thomas is coming to take me to the doctor to investigate my stomach bug and I've just been feeling like mierda with being tired and crap."

"Blame it on them germy froshlings," said the Captain before eating a handful of those smelly candied fishes. "There was a pretty big episode of contagious food poisoning in Rud-dock and Page. Let's just hope that we can counter Iliiryana before she causes more trouble than those Vladivostok giants and Senator Mathers!" Then she offered some anchovies to Joanne, who clutched her stomach yet again and nodded her refusal before making her way out of the lounge, now saturated with everything in the Captain's lunch.

It was going to a very, very long time before Thomas could haul her out and take her to the doctor, who hopefully would be able to help her with the stomach bug. No fever, plenty of nausea and vomiting, and a general sense of tiredness. Joanne pondered what kind of food poisoning or indigestion would cause that set of symptoms that intensified at the foods the her colleague enjoyed most. What kind of indigestion would last for a week though? She vowed to either do her cooking herself or let Thomas do the cooking. She was also going to tell him about the two rings she found on her desk. Maybe if it was clear for her to travel and not be a health hazard, she might attend the ceremony.

## 14 Imladrien and Tinúvion

The first thing Tarathorn saw was a wiry young man with a crooked jaw, bright blue eyes and reddish-brown hair looked smiled at her. "Holy crap, what the frequency was that?" she asked nobody in particular. She then noticed that in the place of her right hand was a silver hand that moved almost as she wanted it to move, but it still felt very odd to her.

"Ya'll had one danged close call," came the reply with a thick Southern accent. "Cylithera, Galka, and I tried really hard but we couldn't fix that, so we had to make do with that. Danged pretty but ain't like the real thing."

"Steve?" said Tarathorn groggily, recalling that Iliiryana had killed him after Vincent had weakened him.

Still smiling at her, he said, "Yes. That was my alias. Thanks to you, I got my True Name back and thus my life. You see, Iliiryana gained her powers by slaying other deities with some dark enchantments the gods have long thought destroyed. And to be fair to you, I give you my True Name, although you already figured it out thanks to her overconfidence. I am Gildharain, as Aeondar my lieutenant would've been had you not released both of our essences from her."

She looked at him intently. "So what should I call you?"

"Whichever you see more of and prefer," he said, grinning like a small boy. The young man then shrank in height until he was shorter than her and his features became child-like again.

"You just looked like Gildharain right there," she replied, mirth momentarily filling her again. That's why he seemed to be so familiar!

He laughed a genuine laugh and then added, "Oh and there's some others who've been wanting to see you but Galka shooed everyone out. I'm actually not supposed to be here."

As if on cue, Ivan and Galka stepped in, hand-in-hand. Ivan's hair was short again, clipped neatly close to his head, and he wore a stately looking red and orange robe. Galka was also in a red and orange robe with her dark hair tied up in a simple ponytail. "I guess we can't keep fellow Tuatha lords out of the infirmary!" joked Galka, hugging Tarathorn. Ivan also gave his friend a hug, tears of joy that she survived misting his eyes. No words formed in his mouth at all.

"I guess so!" laughed Tarathorn. "How long have I been out? And where's Vincent?" A shadow fell on both of their faces. "What is it? Is he all right? Iliiryana didn't..." she trailed off.

Ivan allowed Tarathorn to lean into him a bit. Galka said, "No, he lives, but just barely. He seems to have lost the will to live and he refuses to allow himself to be seen. Perhaps you can restore him to life. As far as Iliiryana goes, her power is sundered, but she will come back with a vengeance and it's even more important that the Tuatha work together to keep her in check. The ceremony will be tonight and we will make sure he is there."

"Ceremony?" asked Tarathorn, puzzled.

"Wedding," replied Ivan simply. "I chose to embrace Sarkany roots and so Galka and I are getting married." Even amidst her fears for Vincent, Tarathorn couldn't help but smile

at the happy couple, especially Ivan.

That night, Tarathorn found herself in the middle of a vast field bordered by a river on one side, a forest on another, and the mountains on the third. The sky was a deep ultramarine and the stars above appeared to yearning to be at the ceremony itself. Guests, both humanoid and draconian, were seated and facing a small hill. A dark bronze scaled Sarkany was at the crest of the hill and judging from the beard, she was pretty sure it was a male. Next to the Sarkany was a copper-scaled Sarkany without a beard, most likely a female. In between the two of them was what looked like a gigantic torch that stood up several feet from the ground. The post-doc's eyes scanned the entire scene, hoping for at least a glimpse of Ivan and Galka or more urgently, of Vincent.

