

Besnowed

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Book Cover by Molly VanRyn

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For the love of my life and the spark in my flame.

Forward

When I first began thinking of the new story that would become *Besnowed*, all that mattered was the atmosphere. I wanted to capture the essence of what I associated with winter.

There's something truly special about the way an early morning in the cold looks and feels. All the sounds are muted and any light bounces further. I spent many early mornings in that air. Catching the first train to Paris for another week of studies. Combining those emotions with a grander nostalgia for the holidays was a natural step. Finding how these pieces of the puzzle then fit into other holidays was what followed. Successful or not, I like to believe *Besnowed* at least reflects a reality familiar to all of us.

Returning home,
 gathering for a feast,
 finding true love,
 or learning to live your own life.

These themes and the journey through memories are what matter most. That may not be perfect for everyone, but it's enough for me.

Last if not better first, a very special thank you to my younger sister Molly for her artwork on the cover. Another thank you to my father for his educated eyes proofreading my drafts.

And of course, a thank you to all my friends and family who inspired my writing and helped create my most cherished memories.

Chapter 1

Aurora Sunrise

It's been five years since we came home. Five long years away from family and friends. Stuck behind the tall stone walls of Veranum City in the name of protection. There was always a new war, always a new pandemic, always a new excuse. Some kind of fatal flaw raging through the greater world.

What was rarer was travel within the continent being so disrupted for so long. Something serious from across the strait raising barriers higher. All we could do is pray and try to celebrate the holidays as best we can. A phone call or a radio message may never be as firm as a kiss and a hug, but the kind words are always a warm welcome.

The trip is long and the route is barren. The ideal conditions for a drifting sleep deprived mind to get in its own way. Old memories hiding in the mist. Nostalgia masked by the frost. Moments stuck in dew drops against the wind. Time freezes at our edge of the world.

Wisps of whim and crystalline dreams preserved in an eternally twilight sky. The sting of the cold and the bite of the wind keeps us all closer. And we survive the darkest nights by staying close together. Mom would always repeat the same lessons on how important it is to bundle up in layers. Coats and furs to match the weather. Deep breaths freezing the very air inside your lungs. Life itself adding to the weight of the atmosphere.

Getting dressed to go outside used to take upwards of an hour. I guess it still does back in Besniwod. Back home. Away from the comforts of the city. In the wild of the frontier

village. That was our reality growing up. Me and my sisters double checking every layer before we were allowed to take a step past the front door.

For anyone from our small village that was only half the story anyway. Bundle up to go outside. Check your layers and cover any and all exposed skin. Minimize the minutes as you move from one building to the next or from the market tents to Saint Vinson's church.

I'm sure Lumi has similar enough stories about how she grew up. We're both from Besniwod after all. It's hard to put into perspective how long we've been together. I imagine neither of us ever thought we'd share this life when we were kids. Our families didn't have a lot in common and lived on opposite ends of the village.

Coming home for the holidays – or really the feeling of Frithlic Nyun in general – tends to bring up these emotions. I end up reliving the journey of how we fell in love every year. The closest person in my life has always been a neighbor. She was my best friend when we moved to Veranum and helped make the pain of missing home easier to bear. But from the first moment we held hands it was clear where we were heading. A stronger feeling than we could have ever known at the time. And now here we are with our own life in the city.

That feeling of true warmth is harder to describe. The closest comparison for me is in the church. Our thoughts and prayers lighting the flame in Saint Vinson's hands. She provides us that life sustaining heat, reaching from the highest peak to match the sun and the moon. Saint Vinson's Triumph is felt in Her promise of another safe tomorrow. Our faith keeps that warmth deep in our hearts. Without it we would have long since succumbed to the desolate cold.

Villagers often carry sacred wards to remind themselves of that faith. Something physical to hold as you pray. A representation of Her guidance and Her flame. Jade necklaces and colorful ball ornaments, decorative candles and bright red banners, beaded chains and lucky bracelets. Personal and familial preferences usually dictate which object is used by whom, but the feeling is nearly the same for everyone.

As the train continued down its path I was thinking about a very specific charm though. A dreamcatcher Lumi made with the kids in the months leading up to our trip to Besniwod. The simple loop with its web pattern holds more specific powers.

I can remember Grandma telling stories about *little nest makers* leaving wards in the wild. The details would shift and change as she got older, but it always involved Saint Vinson's crystal spider and a wandering soul haunted by nightmares. The moral was always about finding peaceful sleep under a dreamcatcher left by Her pet.

These days dreamcatchers are a common gift for new parents. Something to help the baby sleep through the night. So when we heard Lumi's sister was pregnant we thought it'd be nice to give her a dreamcatcher. We stored it in one of our bags but traveling with two kids can make you second guess where exactly things are. In the rush to catch the train and not forget the kids, it's possible we accidentally left it on the kitchen counter.

I was getting irrationally worried as we moved closer towards Besniwod. All that time away meant this visit needed to be perfect. The perfect holiday for my family. The perfect *Frithlic Nyun*. The biggest celebration of the year with everyone across the continent coming together. It didn't matter whether you were from Veranum or Besniwod, we all looked forward to Frithlic Nyun.

That idyllic perfection was all the more important with so many years since the last time we returned. Even with the dates all set well in advance there was enough leeway for train delays or worse weather. Mortal time is more flexible outside the city where infrastructure yields to nature.

I often wonder how my kids Rwen and Zori feel about these things. They're so used to reliable schedules and calendars imposing their will over the seasons. Veranum is built from the ground up to allow for that kind of life. Stone walls rising up as high as the tallest mountain slopes. A vertical city on the coast, a bulwark against the tides staring across the strait. We live in the main residential district just past the second inner wall, well protected from the outside threats and well connected to everywhere and everyone within Veranum.

No matter the weather or the season outside the walls, the kids can always go to school and Lumi and I can always go to work. For five years we did just that, closed to the rest of the continent as quarantines dictated limited movement. Only now can we finally leave. Finally return home.

Zori probably doesn't have any memories from before the quarantine measures. The last time she met everyone was when she was just a baby, more like a sack of potatoes than a person with a personality. She knows who her extended family is though. We talk on the radio and send letters and videos when possible.

Rwen remembers more. He's friends with his cousins and we used to go back every year for Frithlic Nyun. He knows the traditions and how our families have their own feasts. The little details on the hams and the dumplings. I can even remember him working with Lumi's father to stuff handmade sausages.

He's grown a lot in the past few years though. He doesn't share everything with his parents, but we know he's thinking about university. He has dreams of studying at a

prestigious school across the strait. There's something poetic about my own son wanting to move farther still away.

"Sweften?" Lumi whispered my name from the other side of the cramped cabin car. She was nestled in with Rwen and Zori on a cot. I got the bench with barely any leg room between our luggage and the window.

"Yes, Lumi?"

"What time is it?"

"I think we're coming up on morning. It'll be dark by the time we get to my old house."

"Is that Mount Vinson?" Lumi pointed out the window across the snow covered forest. There was a tall mountain peak just visible between the branches. The soft lights of an eternally mixing dusk and dawn split by its stature. The very symbol of the Saint Herself.

"It all looks so different now."

"Reforestation was a success."

"Saint Vinson's Triumph really did lead to our salvation."

"It wouldn't be Frithlic Nyun without it." The mix of well wishes and blessings were always tinged and tainted by the different flavors of our history. Our home by any measure was hostile to life. The land where Besniwod stands was nothing but an icy desert for eons. Permafrost in every direction with the only hint of hope found down the long arms of the coastline. Places like where the original Veranum colony first settled in.

"How many years has it been?"

“Five.” Lumi’s question surprised me a bit. Travel bans being lifted and how that would affect the holidays was all anyone could talk about for months. The small talk about how long five years could feel like was the ice breaker of the season.

“No... I mean since they started the reforestation initiative.”

“Oh... that...”

“It’s been multiple generations now, but it didn’t take root until ours. I don’t really think about it much but being away for so long makes it obvious. There’s even more trees out here than in Veranum!” Reforestation was so integrated into the history of the continent for us we often forgot how it fit on the timeline. It was something that started vaguely in the distant past and now that it was actually working all that mattered was how it made life easier.

Veranum has been settled for as long as the continent has a memory going back to a time before the governments of the world reached into the stars for more resources. Always the same story. Extraction and exploitation. We grew up hearing rumors of penal colonies set up in the asteroid belt and beyond. Our government was never powerful enough to really contend with it all. Better to settle with a slice of the world no one would bother fighting over.

“I think there were already plenty of trees during our grandparents time? I know I remember hearing Grandpa talk about how he received some kind of stipend to build the log cabin on the outskirts of Besniwod. They were supporting that kind of thing when he was young.” I’m not sure how much I believed in my own answer. It made sense in a way, but I was putting the pieces together to make them fit the image I already had in my mind.

“It was probably soon after Saint Vinson’s Triumph and the war ended. Trees have always been an important part of Frithlic Nyun after all.” Lumi made a good point. We

could agree on a fuzzy idea of when it all must have happened. Sometime after the war and early enough to influence how we celebrate the holiday today.

“Mommy....” Zori woke up as our whispers grew louder. Her hair was a mess from sleeping tucked in between her brother and her mother. I couldn’t help but smile as she rubbed her eyes and began looking out the window toward Mount Vinson. “Are we almost there?”

“Not quite Zori.” Lumi was a little annoyed that we would have to help Zori fall back asleep now - we both were really. Our idle chitchat was about to end and we were both hoping to get a little more sleep before we pulled into Besniwod station.

“Is that Saint Vinson?” Zori pointed out the window past the snow covered tree to the highest peak on the horizon.

“Yes, but let’s not wake up your brother! We’ll be there soon enough so let’s get some more rest first.” I glanced over at Lumi to let her know I would be handling our daughter and she mouthed out a silent thank you to me in response. I love her more every day. We were both so much older now but that magic spark never flickered. As bright and as warm as Her flame.

“But I’m not sleepy!”

“Zori, come to Daddy and we’ll watch the trees and look out for Saint Vinson’s spider, okay?”

“Okay!” Zori shook off her blankets and came over to the bench on the other side of the cramped cabin. She found a comfortable spot in my arms but didn’t seem to want to fall asleep as she tried to focus on the trees in the forest passing by the window.

“Daddy! Tell me the story about Saint Vinson and how She saves everyone for Frithlic Nyun!”

“Didn’t you hear that one already last night?” Zori was all too excited to learn more about the holiday. She knew most of the standard traditions. The gift giving and some of the more common dishes. All the customs we kept in our version in Veranum.

“Yes but I want to hear it again! Riding the aurora and how Saint Vinson gives everyone gifts!” Zori’s version of the story was so different from what children in Besniwod understood. She loved the fanciful flight and the extravagant details of how Saint Vinson visited every home on the continent.

“Well okay. First we need to tell the story of Saint Vinson’s Triumph and the first Frithlic Nyun.” I looked over at Lumi and nodded with a soft expression as I mimed a heart with my hands.

“I love you too Swefen.” She relaxed into a more comfortable position with all the new space on the cot, taking a moment to make sure Rwen was nice and tucked in. He was at that age where he’ll sleep through anything. All those whispers and the excitement of his sister. Early morning conversation quietly moving past his ears.

“Saint Vinson’s Triumph is about the war isn’t it?” Zori made sure I didn’t lose focus as she moved her eyes up to line up with mine. It was now story time and she would be sure to not forget that fact.

“That’s right Zori. Do you remember how it happened?”

“She helped the soldiers, right?”

“Exactly! But before She descended from the highest mountain to help our ancestors there was the summit council with all of the Seven Saints. Saint Denali and Saint Himavan were some of the first to support Saint Vinson as She told the council Her plan.”

“Daddy! What did she tell them?”

“She said that her favorite people in the world needed Her help. Only with the aid of Her flame could we find the warmth to continue living. But some of the saints didn’t agree with Her plan. Do you remember what changed their mind, Zori?”

“Frithlic Nyun!”

“So you do pay attention when I tell the story!”

“Daddy!”

“I’m just teasing. Yes, Saint Vinson promised the other saints that we would always remember their help by creating the holiday. Peaceful warmth in Her heart and righteous glory in Her flame. Saint Vinson descended from the highest mountain to save our ancestors. She rode an aurora across the horizon and with the help of her crystal spider spun a web of protection for all of us.”

“Like a big dreamcatcher!”

“I guess it is kind of like a big dreamcatcher.” Kids find a way to point out the bits you miss after being too familiar with the details. I had never thought of Saint Vinson’s Triumph being like a very large dreamcatcher, but the comparison was obvious as soon as Zori mentioned it.

“So now She visits all our homes!”

“You already know everything Zori!”

“She rides an aurora and gives us all presents. Her spider helps too of course!” How much of the story was true is hard to say. I know it’ll be my job to make Zori think Saint Vinson Herself left us a few gifts at my old home. But I do believe She saved our ancestors during the war. Without Her miracle and Her blessing, there is no other way we could have won.

Zori settled down at the end of the story. She was busy thinking about all the gifts Saint Vinson could leave her and was soon dreaming them into reality as her breathing steadied into sleep.

Five years. We were all going to feel the cold this time. Even though me and Lumi were raised in that countryside wilderness, the reality was always surprising. Our bodies were now used to the warmer weather within the walls of the city.

Villages like Besniwod don't even have pipes. They can't. Everything freezes too quickly, including the pipes. I don't believe it's impossible, especially in the face of all the success from reforestation, but like most things it's more a question of funding and economics. The villagers are used to the cold anyway.

Everyone learned from a young age to respect the harsh nature outside or they'd soon be meeting Saint Vinson in the sky. I know for anyone born and raised in Veranum that sounds morbid at best, but growing up out there it never was. We respected the cold like we respect the Seven Saints, our prayers providing warmth and confidence for our future.

The frigid air pairs well with the warmth of Frithlic Nyun too. Seasonal nostalgia as another year comes and goes. Warm emotions reflecting Her flame for generations and generations. That part is common to all humans on the planet. We adapt, we overcome, we thrive. Life in Besniwod is no different.

The extra blankets we brought from home probably helped as well. A veritable sty as the fabric swirled in different directions on the cot. We used to call that kind of thing a *nest* growing up in my family. I can remember making them every year when my sisters and I were all still young – at least until my oldest sister had more than a dozen and half winters.

Winters... My mind falls into the old ways when I slip into these memories. We measure years like that in Besniwod. How many winters you survived. There were other seasons but none were more important than winter.

It reminds me of how the village comes alive during the civil twilight hours. Red banners on every wall and colorful lights strung up inside. The holiday is all about celebrations and feasts – traditions as an excuse for everyone to gather and stay warm. Neighbors and friends sharing gossip and carols. Families walking through the central plaza to attend Saint Vinson’s church and visit the First Tree. We all carried hope in our hearts despite the harsh weather outside.

In the afternoon and evenings, every feast painted a similar scene. Families sat around well-lit tables filled with more dishes than the guests could ever possibly finish eating. Whether the main course was roasted ham, fresh fish, or platefuls of dumplings mattered little to the emotions shared from one side of the table to the other. And the host for that night would always have their home turn into a hostel. All the aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins, everyone piling in at the end of the night and commandeering the children’s rooms.

Us kids would then work with our cousins to find every blanket in the house and put together a few nests. Our beds for the night. It was a mess but it made the whole house feel a few degrees warmer. We loved every second of it. From reaching into the old cabinets and finding our favorite pillows to carving out a new section of the living room to set up another nest. It was the kind of excitement kids love getting into.

Unfortunately, only the cot had room for a nest on the train. My spot on the bench could only afford a few spare blankets and an extra pillow in an attempt to find some

semblance of comfort. Of course with Zori most of that was tucked into her sleeping arms as she softly dreamed away the hours until our arrival.

As long as my family is comfortable I don't mind where or how I need to sleep. I still had the nice view out the window at any rate. And every inch of that horizon held special memories for me and Lumi. The sun hiding in an endless dawn. Dim light reflecting off the vast sea of snow. A quiet calm in an icy forest. All that and more helps calm my more frantic thoughts.

If I were to try to sum up my thoughts on what Frithlic Nyun means to me it'd be something along those lines. Less about the scriptures and Saint Vinson and more about the time my family gets to spend together. Feasts and fireworks, gifts and music, family and friends.

Besniwod during the holidays has an endless source of warmth even in the darkest and coldest hours of the night. Seeing Lumi drifting off into a deeper sleep next to Rwen reminded me of all that. How we share so much love for each other. A warm glow lighting the way through frost and fog.

All I could do is let myself fall into the more relaxing rhythms of the train. Each car buckling in cycles. The overworked engine steaming on ahead. Those rickety chirps and whining cracks a reminder of the passage of time. No matter how far away we were, Besniwod would always be our home. The pristine snow covering everything, everywhere.

It's all so different from how we live in Veranum. We still get plenty of snow, but there's much less of a community around staying warm. Neighbors don't help shovel paths and salt roads. The city government takes care of it all. I wouldn't be surprised if both Zori and Rwen don't even know how much work goes into making the coldest months feel like a flowery spring.

The stone walls block out most views of the coast and leave room for nothing more than the highest mountain peaks if they can rise above the tallest towers. To people from Besniwod that can start to feel like a prison but it's much more like a walled garden. The streets are lined with trees and there is always a park a few blocks away. The sloping slabs rising and falling into and out of the different districts give every path a new feeling as you explore the shops and restaurants. The expansive nature of Veranum made it easy to survive five years of quarantine. For Rwen it probably wasn't very different from life before – outside of us no longer taking trips to Besniwod. For Zori it's all she's ever known.

Yet still... I can't help but think about how Dad says they need to know more about the old ways. They're proud of their heritage, but Besniwod is almost like another planet to them. For Rwen and Zori, their home is a place where bright lights drown out the sky and dim the stars.

I always get into my own head too much. I should have just tried to drift off for a few more hours of sleep. Especially when I was already feeling the beginnings of a seasonal sickness. A quick gripe or some type of cold. But that was just how things always were. I always ended with a stuffy nose and cough by the time we arrived in Besniwod.

"Swefen?" Lumi woke up again just as I was falling back asleep. I gave her a tired smile as I tried to move as little as possible to not wake Zori.

"Yes, Lumi?"

"Did you remember where we packed the dreamcatcher?"

"I think Zori wanted it in her bag. She really wants to be the one to give your sister the gift." I rocked Zori in my arms slightly and Lumi smiled at how sweet our daughter could be. She worked with Lumi to make the dreamcatcher. The plan was to give it to my sister-in-law as a protective charm for the newly announced baby.

“Please check again before we arrive. I don’t want to forget Lin’s gift on the train.”

“I will. Don’t worry.”

Lumi was satisfied with the response and I could finally let my own eyes drift into the soft yellows and reds of the distant twilight sky outside the window. Patches of light flashing between needles and pines or the lucky winter flower shining bright in dull pastels. Our first Frithlic Nyun with the whole family in five years. Going home to Besniwod. Our small village at the halfway stop between nowhere.

Chapter 2

Love Smitten

Maybe it was the time away, but being back on the train after years behind the high walls of Veranum brought back a sea of memories. The tracks always seemed to lead to an impossible place as a child. We all thought of the giant steam machine almost as a friendly monster. A creature off limits that opened a gateway to another reality. And Veranum might as well have been another realm of existence with how it compared to life in Besniwod.

Growing up I never spoke to anyone from the city. I rarely even met anyone who had the opportunity to visit it. There were some laborers who would make the journey, but they were focused on warehouses and shipping more than exploring the gardens and sloping stone paths. Things started to change as I entered adulthood. There were new programs to bring villagers to Veranum for an education. That's where and how me and Lumi started our life together.

The closer we got to Besniwod the clearer the memories became. Between the beat of the train tracks and the passing branches outside the window, I was transported to that first time I stepped past the turnstiles and onto the platform at Besniwod station; when I left to start my studies in Veranum. When the rest of my life took root and began to flourish. All it takes is that one step. One step over the threshold and I'm swept into the past.

We all cried that day. Mom, Dad, my sisters and me. No one was spared the sorrow of the emotional farewell. I was stuck wondering if I shouldn't regret the decision more as I waited for the train to arrive. I could have settled for a simple life at home in Besniwod.

Maybe open my own shop in the central square. The market tents were always cycling through new owners and it was the easiest way to make a living outside of the mandates.

When I rub my eyes I can still feel the tears on my face from that day, still wet from saying those final goodbyes to my family. The platform was limited to passengers with tickets or workers loading and unloading cargo. I was alone for the first time in my life. Truly alone and about to enter the civilized wilderness of Veranum City.

Standing on the platform left my mind free to look for any distractions, the obvious thoughts hidden in the usual weather for the months leading up to Frithlic Nyun. A moderate cold and a bearable amount of ice and snow. Nothing out of the ordinary as the reality of my new isolation closed in with a chilling sensation.

My eyes were glued to the tracks, hoping for the arrival of the train to bring another answer. All that confusion and nervous indecision made it impossible to ignore the presence of another person waiting for the same train. Her eyes as tired from tears as mine and her gaze as lost as my own. Neither of us had much more than 20 winters then.

She was an old classmate and a distant acquaintance of mine. Our families rarely if ever interacted and our social circles never really intersected. We knew of each other but didn't know each other. Oh how things would change.

"It was harder to say goodbye than I thought it would be." I thought to break the ice with something I knew was on both our minds. I clearly remember thinking it was stupid to say anything the moment after uttering a sound. I was some creepy guy with tears in his eyes trying to make conversation with this person obviously dealing with her own sadness.

"Yeah, it's my first time out of the village." Lumi was polite with her answer but we both realized we didn't know how to hold the conversation. Our eyes then locked in an unspoken understanding. We were yearning for an answer to the question. We knew the

gossip and heard the rumors of how we were both leaving to study at the same university, but it was always a few degrees removed. Facing that reality posed the very real question of being friends.

“It’s my first time leaving Besniwod too.”

“Don’t you live by the woods though?”

“But still in Besniwod.”

“Yeah I guess that’s right.” We knew so little of each other but began welcoming the distraction from the other thoughts left inside the station. Her comments weren’t meant to be dismissive or hostile. My parents still live in what most people in the village would think of as the frontier, an old government project attempting to expand the village that seems to have failed.

“I’m Swefen by the way.”