Tarathorn then breathed a sigh of relief at being allowed to wear even a thin shirt and a pair of shorts under the navy blue robe with silver highlights patterned after ocean waves and wind. She decided to just let her hair fall down naturally down her back after bathing in the hot springs. Cylithera was next to her in a sea-grey robe with silver highlights with the pattern of a longbow superimposed on a flying eagle. Both women had their longbows strapped to their backs with their quivers of arrows, although they knew it was only for ceremonial purposes. Like the post-doc, the Eternal Huntress appeared to be a bit uncomfortable wearing a robe. Nearby was Gildharain in a green robe embroidered with various leaves. He made a face at Tarathorn and tried to hold the robe closed. Apparently the robes for men tended not to have anything to keep them closed and Gildharain didn't exactly enjoy it. "You should've worn something underneath," she whispered. He merely groaned silently.

Not too far as she made her way towards the back, were her colleagues from Caltech, also dressed in flame orange robes with the Caltech emblem, a hand holding a lit torch, embroidered onto them. Joanne de Salvo and Captain Greywolf were both there, grinning at their companions who struggled to keep the wind from opening up their robes and exposing them. "Does this robe make me look fat?" joked Thomas with an effeminate gesture. Joanne merely shrugged and laughed. The fox-like young woman quickly turned away when several of the men's robes opened without warning, exposing things she really didn't want to see.

"I thought kilts were bad, but these take the cake," teased Captain Greywolf, pulling out several large safety pins from hidden pockets. She then made sure her companion, a bear-like older man with a salt-and-pepper, more salt, beard, short dark hair with white strands here and there, and a striped recurve bow at his side, wouldn't have to deal with his robe opening up randomly. The heavy-set man with Captain Greywolf merely groaned at the thought of having to stay in one of these robes, even if he did wear a shirt and shorts as his companion had recommended. "Robert, good thing you wore something under that robe, or Tarathorn would've passed out, you know how some of those sheltered little Asian girls can be!" Robert merely laughed and put his strong arm around her.

Joanne also grabbed a few of the pins, knowing that Thomas didn't think far ahead enough to wear something under the robe. He merely groaned, hoping that they would be enough to keep him remotely decent. Years ago, when he had been addicted to drugs, he wouldn't have minded the extra attention, but with his Sidhe-touched wife nearby, he wasn't so keen on being indecent. Plus, he wasn't so sure about being exposed around creatures he didn't exactly feel comfortable with. Sensing his discomfort, she merely secured the front of his robe with a few extra pins. "Don't worry, it shouldn't open up," she whispered before

fighting a small wave of nausea.

A powerful gust of whistling wind signalled to everyone that the ceremony was about to begin. Then flying from high above, Ivan and Galka, both in draconian form, landed upon the hill, glowing with a bright but non-consuming flame. Their voices clanged as one above the background noise, although Tarathorn couldn't make out anything either of them was saying. Then the two elder Sarkany motioned to Ivan and Galka to the torch. Inhaling deeply, they breathed bright yellow flames, lighting the torch and warming up the surroundings dramatically. Tarathorn was relieved that there was some distance between her and the hill and she wondered if Cylithera was going to melt from the heat. Yet there was no cold aura surrounding the normally frigid Eternal Huntress and somehow, it reassured her that she was in no danger of melting away.

"Oroszlan and Galka have made their pledge to be one and to lead our kindred as Legoregebb and Ereny have in the ages past. May the wisdom of our ancestors bless them and may their reign over Pelda be long and fruitful! May this also serve as steps toward a more peaceful era with our fellow Tuatha, the Sidhe and the Alfar," intoned the bronze-scaled Sarkany.

"Let it now be known that Oroszlan and Galka are now our rightful rulers and that their spirits and our ancestors spirits will always remain with us to provide guidance," clanged the copper-scaled Sarkany. "And now it is time for us to celebrate this night, not only for the union of those who bring us hope for the future, but also for that future that we will all work for."

With that, a cheerful clamor rang in the air as Tarathorn had never heard before. The cheers, while filling her with joy that one of her best friends finally found peace with himself and reconciled with his conflicting desires, only left her wondering even more where Vincent was. Apparently, Cylithera also shared Tarathorn's concern about him because she too, was looking around in the crowd. She then whispered to Tarathorn, "Imladrien, just know that I only wish happiness for Eöl-Tinúvion. Once I had wanted him for myself until I realized that I was enchanted by his voice and that by instilling the fury I represent, I silenced him bit by bit. Thus, I know he is meant for another, whether it is you or another, not even the greater gods would know. All I ask of you, Imladrien, is to find him and send him my regards." Shocked at Cylithera's response, Tarathorn could only nod at her in acknowledgment.

Searching through the crowds, Tarathorn looked around for the handsome young man she missed so greatly. Every now and then, a Sarkany would almost step on her, but she dodged quickly and apologized to the majestic draconian creature before moving on. Finally, near a large redwood tree (how did one grow so far inland?), there was a cloaked and hooded figure with crutches, obviously keeping his or her distance from the festivities. Frustrated at the lack of possible leads, she decided to take a closer look to see if this hooded person could provide some kind of a lead. At first, the hooded figure tried to hobble away with the crutches, but the post-doc was far too quick.

"Excuse me, but have you seen Vincent, er, Eöl-Tinúvion? He's..." she started meekly until the figure, which Tarathorn was certain was male, removed his dark hood.

Looking at her was a tanned man with lines of care on his face but his short hair was still raven-dark and his almond-shaped deep brown eyes spoke of terror, grief, and regret mixed with innocent curiosity, albeit tarnished innocence. He had a beard that covered much of his face, but it was neatly trimmed and had been touched ever so lightly by the first winter frost. "I wish you didn't have to see this. I'm sorry about everything, Tarathorn. I should've

trusted you and my instincts, not let my jealousy consume me," he whispered to her in a cracked voice.

"Vincent!" cried out Tarathorn, hugging him tightly and finding that he had grown somewhat stouter. Somehow, his new build reminded her of Steve and she noticed that his waist circumference was a bit greater than her reach. "Oh, I was so worried about you!"

He returned her embrace, but he said, "Look, I don't want to hurt you anymore. I can understand if you won't ever forgive me for what I did to you at the Crossroad and what my rage led me to do." Tears formed in his dark eyes. "You're still the love of my life. That's why our paths must part, I only want the very best for you. What future is there for you, an Alfar, a creature of joy and freedom, with a Sidhe, a creature of fury, and a fat, ugly cripple to boot? I can barely walk, my back won't stop hurting, and I can't sing either, so what is left?"

Tears also formed in Tarathorn's eyes, but she still held him close with her intact arm. "You still have a heart, a good one, maybe a bit insecure and jealous at times, but one I admire. As soon as you intervened to save me and as soon as I saw you rescue Ivan from the corner of the eye, I knew you still have a heart. There's nothing to forgive. I shouldn't have wavered in my loyalty to you."

"Gildharain told me everything, that he saw that your intentions were pure and that you were under his enchantment to kiss him back," admitted Vincent, leaning into her. "And then I ran away because I thought perhaps you'd rather be with one of your own kind," he rambled, teary-eyed and sniffing.

Shaking her head, she said, "Deep inside I still want to think that you're the only one for me even if I know I do have the Alfar wandering eye tendency."

He ran his fingers, no longer slender and nimble but thicker and more callused, through her thick black hair. "Just as I have a bit of that jealous streak and a bit of a short temper like the Sidhe," he said, smiling faintly. "I wish none of this Tuatha stuff ever happened."

"I know, but here we are and we still survived," she reassured him and looking him in the eye. Then her expression changed to one of reflection. "And remember that song?" she asked. "Night-Time Prayer. I still remember that time you sang it to me on the phone an hour after we had that huge fight about travel arrangements to and from Florida and it looked like things might collapse." With that, she began in her clear, child-like soprano voice.

If I were to lose you tomorrow  
In a tempest of regret and sorrow,  
And the darkness embraces me from below,  
With its coldness about to lay me low,  
Where in the empty night sky will my prayers fly,  
That final gesture of love before I lay down to die?

As she finished the first verse, Vincent suddenly felt as if a shroud fell from his heart and something lifted from his throat. With a small cough to clear his voice a bit, he started with his smooth baritone, shy and tentative at first, but quickly returning to the tone everyone swooned over. The constricting sensation that kept him from singing for a while didn't come back to haunt him. In the distance, he could've sworn he heard a panther roaring in frustration and a hawk keening angrily as his throat opened back up, letting the music flow

through him once more.

I wish I knew the path my prayers will take,  
I truly hope that they will reach you in time.  
Please forgive me for each and every mistake,  
I know it's hard but I'll do anything to atone for my crime.