“Yeah, I recognized you. Swefen Kumri?”

“And you’re Lumi Jua, right?” She nodded in agreement and we stood there on the platform, waiting for the train. The air froze the frame in a perfect picture. Steam rolling down the track, finally signaling the start of our new adventure. All we could do was stand with each other as the engine pulled up with a screech and the doors opened up with a crunch – warm air rolling out from inside the car.

The station workers were quick to busy themselves with loading fresh cargo from the village and unloading what quota was left from Veranum. Lumber and mined ice. Fur pelts and gas barrels. Freshly grown mushrooms and quarried stones. Cultivated grass and foreign snacks. Local goods that could be sold for a profit across the strait and basic necessities that were impossible to otherwise find in Besniwod.

The trains were mostly used for freight like that. Passengers made up a much smaller portion of the cars. Things were changing before quarantine and travel was shifting into a more commonly accepted part of village life. However, when we first left it was still seen as a rare specialty reserved for dignitaries and migrant workers moving back and forth across the continent.

"I can help you with your stuff." Neither I nor Lumi knew how to comfort the other as we stood there facing the open doors of the train. Genuine gestures go a long way in helping find familiar comfort in those situations.

"Oh... That'd be nice, but you don't have to..."

"No, I insist."

"Well, then let's sit together, okay?" Lumi smiled as she let me grab her suitcase while helping me with my own in the same motion. We laughed at our attempt to be more forgiving than the other. A welcome change from the cold tears and long goodbyes.

I knew then and there that I wanted to spend more time with her. My face must have given it away, burning into shades of bright red. That's one of the benefits of living in the cold though. An ever present excuse for the obvious signs of embarrassment. I imagine in the more moderate temperatures of Veranum they have a harder time picking out the red from the cold and the red from embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't expect you to help me as well..." The sloppy words slipping from my lips made for an awkward transition into the warmth of the train. Lumi simply smiled as we worked together to store our luggage in the economy class bins.

"Then you don't know me very well!" We were both trying our best to act normal as we stepped onto a train for the first time in our lives. The long corridors and rows and rows

of seats were unlike anything we knew or had ever really seen. The closest image in my mind was Saint Vinson's church with all the pews in the main hall.

What I would have given to be guided by Her flame in that moment. The mostly empty seats made the hum of the engine all the more noticeable as we searched for the economy bins to store our luggage.

"Over here!" I called out to Lumi and helped lift her heavy bags onto the cheap shelves. The only other people in the car looked like they were students from other villages joining the same program.

"It feels different." Lumi whispered to me as we began walking down the car to find our seats. Our tickets already had specific arrangements but it was clear there was more than enough space for us to sit wherever we wanted.

"You mean missing Besniwod?"

"I mean how hard it was to say goodbye." Our eyes lingered for a moment as we held back more tears. The truth in those seconds more raw than anything leading up to them in our life before. True emotions beyond mortal comprehension, more similar to staring into Saint Vinson's flame than looking at a person. She was my warmth. I was hers.

"I thought it'd be easy too. I don't know how you talked about it, but my friends always thought I'd be the first to leave. I'm sure that's how they tell the story, but I'm less certain myself." I hardly knew what I was saying as the words left my mouth. It felt almost like I was possessed as I tried to make the most of the moment and express a combination of who I really was and who I wished to be.

"Mom always wanted me to stay close to home. So of course I got on the program to study in Veranum." Lumi laughed at our shared experience and we settled into a couple of uncomfortable seats by a window.

“You think we’ll see them from here?” People without tickets weren’t allowed onto the main station platform. Some kind of safety protocol meant for the coldest months that was held in place year round. You could, and people did, leave the station and follow the tracks outside to wave goodbye whenever someone close left. Me and Lumi both knew our families would be there, chasing the train until it moved past the bend.

“I’m sure all my neighbors will be out too. We’ll probably hear them setting off firecrackers as we pass.” Lumi grew up in a development across the tracks from the central plaza. One of the first expansions to the village. A series of smaller oval-shaped stone homes built into the side of a hill.

“That’s nice though, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I like how exciting it all feels... but all the attention can be too much. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“I guess that makes sense.” It didn’t make any sense to me, but somehow I could understand the sentiment behind the statement. The confusing emotion of what makes you comfortable and what makes you uncomfortable sometimes align at awkward angles.

“At least we got to spend Frithlic Nyun at home.” The school year starts a little after the big holiday season. The calendar works out nicely that way. A break in studies for a long vacation when the sun is generous with its light and enough time to enjoy Frithlic Nyun at home with the family.

Lumi nodded in agreement as we looked out the window. The dizziness of the motion was calmed by the sight of our families waving and cheering as the train slowly picked up speed. Our parents staying farther back and our sisters chasing after the tracks. Right on cue Lumi’s neighbors on the hill started setting off firecrackers as a final goodbye. One last reminder of how we celebrate the season back home.

The rush of emotions was intense. Our breaths matched a quickened heart and the fast pace of stone structures of Besniwod quickly giving way to the wilderness brought about by reforestation. We could both feel the sensation. Like we were already missing home. Like we made a mistake by joining the program to study in the city. But it was all too late. Those desperate times are when you need Her strength the most.

“Is that Mount Vinson?” Lumi pointed toward the horizon against a fading aurora and its colorful painted skies. Right on cue Saint Vinson chose to reveal Herself to us. Her flame a guiding light as we found the strength to start the next chapter of our lives.

“It is! And just in time for an aurora sunset!”

“You think we’ll see the crystal spider?”

“I don’t think you can really see Bikeshi.”

“Well we can try!” Lumi grabbed my hand and pulled me closer to the window. Focusing on searching for Saint Vinson’s legendary pet. Something to help keep our minds occupied. A welcome distraction from all the sorrow and lingering doubt about our decision to move so far away.

“I think I see the spider!” I pointed randomly in the direction of the mountain and Lumi’s eyes followed with exact precision. She was taking it so seriously I couldn’t help but let out a small laugh that we soon shared. That was something we could already share. We were both children of the Seven Saints. We both grew up celebrating the new year with Frithlic Nyun. We were from Besniwod and knew what life meant for the village.

“Were you trying to trick me!” Lumi gave me a playful shove as we laughed a little louder. There was a nice familiarity to the interactions. A feeling of home.

“...Maybe?”

“I’ll remember this Swefen!” The playful threats were moving more and more toward flirting. Our eyes staying on each other for a few seconds longer. Gentle touches inviting more warmth between our bodies.

“So... what are you going to be studying?” I could feel the obvious attraction rising in the air. As a young man confused by all the emotion, I focused all my attention on continuing the conversation.

“International trade. I think I could get a good job working in imports and exports.” She raised her finger to her cheek as she thought about that future. We were so much less certain than the academic paths seemed to suggest. “What about you?”

“...I’m not sure yet. They told me I could just start general coursework and decide on something concrete further down the line.” My truth felt lackluster in the face of Lumi’s certainty. I really didn’t know what I wanted to study and was even less sure about a career. All I knew was that I could live in Veranum and experience something new.

“You can do that?” Lumi let out another laugh as she heard my answer. My situation seemed relatively normal for me and my family. My sisters were never very certain in their own studies and settled into stable careers in Besniwod. My indecision always seemed to be supported by my parents as well. Although I suppose among my friends I was one of the last to have a clearer goal. The stronger pull toward loftier dreams was probably what got me into the program. A serious student with potential who didn’t have his life set up in the village.

“I mean... I never really thought about it too much. I think I’ll end up studying philosophy and see where that takes me.”

“Wow! I bet you’ll end up having more fun than me!” We settled into a more comfortable atmosphere and started talking about all our expectations for the city. There

were no judgments settled into the cracks of our mutual misunderstanding. We were honestly curious and enjoyed hearing the other's stories.

Leaning back into the chair with a more relaxed posture we let out a deep sigh and reached for each other's hands. The way our fingers interlocked was instant perfection. There was an understanding beyond anything either of us had ever known. A comfortable calm in a single touch. All the anxious desires and wandering tension faded away as we let our dreams thaw. Every second we were farther from home yet somehow we knew then we could survive and thrive if we relied on each other. We didn't know it then but we were already in love.

Chapter 3

Late Arrival

At some point the weight of the nostalgia must have lulled me to sleep. Thinking about how me and Lumi met all those years ago led to slipping into the realm of dreams. Subtle hints of lost phrases and misguided mistakes. Dim lights finding their way past the last corners of a closed mind. Whether an *ever after* or a *forever more*, everything mixed together in the deepest guilt and the warmest happiness that morning on the train.

I found myself in an image of Saint Vinson's church in Besniwod. The old building sat just off the central square. The main gate proudly wore local lumber and contrasted with the stone walls of the other nearby structures. Standing on the steps up to the front door, you could see over the market tents crowding the plaza. Anyone actually standing there would easily be drawn to the First Tree at the square's center.

The frozen branches dripping in ornate icicles, shining like a star to the very top. During the Frithlic Nyun season there would even be a crystal spider worn as a crown. A tribute to Saint Vinson's beloved pet.

Inside the walls of the church, Lumi and the kids were gathered near the altar and the rows of pews were filled with our family. The giant statue of Saint Vinson sat looming behind the priest. An eternal flame in Her hands keeping us all safe and warm. Concrete meaning etched in stone. The sound of it all harmonized well with hymns and prayers.

This was a reflection of our imagined wedding. The emotions and the scene. Lumi at the altar, her radiant smile drawing in more warmth from Saint Vinson's flame. Our family waiting as a perfect audience. We had been together so long. This day was less than unexpected, but they were more than happy all the same.

However, the flaw in the lie was too clear to hold the illusion for long. Rwen and Zori standing by us as they shared in the apparent happiness. That was all it took to break the vow and silence the dream. We were married before Rwen was born and Zori was ever a thought. It was a small ceremony in Veranum at the local government office. We wanted the documents ready first and foremost and didn't have the time for something big back in Besniwod.

A lapse in faith and the shadows in the ceiling descended from the heavens unto those sacred halls. The harsh elements from outside poured into the pews and engulfed the scene in a blinding white light. Saint Vinson's flame extinguished and we were all exposed to the dark of night – the reign of chaos.

A cold sweat and a sharp pain in my neck were that morning's alarm. My head violently twisted side to side against the window. That back and forth jolting motion an unfortunately all too familiar way to wake up. The dramatic tension only exasperated by the cramped quarters of the sleeper car.

Those in between bits are like a twilight for your thoughts. Neither asleep nor awake as two worlds collapse into one. The most terrifying horror and the most unimaginable ecstasy vanishing into the wings of a blue butterfly or the web of a trickster spider. As my senses came back to reality and the dream dissipated from my foggy vision there was one thing on my mind. I needed to stay still and not wake Zori.

"Swefen?" Lumi called out my name as the window finally brought the day to my eyes. Rwen was helping her sort through our luggage. Zori was still sleeping in my arms. Our departure stop was drawing nearer.

"We're almost there?" All the fresh aches and pains sang out in a chorus. Age finally manifesting as more than the number of winters I've survived. The cabin was a real mess

as suitcases were opened and everyone searched for a fresh change of clothes. We wore loose fitting clothes and pajamas for the long ride over but would need something a bit nicer underneath all our jackets now. It would be a while before anyone really saw what we were wearing, but it was a courtesy and a custom we felt obliged to continue. That and my parents would never let me hear the end of it if when we got to their house and it turned out Rwen and Zori were wearing pajamas in the cold.

“They just made the announcement. I assumed that was what woke you up.” Lumi shook her head to mimic how I woke up. I’m sure my strange dreams ended with me twisting and turning on the bench. It must have all looked especially odd from her point of view.

“No, I didn’t hear it.”

“Are you having nightmares again?”

“...Yeah.”

“You need to see the doctor when we get back to Veranum.”

“I know... I know...” I grew up with a strong stigma against being abnormal. Having your head and its thoughts captured under a strong seal that was meant to never be broken. Unfortunately, us humans have a way of forcing even the most secure of barriers to open and I think that’s where these visions and night terrors come from. Bottling up too many emotions. They have to escape somewhere, somehow.

“Here, let your mind focus on something else for a bit. Wake up Zori and let’s get everyone dressed.”

“Yeah. Good idea.” Lumi always knew how to take charge when my mind was numb from a bad night’s sleep. We still needed to pack up everything the kids had taken out during the trip as well. There were surely a few toys hidden in the nest and I would assume

shirts and shoes spread out in hard to reach cracks and corners. “Zori... It’s time to wake up! We’re almost there! Almost in Besniwod!” Taking care of the kids also meant I needed to put on a face of authority and let my own wants and desires step aside as I became *Dad*.

“What Daddy?” Zori hid her face in my stomach as she avoided waking up. She was comfortable where she was and didn’t want to face the rush of leaving the train and starting the Frithlic Nyun celebrations. She didn’t really know what to expect and saw the whole thing as a long trip into the unknown. This would be the first time she remembers visiting the family, but without any context that meant less to her than it did to us.

“Come on Zori, it’s time to get up!”

“Daddy... I don’t wanna.”

“Zori...” I shifted my body and sat up to disrupt her bed a little more. She wouldn’t have a choice but to get up as I moved to get off the bench and her blankets left her to face the cold window alone.

“Come on Daddy don’t be mean!”

“Zori we don’t have time to play. Now get up and get dressed.”

“No!”

“Zori!” She wasn’t really being defiant. I felt the same way after first waking up, but we needed her to get on her way. “You don’t want to miss the stop and have to sleep in the hay?”

“No Daddy! Please no!” Zori shot up and jumped off the bench. She was looking for her clothes and ready to start the day at the first mention of my playful threat. It was an old trick my oldest sister Mekoti used to play on my second sister. Older siblings always find ways to scare the younger ones. Lumi smirked at my mention of the old expression and

Rwen hid his own smile. I'm sure he used a similar tactic on his sister and was justified in seeing his own parents do the same.

"Don't smile too much Rwen. You remember how I used to make you sleep in the hay when you were bad. A Besniwod special out in those woods." Rwen caught on quick to the joke and wore a scared face to catch his sister's wide eyes.

"Don't remind me Dad! I didn't know if I'd make it out in that abandoned cottage. Saint Vinson Herself needed to lend me Her flame to make it through the night!"

"What about Her spider!" Zori looked up from getting dressed. She was immensely curious about the story now. Her brother was not only able to survive *sleeping in the hay*, but he was helped by Saint Vinson Herself!

"The crystal spider, Bikeshi?"

"Yes!"

"Oh he was there too. Spinning a web so I could have a bed and a blanket. Between Her flame and all the pillows from Her spider, it was quite comfortable actually."

"Wow. Maybe I want to sleep in the hay too... but I don't know if I could do it even with Saint Vinson's help."

"Alright Rwen..." I didn't want Zori to start telling stories to the whole family that made it seem like we were torturing our kids. Rwen could laugh about it now, but getting a lecture from his Auntie Mekoti would dampen the holiday mood.

"Sorry Dad. I'm just having fun."

"Having fun?" Zori looked up with a question mark in her eyes. It was Lumi's turn to hold the conversation as me and Rwen looked to start cleaning up before we braved the cold air outside.

“Zori, come over with me. Let’s make sure your hair is brushed and I can’t believe you put on your clothes before washing your face.”

“Sorry Mommy...” We all shared a smile as the clock moved closer to closing time. The minutes would soon be seconds and we’d have to rush to get out the train doors and onto the platform.

“Hey Dad...” Rwen and I were sifting through the piles of blankets and clothes and stuffing everything into any suitcases and bags that had space. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah? What makes you ask that Rwen?”

“I saw you doing that thing when you were sleeping.” Rwen snapped his head back and forth violently. He was imitating how I would move when the nightmares got bad. It was a recurring problem that seemed to have become much worse over the five years of quarantine. We were safe and we didn’t want for food, but somehow I couldn’t find myself in my own head.

“I’m fine, Rwen. Maybe a little stressed about coming home, but that’s normal.”

“Mom doesn’t sleep like that.”

“Well, Mom deals with stress better than I do.”

“She said you should see the doctor... Is everything okay Dad? Can I help with anything?” Rwen cared deeply for us even in his teenage years. He would act cool and sometimes even distant, but we were still his family.

“I’m fine Rwen. Don’t worry.”

“Then why don’t I believe you? I’ve lied to this family too you know.”

“You’re a smart kid Rwen.”

“Not smart enough to get into the right school.” Rwen and his dreams of studying across the strait were slowly dying. His grades couldn’t match his ambitions and it was

looking more and more like he'd end up having to settle for a more normal job in the city. That or find work through the family in Besniwod.

"Don't be so hard on yourself Rwen. When I was your age I didn't think I'd be able to get into a school in Veranum but it all worked out."

"Things are different now Dad. And it's a lot harder to get into a school across the strait than something on the continent. Their standards are so high..."

"I think if you can convince them you really want to go then you'll always have a shot."

"The only way to convince them is with perfect grades and I'm just not there."

"Well, how far off are you?"

"...I'm stuck on this new subject. It's not fair! They only recently added it and now it's like the most important grade!"

"So what is the subject?"

"Some scifi bullshit they use in exocolonialism. They call it abstract interfaces, but it's all about dealing with interplanetary communications."

"I thought you were focusing on forestry?"

"I am, but this new subject has a heavily weighted grade."

"Oh?"

"Plus I heard they're combining forestry and hydrology. You just don't know what it's like being a student today Dad." Rwen was right, but I still wanted to help. When I was growing up you could study just about anything. There was a lot of government support for helping villagers find their way to the city to attend one of the universities there. I ended up with a degree in transcontinental trade with Lumi. It's marginally related to my job, but just having attended a city school made the rest easier. Work permits and residency.

Qualifications and tenure. Having graduated from any school in Veranum made the administrative steps all but ceremonial.

“Well if you can survive sleeping in the hay then you can survive a few more tough years at school.”

“At this point I’d actually need Saint Vinson’s help to get the grades I need...”

“Come on Rwen, if you need some help tutoring or more time for studying let us know and we’ll arrange something.”

“I’m fine Dad.” Sometimes he was too much like me. Too stubborn to ask for help. It would be so much easier if everyone in my family could feel comfortable exposing their problems. Even with both of us thinking that same thought, neither of us dared give it a voice.

“Swefen, hand me Zori’s jackets and let’s start moving to the exit.” Lumi’s demand was a bit rushed and took me out of the conversation with Rwen. We were running out of time but in another one of those bad family habits, I answered with sarcastic tones.

“Yes *Ma’am*.” I regretted saying the words as soon as the sound left my lips. The evil look rolling down Lumi’s brow at least got a laugh from Rwen.

“You think that’s funny young man?”

“Yes Mom. Especially Dad’s face.” It was Lumi’s turn to laugh as she saw my expression twist into a pleading shape as an attempt at an apology.

“Is that how you say *Mommy* here?” All the commotion also caught Zori’s attention. Her innocent question demanding an awkward answer as we zipped up the final layers of our jackets and shoved the rest of the leftover toys in an open suitcase.

“Well Zori... you should ask your father what it means.”

“Daddy? Is *Ma’am* a special Besniwod word?”

“No Zori, you’ve heard people use the word *Ma’am* before I’m sure. It’s like *Sir*, a polite way to refer to strangers.”

“Ooooooh.” Zori giggled to herself as she came to understand my sarcastic use of polite terms. I should be more careful about that. Even if it’s mostly meant to be funny, it can teach the kids to be mean. I probably learned it from my own parents and they from theirs after all.

“You are right though, Zori. Things in Besniwod can be pretty different from what we know in Veranum.”

“Yeah like how Auntie Mekoti always gets us hot cocoa every year when we arrive.” Zori loved sharing the rare memory she had from when she was barely a toddler. She always wanted to be included, even if she misremembered or didn’t fully understand.

“Not like that Zori...” Rwen interrupted with his own quick comment. He cared a lot for his sister in that way older siblings do. I could easily see him having some kind of connection with Mekoti over that shared sense of responsibility.

“Then like how you told us all the Frithlic Nyun trees there have crystal spiders on them?”

“That’s right Zori! But let’s not worry too much about all that right now.” I looked over at Rwen to get him to drop the subject.

“Or how I had to sleep in the hay!” Rwen’s defiance was worn proudly on his sleeves.

“Wow!” Zori’s eyes widened to three times their usual size. Her powerful imagination painting all the colors of how different life was in my hometown.

“Rwen’s just playing, Zori. You don’t have to worry about anyone making you sleep outside or crystal spiders or anything else. We just need to make sure we’re ready to get off the train right now.”

“Okay Daddy.” The train would spend a good ten minutes at the station. Plenty of time to get off the train even with all the luggage. The fear was more existential than actual, but if we somehow managed to miss the stop it would be a real mess trying to figure out how to catch the next one back the other direction. We would surely miss the first Frithlic feast and depending on the weather could have to wait up to a week in an even smaller village further down the line.

The Besniwod station workers would be expecting us though. They would probably even check the sleeper car for us to make sure we didn’t miss the stop. There are very few unexpected arrivals this late into the season, especially coming to Besniwod.

Their fuller focus wouldn’t be on the random family making their way back home however. They’d be much more focused on unloading the freshly mined ice and barrels of gas. There would likely be specialty goods provided by the city government to help with the Frithlic Nyun celebrations as well. Rare meats and fresh fruit.

In recent years there were shipments going out of Besniwod as well. Mostly lumber but more and more coats and furs as well. Goods made from what we could find in the reforestation wilderness. The bulk of that trade went in the direction of Veranum though. Locals thought of it as unfair taxes, but I’m sure the contract stated it differently.

“Daddy? Should I call Mommy *Ma’am* in Besniwod?” I exchanged looks with Lumi as we held a silent discussion. Looks of authority as we gauged how serious Zori was and if I should avoid those kinds of jokes in the future. “I like calling Mommy *Mommy*.”

“*Mommy* is just fine. Don’t worry Zori.”

Arriving at Besniwod station. I repeat, arriving at Besniwod station.

The bell had rung and the time had come. The discussion about how I was teasing Lumi with the word *Ma'am* would have to wait for another day. More than anything we just needed to make it to the platform and into the station.

"Pull your jackets on tight! It's colder out there than it is in Veranum!" The last of whatever was left lying around in the cabin was quickly thrown into any suitcase with space. "Right! Everyone ready? Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!" I waved everyone out of the cabin as the train came to a halt. The messy blankets stowed as best we could make them. We danced like falling snowflakes as our arms filled with luggage and our hearts filled with anticipation until we met the nearest exit down the corridor.