The two of them then joined together in a duet, contrasting voices filling the air and floating high above them. As they continued to sing, some of the lines of care faded from Vincent's face and some of the winter frost melted away. Not far away, Cylithera listened in and nodded her approval, though neither of them were able to see her. Ivan and Galka, too, heard the two voices, and smiled, knowing that his voice had returned and that he would eventually heal.

I'll cherish the thought of every day.  
I promise I'll never go astray,  
Recalling sacred vows I'm to obey  
With a heart like innocent kids at play.  
Who will come and fly with me to my eternal rest?  
I hope it'll be with you that I'll be forever blessed!

I wish I knew the path my prayers will take,  
I truly hope that they will reach you in time.  
Please forgive me for each and every mistake,  
I know it's hard but I'll do anything to atone for my crime.

Will that stellar mantle reveal the truth in the stars?  
I wish I could just keep a fragment of your love from afar...

When they finished their duet, Vincent almost crushed Tarathorn in an eager hug. His face was now stained with tears, as was Tarathorn's, but he smiled weakly at her. "I know we've been through far too much and changed a lot," said Vincent, still stroking her hair and cheek. "I don't know if we can really maintain anything stable with all those perturbations. I gotta admit, I was thinking about getting married before this whole mess started, but I'm not so sure now." He took her hands into his and kissed them, especially the silver hand to replace the one Iliiriana had cut off. The coldness of the silver hand made him shiver a bit too.

She gently caressed his large hands and arms, which were covered with plenty of coarse, dark hair. "I thought about it too, but we do need some time to sort things out with all that's happened. Maybe if we stepped back a bit and see how things pan out over time. Who knows, maybe we'll follow Ivan and Galka's example or maybe we'll find someone else, but we'll never know until it happens. You'll always be the first love of my life." Her eyes were also wet and she sniffled a bit. All the while, she allowed her remaining hand to take in the feel of the thick hair that now covered him.

"As will you. I hope you'll be the only one, but I'll understand if you have to find someone else," he replied. Then feeling somewhat self-conscious at his newfound hairiness, he added, "Courtesy of that battle with Iliiryana and maybe that spell you used to kick her ass, now I got a bit of that lycanthropy in me. I've been sprouting tons of boar hair everywhere and I don't think it's coming off anytime this lifetime without assistance. I hope it's not too nasty for you but if it is, I can shave it off or something. Same with the beard. I thought it was better than seeing me with a deformed jaw." He gave her a sheepish grin before hanging his head slightly.

"And one more thing, Vincent, boy-band look or grizzly bear or anything else, you'll always look good to me," she said sincerely, allowing him to hold her intact hand again and hugging him. If anything, Tarathorn thought that this new appearance somehow suited Vincent well in light of all they had both seen and experienced. "And maybe you won't attract too many of those undergrad girls!" she joked, trying to find humor in the situation.

Laughing back hard until he needed to support himself with his crutches again, he spluttered, "Only until the bear-hunters find me! Then you'll have to kick their butts for me!" With that, he hugged her again and didn't want to let go for a long time. She was right, anything could happen, but for now, they had each other right before their eyes and would always have each other in spirit. Not even the thought of the looming decision over whether to embrace their mortal or Tuatha roots could dim the joy they felt at seeing each other once again.

## 15 Return to Caltech

*Cylithera stood before him as he drifted about at the flooded and rather muddy Crossroad. Then he stepped and slipped into the chest-deep mud and half-swam, half-walked to the best of his ability, unable to make much progress without exerting all his strength. It was bad enough when he was athletic and slender, but in this new shape with the bad back, it taxed him more than he ever thought was possible. He looked around, puzzled at how the seemingly eternally parched land could be so heavily flooded. Did Tarathorn's spell do this? "Tinúvion, if you've learned nothing else from me, trust yourself and your instincts," she said, reaching out to him. He reached out for her hand in hopes of escaping the mud that surrounded him. She single-handedly pulled him out of the thick brown-grey goo.*

*"I'm still torn between my mortal and Sidhe roots," he admitted as he tried to remove some of the sticky mud from himself.*

*"Consider this. Perhaps it is time for the Tuatha to stop being so segregated. You and Imladrien showed me that the difference between a Sidhe and Alfar can be minimal and Galka has also revealed to me that there is significant cross-over between the two. Even the Sarkany aren't all that different from us, even if some of their ways are a bit alien to us," she said almost cryptically. "Whichever you choose, I know you will amount to great things in the time allotted to you."*