The winds were howling and the snow was stinging. What little light there was shone as a cold fire swimming through the frost in the air. The platform was frozen over with more than an arm's length of snow and ice extended far below. The artificial heat of the train quickly disappeared into the petrified sky. The natural cold and its overpowering presence dominated every aspect of the atmosphere.

"You two actually grew up here? Living like penguins!" Zori's jaw dropped faster than a sled on hard snow as she looked around at the platform painted white. She had seen the snowy fields from the window of the train, but it felt different when they embrace all your senses. Five years away and I could taste it. The air was cleaner and the nature was wilder. Endless trees, occasional hardy flowers, and if we were lucky, maybe a skittish animal or two. All within our vision as we stepped onto the platform.

“Didn’t we used to go see the penguins?” Before Zori was born and Rwen was still a little boy, we took a trip to the penguin sanctuary in the neighboring village. It was something we would talk about often but only went the one time. I guess in his memory we went there multiple times.

“Just the one time.”

“No, I’m sure we went there a bunch of times. Remember how we got to sleep with the penguins. The little baby chicks huddled around us to keep warm!”

“No way!” Zori jumped up and down shifting her jackets into less warm wrinkles. Rwen’s dry wit became clear for me and Lumi though. One of those older sibling games to make Zori feel extra excited about something that doesn’t exist.

“Yeah, maybe you can get Grandpa Kumri to take you there.”

“Daddy! Can Grandpa Kumri take us to see the penguins!”

“Well, it’ll be easier if you get Grandma Kumri on your side first.”

“Oh yeah! She loves penguins, right?”

“You remember the gift she sent you last year for Frithlic Nyun?” Rwen didn’t want his parents to interrupt his scheme and butted back into the conversation. A simple question to make sure the idea stuck in Zori’s head as I mentally prepared myself for all the greeting just beyond the platform doors.

“A penguin!”

“That was one of the penguins we stayed with.”

“No way!” I rolled my eyes at Rwen as he held in his laughter. I know he probably often plays those kinds of jokes on Zori and as long as it doesn’t go too far I like to believe it’ll make them closer. No matter the reason, it’s always nice to step on new soil with smiles and laughter shared between family.

Chapter 4

Season's Greetings

"Bless ye and thee! I can't hardly believe mine own eyes! They told me we should be expecting guests, but who am I to doubt such unreliable visitors. Coming home to Besniwod this late in the season!" The only uniform needed at the station was coats and furs. The layers of fabric shielding skin and bones as they added a new layer of difficulty to the work of loading and unloading cargo. They were their own caricatures of strength and bravery as we entered the wilderness that is a frontier village. We were of course greeted by the most giant and burliest of them all. "Don't recognize your own flesh and blood! You always were a right bastard!"

"Uncle Umbali! What are you doing here?" Dad's brother was a bit rough around the edges. He meant well even if his words struggled to express it. He lived off and on with us growing up. One of those from the town who struggled to find a place where they belong. Uncle Umbali always seemed to find a way to get back on his feet though and the community supported him in his new endeavors.

"I've been working at the station as of late. There's a bet going around about whether or not you'd make it home this year. Rumors of more quarantines or no longer having the taste for our flavor of snow. I don't blame the others for doubting city folk, but I always trust the word of a fellow Kumri." Living behind the walls of Veranum it's sometimes hard to know what it feels like on the other side. We were healthy and safe but isolated in such a different way than those in Besniwod. It wasn't nature guarding a town, it was a government controlling the people.

“The five years went by faster than you’d think. Veranum takes good care of its citizens. We were still able to work and Rwen and Zori had no issues continuing their studies or going to school.”

“Ah get over yourself. Tainted by the city. You sound like your old man bragging with no invitation. Everyone’s waiting for you inside and we don’t want these kids to freeze themselves alive. Lovely Lumi would never forgive you for being such a fool! Well, no more of a fool than you already are.”

“Oh stop it Umbali.” Lumi and her sly smile only affirmed her approval of the jest. I was fine with it all. The teasing and the sarcasm. Maybe that’s where Rwen learned some of those tricks. Leaning into the wit and tricking his sister into believing all manner of the unbelievable. I know my sisters did that to each other and me as well. All siblings do.

Being back at Besniwod station brought back more memories from a lifetime ago now. That time I first left. The first time I had to say goodbye. My little sister Nali’s voice is always the first in my clearest memories.

“Make sure you write to me and let me know what it’s like in Veranum City!”

“I will...” My voice was lost as I tried to hide a deeper sadness. I always thought I would be gone with no hesitation, but in the moment it was harder. Much harder. These were the people I loved the most. The people who loved me the most. And we were saying goodbye. None of us really knew for how long, but the distance between us meant it might as well have been forever.

“Swefen...” Mom was already crying as I looked up from staring at my ticket. “Find a way to send us a message as soon as you arrive.”

“Or we’ll both be angry!”

“Aldor cut it out! Don’t stress him out!”

"I'm just making sure he's okay."

"I will Mom... And I know Dad..." I gave Mom a deep hug holding her tight before moving to Dad. We did that awkward thing where neither of us knew where to put our hands. It can be hard to show affection between father and son, but when it matters most I like to think we both understand.

"Swefen." My oldest sister Mekoti was next in line. Stern as always. Hiding her sorrow in plans within plans. "You should be arriving in the evening and there is a hotel near the station that will be good for you to rest for the night."

"Okay." I used to struggle so much with showing proper appreciation for all the work she put in to making sure her little brother could find success. I guess I still do, but it was remarkably noticeable back then.

"Don't get lost, idiot."

"Shut up Bryne!"

Everyone let out a little laugh at the quick summary of me and my second sister's relationship. We all shared another smile before one last round of hugs, regretting the final goodbye. After another forever in a second I walked past the turnstile. One last look at my loving family before opening the thick door to the harsh realities waiting on the snow covered platform outside.

"Where's your head at boy!" Uncle Umbali smacked me on the back as he shoved me into the station doors. "Be a man and open the door like a proper host does for his guests!"

"Uncle Umbali! That's now how you treat people!" Zori was shocked at the forceful nature of the polite gesture. She was never really exposed to the roughness of the wilderness. People in Veranum kept a respectful distance from each other. Comfort in the

space between strangers. In Besniwod those closest to you wouldn't hide the relationship. There were no conditions to the agreement and the loyalty was absolute.

"Hwa ha hahaha! That's not how *city* folk treat people Zori! Out here you need to make sure there's enough meat on your bones to survive the cold." Uncle Umbali softened his laughter and helped me find my feet as we all stepped inside. He didn't mean to bully and had no ill intention in his forceful nature. It was an honest expression of support even if it seemed well past an acceptable line for Zori – and probably Lumi too.

"Umbali... just tone it down a little okay. I don't want Zori to talk about the barbarians from Besniwod with her friends and I don't think you would either."

"Lumi my dear. I don't give a shit one way or the other. Hwa hahaha!" Rwen moved to hold Zori's hand as her eyes widened at hearing what she knew as inappropriate language. She was being welcomed to her family in a way that Rwen knew was normal but was a bit overwhelming for his younger sister.

These would be her first real memories of the village. I'm not sure we really understood that, but a part of me was glad it started with bombast and contrast. Having those strong moments in her mind would mean Besniwod would stay in her heart as she grew up. That's better than a fleeting vision that passes as just another family trip.

The thick wooden doors and that smell. The unmistakable aroma of home. Cured meats and seasonal sweets. Fish from the far away bays and rows upon rows of baked goods. The large stone archway and those old signs written in the older script meant to welcome visitors to the village. The station itself in the same masonry style as the other buildings of the central square. The only material that was easy to source in the earliest days of Besniwod's existence.

The warmth inside the station was inviting in that way. The kitchen and the fireplace sitting on opposite ends of the room. The oven was even built in the traditional style, a furnace dug into the ground with a system of tunnels beneath the floors. Fresh bread and any brewing stews not only added to the flavors of the room, they heated it as well.

Looking out the front doors you could see the central square and all the market tents. They formed circles around the First Tree and its ornate icicles. Saint Vinson's spider Bikeshi sitting at the top and sparkling in the dim sunlight.

With the doors to the station opened we were welcomed by those familiar sights and scents. All a little more run down, but still the same. We'd only been gone five years but it looked like the lack of real train travel led to neglecting some of the upkeep and housekeeping. Or maybe being away just made my memory of the station look cleaner and more modern than it actually was. It's hard to tell how well your own mind plays tricks on you.

"Look at who I found out in the wild!" Uncle Umbali sounded the start to the season as everyone in the family let out a cheer. The loud chorus of welcomes and greetings sang out in a deafening roar. All our family impatiently waiting just past the turnstiles.

"Swefen!" My little sister Nali is always the first voice. "Did you get our card?"

"The one with that serious photo?"

"Be nice Swefen! We worked hard to get it right!" As the youngest in the family Nali worked extra hard to do the acceptable and to be accepted. Her husband Tamir and their daughter, my niece, Rhodiola was the first of the next generation in our family. She bore an incredible responsibility that was silently thrust upon her with the expectations of lineage and continued traditions. I like to believe it's different these days though. That's how these things change. Coming home means something different every time.

With such a long break since the last time we made it to Besniwod it was a big event. Welcoming us at the station. The whole family wearing smiles as they put off holiday preparations. There was a time when my coming home was much less special however. Shortly after I first moved to Veranum for my studies everyone got used to the convenience of the train and the flexibility of a school schedule.

It reached the point where I was expected to show up nearly every weekend and minor holiday. My address may have officially been in the city, but I still lived more in Besniwod than behind the high stone walls of Veranum. Even if something came up during exams or an important project was due, I'd be sure to hear a comment or three about how I should have made more an effort to show up.

After graduating everything changed. Life was busier and my survival in the city demanded more commitment. Between growing into a new home with Lumi and working on my own career, I couldn't find the time or money for train tickets back home. And so for a few good years my homecoming was an event for the village. When my grandparents were still alive they'd even get all the cousins, aunts, and uncles to show up at the station.

With their passing and our aging, everything calmed into a quieter arrival. The only reason there was a crowd on this day was the five year delay since our last visit. I imagine the only reason Uncle Umbali was there was because of the new job. And even that was somewhat strange.

My uncle shared some strong political views. The common opinion of undeserved taxes being sent too often to Veranum. Seeing him support that very system was a bit strange, but pragmatics have a way of winning out in the end. I could have also been overestimating his passion. Everyone has looser lips and a louder bark at the big family

dinners. My memories of him and my dad arguing for hours, happening when the glasses are newly full and the plates are already empty.

“Little Rwen is so big!” Lumi’s mother, Lochu Jua, cried out from just past the turnstiles. She quickly reached out, guiding the rest of the family to help with our luggage as we stumbled past the mechanism and into the main hall. “Have you already eaten? Are you hungry? We brought some of Lumi’s favorite snacks!”

Lochu was always willing to help the family in any way she could. Both of Lumi’s parents were like that. Tamu, her dad, was a strong man with a scarred body from the years of hard labor. He moved from simple cargo loading and unloading at the station to owning a market tent for the family to buying into a larger store in one of the buildings surrounding the central square. Both of them would move the world for Lumi and her sister Lin.

“We ate on the train but I’m a little hungry.” Rwen answered in an unfortunately honest reply. Nothing short of stark denial would satisfy Lochu and her generosity. He must have forgotten how strongly and immediately his grandmother reacts to any needs of the family.

“Take this then!” Lochu brought out a small box and handed it over to Rwen. They were roasted chestnuts that were likely only recently shipped in. They weren’t local goods, but the flavors were home made.

“Thank you so much Grandma Jua!”

“Make sure you share them with Zori too! We’ll get some more from the bakery before we leave the station. They must have just delivered some.” Chestnuts represented more to his grandmother Lochu than I think Rwen could understand. Not only were they one of Lumi’s favorite holiday snacks, they were seen as a rare delicacy when Lochu

herself was young. Over the span of a couple generations they went from a symbolic offering to a special dessert to a simple snack.

“Mom!” Lumi pushed past Rwen and embraced her mother with the full emotion of being separated for five years. They were always close and as such the strict measures of the quarantine and travel bans were especially tough on Lumi and Lochu. All that was eased as they felt the touch of one another again. The feeling of home shared through the whole family.

“Lumi! You’re as beautiful as ever.” Lochu rubbed Lumi’s back as tears rolled down her eyes. Neither mother nor daughter could hold back the raw emotion in their body. Reunited after the long journey and welcomed with her favorite snack. The little things that make life worth living and reminders of how much those who are closest love us without exception.

Lumi’s father Tamu was quick to offer his own aid. He grabbed our luggage from my hands and helped move the heavy bags to the side as we prepared to greet the rest of the family. He then gave me a stern approving nod before joining his wife and daughter for another warm hug.

“Dad! Rwen give Grandpa Jua some chestnuts too!” Lumi always knew how to keep everyone together. Especially her family. “And get Auntie Lin over here too!”

“Okay Mom.” Rwen was familiar with how these arrivals could go, but he still was obviously a bit overwhelmed. The attention and pressure was on as he was meant to adapt to the way things were in Besniwod while also helping his sister Zori understand as well.

“Why send Rwen when I’m already here!” Lumi’s sister Lin shared a dry sense of humor with Rwen. They laughed at Lumi’s expense before sharing a few bites of chestnuts

and another warm hug. Through it all Zori was passed around as the newest member of the family. These were all people she met in videos and letters, but had no memories of ever meeting in person.

“Daddy...” Zori looked up to me with wide eyes and a bit of a frown on her face. She wasn’t sure how to behave and wanted to fit in, but obviously felt like these people were still somewhat strangers. And they were to some degree, at least to her. She would surely get over that initial uncomfortable air, but I knew it was time to become *Dad* again. I picked her up and held her tight as Lumi’s family took turns sharing their love. Me being there to hold her helped calm her nerves as the members of the family only continued their greetings.

My own mother soon joining the chorus, rushing up to hug her son and granddaughter. “I’ve missed so much... And Zori... She’s so sweet! I can’t believe I’m finally getting to see her!”

“I’ve missed you too Mom.” We smiled for everything we remembered together. How she raised me to be the type of man Lumi would fall in love with. How my kids were proud to call me Dad. How she would always love me and I always love her. And then we hugged deeply – squishing Zori a bit as she let out a little yelp between our bodies.

“Zori! How is my lovely little cupcake doing? Have you missed us all the way in the city?” Mom backed off and took Zori from my arms. She was still treating Zori like the toddler she met over five years ago.

“Grandma Kumri... Can you really visit the penguins in Besniwod?” Zori asked the question still on her mind, but it could not have been more perfect. Mom loves penguins and sees them as a special animal. They remind her of her family and having my daughter bring up the subject unprovoked meant they now shared some kind of unique connection.

“Does little Zori love penguins just like Grandma Kumri does!” Mom’s face lit up as she held Zori high into the air. Her smile drawing in the full glory of Saint Vinson’s flame and Zori could only provide a confused expression in return.

“...Yes... Well, Rwen told me you can live with the penguins and I’ve never lived with penguins so I think we should do that.” Zori struggled to organize her thoughts amid the onslaught of affection. She knows her brother well and although she may have appeared to simply naively believe everything he said, she definitely held some doubt to his claims. Having everything not only be confirmed as true, but so enthusiastically caught her somewhat off guard.

“We can’t live with them, but if we have time maybe we can take a trip to see the sanctuary! Right, Aldor?” Mom looked at Dad and the plans were already being made to conflict with the existing Frithlic Nyun schedule. I’m sure all Dad wanted at the moment was to make it through the feasts and gift giving before thinking about a big family trip anywhere but to Saint Vinson’s church.

“I’ll look into it, Coram.” Dad tried his best to hide his sigh, but it was clear to anyone with half a brain and eyes. He was always like that though. Hard to get to do anything, but would inevitably be the one who talked about it for the longest after it happened.

“*Psst...* Zori I have something for you.” Mom let Zori down and whispered in her ear as she hid her hands behind her back. Some kind of early Frithlic Nyun gift to be sure, and we all had a good idea what it would be.

“A gift!?”

“A penguin just for you!” Mom pulled out a stuffed toy penguin she must have found at one of the market tents in the central plaza. It was locally made and the quality was so different than anything Zori knew from Veranum. The colors and the fabric were also a bit

off from what she was used to, but that mattered little to the excitement of a small child receiving the gift of a new toy.

“Thank you Grandma Kumri! I told Daddy I like penguins so this is perfect!” Mom was doubly happy to hear how much her granddaughter loved that favorite animal of hers. Her heart melted as she lamented the five years away. All the growing Zori did without seeing her loving grandma.

“I saw it and thought of you Zori. And don’t let anyone know, but there may be more for your brother, your mommy, and even your grumpy daddy!” Mom loudly whispered the last bit as was her style of humor. She always got us similar gifts so it was hardly a surprise. There were groans to be shared, but we all appreciated how much she thought of us even if it was often expressed in a silly sentiment like stuffed penguin toys. What was important was what we meant to each other.

Zori was then passed around like a hot potato from grandmother to grandfather, aunt to uncle, cousin to cousin. She was the star of the hour as everyone who knew her so well was introduced to her world.

“Auntie Lumi!” After meeting the last of the cousins Zori’s head was spinning trying to remember all the names of the relatives that knew hers. She tried her best to remember the halves of the familiar, but by the time it got down to cousins she truly struggled to recognize the relation. So when Frezy, our niece – Lumi’s sister’s daughter – brought her back over to us, she wasn’t sure whose hand she was holding. She put blind trust in someone who to her was a stranger. She simply knew she could be confident in her comfort trusting family.

So when Frezy – Zori’s cousin and Lin’s daughter – brought Zori to Lumi, her face was filled with confusion as she tried to juggle all the names in her head. On top of that,

Lumi was lost in conversation with Lin – Zori's aunt and Lumi's sister – and Lochu – Zori's grandmother.

"Frezy! How is my niece doing?" Lumi answered with a smile as she reached for Zori's hand, her serious expression going over the faces of the three generations standing in a circle.

"I'm doing alright. I'll probably be taking up more responsibilities at the family store soon."

"That's wonderful!" Lumi's parents owned a local store in one of the buildings just off the central square and her sister Lin had taken up the family trade after we decided to stay in Veranum. The shop itself had gone through many iterations, from a simple restaurant to an entertainment center to now being a place for household commodities. It was quite successful locally and the Jua family name was well known in Besniwod from all the people who passed through their store.

"But what about the food?" Frezy knew how to ask the most important questions and so as the conversation relaxed and the formalities passed, all three generations were soon busy discussing the details of snacks and other tasty treats from the city.

"You wouldn't believe all the amazing foreign chocolates you can get in Veranum!" Lumi started half bragging half explaining as she motioned to Rwen who then pulled out a box of chocolates we prepared before leaving.

"You can get any chocolate whenever you want?" Lin wore a surprised face that only grew into grander astonishment as Rwen handed Lumi the box. They were imported goods from across the strait and the packaging wore letters in a foreign script. Everything signaled exquisite taste that was impossible to find in Besniwod.

"Not just any chocolate! Good chocolate!"

They could go on for hours about the different types of food that were hard if not impossible to find in Besniwod. I wouldn't be surprised if one of the heavier pieces of luggage was filled with nothing but snacks. If I ever dared to bring it up the response would likely be a snide remark about why I would even think to ask such a question.

"Lochu! Let's make sure they have enough to eat. And I'm sure they're hungry after the trip." Lumi's father Tamu waved his side of the family toward the bakery in the train station. He would look to buy some of the latest breads and freshest meats. He always cared so deeply about making sure we felt not only welcomed as guests, but as family.

"I'm going with them Swefen! Watch the kids and we'll meet up with you later!" Lumi pointed Zori over to me as she joined arms with her sister and her niece. She playfully pulled her mother Lochu toward the bakery and could easily end up spending the rest of the day sampling new dishes and picking out new snacks.

"Okay!"

Rwen and Rhodiola were already catching up on the small town gossip. It'd been five years since they last met. They were around the same age – close to that of Frezy as well – and that meant they were automatically friends within the family. Zori was the younger cousin and left out in some ways. Not old enough to share their same teenage dramas and worries about entering a more adult life. She found more than enough attention from Mom though. Alternating between holding her up and doting her with new gifts as we bundled up for a trek through town.

Before that ceremonious exit could happen, my oldest sister Mekoti and her new shade of greying hair took center stage. She was ever the most organized and there was always a plan in her head that we were all expected to follow. She motioned to Uncle

Umbali, leading the way to pick up our bags. “Do they have enough coats for the cold this year or do we need to get them a few furs before heading outside?”

“Their city fabrics are supposed to be tested for all our temperatures. They wouldn’t lie over there would they? Hwa hahaha!”

“I’m serious Uncle Umbali!”

“Aye. I’m sure they’ll be fine, but I can spare a few furs if you’re worried our amenities aren’t to their expensive standards.”

“That’s not what I meant, but thank you.”

“You’re always welcome.”

The closest relatives always know how to lay on the thickest sarcastic tension. The response may have been less than polite but at least Mekoti was satisfied and the march to my parent’s house, my old home, could finally begin.

“We’ll have to stop by the cafeteria some time while you’re here! I really want you to try the new batch of mulled wine. Ridni works there now and I promise you this year’s recipe is extra special. He’s been telling me how excited he is to see if it passes your sophisticated city taste test.”

“Ridni works at the cafeteria now?” I asked an obvious question. Mekoti met her husband Ridni Pori at the cafeteria nearly half a lifetime ago. She used to tell the story to anyone and everyone who’d listen, but I guess time’s eroded the sweetness of the tale to the ears who heard it one too many times.

“Yes? Is that funny?”

“Well...”

“Oh you actually remember that story!”

“How could I forget?”

“Hey pooppy egg!” My second sister Bryne broke up the conversation and was quick to highlight our ever cheerful relationship. “Don’t let your sisters do all the work and help us carry some of the bags!”

“Right, sorry.”

“Oh stop it Bryne. He’s tired from the trip already. There’s no need to be so short with him!” My youngest sister Nali moved to help with my bag as the old wooden doors opened up to reveal the quiet snow covered central plaza.