*Tarathorn could hear Gildharain piping once more, but unlike in the past, she could hear songs of mourning from his pan-pipes. What could make the Alfar lord so sad? Perhaps the death of his most loyal lieutenant, Aeondar or the loss of innocence thanks to Iliiryana's machinations? While she pondered, she could hear him speak in the wind.*

*"No matter what you are, Alfar or mortal, remember you only live but once," his voice whispered through the warm breeze. "So throw caution to the wind every now and then."*

*She then saw visions of the Crossroad still semi-flooded from the water spell she had cast to protect herself from Vincent in his Stellar Tiger form. She also saw visions of Mag-na-Oige dried out, parched from the lack of water and the islands scattered across the ocean were now mountains and hills. "What the frequency?" she asked, confused. There was no response and she bolted awake in what used to be Galka's bunk bed in the living room of Vincent's apartment.*

Vincent tossed and turned as he usually did ever since he returned from Pelda. He had been reluctant to go back to Caltech to finish up his PhD at first, but with enough persuasion from Ivan, Galka, and most of all, Tarathorn, he finally found the courage to return. It finally came time for his dissertation defense. "You'll be ok," reassured Tarathorn, hugging the now stocky and heavy-set young man. She had come to visit him after giving an especially difficult final to her ecosystem simulations class. "I know you'll be able to get through. Your brains and determination are what got you this far, not your looks. And hey, James didn't give you that much trouble about your looks except for his usual health-nut stuff. And you did get rid of most of the gut Iliiryana put on you." He couldn't help but laugh at her last comment, recalling how he not only overcame his inability to walk after that last battle with the half-Dhaerow, but also to be as strong and healthy as the remnants of his injury allowed him to be.

In the morning, after Tarathorn made sure he ate a full, healthy breakfast in the faculty cafeteria, Vincent stepped into the auditorium where he was supposed to give his dissertation defense. James and Efren were already there, smiling as they held marked-up copies of his dissertation. She nudged Vincent in when he hesitated to step in any further. "Be careful that Helen doesn't see you or make sure you keep Tarathorn with you at all times, she might want to have a bear farm," joked James, shaking his hand. Joanne was also nearby and Vincent squinted for a moment, wondering if she had picked up Ivan's eating habits and wasn't quite able to burn off all those calories.

"I know you'll do well," she said, also shaking Vincent's hand with a crushing handshake. "Don't let Danielle intimidate you with those inorganic and atomic chemistry questions," she added, grinning. Dr. Danielle Song was the least intimidating member of Vincent's committee, although her Korean accent did make it a bit hard for Vincent to fully understand her questions at times.

"Vincent!" called out Dr. Song, also shaking his hand. "No worry, you going to do good."

While Vincent was trying to let his hand recover from being shaken powerfully by all of his committee members and trying to hide from Captain Greywolf, whose handshake was notoriously powerful, a light, warm breeze blew through the hall. "Vincent! You know I won't miss your defense!" rang a high-pitched male voice. He looked up to see Ivan, who was now a few shades darker than his usual math nerd pallor and had put on a bit more muscle, although he was still very slender. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a button-up orange and white striped shirt with a collar. Without any hesitation, the two old roommates hugged each other tightly.

Galka also materialized in a small puff of fire. She, too, was wearing a pair of jeans and a grey shirt with the Caltech torch embroidered onto it. Like her mate, she also hugged Vincent, proud that he was just about done with his PhD. "You've done well," she said

simply.

Vincent bowed slightly to his friends. "Thank you for standing behind me and saving me that time," he said.

While Vincent made last minute preparations on his presentation, he felt yet another wind blow through the lecture hall. It wasn't a warm one like the one that brought in Ivan and Galka, but a chilly one. At first, he shivered at the thought of what a chill wind could bring, but he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw a tall woman with an aquiline expression, jet-black hair in a bun, and steel-grey eyes that seemed to pierce everyone in the room and a fairly nondescript set of khaki pants and a silver tank top. Yet another need for brown pants averted! She nodded to Vincent before taking a seat next to Tarathorn. "Let's hope Iliiryana and Firianna dare not show their faces here," she whispered to Tarathorn, who nodded grimly.

A wiry reddish-brown-haired youth with slightly pointed ears in blue jeans and a green tunic-like top walked in. He groaned slightly when he saw that the two seats next to Tarathorn were taken, one by Cylithera and the other by Galka, but he sat next to Cylithera and waved both to the nervous doctoral student and all those sitting around him. "Gild-harain!" said Tarathorn, stepping over to hug him.