And it was cold. Biting cold. The warmth of the station created a wall against the impressive armies of the frozen front. A losing battle in the long run. I always worried Rwen and Zori wouldn’t be ready to take in the low temperatures of Besniwod. They weren’t that far from our own winters, but it always felt more extreme in the village. Fortunately, Rwen was distracted, trying to learn the new inside jokes from his cousin Rhodiola – Nali’s daughter and my niece – and Zori was properly squished between Mom and Dad.

And I know I’m repeating myself, but it’s worth saying again. Besniwod is, was, and will always be significantly colder than Veranum.

Chapter 5

Mulled Memories

The frosty fog and its currents swept me into the past. Destiny flowing in the wrong direction as thoughts took shape and visions took form. That time way back when. A memory and a dream. The details as hazy as the weather outside. Until it's not and I am there. We are there and I can remember it all.

I'll always think of it with a soft fondness. Meeting up with my oldest sister Mekoti on that fateful day so many winters ago. This was one of those times after I had only recently moved to Veranum. When coming home was expected and not an event. When me and Lumi weren't officially together, but clearly had eyes for each other.

We would say our goodbyes on the platform or inside the station. Classmates and friendships lingering on the unsaid syllables as the weight of our emotions carried warmth into our hearts. Neither knew who should make the first move. Neither dared pronounce the words. We simply left the unspoken desire rest uneasy in the air every time we said goodbye.

My head would always be stuck on Lumi and her smile as I made my way home. To see my family and enjoy a weekend of home cooked meals or a longer break filled with family feasts. Everyone was still so used to me just always showing up back then. There was little fanfare at my arrival and greater expectation of my participation. It was only as the gap between visits grew into a wider and deeper abyss that a welcome party was deemed a worthy greeting. Even that waxes and wanes as the years pass into decades. This time was a return to greater bombast and pomp. The extra few years walled away surely made the news of our arrival turn into a local event – at least for our families.

During those first few years when my attendance was all but guaranteed, if there was anyone who would go out of their way to form their own welcome party of one, it was my oldest sister Mekoti. She always took on the responsibility and the burden of being there for her siblings. A willing counterweight to the overbearing opinions of Dad and the heavy emotions of Mom. I'm sure she noticed how me and Lumi's goodbyes seemed to take longer and longer each and every time I returned. We thought we weren't obvious. Hell, we didn't know ourselves. But sometimes even that which you don't know is clear to a third party.

Mekoti would respect my ignorance though. Brushing the blushing under the rug as she started a new conversation against my lovesick eyes. We'd sometimes spend entire afternoons wandering the central square markets as I discussed my lessons and she eagerly listened with her own ideas and opinions.

The First Tree and its auspicious aura inspiring a deeper, more spiritual connection. Offering a small prayer to the Seven Saints would often lead us to spending time in Saint Vinson's church. The priest would be happy to join in the conversation as we took in the warmth of Her flame or stopped by one of the lesser shrines.

We were also known to end up in the cafeteria on the opposite side of the central square. That was the most common destination when I was particularly absent minded, head in the clouds as the last images of Lumi faded in my mind. The straight path to the stone building was a nice way to feel welcome home. We could enjoy a slow meal and a hard drink as the topic of the hour spilled onto the counter. The fun was in figuring out how to clean it up as we learned more and more from the other's words.

One time in particular Mekoti came to welcome me at Besniwod station with an uncharacteristically large smile. No words needed to be said. I knew there was romance

overflowing from her eyes. She poured out the details of the proposal and the ceremony as we walked through the central square, past the First Tree and into the cafeteria.

“So you’re a Pori now?” When I was younger I lacked an appreciation for tact and polite gestures. I grew up feeling slightly removed from it all, more often lost in dreams than striking deals with the waking world. An unfortunate consequence of this cloudy approach to common conversation was coming across as rude and crass when really I simply wasn’t sure of how else to express my thought and my will.

“Yes! But what’s more important is I’m – we’re in love!” Despite my blind eye to the bulk of the emotion, Mekoti always knew how to connect with me. She had a way with words and an understanding of my intention that made it easier to be myself. Maybe it’s better to say it made me feel like she understood my true self without me needing to explain it in ways that made me uncomfortable. That all quickly begins to swirl in circles of confusing thoughts so it’s best to leave it at a simple idea. We made each other comfortable in who we were – who we are.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“...I’m happy for you?”

“You sound absolutely thrilled.” My oldest sister’s sarcasm never came across as condescending. It was our way of acknowledging the holes in my own manner of expression. She was clearly more than happy though. She was finally living her own dream. There was a time when she planned to study in a similar program to the one I was in, but delays in government funding made all that fall through. She ended up staying in Besniwod and struggled to find a workable career for most of her young adult life.

“I’m sorry I missed the ceremony by the way.” The only way to break the most improper news is bluntly. For those who are close to us, hiding behind difficult words only serves to further deepen the wound.

“I understand Swefen.” Her apology was more than the usual vocabulary. She was deeply hurt by my absence and put on the right face to avoid further pain. Her marriage had the unfortunate happenstance of falling on the same date as one of my most important exams. I suppose there is a world in which I could have repeated a year of my studies, but that would have risked losing access to the study program and my right to live in Veranum. That’s a lot of words and excuses to say my reasoning was sound but the emotions were still hard to deal with.

“Tell me all about it then.” I turned to face Mekoti with honest eyes and breathed in the cold air of the central square. Saint Vinson’s flame ignited a fire in my soul that beckoned a truthful confession. The highest peak on the continent guiding my light to reach my sister and make her feel like I was there.

“Thank you, Swefen.” Mekoti wiped a few tears from her face and shook her head. She nodded a few times and memorized the lines to recite for the new character about to walk on stage. “The ceremony took place at Saint Vinson’s church as I’m sure you know. We invited everyone and anyone filling the pews and the shrines to the brim. There were so many bodies we were actually not worried about the heat for once!”

The marriage happened in that same church I saw in my dream. The stone walls and giant statue of Saint Vinson only matched by the endearing vows and eternal blessing from the priest. There would have been an exchange of vows and a ceremonial church accompanied by a choice of hymns and prayers chosen by the bride and groom. The voice of their love taking to the sky and, as we believe, eventually reaching the top of Mount

Vinson and singing out to every corner of the continent. It's said on the most auspicious of days a prayer may even ride an aurora all the way to each of the Seven Saints, granting wishes at every summit along the way.

"H-hello." We were greeted at the door to the cafeteria by a young man. He was clearly enamored by my oldest sister Mekoti and was trying his best to make a good impression. Ridni Pori. My sister's new husband and the latest addition to our family. "I'm Ridni. Ridni Pori. And... uh... yeah, I got us a table by the fireplace to help with the cold."

"Oh... you made a reservation?" The cafeteria was a large hall in a large building. One of the oldest in the village and one of the least changed from the first settlers. The door was set at an angle against stone steps and a counter extended along the entrance where staff would greet guests. There was usually something of a buffet spread out on the counter but it wasn't unheard of to order from a menu or stay for drinks. At the far end of the hall was a large fireplace that used to rely on nothing but the gas shipped in from Veranum. Within my lifetime the fuel shifted to local lumber, but the sentiment was all the same. Warmth against the weather. Health from the sun.

"Well, Mekoti speaks so much of how great you are and I just wanted to make sure we had a chance to properly meet." Ridni stumbled over his words as the explanation escorted us to a table by the fireplace. It was rare indeed to reserve a seat at the cafeteria, but not unreasonable if one wanted such prestigious seating. Ridni was going way above and beyond anything I expected and anything I could appreciate.

"Your family lives in Block C?"

"Yeah. We came over with the migrants from the reforestation project and have stayed for a few generations now." The central plaza and its surrounding building were named after letters of the alphabet. We would call them Block A or Block B or Block C in

the case of where Ridni and his family lived. Decent sized apartments built into the infrastructure of our life in Besniwod.

“And I’m sure Swefen is more than grateful for all you’ve done for him, Ridni.”

“Yeah. Thank you Ridni.”

“Don’t mention it!” The silence was colder than the air outside as we sat by the fire. I was happy to meet the man my sister loved so much. But something about the formalities of expecting a higher level of comfort lead to everything feeling even more uncomfortable.

“So why this place?” I asked the only question I could think of to help thaw the frozen air. We were seated and our orders had arrived. Three cups of the latest batch of mulled wine. A seasonal special that brought flavors of Frithlic Nyun to the table.

“Well!” Mekoti opened up like a flower. That was the question she was waiting to be asked. Her patience was finally sowing its reward. “A few months ago I was having an afternoon tea here when a dashing gentleman walked through the doors. We were going on a simple first date, but I could tell there was a spark.”

“I knew she was the one.” Ridni reached out for Mekoti and gently rubbed his fingers along the back her hand. I recognized the emotion. The way someone’s touch can soothe the soul. I felt it on the train with Lumi. Yet for some reason I struggled to connect the two feelings then.

“Oh stop it Ridni.”

“It’s true!” Ridni let his guard down as he beamed in brighter shades of red. “We hit it off like magic and I knew it’d last a lifetime.” They wandered into and out of each other’s eyes. Infinity in an instant as their love embraced the brightest light from Saint Vinson’s flame. Ridni was not just a good husband to Mekoti, he was her best friend.

“We said as much in our vows, Swefen.” Mekoti let her gaze drift back over to me. I was trying my best to balance that polite presence and not interrupting their ongoing love. A delicate exercise that I was ill equipped to manage.

“Yeah?”

“Show some interest, please Swefen...”

“Mekoti it’s not his fault.” Ridni came to my defense while still barely knowing who I was. He saw it as a way to show his affection to Mekoti. If my oldest sister loved me so, he could show his love to her by mirroring the same. Or at least, that’s how I came to understand and appreciate it. Ridni wasn’t wrong either. I was lost in my own thoughts of love and didn’t quite know how to continually congratulate my sister for hers.

Then, as if on cue, Lumi passed by the window outside the cafeteria. Mekoti and Ridni both noticed my change in posture and demeanor. No longer slouching in with a bored expression. Eyes widened, back straight, looking straight at the girl who always seemed to come home with me on the same train.

“So... you and Lumi Jua?” Mekoti grabbed my head and turned it to face her. She was grinning ear to ear as she saw through my denials and vague deception. She knew the truth though. As bright as a holy light and as clear as Her crystal spider’s own web. Caught in the trap with nothing short of an honest refusal to aid in my feigned rebuttal.

“Me and who?”

“Oh he doesn’t want us to know. Don’t pressure him Mekoti.” Ridni softly reached for Mekoti’s arms and pulled them away from her forceful grip on my head. He understood that some things need to marinate a bit more before they can be said to the family.

“Ridni, he’s my brother. I can tease him all I want.” I struggled to pay attention to what my sister was saying. My eyes taking a long detour back to the window and resting

on Lumi's presence outside. She was playing in the central square with her sister Lin. Picking up some snow and packing it into a snowball. She aimed it at Lin and threw it with a mighty force and an explosive burst of laughter.

"She is cute." Ridni smirked as he exchanged glances with Mekoti. My own sister resorting to rolling her eyes to the farthest corner of their sockets.

"Yeah..." My words drifted faster than my thoughts as I kept staring out the window. Lumi's parents Lochu and Tamu were busy bargaining with one of the vendors in the central square. Market tents selling special treats for her welcoming meal more than likely.

"So it is true?" Mekoti started to stand up as she followed my eyes straight to Lumi and her sister in the snow. I could have never predicted what she would do next, but am grateful all the same.

"What?"

"Mekoti just drop it. Let him be." Ridni's protests were met with defiance and my sister was soon pounding her fist on the glass of the window. She motioned for Lumi to join us in the cafeteria. My face went pale white then beat red as a rush of heat and emotions flushed through my entire body. I was scared. I was embarrassed. I was lost. I was in love.

The answer on Lumi's face was confusion at first. She stood there looking at me through the glass as we both were a bit confused at what we should do. The long seconds separated by the warmth of the fireplace and the frozen air outside were interrupted by the *wallop* of a snowball from her sister. Sibling revenge served cold.

"That reminds me of me and Bryne!" Mekoti laughed as she thought about the games she played with and tricks she played on my second sister. The jests were in good fun and the honest compassionate expression was made clear through the walls of the building. My oldest sister let out another laugh as she made a large gesture for Lumi to

come inside and join them. She mouthed out the words and waved her hands wildly until it was understood. The confusion on Lumi's face slowly softened as she pointed to her sister with a question. The answer of course being *bring her too!*

So they joined us in the cafeteria. Ridni made sure to get Lumi a new cup of the latest batch of mulled wine with a special order of hot cocoa for Lin. What followed was a hollow moment as we all sat in an uncomfortable silence. The pleasantries pushed aside and reality of a relative stranger sitting down with us at the table by the fireplace settling in.

"You and Swefen are going to the same school in Veranum?" Mekoti had a way to calm those quiet storms. Navigating the proverbial sea of expectations with the expertise of a veteran captain. In retrospect I doubt she knew much of what she planned to do or wanted to achieve. The goal was to embarrass me in a silly way and meet the girl I had a crush on. The first half of the mission was well accomplished as I did my best to hide my face in the steam coming off my cup.

"Yeah... we just got here a little while ago. We have the same Frithlic Nyun break so I guess we ended up on the same train back to Besniwod." My lie was highlighted in the crooked bend of my fingers around my cup. Grasping on to the handle to reveal the white of my knuckles. We had long since planned to come home together but I thought we both thought it would be better to avoid mentioning that detail to our family.

"Actually, we arranged to come here together. It's better to have company for the ride." Lumi gave me a coy look as the rest of the table decided whether it was safe to laugh or smile. The chill down my spine as I processed the pressure only shifted the color in my face to a brighter shade of red.

"Swefen! Why wouldn't you just tell us that!" Mekoti put on her mock disappointment with care. It was more about teasing me than making me feel uncomfortable.

“Oh... Cut it out Mekoti. If he doesn’t want his big sister to bother him about his love life that’s okay.” Ridni came to my defense by saying something that only dug the hole much, much deeper.

“Love life? On the Seven Saints we’re just classmates!” Lumi choked on the words as her eyes shifted to check on her sister Lin’s reaction. Lin, for her part, was mostly unaffected by the conversation. She was more focused on the coming celebrations and trying her best to not disrupt the strangers who seemed so interested in Lumi.

“Yeah. You wouldn’t believe it, but there are very few people from Besniwod in Veranum. It’s nice to have familiar company over there.” I added in some logic to help the reasoning behind my transparent deception.

“I see... Well, I hope the company is enjoyable then.” Mekoti let her lips curl into a wry smile as she raised her cup for a toast to the holiday season. “To another perfect Frithlic Nyun shared with those most beloved of souls!”

We ended up spending hours and hours at the cafeteria that day. That was my first chance to really get to know Ridni and it was the first chance for Lumi to meet someone from my family. We all warmed up to each other and the vocabulary soon shifted from polite and stifled to energetic and emotional.

“Take the First Tree for example!” Lumi was on her fourth or fifth shared cup of mulled wine as she waved her pointed finger out the window toward the center of the public square. Her sister Lin already left to join her parents back at their home in the oval-shaped house on the hill.

“Whabout it?” Mekoti asked the follow-up question as her own words began to slur. We were breaching one of those sacred seals and it seemed everyone was along for the ride.

“What function does it serve?” Lumi’s question bordered on the blasphemous, but it was intriguing all the same. Such an intrinsically important aspect of our life and our culture was not something often brought under the scrutiny of such a bright light.

“It’s a symbol of Saint Vinson and Her devotion to our people.” I gave the respected and expected answer. The unsatisfying script that revealed nothing more than how good my memory of old school lessons was.

“No! No... I don’t mean that. I mean in a more practical sense. How does a crystal tree help Besniwod survive the cold?” Lumi was swirling her cup with little splashes of wine washing onto the tabletop. We all focused on the drips and drops to avoid an answer as a blanket of silence dampened the light of embers in the fireplace dancing through the room.

“Well, it’s art isn’t it?” Ridni was the first. The first to provide a more honest answer to the question. A new direction in an otherwise intensely vague idea. I’m not sure whether we realized it or not, but we were all lazily wandering around the core and crux. The eternal paradox of solving the almighty infinite. Everyday practicality solved with a single simple equation.

“So what’s the point of art?” Lumi asked bluntly to the shock of all the eyes around the table. Holy truth and divine unity in a dismissed and divisive manner. Our impassioned desire on an unfamiliar summit. So we stayed silent again. No answer found in the orange glow of the fireplace or the white flakes falling outside. *None but She may think for thee.* The easy way out was in the repeated recitations. Saint Vinson’s eternal blessing and the protection Her flame avows. She is sworn to forever protect our people.

Lumi was searching for another level of abstraction. Something further down the line and deeper down the hole. Besniwod was not a place you would think cares for the distraction of art. Stone structures built on stilts to survive the permafrost and extend the

ongoing experiments of a powerful and wealthy nation. And yet it was important. She was of such an integral significance that Her ceremonious presence demanded a place on our town's center stage.

"It's an expression of... expression..." Ridni stuttered between sips as his lips stumbled between syllables. He let his cup settle on the tabletop and let the words fall into a more proper order. "The First Tree... all these Frithlic Nyun decorations... it's all a part of that same feeling. We aren't just wild animals finding shelter. We're more than that. We have to be. The only way we know how is with an expression of what makes us who we are... how She makes us who we are. She blesses us with art."

"Okay. But what does the First Tree mean – *as art* – to you?" Lumi looked into Ridni's eyes looking for more answers. My Lumi could be soft and intense at the same time like that. Curious and interested on all manner of subject, whether or not it fell within her usual comforts or not.

"That's a good question..." Ridni paused to consider the idea and give an honest answer. Any doubts or worries that were once present had long since passed. The first impressions were settled and we were comfortable in those seats and roles. The memory would be lasting as we dived into that exploration of who we really were and what values truly matter in the most abstract of senses.

My sister Mekoti surely thought some of it was influenced by our time in the city. New experiences leading the young lovers to question the life they once knew. In some families and with some people that would turn into a sarcastic or cynical dismissal. But Mekoti looked on with honest eyes, listening to our thoughts with interest and care.

"What do you think, Swefen?" My sister shifted the focus onto me with just a few words. Cups raised to allow for more time to answer. A notable silence as thoughts

gathered into a steady storm. I had specific opinions about these ideas. Art and its place among the broken backs of pragmatics. I was also less confident and less than sure about how to express them.

“I don’t think... It doesn’t need to mean anything for it to be important to people.” My crude draft flooded over the rising steam of the freshly poured round of mulled wine. “Everyone has their own take on what the First Tree means, right? It’s a symbol to the Seven Saints, a beacon for Saint Vinson. Her flame has always warmed Besniwod in a very real sense.”

“You mean the altar in Saint Vinson’s church?” Mekoti pressed the subject further.

“No... Well yeah sure, but no.” The jumbled mess of thoughts and prayers were placing predicates without precedence. I needed to take a breath and get the story straight or I’d be lost in a muddled confusion that at best made me look lost. “I mean the art, the First Tree, the decorations, the statue, and even the altar. All the symbols right? By having such a prominent symbol in the center of town She’s the center of our life. Saint Vinson keeps us warm with that piece of art.”

The steam settled on the cold counter and we all stopped to watch the snow. The crystal icicles reflecting the dimming twilight sky. A church in all but name as our deepest wishes flashed before our eyes.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. But I was thinking about it a bit different. About how it compares to how everything is in Veranum. You’ve noticed, haven’t you Swefen?” Lumi surprised me with the return to reality. My home town of Besniwod and the First Tree at the center of our village seemed as far away as possible from any idea of an example in Veranum City.

“What do you mean?” Mekoti raised the next question and turned to focus on Lumi’s words. She once dreamed of moving to Veranum herself and was intensely aware of the missed opportunity. The unfortunate missteps of a lost life and the serendipitous luck of finding love may have once led to a confusing mix of emotions, but she was confident in how everything ended up now. But the bright light of that dream still sparkled in her eye.

“Well, Veranum likes to think of itself as a springtime city and that’s sometimes hard to imagine against the backdrop of our climate and the masonry architecture. Cold temperatures and high stone walls reaching for the heavens. You could even say the city center and its tallest spires aim to rise higher than Mount Vinson!” Lumi wasn’t wrong in her description. Veranum was like a portal into this world of contradictions. The government put so much money into projects meant to mold the world into a paradise. It still seemed a bit disconnected from the subject at hand. I wasn’t sure how Lumi meant to connect the First Tree and its symbolism to the design of the largest city on the continent.

“That doesn’t sound so different to what we have here?” Ridni pointed around at the buildings surrounding the central square. Letting his finger rest on Saint Vinson’s church, drawing the straight line between its massive doors and the First Tree.

“I’m sure it’s an order of magnitude more impressive in Veranum, Ridni.” Mekoti answered.

“I don’t know. I find Besniwod’s central square plenty beautiful. Maybe not springtime, but we appreciate the art. That means more to me than having something designed around ideas that are supposed to mean more. It’s enough for it to mean something to us.” Ridni looked to Mekoti for approval of his appraisal. He wasn’t wrong and he was honest in his expressions, but there was much more to the city than I think the village could really ever understand.

“You’re right, Ridni.” I answered this time. I wanted to share my own misconceptions of Veranum. The surprise in my eyes as I first arrived and the shock I still felt wandering the streets. “But it’s not quite like that in Veranum. I thought it would never be much more than a grander version of what we have here, but it’s not. The attention to the aesthetic in every stone is almost immaculate. They planned the streets and the tunnels and the parks and the districts. Everything flows to the other and rises up in layers. We think the First Tree is impressive but they have a park near where we live with a crystal tree forest!”

“That just sounds like a more expensive version of what we know here...” Ridni continued to defend his position, not in defiance but in curiosity and a willingness to understand. The ideas of beauty and aesthetics against pragmatics and utility.

“It’s really not though. Especially not for people who are from there or have adopted the city as their home.” My defense was weak, but it was all I could offer to someone whose eyes had yet to see the full glory of Veranum. And it was glorious in that vaguely religious sense. When me and Lumi first arrived on that train we held hands and each other close as the stone walls came into view. We were scared and we were in awe. It was magnificent and it was massive. Our eyes got lost following the towers as they climbed higher into the sky, past the clouds and reaching for the moon. I don’t think I would have been able to believe it was real if not for having Lumi so close. She grounded me and I grounded her as we realized the new world and new life before us.