"Quite the reunion for Tinúvion," he laughed. "And looks like he's adapted well to the curse Iliiryana spewed on him when you set her back." It was all too true. That last battle with Iliiryana had released an insane wave of energy, including the same curse that Kiora had used on Aeondar that turned him into a heavy-set, bear-like man.

"And I see you've also regained your vigor," commented Tarathorn, noting that no trace of Kiora's curse remained on him, except maybe for that disarming grin he tried to use on her several times.

A loud, somewhat defiant female voice then boomed. "Hey, is this Vincent Gahan's defense talk?" she called out. She was wearing a pair of blue cut-off shorts and a black tank top with the Hoyt logo on one side and the UC Berkeley logo on the other. It was obvious that she took pride in her muscular build and some of the men in the room suddenly felt weak and out-of-shape compared to her. Her short-cropped dark hair blew ever so lightly in the wind. Next to her was a stout young man of medium height and somewhat dark complexion. He, like her, had large, rippling muscles and was wearing a tank top to show them off. He was clean-shaven with a crew-cut and he had Maxwell's equations tattooed on his left arm and a green flying parakeet on his right arm. On his tank top was a UC Davis logo and a stylized flying owl made to look like a compound bow. It was very obvious, though, that the two of them were related and many thought they were siblings, although they were really cousins.

As soon as Dr. Katie Castro's voice rang out, Joanne cringed involuntarily at her old jiu-jitsu partner. Tarathorn and Ivan ran up to the newcomers and hugged them. "We're so glad you could come!" said Ivan.

"Damn, you finally put some meat on those bones!" laughed Dr. Roberto Pichardo. "And congrats to you too, Ivan! Heard you got hitched!"

"Yeah, knew you'd finally fuckin' fill up!" said Katie, also hugging Ivan. "Although looks like they fed Vincent some really good shit," she joked, noting that the once slender and athletic young man was now stocky and hairy. "What the fuck did Cylithera feed him to finally put some hair on his chest and apparently all over for that matter?"

Then the two cousins noticed that Tarathorn's right hand was made of a silvery metal.

"What happened?" gasped Roberto, pointing out the injury to Katie as well.

"Long story," started Tarathorn, sighing a bit. She could see that Vincent wanted to greet his friends, but James and Efren were talking with him.

There was a bit of clatter from the front of the lecture hall as James and Efren leaped up and down frantically. It looked like both of them were trying to reach for something just out of their reaches. "Oh shit, looks like someone fuckin' found us out," snickered Katie, pointing at Thomas, who was looking at the ceiling and let out a few choice words of his own. "But yeah, we're gonna be here for a few days, had damned enough of those fuckin' hippies in Nor-Cal crying over the Clawed Fury."

Before the friends could converse any further, Thomas stepped up to the lectern after realizing that neither James nor Efren could reach the microphone that someone had placed on the ceiling. He ignored the two short men's protests and read from their notes in a strong, booming voice, "Today, we're gonna have Vincent Gahan give his final talk on the characterization and synthesis of post-Rift para-ketone based compounds. His adviser is Dr. James Nunnelley in the chemistry department. He came to us from Cal State LA, which is where three of his four committee members, including his adviser, graduated from and where Captain Greywolf also left a mark. Besides being an incredibly brilliant student, he also was the lead singer for the Geeksters and narrowly saved us from that witch Iliiryana. The format of this defense will be that he gives his talk and nobody's supposed to interrupt, ya'll included, James and Efren. Then we'll take a break and then fuckin' grill the shit out of him. So let's let him rip!" Everyone laughed knowing that Thomas had improvised the last section.

Shyly, Vincent tapped on the microphone out of habit from several Geekster concerts riddled with technical difficulties. "Hi everyone. Thank all of you for coming to my defense," he started. He then continued to speak about the research he had conducted for most of the last seven years. An old man with an unkempt white beard snored periodically, but nobody paid attention to the nearly senile Dr. Wally "Bilbo" Bracegirdle. Despite his habit of appearing to be asleep, he still asked some of the most challenging, insightful questions.

At the end of his talk, Dr. Bracegirdle asked, "So, in reference to the protective group on what you call the alpha paraketones, what mechanism do you propose to protect it from reacting? You suggest a hexene group, but why not a diethyl ether when it's a much more commonly used one?"