The stone walls pushed right up the coast and opened up to a view of the sea. An infinite horizon we only knew from books and dreams. The air so cold it froze our thoughts as the train took the last turn into the city and set the air ablaze. Warmth and lights in every corner and every abyss. Comfort and protection with strong stones and a large population. There was more activity at the train station than an entire year in Besniwod.

It was overwhelming. That such a place could exist on the same continent – *in the same world!* It didn't feel real. Me and Lumi held on to each other to remind ourselves of home and remind ourselves that this was our new reality. The fast pace of the city currents didn't give us much time to adjust and we were soon swept up into new schedules and schoolwork. In a few short months the once impossible sights of cliffs and stone walls climbing to dizzying heights felt normal and usual.

"Well then how am I supposed to understand or appreciate it. Should I just feel bad for living here in Besniwod?" Ridni turned his gaze back to me as his questions sunk in. An honest half of me believed what he was saying to be the unfortunate answer he needed or wanted to hear. But that wasn't fair.

"I don't think Swefen means to make us feel like we're missing out." Mekoti calmed the sea with her voice. I'm sure Mekoti knew that Ridni was speaking on behalf of his lover's own doubts and regrets.

"I just think it's pretty." Lumi lightened the mood a touch further with a new interpretation and we finally let out a laugh. I nodded in a quiet approval to Ridni. He was right both in his calling me out for verging on the condescending and for correctly understanding my accidental intentions. He replied by calling over another toast and another round of mulled wine.

"Me too, Lumi!" Mekoti reached out for Lumi's arm before preparing her words and lifting her cup. We had a few more discussions around similarly heavy topics, but the mood was always light. We felt safe and comfortable sharing even unorganized emotions that afternoon. I learned how Ridni was an aspiring chef of sorts and how him and Mekoti were planning to get one of the new wooden cottages near my parent's place.

Since then the story has become one of those things Mekoti repeats if there's ever a lull in a dinner conversation. The rest of the family plays their part in remembering how drunk we were by the time we made it home. But there really was something sweet about the memory even if everyone is tired of hearing it. A love story that matched the special batch of mulled wine. I would bet Ridni was trying to recreate it. Finding a subtle way to remind my sister of the story without forcing the entire family to listen to it yet again.

That's how family tends to feel. More emotions than years to bear or the wisdom to properly process. Regardless of the tired tales we all really love each other. Hurtful words may sting and delayed apologies may grow into longer regrets, but that doesn't change who we are to each other. All that matters is that indescribable connection. It's all that ever will.

It took me leaving home and learning to love Lumi to figure all that out. I often wonder if my kids will struggle in the same way. Time will tell that cruel joke I'm sure. When it's my turn to say goodbye and see them off to make their own future and family.

For now, every meal we share helps us grow to love each other more in the moments between each bite. A lifetime of winters spent being who we really are without judgment or expectation. Laughing through all the silliness we once thought was worth arguing about. Fights over who got the best nest or the pain of being tricked into doing all the chores. The details matter so much less as time marches on. Perspective in the aggregate and protection from the cold in the familiar feelings of each other. I can understand now what was most important was simply being there. Together.

Chapter 6

Beating Heart

Everything in life is rhythm. School, work, marriage, kids. It all has a steady pace as calendars twist and turn. A constant timeline lost in flux as it all moves faster than the memories. They get harder and harder to hold. The moments between stars. The important dates. The unrivaled happiness and the deepest despair.

I like to take comfort in thinking we all get caught up in what's next. Normal as a state of absent minded progression through the years. As time piles up and the signs show their age, there's a different focus hidden in plain sight. All the detours and tangents were the most defining scars in the end.

Whether they were reflections of these winding thoughts or just another symptom of the stress, I couldn't help but think about my struggle with strange dreams. Five whole years since the last time we came home. There was an odd stillness to the exception. Finding warmth together without feeling the cold inside.

The weather was different in the countryside. The extreme conditions of our life were impossible to avoid without the protection of the city walls. Even though we used to come back every year, me and Lumi were so worried about Rwen and Zori in the months running up to the trip. They didn't know the cold like we did. I usually ended up sick for a few days so surely they could as well?

A perpetual fog and my rambling thoughts. It was hard to say if it was simply nostalgia or fatigue. Nightmares fueled by some other pain. A shroud of darkness to

dampen the mood. A new temptation to snuff out Saint Vinson's flame. Her grace and our savior. Heath and home as a candle in the sunless sea. The cause and its effect as bent as time itself as the ages turn to eons and legend into folklore. In that pungent mix of spices and spells was one that I knew could cure my sleep troubles. The dreamcatcher.

The old trinket made into a gift for Lumi's sister. The one we packed and lost somewhere between our apartment and my parent's place. Punishment for not triple checking everything at every leg of the journey. The kids are already more than a handful to corral and I just couldn't keep it all in my grasp.

We left it – / left it somewhere. In the old stories it was Saint Vinson Herself who ordered her pet crystal spider to weave a web for the defenseless souls devoured by terrors in the dark. All the proof was there. I was alone in the night without a shield or a sword. I could only tremble before the invasion eating away at my mind every hour of every night.

It may seem silly to someone from Veranum, but regardless of whether I believed the stories to be true, they impacted my emotions. So while I could say with almost full confidence that I wasn't being neglected by a phantom pet spider, my reality – my body – acted as if it were true.

Especially for my family. The Kumris of Besniwod. We had a stronger connection to some of the other families in the village. Although this all gets overly complex with the different ways we worship and revere the Seven Saints. Basically, unlike in Veranum where there is a prideful unity found in the new patriotic continental heritage, village families hold on to more traditional ancestral lineages.

It's in the details of the city churches and how you'd be hard pressed to see any of the Seven Saints except Saint Vinson. She who is our guiding light. She who shields Her

flame for our lives. Undeniably the Saint of the Saints and the closest to all our hearts, but She is not the only saint.

In the villages you can still see small shrines dedicated to each of the Seven Saints before the massive hall dedicated to the holiest of them all. The reason for our appreciation for and continued worship of the lesser saints extends to that long standing connection to a pre-migration history. The exodus. How we all came to find refuge here between the coldest mountains of the world.

How it all connects to modern politics feels distant at best, but we all know it wasn't too long ago that the harsh environment of our continent was unfit for human life. The great motivator that is religious furor and a raging war conquered the spirit over generations and the ground itself began to transform. Whether you believe it was Saint Vinson helping set the first stones of Veranum city or just a courageous act in a dangerous time matters little to the fact that we survived. We thrived. And we thank our Gods for their everlasting font of hope.

It's then no wonder that the older lesser saints have faded away in the city where the foundation of a supreme deity is quite literally built into the walls. Out in the country though things are different. The nights were rougher and the cold was superlatively bitter. We found refuge not only in Her flame but in our family and our heritage. In the stories of the lesser saints from where our lineages – *mythic or real* – were said to be traced.

Those thoughts continue as individualized customs and traditions found in different homes around villages like Besniwod. Different last names celebrating the most important and the most holy of days in slightly different ways. Anyone from Besniwod will instantly recognize one of these quirks and be able to identify which family it belongs to – and by extension, which of the lesser saints.

In the case of my family on both my mother and father's sides, we claim heritage with the lesser saint Denali. The same lesser saint from where my little sister gets her name, *Nali*. Named as a reminder of how far our family journeyed to find a new home. It probably sounds hyperbolic to some, but without that connection we would have been lost between worlds into an unknown infinity.

All of us in Besniwod are gracious for the contribution of the lesser saints but never let them overshadow the almighty glory of Saint Vinson Herself. So what remains of a stronger faith from continents away are simple vestiges. Little trinkets and twists on traditions.

An obvious example for the lesser saint Denali are dreamcatchers. Maybe that's what was bothering me. I didn't just forget a gift, I forgot my heritage. Even if it was made in Veranum by Lumi and the kids, the idea of the dreamcatcher held that connection to my ancestors – to Rwen and Zori's ancestors.

The intention of the spirit still burning strong after so many generations. The passage of time may mix up the details but that vague emotion remains ever so clear. Perhaps that's the will of Saint Vinson. She takes pride in raising up our origins and reminding of us who we are. Reminding us of Her family of lesser saints.

It all gets confusing the longer time moves down its path. The vaunted dreamcatcher was once a folk remedy – or so the stories say as much. Now it's more a symbol of my family's ancestral pride. These layers always add up and pile on to the mess that is personal and collective identity.

To people in Veranum I'm just a villager. To myself I'm someone from Besniwod. To my family I'm a proud Kumri, descendant of the lesser saint Denali. Even between my

family it's never exactly clear. Does Dad see himself as a naturalist following his passion or an inspired patriot who is driven by Saint Vinson's Triumph.

The divisions are more fluid as generations pass on their fuzzy memories and families mix between different traditions. I know one day even the villages will feel like Veranum in that regard. The differences found between the families and their lesser saints melting away as a unified worship for Saint Vinson solidifies our identity. A quantum soup of wanton thoughts describing origins that might have once been real.

I doubt there's a good way to know for sure what will happen and for now claiming heritage with a lesser saint is still the norm for villages across the continent. If anything, there's currently a growing tendency to exaggerate one's unique claims to a tradition. Not unlike how I seemed to think my own nightmares were caused by a more personal connection to dreamcatchers.

Even if it makes little sense, people take pride in all of that. Proverbial or not, it is important to who they are – *who we are*. The little details that make life worth living and holidays worth celebrating. Defining what it means to give a good gift and host a filling feast. Families in Besniwod could disagree on which was right, but we clearly found solidarity in such an honest disagreement. The sentiment rang true through the stories and laughter no matter how they were told or with whom they were shared.

"Rwen, Zori! Make sure you wash up before heading downstairs!" The call of the wild bringing me back to bed. The snow piled up outside in the yard and the kids dealing with the same travel weary fatigue. Lumi was always the first to reassert some control over what was normal. The expected actions or a clearer focus on what needed to be done next. "Go see if Grandma Kumri needs some help getting ready for the feast after you've brushed your teeth!"

“Yes Mom...”

“Okay Mommy!”

Rwen and Zori followed along to the rhythm as Lumi waved her hands, holding an imaginary baton she had somehow hid beneath the covers of our bed. Preparations and planning were nearly half the struggle to a good meal. Making sure all the invitations were properly made and there were enough plates for those who would otherwise be joining us at the table. A big family gathering filled with holiday joy and cheer.

I knew there was an added layer of stress to it all as well. Not least of which came from the ongoing desire and assumed obligation Lumi held regarding the impression she needed to make on my parents and sisters. That wasn't the full story though. Something about how my family did the holiday was simply more stressful than how Lumi and hers did it. More worried about the details that never matter. The gifts that would be forgotten in a few days or the conversations that no one really cared to hear. Something about the weight of that expectation and how we were all meant to put on a bit of a show.

That's painting it all in the most negative of lights of course. While things may start with that stiff rehearsed ritual, even my family would relax into all manner of discussion as the hours bled onto the dinner tables.

“Mom? Are we going to see the show today?” Rwen asked his question between washing his face and helping his little sister brush her teeth. The old bathroom was just across the hall and it made it easy to peak in for another conversation during those morning routines.

“I think today we're just staying here. Don't you remember how long the feast goes on for?” Lumi's answer sparked the mangled memories in Rwen's mind. He surely remembered some of what a Frithlic Nyun celebration was like in Besniwod. Over the

years he must have forgotten exactly how everything fits together. Unlike me, these village holidays are the exception and not the usual affair. I wonder if we struggle to connect because of differences like that.

“Oh that’s right!” Rwen turned back to Zori and continued getting ready. I did worry about how they were handling the cold. My old bedroom, all our old bedrooms were up the stairs and on the second story. The old heating ran from the kitchen and the fireplace and into the floors first. So the higher up you went the warmer everything became. You could easily forget that it was freezing outside after a warm night of sleep under a nest of blankets and pillows.

“Mommy? What show is Rwen talking about?” Zori asked her questions several minutes after Rwen asked his. She must have held in that curiosity with all her strength as the two of them finished washing up and getting dressed for the soon-to-be-arriving guests.

“You remember the big church and that big square with all the tents?” Lumi softened her smile as she gave me the signal that it was our turn to occupy the bathroom. The day really was starting whether I was ready or not.

“Yes? With all the funny stuff being sold! Right by the train station!” Zori was letting her excitement of everything simmer inside. She knew how to be well behaved and was aware that Besniwod was a place she should know, but the truth was this was all new to her. The first time she was living the secondhand stories she heard over and over. We were bringing her bedtime stories to life with all the new feasts and flavors waiting in the days to come.

“We’ll be seeing shows there and attending a service at the church later on this week!”

“Really!”

“And that’s not all...” I brushed off my knees and stood up with a crunch as the years made their burden obvious on my back. “After we’re done eating tonight there will be a fireworks show.”

“Fireworks!”

“We already told you there would be fireworks Zori...”

“I know Rwen, but I’m still excited!”

Rwen and Zori finished washing up with clanks and clatters before stomping down the hall and into the kitchen downstairs. The loud music of mismatched pots and pans let us know they were helping my parents as much as they were hindering. I could only smile to myself thinking about how my parents try to be extra polite around the kids. Some kind of compensation for getting angry at me and my sisters when we were young. Kindness skipping a generation or something like that.

Over the course of the day I’m sure Rwen and Zori would find a way to be more useful than not. Their presence no longer a distraction but a welcome addition to the preparations. And at the very worst I knew Mom and Dad were willing to sacrifice efficiency for more time together.

The kids busy making a mess and drawing out the limited time needed to cook all the meals and plates left me and Lumi alone for the first time in a long while. With a single look I crawled back into bed and we embraced each other in an everlasting warmth fit for the holiday. Our memories melting into one as the core of our love beat together in the same steady rhythm. I don’t know how long we stayed like that. A lifetime in a moment as the comfort we felt for each other spread across the entire world.

“I love you Swefen.”

“I love you Lumi.”

We smiled and closed our eyes again. Somewhere between a dream and a desire all our thoughts floated past the clouds and into visions only possible from high atop Mount Vinson. Graced with Her blessing and welcoming Her flame, we found each other. Miracle of miracles and the life we were always destined to live.

“We brought a few things from Veranum?” My question added weights to the world as the hours drew nearer. We would need to get up and start helping in our own way for the big feast and all the celebrations.

We still had time to create our own seasonal magic. Rwen was getting to that age where he was too old to believe in the stories but Zori was at that prime age where even the most unbelievable of tales was tangible and real. The old legend says that Saint Vinson Herself visits the homes of families all over the continent with the help of her pet crystal spider. Over the night or the whole week they deliver special gifts to everyone looking to share the warmth of the holiday spirit.

Waiting for true divine intervention could prove to be a bit tiresome though and in the modern era it fell on mortal innovation to ensure gifts were delivered. Mainly for the younger members of the family and the community, but the overarching gift giving tradition extended to everyone of every age.

However, the details of how those gifts were delivered and what constituted a good gift would vary greatly from family to family. At least in Besniwod where that connection to the lesser saints was still strongly present. Veranum was decidedly different in that regard. Frithlic Nyun as a whole was just not as prominently important in the city. The week of celebrations and gifts didn't match the pace of convenience people expected there.

So everything was simplified and lost its distinct flair. Any connection to the lesser saints lost to time as more standardized universal rituals built up around an all powerful Saint Vinson. Even in that modern context it's still possible to find remnants of the lesser saints in Veranum. The vocabulary is different and the lineage may be forgotten, but the vestiges persist in some manner or another.

My family, the Kumris, see dreamcatchers as an almost auspicious gift as an example. We attribute its supernatural power and value to its origins with the less saint Denali. Dreamcatchers also exist in Veranum and are relatively commonly given out as gifts, especially during Frithlic Nyun. However, the history of its journey is gone. They see it as nothing more than a cute charm that may or may not help people sleep better.

There were similar examples for everything we attributed to a specific family and a specific lesser saint in Besniwod. For Lumi's family, the Juas, her family insisted that the Frithlic Nyun feast must end with a nicely cooked fish. A common tradition among any family who claimed heritage with the lesser saint Himavan – at least in the villages.

The story goes that the people who were once under the protection of the lesser saint Himavan saw fish as a symbol for good luck and fortune, especially in connection with the new year. And so it wasn't rare to find people in Veranum city who would follow the same tradition, but would credit it to simply enjoying fish. Some may be vaguely aware of some kind of connection to well wishes, but almost no one would draw the connection to the lesser saint Himavan.

The continued focus on lineage and long-standing traditions in villages like Besniwod meant more than being aware of the lesser saints and who belonged to which. We also built up a strong sense of mutual respect for each other's ancestry. Someone from outside

the Kumri family would surely fully understand the impact and meaning behind receiving the gift of a dreamcatcher from someone from my family.

The long and short of it is that someone from Veranum would appreciate the gift, but they wouldn't understand the importance of its lineage. That's part of why me and Lumi thought it would be a good idea to make one with Rwen and Zori. Not just the perfect gift from my family to her sister Lin, but also a chance to help teach our children how people from Besniwod understood and respected each other.

That's how I was stuck with the weight of a heavy problem. Forgetting the dreamcatcher back in Veranum or losing it somewhere along the way meant missing out on an important life lesson for my kids. At best it would look like I was disrespecting my own family's heritage. Not to mention the embarrassment of having no gift for Lin. No way to show proper appreciation for the new life being brought into our world.

I could feel myself messing up a lot recently. Little mistakes like that. Distracted for reasons I couldn't quite understand. I wasn't intentionally making life harder, but it was an undesirable consequence. I needed to be there for Lumi and the kids – *for my family* – not lost in my own confusion.

We definitely packed the dreamcatcher though. I remember putting it on the counter at least. It was such an important thing... but we were in such a rush to leave. I might have told one of the kids to pack it... Rwen would never have forgotten it. *But what if I asked Zori?*

I need to just look through all our luggage. I'll find it somewhere unexpected and then my nerves will finally calm. There's something poetic in that. If finding the dreamcatcher really could help me sleep peacefully.

Chapter 7

First Feast

“It should be packed with the dreamcatcher.” And there it was. The pain on my face as Lumi pronounced the word. That thing shifting in the shadows. The perfect gift becoming a living nightmare.

Only she wasn’t talking about that. We packed more than just the gift for her sister Lin. She was thinking of the berries. Fruit meant to be implemented in the next steps of reforestation. A new natural resource and a way to keep our people fed. The daylight was always enough but with the warmer summer proper produce could be a reality.

The initial tests in Veranum were already easy to find in the city markets. They were expensive and heavily controlled. Grown in specific circumstances to test the limits of survival. They tasted worse and were much smaller than the imported varieties that were several times cheaper. But these were local. These were ours.

Proof of Her grace and Her blessing. News of a possible crop being brought to the villages stirred throughout the continent. Families were researching their lineage and history for ancient recipes that could use the small fruits. Everyone would appreciate us bringing some of those berries to the feast. A perfect way to wish for a better future.

“You didn’t forget where we packed it did you?” Lumi sat up and her eyes scanned the messy room. Pillows, blankets, toys and our baggage all strewn across the floor. We were never very organized travelers and being out of practice only made it worse. “Swefen. Where is the dreamcatcher?”

“I think I left it with one of the kids...” There was panic in my voice as my eyes shifted around, looking for a comfortable place to hide. There had to be a sign of where it

was packed – where I left it. I just... couldn't remember. A hole in my mind growing bigger with the stress and excitement of travel and family.

"You didn't forget to pack it did you, Swefen?" Lumi rested her arm on the side of the bed as she looked over our family's mess. The nest where Rwen and Zori were sleeping covering up their own luggage and spilling out under the bed. I could read it in her eyes – she knew I lost it. "I know dreamcatchers really mean a lot to your family. Lin will really appreciate how close it makes her family to ours."

"Do you really want to start this now? I didn't forget it, but it might be... a bit *lost* – at the moment!" *Did I forget it?* I know I wouldn't have forgotten to pack such an important gift. Lumi worked so hard to make sure it was something Mom would be proud of. Losing it would surely be seen as me not caring about how Lumi feels. About how hard she tries to keep our families close. She went out of her way to learn how to make a traditional gift and yet I couldn't take a moment to ensure it was packed. *But I know I would have checked!*

"I'm only making sure everything is ready."

"Are you bringing that up again?"

"What are you talking about? Just drop it and help everyone get ready for the feast."

"But you hurt me Lumi!"

"I hurt *you*?!"

"Yes... I mean I know it's my fault, but I didn't mean to lose it. And it's not lost besides!"

"Not now Swefen..." I was being dramatic and defensive because I knew she was right. It's in those most embarrassing moments when I'm at my ugliest that I need to realize how lucky I am to be with someone who understands those emotional outbursts. We both knew to never let the worst moments be a burden on our love for each other.

“Just bring out the berries for the meal. I want to let my parents have a taste of that new dish. And don’t let the dreamcatcher worry you too much. I’m sure it’ll turn up.” That small weight feels heavier every time. Ignoring the little bits. Until it becomes an unavoidable reminder in every conversation.

Even if we are quick to make up and get along it still feels worse to have a fight about nothing. Like the distance between us grew over the years. I hate even imagining such words, but better to understand the pain than stir a festering wound. There was just always so much life going on. So much living. So much moving.

Work, kids, coming home for the holidays. We were losing time for ourselves. We lost time for ourselves. Yet I will always remember how strongly we once felt for each other. How strongly we still do. And maybe I’m the one at fault. I could try harder. I should try harder – *But isn’t it supposed to be easy? Loving you.*

I lost myself in my own mind. Collecting scattered thoughts between the mess of blankets and pillows between the kid’s nest and our pieces of luggage. Without another word for the weary, I found the berries and began helping prepare for the first Frithlic Nyun feast. The hours chugged along one by one, two by two, family by family. Guests arrived and the smell from the kitchen grasped every inch of the old wooden walls. The morning soon came and went and the dull midday sun was singing along with the familiar sound of the radio before too long.