After an hour of questions from the audience and answering them, Vincent found himself with four copies of his dissertation, all marked up by his committee members. He decided that if he had been a cartoon, steam would've been coming out his ears. True, it was nowhere as bad as his qualifier exam where James and Efren both made him write really complex organic synthesis mechanisms on the board, but Dr. Bracegirdle kept him on the defensive. He looked at his friends who had taken up a significant block in the auditorium and could see that only Tarathorn had followed most of the material he had just thrown at the audience. She even had the nerve to question Dr. Bracegirdle's proposed use of a diethyl ether to stabilize the beta paraketone group and left the otherwise vocal professor stunned! Even James and Efren were surprised at her knowledge of chemistry and looked in her direction, slightly buggy-eyed.

While Dr. Bracegirdle remained speechless, Vincent then countered Tarathorn's comments. "Well, only problem with completely dismissing the diethyl ether to stabilize the beta-paraketone group is that there aren't too many other protective groups that are both

easy to synthesize and can still be removed without a heavily exothermic reaction. It still doesn't work very well, but it certainly beats blowing up the lab every few days. I tried a chlorinated bi-phenyl group as well, which has better rate kinetics and is a bit less likely to react with the other groups, but it is a poor leaving group and it takes a pretty hefty SN-2 reaction to dislodge it, which is just as likely to replace something else as the protective group," he replied, hoping he spoke correctly.

Not far from Vincent, Efred and James were taking notes frantically, muttering about the soon-to-be doctorate student's cheeky girlfriend who seemed to know almost as much as they did. Katie and Roberto were scribbling on blank sheets of paper as well, but instead of notes on improving synthesis techniques, they drew cartoon renditions of the SN-2 reaction based on the molecules Vincent had shown during the presentation. "Heh, SN-2," snickered Roberto. "Imagine Dr. Hong teaching that!" Katie merely drew a few more pictures, this time with their old professor with the hooked stick in molecule form and chasing after various organic entities. She also drew a set of speech bubbles on the stick-figure and the molecules before writing captions in Spanish, hoping that Galka didn't know Spanish.

Finally, several more detailed questions and answers later from a more general audience about potential applications, James finally announced, "Thank you everyone for coming. And Vincent, you've passed your defense. All you have to do now is turn in the final draft after you make the corrections." With that, the exhausted and hungry graduate student nodded to the crowd and to his dissertation committee.

While Vincent made his way through the crowd toward his friends, he thumbed through the comments his committee made. Aside from minor grammar changes (none of which agreed with each other) and suggestions for clarifying his reaction mechanisms, the comments had generally been positive. Joanne had left a comment in what he had recognized as Eldharin runes but in the semi-secret archaic form of the Sidhe tongue. "May happiness reign in your life," she had written. James had also written a similar note, albeit with what looked like a long, messy organic synthesis. All he could do was take a deep breath and fidget a bit with something in his pocket before he found his friends all pouncing on him and congratulating him. Struggling to make sure his hands and ribs didn't get crushed by his friends, he let out a little squeak.

"Damn, what's with you guys going on all these fuckin' adventures and not bringing us in?" said Katie excitedly, still hugging Vincent. He was relieved that he no longer had his slender build because he was certain that her powerful hug would've crushed him otherwise. "I heard you got into some serious fuckin' shit there and Ivan's the heir to some throne."

"Is it made of porcelain?" joked Roberto, hugging Ivan and Galka. He was always eager to insert a toilet-based joke anywhere.

"Everything's toilet to you two," laughed Ivan, thinking back to all the Dungeons and Dragons games they played and to all the comics the two cousins made of various professors they had over the years, especially a notorious Dr. Hong who taught a non-linear dynamics class. "Hey, let's go eat and catch up! I'm hungry again!"

"Bet he eats even more than before now that he's buff," said Roberto, pulling out a five dollar bill from his pocket. "Wanna bet, Katie?"

Laughing, she replied, "I sure fuckin' do. If he eats twice as much, you fuckin' owe me two beers. If he eats less than fuckin' double, I'll get you two beers. How's that sound?"

Shaking her hand, he said, "We're on!"

Whispering to Ivan, Galka commented in the Sarkany language, "Rather vulgar, isn't

she?" He smiled and nodded.

"So, where are we fuckin' eating? I don't wanna see Ivan and Vincent hallucinating that weird shit again like that time in non-linear dynamics!" swore Katie, motioning to everyone to step out of the emptying auditorium. "Vincent, you pick 'cause you kicked the shit outta them during the defense!" she added, lightly elbowing Vincent.

Pausing for a moment and scratching his neatly-trimmed beard, he said, "Well, how about that dim sum place over on the corner of Hill and California, the one that serves dim sum stuff late into the night unlike those other places?" Everyone nodded in approval and with a bit of prodding from both Katie and Roberto, they filed out to the street and began walking together, chatting eagerly about all that had happened. After a huge dinner, the six friends walked back to the Caltech campus, where everything was unusually quiet aside from the occasional student sprinting across campus to get a final exam turned in on time.