“You wouldn’t believe what Dad went through to get this house.” Uncle Umbali was pouring the grog after his rowdy entrance into the old home. He grew up with Dad and their other siblings here. There was a story about the move from a more standard room in the stone buildings by the central square. One of those things Uncle Umbali brought up every time we all got together. A reliable tale to set the mood as we set the table.

“What do you mean Uncle Umbali?” Zori asked an innocent question in a small voice as the drunkard lifted another mug to his mouth. Drops of the thick liquid spilled on the kitchen floor as he took a deep swig and let out a loud laugh. The man was larger than life in character and stature. He spat in the face of that uncomfortable aura around the ignorance and refusal of the expected polite gestures.

“These wooden cottages were a luxury and a half in his time. A snowhome in the burrs! We all hoped to inherit it... but of course your granddad gets it!”

“What do you mean?” Zori raised her voice higher at the confusing retelling. I knew all the beats by heart, but we all must have forgotten that Zori never learned it. Uncle Umbali was ever all too gracious to indulge in the request to dive into those details.

“Your great-granddad, my dad, built this house! Your granddad, my brother, got the inheritance since he’s the oldest son!” The sound of the holiday music was growing in its usual crescendo. The notes seemed to marinate in the wooden logs, keeping the conversation a few degrees warmer.

“My great-granddad? How old is this house?!”

“Older than you by a good few years!” Zori and Uncle Umbali shared a genuine laugh. The rest of us joined in for the chorus. It didn’t really matter if we were laughing for different reasons. Enjoying the moment together was more than enough.

“Did Grandpa Kumri put all the wood in the walls?” Zori asked her question as she smacked the side of the room with her hand. The vibration ran all the way out to the cold, following the waves of the music and the shifts in temperature.

“We all did! Well, I did. Me and the boys from school came over to help with most of the work. Your granddad was too busy off in the woods or some other bullshit.”

“Umbali!” Mom was always over worried about the way people spoke. Even a few rooms over her ears would pick up on any inappropriate language.

“Sorry Coram but it is bullshit! Hwa haha!” My uncle’s version of the events differed significantly from how I remember them being taught. Dad would say the house was built when he and his siblings were still young. It was all part of some new initiative – new at the time – to expand the borders of Besniwod. I’ve never checked, but it makes sense in the broader context of widespread continental reforestation. My dad’s youth was all about that kind of thing. Excitement for what was possible as every test and every experiment brought back positive results. The villagers themselves were more than happy to oblige as well. If it worked they would finally have more self sufficiency. Anything to loosen the grip of the short leash Veranum held around their neck, tugging on their collar so strongly every day. A way to make use of the woods as a natural resource rather than being constantly in debt to imported stone.

A generation later and it turned out some of that enthusiasm was a bit undue. The wooden cottages on the frontier stood as vigils to the pride we once sought. And they were nice houses. Fully made from local lumber. Corked and insulated with both high grade synthetic fibers and more traditional solutions of whatever plants and sap were lying around. The walls soaked in sound and the air was warm quick. Living outside of the main block of buildings also opened up room for a real yard. It was constantly covered in snow, but it did help make the house feel like a home – at least for me.

“Grandpa Kumri worked with reforestation?” Rwen picked up on the kernel of truth in Uncle Umbali’s ramblings. Around the time the house was built Dad was doing our village’s equivalent of university studies. It would have been impossible for him to make the move

to Veranum, but there were still prestigious programs in Besniwod, fully funded by the government to boot.

“You should ask him yourself. I don’t like to meddle in intercity affairs so that should tell you enough already.” Rwen didn’t get Uncle Umbali’s remark. He knew our family in Besniwod held some sort of animosity toward the city, but the finer details of what was a joke and what was a jab were lost on him. He was from Veranum and couldn’t understand the generalized resentment we placed squarely on the city. Justified or not, the far away place that controlled everything made for the perfect excuse at all times.

“Hey Grandpa Kumri!”

“Yes Rwen?”

“Did you work on the continental reforestation projects when you were younger?”

“Well... I’m not sure how much I can say...”

“Aldor! Don’t be so secretive with the family!” Mom didn’t like when Dad hid his past from the family. It’s not unlikely that some of the details were meant to stay secret, but to Mom those contracts never extended to the family. We were meant to share everything and anything regardless of what was signed on a dotted line.

“Okay... I’ll think of a way to tell you the story.” Dad paused for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. He was always such a serious person and it often made it hard to connect with him. He had his own way of showing that he cared. Like breaking his own moral code to share this story. It may seem trivial to Mom and most other people, but if you knew my dad you’d see how it was his way of showing how much he cared – *how much he loved us*. “So there was a project on the outskirts of the village. Testing new soil and genetically modified seeds. They were struggling to keep plants growing and more and more seemed to die every winter. We had a bit of a breakthrough and with that confidence

came a greater need to understand it. That's what I was doing and in a way... and also why this house was built. Veranum was looking for ways to test those limits."

"Important work to some, but it still got you out of the manual labor! Hwahaha!" Uncle Umbali was always ready with the perfect comeback. Settling the more dramatic tones of Dad's speech into a more appropriate holiday mood.

The round of laughter and comfortable chatter set the kitchen ablaze as the final touches to the feast were added with flair. The whole house baked in the scents and sounds that I knew as Frithlic Nyun. The same music year after year bouncing off the walls. The same smells rising upstairs to my bedroom at the end of the hall. There was something indescribably reassuring in the familiarity of it all. The perfect moment in a lifetime of memories as we all prepared to sit down. The last guests making their way to the old house on the edge of town.

One of the last guests to arrive was Ridni Pori, my oldest sister Mekoti's husband. He was working at the cafeteria again that morning, always taking his work seriously. But the late arrival was likely less about the obligation and more about the holiday surprise waiting in the jugs of warm wine held in his arms. Ridni was good at always finding new ways to show Mekoti how much he cared for her. How proud he was that she is now a Pori.

"Is that your new recipe?" My question was meant to be polite. Bringing up something I thought I remembered my sister mentioning. But it could very well have been a lost thought. My mind keeps rushing to the past and sometimes that makes it hard to keep clear what really happened and what was a dream and what was just a memory.

“You’ll have to taste it to find out!” Genuine care and honest action without an ulterior motive. Ridni is a natural at it. I try to go for the same effect but usually fall short. Too many sour afterthoughts. The wrong flavor for keeping the peace.

There I was getting into my own head again. Too tired from the trip or coming down with a cold. The excuse for the drifting regret and misguided jealousy mattered little to the reality of the moment. It was time to embrace the season. Frithlic Nyun was here and an atmosphere of loving family should be more than enough to remind me of the important things in life. What really matters is being there together with those who love each other unconditionally.

“Does it really taste like the same mulled wine we had that day?” I dropped the pretense even if it was a little clumsy. I think we both simply wanted to try having an honest conversation.

“You could say that. I may have changed it a little, but only for the better.” Ridni let out a laugh as he dropped a few ingredients on the counter.

“I guess I’ll have to wait and see.” I settled into my own smile as the house began to rise in expectations. We were getting close to mealtime and that meant another flurry of activity from kitchen to dining room and everywhere in between.

“You won’t be disappointed!” Mekoti shouted from the other room as another wave of preparations began. And then it wasn’t long before Mom ordered anyone and everyone to help finish setting the table – or better said *tables*. I imagine that weight was tenfold if not more for my parents. Hosting their grandchildren and making a good impression on the in-laws – their neighbors in a very real way.

With the last place mats pulled out from the cabinets and the last tablecloths prepped from the fresh laundry baskets, it was time to sit down with a prayer and a smile.

The arrangements were not rigid but there were clear expectations. The main table with the roasted ham and baked turkey meant for the head of the Kumri household and the most esteemed guests. Growing up that was always Grandpa's seat, but it has shifted into a spot for Mom and Dad. One of those subtle reminders of how families grow and change over time yet still remain the same.

There were never enough seats at that main table though. We always thought of whoever got to sit there as having the highest honors. So as these matters regarding respect go, that usually meant at least one of our parents-in-law. Us coming all the way from Veranum gave Lumi's parents, Tamu and Lochu Jua, extra special attention. They would sit next to Mom and Dad at that oh so important main table. That seating arrangement played into the other unwritten rule in how the table doubled as a generational divide. Uncle Umbali would have his seat there along with any other Aunts and Uncles from the same generation.

Occasionally Mekoti would attempt a coup and find a seat next to Dad. She saw it as a way to earn more respect within the family. Something she believed – and I think all us siblings would agree – were connected to her oldest sister responsibilities. Naturally, my second sister Bryne would also try to steal the same seat. Some kind of payback for getting tricked into doing chores when they were young. Maybe she still feared sleeping in the hay.

Whatever the cause, It was likely Mekoti and Ridni or Bryne and her husband taking up any remaining seats at the main table. That left me and Lumi with the second table, sitting next to Nali and her husband. Lumi's sister Lin was also always invited and had a seat reserved for herself and her husband close by. Uncle Umbali would then sometimes float over to our table if the main table proved to be too boring. Any other cousins and

neighbors spending the holiday with us that year would also likely be at our less prestigious second table.

Last but not least, there was the smaller kid's table wherever it could fit. Rwen and Zori and all the nieces and nephews would crowd together and take turns rushing from table to table to gather their food. They had a blast with their own jokes and commentary even if the table was awkwardly shoved halfway between rooms.

"A moment of silence for Saint Vinson. May She hear our thoughts and answer our prayers before another year's Frithlic Nyun feast begins." Mom would motion for everyone to hold hands as we either pretended or actually did say a short prayer. I imagine my kids were simply being quiet and trying not to find the situation strange, but for many of us it was very real and truly important. Even if the ritual lost some of its meaning to me, I thought it was a nice gesture to show respect to the food and each other.

And boy was there reason to show respect for such a meal. There were the usual soups and stews to help anyone still weary from the cold. More of a side dish to help wash the feast down or a secondary drink for those who didn't have a taste for wine and grog.

What really made it feel like a Frithlic feast were the large cuts of meat set on the main and second tables. A full roasted turkey with fresh seafood stuffing pouring out. It would have been cooking for at least 4 or 5 hours and the whole house smelled of its marinade.

Second, but not any less important, was the cured ham. Covered with egg batter, breadcrumbs, and mustard, the ham was baked in the oven over several stages. Someone in the kitchen would add layer after layer of each ingredient, adding more flavors to the seasonal aroma over the course of the day.

Some people liked to eat the ham with little slices of bread instead of relying on the broth of the soup to wash it down. The grain lets you add even more sauces and honestly was a technique often applied to the turkey as well.

Spread throughout all the tables were a smattering of meatballs and pickled herring to go along with the oyster dressing, thick yogurts, and butter. Sometimes we'd include a potato casserole featuring whatever special deal there was available at the central square markets. Dad would try to make sure it was a fresh catch from the closest bay. But it all depended on what was on sale or what was shipped in. The way it could vary from one year to the next led to our family calling it a temptation, using rarer ingredients and fresher catches than most any other dish on the table.

There would be other cured meats, sauce covered vegetables, and of course Ridni's mulled wine. Depending on the year there could be more or there could be less. It was also common for guests to add their own favorite dishes with unique twists on flavors as well. So the menu wasn't exactly fixed, but if any of the basics were missing it didn't feel quite right.

"Thank you all for being here for another Frithlic Nyun. Even as our family grows I can only think of how it makes my heart happy to see us all together."

"Thank you Coram."

"Thanks Mom!"

"Thank you Mrs. Kumri!"

The table then erupted into its many thank yous and everyone dug in and pigged out. The sound of forks and knives against the many plates and platters struck in a rhythm with the music on the radio. It had always been that way. For as long as I can remember this was the height of the holiday. An assault on all the senses are merrymaking and

storytelling marked the passing of yet another year. The gifts waiting for another day and the prayers sacrificed in the pews all freezing into the frost of another foggy afternoon.

“Mom! Make sure there’s an extra serving for Rwen and Zori!”

“Don’t worry Koti, it’s already taken care of.” The odd mundane bits that stick out all the more in retrospect. A distinct echo of the past. Somewhere between a dream and a memory. My oldest sister really cared for us. She always did. She always has. Even when we were kids I can clearly remember her voice rising over the rowdy tables with an unearned authority.

“Mom! We need to make a nest for Swefen and Nali!” It would’ve been more than 30 or 40 winters ago now. Back when me and Nali were always grouped together. Bryne and Mekoti probably still think that way. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole family still does. Gathering the youngest siblings in related responsibilities.

“And what about me! That’s not fair Mekoti!” Whenever my oldest sister put on that air of authority, Bryne was quick to point out her own lack of deserved attention. She had a few fewer winters than Mekoti but was forced to act older when me and Nali were around. Unfortunately, that also meant her and Mekoti would be last pick for any comfortable beds when Mom and Dad were hosting the Frithlic feast.

“We’ll be fine Bryne! We always find a place to sleep!” Mekoti and her stern answer drew in the room. As a child it was all so dramatic. The main table with the huge turkey shifting from listening to Grandpa’s story to everyone staring at us kids. The second table quieting down to listen in on the amusing argument about to erupt.

“No! I don’t want to sleep in the hay!”

“Sleeping in the hay?” Both the main and second tables broke out into laughter as my sisters attempted to leverage their position from the kid’s table. Dad turned to face

Bryne with a more serious expression. I'm sure he wanted to find a subtle way to figure out where the problem was without getting too invested. "Now you know we'd never make you – No... We'd never let you do that!"

"W-we... It's j-just..." Mekoti started to find an excuse with a stutter, syllables clumsily dripping from her mouth.

"Aldor..." Mom focused her attention on Dad and the room narrowed again. I just remember feeling such an uncomfortable sensation. It felt like we were all in trouble but I didn't know why. Maybe that's why this memory has stuck with me for so long.

"What Coram?" Dad's voice scared me. So much anger in so few words. All I could do was look to my sisters, but it seemed no one was quite sure what to do or how to behave. Nali was looking down at her feet. Bryne was looking up to her big sister. Mekoti was still trying to find the right words for her thoughts.

"We... could make a nest for all the kids!" Dad's stern face softened as Mekoti said the words. The cold claustrophobia erupted into warm hearts and warm laughter.

"And it wouldn't be a Frithlic Nyun at the Kumris without it!" Dad turned back to face all our guests and raised his glass in cheers.

"But... But Mekoti told me you'd make us sleep in the hay!" Bryne blurted out her concern one last time over the rising sound of drinks and dishes.

"Did she now?" Mom looked over at Mekoti with an expression that said more than any word ever could.

"I was kidding Mom! You know how we play tricks on each other! Mom, please!" Mekoti's excuses mixed into the other conversations and the feast returned to its usual merry pace.

My younger self didn't quite understand it at the time, but there was a joke in it all. I can see it now with my own kids. Mekoti was clearly trying to trick Bryne into doing more work. Nothing too serious but worth making the kids understand that it's wrong. I'm sure Rwen and Zori play similar tricks on each other. I don't know if they call a makeshift bed a *nest* though. That's the kind of thing they'd learn more from Lumi than me.

"Hey Mekoti! Remember when you tricked Bryne into thinking she'd have to sleep in the hay?" Coming back to the present I thought it'd only be right to tease my sisters about the old times. How things change yet still remained the same.

"Swefen!" Mekoti was quick to defend the oncoming embarrassment. It's hard to tell if she was more worried about how it would hurt her current image or how it would reflect upon her past self. Either way it seemed foolish to the family. We knew her too well to play into that hand.

"Shut up Koti! You know what he's talking about! You made me think Mom and Dad would make me sleep out in the hay!" Bryne slammed her fist on the counter and shocked her husband Tarris into paying more than the polite attention due at such events.

"Is everything alright, Bryne?" Tarris asked my sister a simple question that sparked the next discussion. The story would be retold with new vim and vigor. The eyes of the room feeling different to each sibling.

"And I knew you were all waiting for some joke from Dad!" Mekoti burst out as the climax reached its dramatic peak. "I didn't really want to hurt Bryne you know that..."

"I don't know about that."

"Bryne!"

“Auntie Bryne...” Zori spliced into the sequence with an interruption. Her generation and her outlook from afar were as confused as they were familiar with the old story. “Rwen plays those kinds of jokes on me too...”

“Does he now?” Lumi looked over to Rwen with all too familiar disappointing eyes. A wry smile with crooked lips was all he needed to show for us all to share another round of cheers over the clacks and clatter.

“But Auntie Bryne?” Zori brought in the room and moved the spotlight away from the red face of her brother. “What does it mean to sleep in the hay? Is that something special here in Besniwod?”

“Oh little Zori, it was something meant to scare me! There are old stables and abandoned wooden cottages out further in the forest. They often store animal feed like hay, but are dark and cold through all of winter.”

“So how could anyone sleep out there?”

“They can’t. That’s why it’s so mean!” Bryne looked over to her sister Mekoti with a growing anger beneath her eyes. “She was basically telling me I was going to die.”

Silence. Repentance. Pleading prayers. Forgiveness.

“Why would anyone say that!” Zori’s voice squeaked as she covered her mouth and her eyes widened to three times their usual size.

The game was now afoot. The pieces on the board finding their moves as the two sisters locked eyes and found themselves lost in the old memories. Painful bonds of love and hate. Broken into a suspenseful respect for the table as Ridni and Tarris took turns comforting the silent noise of that night.

The festivities picked up again and that fight never saw its proper resolution. As was tradition. As is our faith. As our family will always be. Between the trips between dishes

and plates and cups of grog and glasses of mulled wine, I caught Mom in the hallway and that anxious dream swept into our breath.

“Mom...” I held on to her hand as the music drowned out any clear conversations at the dinner tables. “What happened back there with Bryne and Koti...”

“I don’t know, Swefen. It’s not worth digging into old wounds. Especially not when we’re here to celebrate Frithlic Nyun. It wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be proper.”

“I know Mom... But I mean it made me think about Rwen and Zori. They probably play the same tricks on each other and I don’t want them to bottle that up for decades.”

“Swefen my sweet boy... don’t worry about that so much. When it comes down to it they will know you love them and that will always be more important than some petty squabble about who did whose chores.”

“But don’t you think it would be better to let them find a way to make up?”

Mom sighed into a quiet laugh as she let her body rest on mine in a long awaited embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here after so many years away. I love you so much.”

“I love you too Mom.”

“That’s all that matters.” I could hear her softly crying into my shoulder before she lifted her head up with a smile. So much emotion in the stifled breath. Drifting in the space between words like making up for decades worth of lacking sleep. “Swefen my sweet son... We’ll always be here for you.”

“I know Mom.” She held on to me in that hallway for a full minute or three as the holiday music blasted through the walls. The smells of dinner and the ramblings of another discussion – or maybe it was another argument. The talk from the tables as another night added to our memories together.

"I loved my mom so much and sometimes the holidays remind me of how much I miss her. It's silly but you understand, right Swefen?"

"She was a good mom."

"Do you remember her? You were so young when..."

"I remember bits and pieces. How she and P  p  re would host big reunions with all the aunts and uncles. There was always a lot of love between you all." Mom buried her head in my shoulder again. The foggy vision of her parents was enough to break down the polite barrier she kept up with so much strength. "It was always so much different than Dad's side of the family. My mother's mother, M  m  re, my mother's father, P  p  re, they both had a softer touch than Grandma and Grandpa Kumri. At least that's how I remember it."

"Thank you Swefen." Mom wiped her face and let herself smile deeply as she looked into my eyes. We both shared that habit. Keeping too much inside. Caring too much about the other side. It could be exhausting and depleting, but sharing that understanding made it a bit easier. I know it warmed Mom's heart to know we shared that emotion. At least, that's how I read the moment.

Chapter 8

Flowers in the Sky

The steam eventually settles and the plates begin to go cold. The half burnt candles and growing pile of leftovers are less a signal of the end of the meal and more a transition toward another dish. It can be complicated, but depending on how everyone's stomachs feel and how much was prepared, there could be anywhere from a few more courses to nothing but a digestif. We've all heard of some families having multiple turkeys or hams when there's a particularly large party of guests – or just a particularly hungry group.

When everyone is good and full or the main courses have run their course, the desserts will begin to work their way onto the main and second tables. In my family it's always pies and cakes of some sort or another. The exact flavor changes with what's available at the market, but some of my favorites were a nice apple pie or pistachio cake.

"Uncle Umbali?" Zori called out from the kids table after some kind of disagreement seemed to have broken out. Her being the youngest, it wasn't unexpected for the older cousins and her older brother to gang up as they tease her.

"Yes Zori?"

"I thought you don't have pipes here."

"That's true little Zori! They'd all freeze and be useless or worse in any inland village."

"Then how does the radio keep playing?"

"What? Hwa hahaha!" Uncle Umbali and the rest of the adult table had a good laugh at the question. It was obvious. Zori was young and from the city. Utilities of every kind just poured into houses and homes via the magic lines outside.

“Sorry Uncle Umbali. Zori might not quite understand how water pipes and electric wires work.” Rwen was quick to adjust his stance from teasing to defending as their jokes became the subject of the entire room.

“You city kids have it too easy!” Zori’s confusion wasn’t just due to her young age. I’m sure everyone in Besniwod could expect someone from Veranum to have a similar misunderstanding. We all knew how the continental government developed a system of pipes within its walls. Modern conveniences afforded by some kind of intricate heating system built into the layers of the vertical city.

Life in the village was different. There were – *there are* – ever-present freezing issues that made it impossible for any practical use of the same pipes. Luckily, electricity doesn’t care as much about the weather and the climate. Some would credit that fortune to Her Flame.

“I don’t understand!” Zori’s eyes welled up as the confusion turned to frustration. The playful jokes were becoming hurtful insults. No longer naivety but simple stupidity. At least to Zori and her emotions.

“Zori come over here and take a seat with Daddy.” Lumi gave me a signature scowl and motioned towards my spot at the table. I was in my usual chair at the second table. Close to my little sister Nali, on the edge closest to the more important table where my parents were sitting.

“I know you saw some of the wires outside right?” Zori sat down on my lap under the watchful gaze of everyone in the room. Whether it was personal offense or intense curiosity, they were all eager to see how I dealt with how little Zori and her now embarrassed eyes were pleading for an explanation.

“Yes...”

“And all the lights too.”

“Yeah but...”