Ivan and Galka had taken on their draconian forms and flew off into the night sky, causing Katie and Roberto to stare at them in awe, unable to speak. Finally, Katie said, "Holy shit. Ivan... so he wasn't a fuckin' fruit-cake after all. And to think he's the heir to the throne..."

"I wonder if it's a porcelain throne," joked Roberto, eager to put in a toilet or bathroom reference in whenever he could. "Dunno about you guys, but I'm gonna go and see if I can get a bit of tae kwon do or mixed martial arts at Braun gym, heard there's a good group now."

"Jiu-jitsu for me over in Brown gym. They did fuckin' fix that place up, right?" added Katie, flexing her muscles. Vincent nodded to her, assuring her that the little fire damage Galka accidentally caused in a fit of ire was gone. Breathing a sigh of relief, Katie and Roberto marched over towards the athletic facilities, eager to enjoy a bit of mock-combat and intense physical exercise.

With everyone else gone, Vincent and Tarathorn continued to walk around on the Caltech campus until they reached Throop pond. The vegetation surrounding the pond was even more lush than before after Joanne had planted some plants she had obtained on their travels. Several silver-leafed oaks surrounded the pool of water, as did a handful of unusually hardy rose bushes with blue flowers and silver-tinged leaves. The full moon shone brightly down and the light filtered through the rapidly filling canopy of the live oak hammock that had been planted. The silver-blue jasmines from Dûnhèasa that Joanne had planted were also starting to bloom, releasing their fragrance into the ever-so-slightly breezy night air. At first, the two of them merely stood and hugged each other. "Thank you, for getting me through school and helping me get back into at least ok shape and letting me finally become Dr. Vincent Gahan," he whispered to her, holding her close.

She nuzzled up to him gently, gently patting the persistent belly on him and whispered back, "I know you'd make it." Then she gazed absently into the sky, her dark eyes focused on the moon for a moment before looking up to him.

"It's the Calling, isn't it?" he murmured, also looking up at the moon before looking back at her. "I've come to my decision, even if it took forever and lots of waffling around." Absent-mindedly, one hand wandered over to her hands while he put his free arm around her. She had always been tiny to him, but now she seemed even tinier to him.

"As have I," said Tarathorn, her tiny intact hand on his large, hairy hand. "Which way will you go?" She couldn't help but stroke the coarse dark hairs on his hands and arms. No wonder the Captain found the bear-like man (rumored to be a were-bear by the Dungeons and Dragons playing undergrads) so adorable despite the significant age difference and big

belly. There was just something absolutely soothing about running her fingers through all that hair!

Pausing for a moment, he breathed in deeply. "I've chosen to embrace my Sidhe roots. There's a lot that needs to be done in Dûnhèasa and beyond," he said. "What about you?"

"I'm embracing my Alfar roots," she replied with a small tear in her eye. "Somehow I had this gut feeling that this would maximize our chances of our paths staying converged. I don't want to lose you again." She then scooted a bit closer to him.

Vincent then took her hands, both the nimble real hand and the robotic one and held them close to his heart for a moment. "I've had something I've been wanting to ask you," he said, letting go of one of her hands and fumbling in his pocket. Finally, he pulled out a small box and knelt before her before opening it. In it was a silver ring with a diamond-like gem that glowed with a soft blue light thanks to the full moon high above them. "Tarathorn, you don't know how much you've done for me all these years from the day I first laid eyes on you at that seminar in Cal State LA," he started, trying not to stutter. "I think we've waited long enough and so to make the long thing short, will you marry me?"

She let out a small gasp and blushed. "Of course," she replied, still slightly stunned. He then kissed her hand and placed the ring on her fourth finger of her nut-brown human hand before standing up to hug her once again. She wrapped her arms around the stout man before looking up to kiss him on the lips. "In all the years I've known you, I've come to realize that we were meant to be, even if we've had our stumbling blocks and challenges," she said to him, eyes slightly wet from joy. "And there will still be challenges for us all along the way, but I'll take them with you for the rest of our days."

"As will I," he replied, his heart pounding in excitement and relief. He could also feel her heart racing away, almost like a tiny little bird fluttering about. As Tuatha, their time together would indeed be a long, very long time. If their bond could survive that long separation, the battle at the Crossroad, and his PhD at Caltech, they were sure they could handle anything together.