“Those lines carry the power all the way from-”

“I know that! But Rwen and Frezy and Rhodiola told me they were just broken pipes!” The truth of the teasing was finally laid out bare. Not quite sleeping in the hay but a joke now gone too far. Clearly.

Rwen immediately stood up to defend the decisive judgment. The cousins moved to hide their ears with a sudden unbreakable interest in the food left on their plates.

“That’s not how it happened! Dad we were just kidding!”

“So Zori, you see the problem right?”

“What?” Zori wiped her tears away, curious to hear what I would say next. It was time to play through that old memory with the roles slightly shifted. I gave Dad a quick glance and he was smiling into his cup, hiding how much it meant to him to see me finally understand.

“I think the problem is Rwen needs a lesson in how wires and pipes work. Not you. Now go back to the table and teach him and your wonderful cousins everything you know about electricity.” Frezy’s parents, Lin and Akit, and Rhodiola’s parents, Nali and Tamir, smiled in agreement with my punishment.

“Dad... It was just a joke...” Rwen was practically stomping his feet as his age shrunk down to match someone younger than Zori.

“We wouldn’t want you to have to redo a year again would we now? That’d make it pretty hard to get a scholarship for a university across the strait.”

“You asshole!” Zori gasped as Rwen cursed in front of the family. Bad parenting or a bad kid on full display for neighbors and in-laws to see. I turned the disappointment on too

high perhaps. Mentioning one of my son's worst moments. He was a serious student but recently struggled in school. We all knew the full story and how it could easily be seen as unfair to Rwen. He got in a fight defending Zori from a bully. Since he threw the punches he received the harshest punishment. After he was held back he lost some of the enthusiasm he once had for studying. Understandably.

"Don't listen to Swefen my boy! We're all proud of what you did for Zori!" The tables all let out a sigh of relief as Uncle Umbali broke the tension. My tactic may not have been as effective as Dad's, but things seemed to have worked out in the end.

There was enough retribution waiting for me whenever me and Lumi would next have a moment to ourselves. For the time being it was okay to relax into the desserts. More of Ridni's mulled wine. And Zori swung back to the kid's table, happy to have free reign over the conversation. Neither her brother nor her cousins could stop her as she rambled on about anything and everything.

But all it takes is a cup too many or a word too few for the jovial atmosphere of the first Frithlic feast to slip and spill all over the table. The ever present taboos and the unforgivable broken promises finding a platform to take center stage.

All the family together also meant it was easier for discussions to digress into those passionate emotions. There was always something political to complain about, especially with guests from Veranum City reminding the villagers of their governmental grievances.

Besniwod and its history was focused on the immediate survival of the people and their home. The cold and harsh climate was never far away. The trains from the city were at best an unreliable exchange twice a week. There were many times when essential supplies arrived too late. Not just snacks and treats, but medicine, food, and fuel.

On top of the unreliable connection, the villages were expected to pay a hefty tax with each outbound train. Many villagers were outspoken about their distaste for such a system, but at the end of the day Besniwod could not exist without the help of Veranum.

There were agreements drawn up in the time before even my own grandfather's life where the government would work to ensure self sufficiency. For generations that was nothing but an empty political promise, but in Dad's lifetime everything changed.

Scientists on another continent had some kind of breakthrough and we found a reliable way to grow plants on our hostile soil. I think it was connected to some kind of terraforming initiative, exocolonialism and bigger wastes of money like that.

It was a boon for Besniwod though. That's when reforestation officially started and wood became an actual domestic commodity. Early experiments like my parent's house – or really my grandfather's house – were one part proof of concept, two parts political achievement.

The more realistic change was in how we had our own fuel. Instead of relying on unreliable barrels and needing to stockpile way more than we could ever need, we could burn our own wood – our own fuel.

It was a growing system of choice for villagers everywhere on the continent. Finding a way to avoid the city and creating jobs where employment was often scarce. Exporting excess lumber, heating your home, and feeding the family. Even with such a proud source of fuel, gas from the government was still the most widely used source of heating. And so the subject was always kindling for an unruly argument.

No matter which side or how strongly one feels about who is right, it's easy to understand the pain of being ignored. Fighting battles on the front line as a general in a comfy chair makes decisions for which they have no context. No experience. The global

economic incentives too abstract for the reality of someone trying to raise a family in Besniwod.

“Aldor! My dearest brother of mine! Are you hearing me?” Uncle Umbali grew up as the younger brother. He learned the hard way how to fight for his space at the table. Taking the teasing and the jokes in stride until he learned how to hit back. A darker shade of sarcasm that flirted with the perfect notes. And it always worked. Dad would fall for it every time. Especially on the night of a Frithlic Nyun feast. Grog mixed with wine as the twilight left the sky. “I saw what they’re doing in Veranum.”

Dad felt a special passion for politics. I don’t think any of us fully understood why. He was rather distant to his friends and family. Reasonable to a fault and struggling to make those deeper connections. But politics. The man would burn his heart and bury his soul in the name of a just cause. Or what he thought was a just cause.

“You mean the extraction effort?” Even if no one wanted to listen or have it mentioned at the Frithlic feasts. He couldn’t help himself – in his mind the injustices were too brazen to ignore. So he’d interject with the most uncomfortable of comments in the middle of an otherwise pleasant evening.

“Aye and with a spy in our midst wouldn’t you like to know more! Hwa hahaha!”

“Why would I have any information on something like that?” Uncle Umbali was of course talking about me. I existed in both worlds but could never be accepted in either. To people in Veranum I was a country boy from a backwards village. To people here I was a sellout in the city. Over the years I learned to navigate what each side wanted to hear, but it left me feeling a bit out of place everywhere.

“You work in propaganda don’t you? You lie to the villagers about what’s happening in the city. What those assholes plan to do to us.” Dad was on the warpath. Uncle Umbali had set the perfect bait and we were now derailing the evening.

“I work for the continental government if that’s what you mean. I’m in charge of handling a small piece of our communications with intercontinental partners. All I see are messages keeping shipments on time and in order.” My work was mundane but it touched on trade across the strait. That was enough to brand me as a traitor. I could shrug it off since I mostly worried about collecting paychecks and supporting my family. “All I know about politics is the same thing you hear on the news here.”

“Horseshit. And what about Rwen and Zori? They aren’t growing up thinking extraction is worth the cost to Besniwod?” That was the line. I didn’t really care if they thought me a traitor. If they called me a sellout. If they hated me for my job. But don’t insult my family. Don’t drag my kids into your holy war.

“Are you calling my family stupid?”

“That’s not what I’m saying Swefen. You know that’s not what I mean. But the idea that you don’t know anything about the politics is silly.” Dad folded his hand as I stood up from my seat. I looked him dead in the eye from my seat at the second table. He was avoiding me as he sat on that throne at the head of the table. A king not worthy of the title. As I slammed my clenched fist on the table Lumi tried her best to spread a smile but it was Mom who had the ultimate solution.

“Aldor! Watch your mouth!” The ebb and flow of the mood flickered with the dancing lights. The colorful rays of the infinite horizon and the neighborhood festivities painting the snow and the sky. In an instant, for a moment, and with Her grace, laughter spread

throughout the tables. Mom calling Dad out for the most minor of infractions was the right move to lift the atmosphere.

“Coram this is serious? Don’t you want to know why your son is *lying* to us?”

“What are you talking about Dad?” The crusade wouldn’t be stopped before reaching the temple in Jerusalem. Dad was determined to say his piece till the bitter end.

“I know what they call it up in your castle. The holarctic dream right? The *second* holarctic dream. Talks of an actual boreal forest? And what about the desert? All this effort for such a temporary solution and they’re already celebrating while we have to learn to actually live with the consequences.”

“Dad I couldn’t even tell you if I knew.”

“So you admit they’re hiding something?”

“What?”

“All this talk about the barrels from the city and whatnot. They’re trying to say we shouldn’t burn our own fuel either – *the wood we worked so hard to grow* – but if we can’t rely on our own resources why are we bothering to get them growing in the first place?”

“Aldor did you hear me?” Mom reached out for her husband’s hand but Dad just shook it away.

“They clearly lied about how unification and reforestation would make everyone richer. What’s one more lie to add to the pile?” The worst part was there was truth in his words. Hyperbolic and dramatic, but the emotion was warranted. It just wasn’t the right time. It wasn’t the right place. I wasn’t the right person.

“I don’t care if it’s horseshit or horse cocks. I just know this is the best damn meal we’ve had in months! A toast to the beautiful cooks and chefs who made it all! Not least of all the great Ridni Pori and his new taste for mulled wine!” The response from Uncle

Umbali finally added flavor to the bait. His words said more than their meaning. A deeper understanding and an apology to help guide the meal into a more appropriate shade of conversation.

It was often like that after one of Dad's outbursts. He would say something ridiculous yet undeniably correct and conclude it all with an unsatisfied frown. The rest of us would oddly pretend it didn't happen as new topics leaped from one side of the table to the other, passing whatever food was left on the table from plate to plate.

The shift in atmosphere would only further be confirmed as gossip was shared from uncle to aunt, grandfather to granddaughter, friend to friend, and family to family. Maybe I struggled to see that aspect of the holiday. How people from Besniwod grew distant and apart. Not least of all my parents and my in-laws. People who didn't often have a chance to relax in such a grandiose way.

"What was in this year's casserole Coram?" Lumi's dad Tamu asked a more neutral question as the mood further lightened.

"I believe they told me it was some kind of cross breed. Salmon fat with something else. You can really taste how it brings out the flavors."

"Ah yes, of course!" Tamu and Mom talked about the details of how they cooked or would have cooked the casserole for more than an hour after that spark. It was nice to hear the two sides of my family get along despite my Dad's reasonably unreasonable passion for politics.

And then, after the last bites found their way to the farthest edge of every plate, the next phase of the Frithlic Nyun celebrations could finally begin. Or better said had already begun. A loud bang and a flash across the sky. Flowers painted on the horizon. Fireworks knocking on the door outside.

My yard – *my parent's yard* – extended out past the kitchen. Covered in ice and snow and fenced in with local lumber. With the warmer weather it was possible to go out and add to the excitement and noise across the village and the continent. It was still night and it was still cold though. Especially for Rwen and Zori.

They were much more sensitive to the climate and needed a few more layers of bundling to brave the backyard than their cousins. There were a few laughs at their expense, but the children all quickly got more caught up in figuring out new ways to light off the fireworks. Making the whole ordeal a race against the cold from the foyer area where we stored extra coats and shoes to the launchpad in the yard.

Lumi and I were more worried about them hurting themselves with the fuse. Uncle Umbali and Dad were on guard duty, holding the flames and igniting the torches. I'm not sure that reassured either of us, but the kids were having a blast.

"Three... Two... One!" Uncle Umbali would count down as Zori screamed from the backyard to the door leading back inside. It's a miracle she didn't knock the firework over. She joined her brother and her cousins looking on from behind the glass window as the explosion rose to the sky. The silly game would go on like that until it got too cold or they accidentally burned their clothes and needed to then stay inside.

The spirit of the holiday was everything in that moment. Looking at Rwen and Zori run up with Frezy and Rhodiola toward Dad and Uncle Umbali to light another set of fireworks and dash away before they launch. In a way we were making up for missing the past few Frithlic Nyun, but it felt much more pure than that. These would be cherished memories for my kids. They already were for me and Lumi.

My second sister ended up pulling me away as the kids ran back and forth from the fireworks to the foyer. Our relationship was complicated in those middle children ways.

She shared that same misguided passion with Dad, but it was less directed. More wild. We often fought growing up as a result and never really made amends. The silence spread through the years becoming a dull pain as the nerves numbed.

“Swefen?”

“Yes Bryne?”

My sister hadn’t touched her dessert. She was watching the scene outside from her seat at the table. It seems she found a way to sneak into the first table and wasn’t ready to give up the honor just yet.

“What’s it like living in Veranum?”

“It’s different from here.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well...” Bryne’s simple question had no easy answer. The small details of how the architecture and infrastructure were completely different. The way it felt to live in a hive of people with a population more than 100 times that of Besniwod. The stone structures, the neon signs, the endless sea of chimneys, and the parks as large as our local woods. “From our apartment you can just barely see over the last of the stone walls. The walls that hug the city and keep it warm. So we’re lucky to get a glimpse of the world beyond. And it is quite the sight. Endless water as far as you can see!”

“The waters of the strait? You can see them from your home?”

“Only just barely! But it really is something different if you grew up seeing mostly ice and snow.”

“Wow!” Bryne clearly wasn’t interested in hearing about the city and wanted to try having something like a normal conversation with her brother. With me.

"Tell me the story of how you met Tarris." We all knew the story but if we were playing this game I needed to play a safe card.

"You know that story Swefen."

"Something about how you liked his voice? I don't think you've ever really told me the whole story."

"Really?" I knew the whole story but it was worth finding a way to let her speak. I don't really know why but it felt like it'd be uncomfortable if we didn't have something, anything, to talk about. "Well he was calling into the nightly radio show we listened to. It was called *Kavod*. A show about helping turn your life around or just get better at something. You remember it right? It was something from across the strait and then all the villages here started their own local versions."

"Yeah. You used to make fun of it. Said it was stupid."

"Yeah I guess." Bryne let out a nervous laugh as her past shadowed the brightness of her story. A part of the tense feeling in our adulthood relationship came from how she went beyond teasing and joking when we were kids. In a way, this was her way of saying she's sorry.

"So you were listening to Kavod and Tarris would call in."

"Almost every night!"

"How'd it go from that to meeting him?"

"Well... I started calling in with a fake name. Trying to figure out where exactly he lived and who exactly he was. I told the host that I loved the lilt of that Tarris. His voice was calming and gentle and drew me in night after night."

"Did you just say *lilt*?"

“Yeah! That’s what I called it. I don’t know why... you say stupid things when you like someone.”

“That is true.” I thought back to how clumsy I had been when falling in love with Lumi. If all I had done was use a weird word like *lilt* then my memories would be a lot less embarrassing.

“So the host ended up keeping us on the air for hours and we became fast friends. When we found out we were both in Besniwod I had to hold myself back from moving in together then and there.”

“That’s a nice story.”

“You already knew it though.” I did already know it. But it was nice to hear her tell it. I didn’t mention that part to her. A lack of courage or not having the presence of mind to speak my emotions. In any case we ended up just sitting at the table in silence for a few minutes more. Watching the fireworks go off outside and hearing the younger generation laughing in excitement.

When Dad came back inside and found a seat at the table Bryne got up and went to find her husband Tarris. She and Dad struggled to get along in a different way from me and her. We all said they were too similar. Hardheaded and good natured but too quick to get angry. I think the constant comparisons also made my sister feel like she was trapped in some kind of generational empathy. She couldn’t be her own person without it being a shadow of Dad.

“I’m sorry for calling you out like that earlier.” Dad was back to his usual post dinner apologies. Maybe a little more sober or maybe a little more drunk. I don’t know if it mattered which but he always came back around for an apology after an outburst. It was a toss up whether it turned into another rambling rant or a shy admission of guilt.

“Don’t worry about it. The food was good and that’s what counts.”

“I know. Tamu Jua really knows how to make the flavors come out of that ham, doesn’t he? Lumi was lucky growing up with him as a dad.”

“I think she’d agree.”

“How’s Lin’s daughter doing anyway? She’s about Rhodiola’s age right?”

“Yeah. Frezy’s quiet but doing good as far as I know. A little older than Rwen. All the cousins are getting along alright so I think everything’s going well. Zori might get left out sometimes since she’s so much younger, but that’s kids.”

“Kids can be mean.”

“She just plays with Mom or Lochu when they leave her out though. There’s more than enough attention to go around for the granddaughter.”

“It reminds me of Saint Vinson’s Triumph.”

“I didn’t think you were that religious?”

“It’s not about the worship! It’s about the facts of history!”

“The real history?”

“Yes! Before Vinson was one of the Seven Saints she was a mortal. The story tells us as much with how even the mightiest of mountains must erode to time. Yield to the forces. I don’t know if I’d call it yielding to the divine, but I do agree with the idea.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And you know the story. Saint Vinson raising the highest peak higher to guide our ancestors here to this new home.”

“You’re talking about the exodus?” There were old legends that mixed folklore and church scriptures. It was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. As I remember it, Saint Vinson’s Triumph was tied to some kind of war and an exodus. Masses of people

from around the world migrating to our continent. The only real remnant of truth behind the tale is in how families today claim heritage to different saints from other continents.

“I’m talking about the war. I think Saint Vinson was a military genius. She not only assured victory but gave the common people hope. So much hope that we now build statues to honor the achievement. Sing prayers to remember the feeling.”

“I thought you hated unification.”

“The modern unification is a political maneuver. Capitalists selling a dream they know we already share. Saint Vinson’s Triumph was real unification. Real peace. Real warmth. Giving family and friends the ability to feel both is what Frithlic Nyun is all about. Not this obsession with reforestation and extraction.”

“Well, then I think you succeeded in hosting a good Frithlic Nyun.”

“Thank you Swefen.” The bright lights in the sky painted a picture of Dad’s words. An explosion of passion in a flurry of shapes and colors. The show here in Besniwod wasn’t as well planned as the fireworks in the city, but it made up for that lack of professional shine with 100 times the heart.

People here in the village have so little to spend but always find more to give. That spirit is hard to find in Veranum and really defines what the holiday and the season are all about. Without working together we wouldn’t survive, no matter how pretty the flowers.

Chapter 9

Comfortable Walls

The formula may slightly change and the variables can drastically shift, but the making of a good Frithlic Nyun always included fireworks and firecrackers. The loud pops and bangs echoing throughout villages and the city alike. The sky set ablaze in a glorious manifestation of Her flame. There's comfort in the usual gestures and familiar customs. A place to go back to where things make sense without needing to try. Natural growth from our own fuel.

Lumi and I were searching for that feeling early on in our Veranum lives. Feeling like we stuck out more than we did. Struggling to balance who we were in Besniwod with who we were in Veranum. During Frithlic Nyun those woes and worries could melt away for the week of celebration.

For some reason we couldn't make the trip back to Besniwod that particular year. Be it a blizzard or exams, there was a blockade on the tracks and we found ourselves alone in the city. There were ads all around for the big fireworks show they'd be putting on near where we lived. The city is so big and so rich, different districts and different quarters each hold their own spectacles.

Everywhere you walked there were posters and billboards up trying to convince people to come to their local event. The most central of which would have prestigious tickets and seating in a stadium near the top of the city. The ads made it look like you'd be able to see the fireworks and their reflection in the ocean. Something way over our budget and way out of our league.

So we went to the one at a large park near our home. We thought we should arrive early to get a good seat and we were more than wrong. By the time we stepped into the park there was a sea of people and a mountain of men.

“Lumi hold my hand!” I remember thinking it was such a big deal to reach out and grab her as we made our way through the crowd. The perfect excuse to let our fingers find that comfortable spot between each other. But we always felt something more than the comfort of that embrace.

“There’s so many people here!” Lumi shouted as a mass of bodies tried to break the chain of our arms. I could only pull her closer as the violence of the eternal movement made us need to stick closer and closer together.

There was no open space. The park was filled from wall to wall with citizens and visitors. Our second rate local show drew an impressive crowd. The manicured trees were the only real landmarks we could use. Their brittle branches seemingly horrified at the scene. An unfit species for the climate and yet they were so carefully cared for.

“They waste a lot of money on those trees I bet.” My small talk bordered on the political. A bad habit I picked up from Dad. It was fortunately the kind of critique most people agreed with, but you never really know. Especially with someone new. Especially with someone you want to be closer to. Especially with the person of your heart’s desire.

“I think it has something to do with reforestation.” Lumi’s answer echoed a challenging response. Everyone tricks themselves into thinking puppy dog love means both parties agree on everything. The transitive property of enjoying each other. I think something is true so she must too, otherwise why would we like each other.

“You think it’s worth the effort?”

“Well... it’s hard to say right now isn’t it? These things take a long time and I’m sure the world could always benefit from more trees!”

“Yeah but here?” More than a righteous environmental cause, the trees were also our ticket to a clearing in the park. Little did we know it was precisely because those brittle branches were blocking the best views. “I guess it works for the marketing. *Veranum City a springtime paradise.*”

My joke wasn’t met with any laughter. We just kind of let the topic hang there as we found a comfortable spot behind one of those trees in the park.

“It should be starting soon.”

“Wow! Look!”

There was a forest fire spilling into the stars. A path for Saint Vinson and Her followers to follow as we made our way home for Frithlic Nyun. We could only make out the most spectacular of the bits of fireworks between the brittle branches. But it was enough. It was more than enough.

Any cynical thought about wasted resources and bloated budgets were lost in that moment. Real magic in the atmosphere. Answered prayers floating up from Her altar. The dark stage of the night sky allowed for all the room in the world to perform. And perform those lights ever did. There was a story being told in every color and each light.

The Seven Saints all had a chance to shine with their signature stars illuminating everyone’s faces in the crowded park. You could tell who among us still held on to their heritage. Loud yells and hollers when specific saints were crowned. The individual differences mattered less and less as the show went on and it built up to a finale unlike anything Lumi and I had ever seen.

Untouchable reverence above all. Inconceivable awe in the light of our faith for Saint Vinson. Her flame becoming a fleeting reality outside the church in the sky. Everyone on the continent was worthy of Her protection. We were saved by Her grace. She was our savior.

Veranum made sure everyone in the city could feel the emotion behind Saint Vinson's Triumph with these firework shows. The highest mountain on the continent and the most sacred of the Seven Saints. There were no witnesses alive who would be able to say otherwise.

Lumi and I could only exchange the occasional gaping maw as the lights danced up and down the avenues of manicured trees and perfect ponds. Besniwod could never afford such an organized and extravagant performance. We would just light off firecrackers and fireworks at random in the backyard at best. That was enough for us.

I'll never forget that moment though. I'll never forget it. We were completely and totally in awe against the distant hints of another long twilight day. And we could only see a fraction of what was meant to be the show. Our cramped view between the brittle branches was more impressive than either of us were prepared for.

Our heads were filled with visions beyond our dreams and wilder than our imaginations. Heads drifting along with the dramatics of the music and the direction of the flowers in the sky. All it took was another shared rush of emotions for our hands to meet in the air. Fingers interlocked in that most comfortable and natural of ways. It all felt perfect and natural. We were home as long as we were together.

"Hey Lumi?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's move in together."

“Are you sure?”

“We already go back to Besniwod together all the time, let’s start looking for our own place.”

“That sounds nice.”

Maybe it was the weather. Maybe it was the fireworks. More probably it was how much we felt guilty about not making it home for the holiday. From that spark a new passion was ignited and we rushed to find an affordable apartment somewhere close to the park with our cherished memory.

In the end we settled for something much farther away on one of the lower levels of the climbing stone walls. The whole area was slightly rundown and worn. Clearly a forgotten section for the city government. But it was cheap.

We more than made up for the lack of nice amenities with our growing love. We worked hard to build the life we wanted. The life we have now. But it wasn’t always easy. It was actually often hard. And sometimes the foundation felt like it would crack. A catastrophe with enough intensity to bring down the walls of Veranum.

The first of which was definitely the time money became an obstacle we couldn’t overcome. When we missed a year coming home to Besniwod for no good reason other than not having gainful employment and barely being able to make rent. It wasn’t the first time me and Lumi couldn’t afford the trip, but it was the first time it was an issue for us. We were at an age where it was embarrassing to lack the funds. Everyone could see we didn’t have our life together enough and that was why we weren’t with the family.

The whole incident left a lasting impression on my mind. Until that moment we thought we were the kind of couple that would never fight. Always happy to just be together. But reality is messier.

"Lumi... I couldn't get any tickets."

"Why not?"

"We don't have the money."

"So you just gave up like that!"

"I didn't give up!"

"You always give up!"

"What do you mean?"

"Every time there's even a slight obstacle you just give up." Lumi started crying as we began lashing out at each other. Then everything gets fuzzier as I try to remember the details. Maybe it's the opposite. I'm trying so hard to forget this that it's just harder to remember.

"That's not true."

"I've never gone so long without seeing my family. I'm still here for you. I'm here for *you*! But why do I feel like you're not here for *me*?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Swefen. Do you really love me?"

"Of course I love you."

"Words are cheap and I'm not a whore."

"What's wrong with you!" Outbursts lead to outbursts and before long neither of us really knew why we were angry anymore. It was an uncontrollable rage as we prepared another simple dinner alone together. Our families would be setting the big tables as guests arrived and music played and we were stuck with nothing but a limited imitation.

"Shut up! I don't want to see you right now!"

She slammed the door and left me dumbstruck as the pot on the stove began boiling over. That was our first big fight but far from the last. It set the mood for the holiday that year. We would reluctantly spend hours together as the worst of our thoughts invaded every bite of every cheap meal. We didn't even leave the apartment to see the fireworks. At least that year.

I don't think we ever really made up or came to an agreement. It just stayed in the air as an unresolved issue. A more charitable reading would be that we came to a silent understanding. I guess the truth is that I'll never really know. And it's probably more on me. My family. We all try to avoid resolving those kinds of issues. A family trait or a fault in our personalities, it's who we were. Who I am.

Even when these memories haunt me as hellish nightmares, I look back and am grateful for the time together. Seeing each other at our worst and still then finding each other more than attractive. Knowing that she was the one for me and I was the one for her. Perfect halves to make a whole.

I think all couples are like that though. Life is never perfect or always happy. It's about overcoming these things and growing stronger together. Appreciating flaws while working to improve each other and ourselves. Finding forgiveness in our heart even when it's hard to forgive yourself.

In my heart of hearts I understand this. Yet I still find myself haunted by those thoughts. A dark cloud in my dreams – *Did we ever actually get over that fight?* But that's just me overthinking everything again.

If there were ever any doubt, we made up for it all years later. Long since finding a comfortable life behind the walls of the city, we took Rwen and Zori to see impressive firework shows year after year. What finally convinced me those darker thoughts were

nothing more than fleeting nightmares was when I finally got tickets to the main event at the top of Veranum.

“We can see the ocean from here!” Zori was excited enough for both herself and her brother. Rwen was impressed with the view, but he was at the age where he started hiding his emotions.

“Wait until you see how the water reflects the fireworks!” I remember talking about the show for months leading up to the event. The kids had already been to many shows in the local park near our home, but after longer quarantines and missing another trip back to Besniwod, last year we decided to splurge on tickets to the biggest spectacle of them all.

“It’s so much better than the view from my window!” Zori was still taking in the incredible sights from the top of the city’s walls. And she had good reason to. It was an incredible view. We were in good seats looking across the strait to that infinite world beyond.

“The university on the other side is just across the water right?” Rwen finally spoke up as he focused his eyes on the horizon. From a young age he was fixated on finding a way to experience life across the strait. Going further and further away from our home, but I guess he was following my example.

“Something like that, but you won’t be able to see it from here.” I rubbed Rwen’s arm and smiled deeply. His dreams had somewhat dimmed ever since he was held back, but it was one of the things that really kept him inspired. His ambitions were still vague, but as long as it involved crossing that water he would do anything. University and a degree were simply the most pragmatic motivations for a boy his age.

After waiting a bit too long and having every seat in the stadium fill up, the show finally started. And when I saw the show started, I mean *the show started*. After all these

years Lumi and I had never seen the most fantastic fireworks in person. We always found an excuse not to go or couldn't think of a good reason to justify the price.

The flowers bloomed and the seasons shifted as every image in the sky carefully painted a perfect picture in the ocean below. The familiar saints danced in time to the music with accents meeting the sound of firecrackers.

When the image of our savior and Her flame, Saint Vinson, walked across the dark canvas above our heads I nearly cried. Only saved by reaching out and finding Lumi's hand. The familiar feel of every finger as they slid into place between each other. And then we cried together as we embraced.

"Mommy! Daddy! What's wrong!" Zori was the first to notice our tears as the spectacle continued to unfold.

"Don't worry Zori. These are happy tears!" I said with a smile to my confused daughter, but she seemed to understand it wasn't her place to understand. Rwen rolled his eyes as a way of showing us he understood how strongly our romantic desires lingered in the air.

"I love you Lumi."

"I love you Swefen."

Zori smiled at us with a grin from cheek to cheek and I pulled her over to look up at the sky together. The tears quickly stopped and we took in the rest of the show with its due awe and bountiful respect. I didn't let go of Lumi's hand until we were back home.

Chapter 10

Peaceful Nyun

Those hours of sleep as black as night. The dread and the dreams shaking off the stress of the holiday with images lost to my own mind. The grand display of fireworks from the city quickly outdone by the majestic visions visiting me in my bed.

As the blankets turned to fields of snow and the room expanded to fill the continent, I found myself on top of Mount Vinson. Face to face with Her glory. Ready to light the fuse as the familiar sound of Uncle Umbali filled the sky. The numbers fell down like snow as Saint Vinson herself guided my hands and calmed my voice.

Her spiders were close in the shadows. The crawling sensation of Her pet gently amassing an army shifted the tone to a more of a panic. Bikeshi may be benevolent but an entire horde of spiders. Even if the tales were true, seeing it in the flesh was almost incomprehensible.

“Be not afraid my child.” Bikeshi spoke for his master. The sound of crystal chords singing across the worries in my shaking limbs. The biting cold coming for me as I looked up for Her guidance once more. “We will ever love thee.”

The strange cocktail of stress and nightmares shifted my body in bed. I must have still been sick. I was more annoyed than anything as I rolled over and knew I needed to deal with the reality of waking up again. My life with the family in Besniwod. The kids were sleeping in that same nest at the foot of the bed. Lumi was by my side fast asleep and not nearly looking ready to open her eyes.

There were mystical creatures involved with the Seven Saints. Giant furry beasts, flying hooved animals, handsome and slender serpents. The list of wild combinations could

go on and on. Shifting from one saint to the next, one family to the next, one holiday to the next.

For the followers of Saint Vinson none were more significant than Her pet crystal spider, Bikeshi. She was often depicted with the spider friend crawling around her robes or doing her bidding with humans. Her pet held a special place with our people, often finding his way onto our decorations and usually cited as the inspiration for putting a crystal spider atop the seasonal trees.

Bikeshi was also seen as a big part of Frithlic Nyun. There were always stories about how good children were rewarded for their good deeds throughout the year. The exact details could be a little fuzzy, but our village settled into a superstitious belief about little spiders hiding in the shadows.

My parents would say they were waiting to punish any naughty boys and girls. When I was a kid the thought terrified me and plagued my nightmares. I would have trouble sleeping thinking they were under my bed! Double that up with the more generalized excitement of the holiday and it was a recipe for strange visions.

Being back home after so long away must have brought those memories into focus. Soaking in my surroundings. My old room. My wife. My kids. We were using the old traditions to raise a new generation. Even if I sometimes felt lost on the scale, I knew it was better to appreciate that thought. The way we were happy together.

“Are you awake?” My whispers to Lumi were met with a snore. Looking down to the nest I saw Rwen breaking down the barriers between siblings and holding on tight to Zori. They were so cute together, keeping each other warm. Sharing the Frithlic Nyun spirit.

I don’t know why or when I realized, but it had been years and years since I was the first one awake. As a kid that morning was a game. All of us know the others were already

awake, but we didn't dare make the first move. Anxiously waiting in bed, hoping one of the other siblings would wake up Mom and Dad.

As an adult and a father I can see the other side. It's nice having the kids keep themselves in bed for a while longer. More often than not there's a special need to sleep off the celebration of the night before just a little more.

But as a kid it's just raw tension. Not wanting to be the first one to make a move. Break the vow of silence. Sound the alarm and officially start the next day of Frithlic Nyun. And what a day it would be.

The tree in the living room. A mountain of gifts hiding under the branches. As kids it was a whole ordeal where we'd go out into the woods and find the perfect tree in the weeks leading up to the holiday. None of us knew at the time, but being able to just get a local one was a big deal. A part of our way to promote and celebrate a self-sufficient Besniwod.

Traditionally the only tree in Besniwod was the First Tree in the central square. An eternal offering to Saint Vinson and how we welcomed any guests from afar. Although the history was different there.

The First Tree was unique. It was the foundation of the village and the proof of the concept that sparked further reforestation. A living thing that could not only withstand, but thrive within the elements of our home. A symbol of our pride and an extravagant display of our faith.

Over the years some of the branches had withered and we began replacing the frozen bits with crystal leaves and branches. These days it's hard to say if it was more crystal and ice or more wood and fuel.

For Frithlic Nyun the First Tree would then be the ultimate example of the colors and lights of the holiday. Bits of tinsel and strings of lights rung up around and around our village's oldest living friend. Crowned with Bikeshi, completing the image of his web and pointing toward Saint Vinson's church on the far side of the square.

Her flame, eternally bright and ever guiding, could be seen from atop the First Tree. From the ground the view was obscured by all the market tents and the little shops selling goods and wares from near and far. But we knew. We knew what Bikeshi saw. Her messenger and Her pet. Our friend from now until forever.

So when people could finally bring a tree into their home, we of course attempted to copy the image of the First Tree. Replacing the thin strips of silver and crystal icicles with threads from our local furs. Everyone wanted a crystal spider to put at the very top, but such an ornate decoration wasn't always easy to find. New symbols grew to substitute the rarer materials, but in the end all that mattered was knowing what it meant.

Growing up we cared less about the exactness of the decorations anyway. What really caught and kept our attention were the gifts. Different families would open presents in different ways. Everything from opening them all after the feast while setting off fireworks to making it a longer exchange throughout the week between friends and relatives.

How we did it in my house growing up, and by extension how Rwen and Zori were now used to celebrating Frithlic Nyun was to wait for the morning. There were no generalized traditions about what would be a gift for everyone. You were meant to think about specific items everyone wanted.

The living room became a stage for that show. Looking over the carefully wrapped presents. My family's tradition built up a strong sense of tension. From both sides.

Receiving a new gift and seeing how much everyone cared about you. Giving something specifically special to those closest to you and finally seeing it pay off.

At least that was how my family – *how the Kumris* – how we thought of the morning. My sisters and I all quickly learned that it all came across as a bit slow and definitely unnecessary to other families.

Lumi's family and many other villagers were used to putting much less emphasis on the actual gift and decorating the perfect tree at home. The act of giving was the important bit. Over the years that settled into children rushing around neighbors and relatives alike asking for little red envelopes. After giving thanks and saying the proper well wishes they could open it up and be happy with a few pieces of money waiting inside.

In both cases there was more than enough excitement in the morning air. In those moments of twilight before the day really began. Thinking through it all helped me relax back into this reality. Looking forward to seeing Zori really experience it all for the first time in her life. Watching Rwen melt into a more comfortable spirit. Holding Lumi's hand in that comforting gesture only we could truly appreciate.

"Daddy..." Zori's soft voice peaked out from the nest. "Daddy... is it okay to wake up?"

"Yes Zori! It's almost time to get up. Maybe we should let the others sleep just a little more though."

"Okay..."

"Swefen..." It was Lumi's turn to show signs of waking up. She looked at me with half awake eyes and pointed towards our daughter before looking at the door. "It's late enough."

"Alright."

“It’s time to open presents!” Zori’s voice raised five pitches higher as she leaped from under the blankets and violently shook her brother awake.

“What’s going on!”

“Rwen! It’s time! It’s here! Frithlic Nyun!”

“What?”

“Rwen don’t be silly!” With another quick hop and a second skipped beat, Zori was out the door and down the stairs, running down the hall and into the living room. Breakfast donuts were already out and the room was already filled from wall to wall with gifts. The Frithlic Nyun tree made the transformation from simple decoration into a set piece for the main event. For a kid it is all magical. Knowing the tricks of the trade as an adult, it’s still magical.

Every variation of the Frithlic Nyun story included a visit from Saint Vinson. She offered all of us a silent prayer, carefully folding the syllables into an ornate envelope. The depictions and manifestation of that angelic visit could shift and change, but the idea of receiving a saintly gift always remained.

“Saint Vinson really came!” The whole house could hear Zori and knew it was officially time to wake up. Crawling from their corner of a bed or out of nests bundled in blankets, another Frithlic Nyun celebration began.

We try to hide it, but adults play the same game. Seeing who will get up first and who is allowed to move around the house. With us visiting from Veranum we were mixing households across in-laws that rarely met. No one was completely sure of what to expect and the space saved for polite gestures was the perfect fuel for that game.

One thing I know most of them already knew was how the Kumris go about that morning celebration. Weighing heavily in favor of making the whole of opening gifts into a

spectacle in its own right. Mom was especially concerned in making sure the gifts were handed out and opened one by one.

We would take turns watching the receiver as they held the box, the bag, or the envelope. Anticipation in our eyes as we waited to see the joy across their faces. There was something fun in seeing the different ways people went about opening gifts. Those who tore through the wrapping paper to quickly get at what's inside. Those who carefully removed each layer, folding it up into a proper pile before taking a good look of the surprise inside.

What followed was ideally a shared smile or at worst an understanding of the humor in a joke. As Lumi and my sister's husbands will quickly complain though, it can become rather uneasy if you get a gift you don't really want. How I see it and how I think my family always wanted to see it was allowing those moments the space to grow to know and understand each other a little more. Maybe there were a few seconds of regret or misguided intentions, but in the end we would have a clearer picture of how we saw each other.

For Rwen and Zori it didn't really matter how we celebrated. As long as they got something they were happy. They were used to the back and forth between gifts and envelopes growing up with me and Lumi as parents.

The room was soon crowded and my mind drifted away as the fog of memories clouded my mind. It wasn't always this easy or this nice. We learned the hard way how to meet those expectations, growing to appreciate what both cherished.

The last time Rwen was in Besniwod he was still young enough to fully believe all the old legends. He would be the one laughing and yelling with his cousins as we held them back. Respecting Mom's rules as they were handed specific gifts one at a time. He

was too old to let himself show those same emotions, but I could tell he was reliving the memory through Zori's reactions.

Little Zori could still honestly believe Saint Vinson visited every home on the continent. Answering specific prayers and following every household's specific traditions. Logistics be damned if there's a wish to be found beyond one's imagination.

"A penguin book with our names in it!" Zori shouted as she opened the latest present. It was obviously from Mom but this was a different twist on her usual gift. She must have figured out a way to make a custom children's book and had someone write a full story for Zori.

"Yes and if you look at the pictures we're all there! Just as penguins! Can you tell who is who?"

"Grandma Kumri! Grandpa Kumri! Uncle Umbali! Lumi!" I looked over at my mother and father-in-law, Tamu and Lochu Jua, wondering who exactly Mom included. They seemed content with however the morning unfolded. Less concerned with the performance than the happiness it spread. Seeing their peaceful faces, I let my guard down and listened to Zori ramble on about how the penguin family saved that year's Frithlic Nyun.

"Thank you Bryne." Rwen was a little confused by his gift but it meant a lot to my second sister.

"Those are some of Grandpa's seeds from the first forest generation."

"Wow!" Dad was much more surprised at the meaning behind the gift than my son. "How'd you get that?"

"They were in one of the tents at the market! I thought it might be a good thing for a school project. Stand out in your applications for university."

“Oh... that’s actually pretty cool!” Rwen lit up as he realized how the seeds could be useful and we all had a laugh at the realization.

“Grandma Kumri? Can penguins ride sleds with dogs?” Zori asked a strange question that further took away any need for Rwen to show us his awkward politeness.

“I don’t see why not?”

“The kids at school will never believe me! What kind of dogs? Auntie Mekoti can Haimarik pull a sled with penguins?” Haimarik was Mekoti’s old dog who definitely was not well enough to pull a sled full of penguins. But we were all curious to hear how my oldest sister would respond.

“Zori! Of course Haimarik would pull that sled. Do you want to go visit him and try it out?”

“...No” Zori’s simple answer filled the atmosphere with the honesty only a child can provide. Mekoti let it off with a laugh as the rest of the gifts took their turn finding curious hands and open arms. The signature pace of a Frithlic Nyun morning at the Kumris – at home.

When we were finally finished opening the gifts and the floor was a mess of packaging and wrapping, I found my little sister Nali in the kitchen as I sifted through some of the mess. She was looking through the book about the penguin family Mom had given to Zori. Naturally, I was a bit curious what drew her to the rather simple children’s story.

“I didn’t take that to be in your reading range.”

“Oh Swefen... I’ll read anything you know that.”

“Then I guess the question is why are you reading my daughter’s book!” Nali relaxed her face into another smile as she motioned to the seat next to her at the table. I tossed

the bits of paper and boxes into its proper bin and found myself drawn into another conversation.

“It reminds me of how I met Tamir.” I failed to see the connection between a penguin family and her husband, but I admittedly didn’t really know how they fell in love. I didn’t like to give people that kind of pressure. Feeling like they needed to provide a reason for why they were with someone. That they were together was enough of a reason for me.

“How did you meet Tamir?”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever asked?” Nali rolled her eyes. She knew how her brother could be careless in how he was caring. Something so important to her life that I was willing to take it in stride. Not a common trait in our family. “Yeah, yeah. I know. So tell me the story.”

“Well you know how he used to be stationed in Nistilon further inland?”

“No, but okay.”

“Come on Swefen! Do you pay attention to anything I say...”

“I do! I just didn’t really care about what Tamir did or where he was.”

“Okay fine...” I shifted in my seat as Nali rolled her eyes round and round. I put on a reassuring posture and got ready to pay full attention to the tale. Maybe I should have asked sooner. Maybe she told everyone before and I didn’t listen. It didn’t really matter as long as I was ready to listen in that moment. “So he was stationed in Nistilon at the penguin sanctuary. You know the one Mom loves to visit but we only saw like once every five years?”

“Of course!” Mom was famous for her love of our local birds. What surprised me more was the use of the word stationed. I knew Tamir worked or at least had worked with the local government, but I seemed to have forgot exactly what that entailed.

“He was working on some kind of guard duty where they were surveying for new plots where reforestation was possible. The sanctuary was already set up as a base so they often house officers and other officials there. Especially if they aren’t local.” Nali had a way of reading my thoughts even when I tried to hide them. We were like that with each other. Making up for the games of guilt and judgment that were more prevalent among our siblings and our parents.

“So he was feeding penguins or something I take it.”

“He was actually in charge of the local radio comms!” I had no idea what that meant but neither of them wanted to go down the road of explaining a mundane job to someone who didn’t care or understand.

“Right so he was stuck in Nistilon and you were stuck in Besniwod and then somehow penguins get involved? Or is it just because he was stationed at the sanctuary?”

“Well...” Nali laughed as she thought about the way I phrased the question. So pointed yet open to different interpretations. “I ended up getting an annual pass as an excuse to visit more often. It was easy to convince Mom it was a good idea and me and Tamir never let the tickets go to waste. We started making up stories about the penguins. Dramatic love triangles about who was dating who and other silly things.”

“That’s only half the story though isn’t it? I mean that’s how you started seeing each other, not how you met.”

“I guess you’re right... how we met isn’t nearly as fun. Just a kind of word down the grapevine thing. Gossip among friends as we heard second and third hand how we both thought the other was cute. That kind of thing.”

I looked down at the penguin book in her hands and pointed toward the penguin Mom included for Rhodiola. “Looks like yours made it in too at least.”

“You’re not wrong!” She laughed as we flipped through the pages together. The family sledding on their stomachs as they performed penguin versions of our favorite traditions. They even had their own tree with a crystal penguin at the top.

Nali and I were the same as our sisters in that way. Silently commiserating in curled lips as Dad slipped into another political rant. Sharing a concerning glance as Mom thought about how much she missed her mother, my Mémère – how much she missed her mom. Where I think we differed was in feeling comfortable not living up to whatever invented expectations may be waiting in the open air.

“Do you still visit the sanctuary?”

“I haven’t been since Tamir moved back here. We were going to take Rhodiola there but I guess I’ve fallen into the same trap our parents did. The years just pass by too quickly.”

“Now you’re sounding old like them.” We shared another laugh as we reached the end of the book and stared at its back cover. There was a picture of Mom and Dad holding a Zori as a small baby. The last time she visited Besniwod. A time she can’t remember.

“You’d think Tamir was rugged and wild. Being stationed at an outskirt outpost like that.” Nali wasn’t done reminiscing and I wasn’t one to stop her words. I listened with honest curiosity as she spilled her heart and exposed her soul. “But he’s as pure as Her flame. I tricked him into using the radio to send a message from the sanctuary after I made it home. He would interrupt the nightly broadcast – that stupid show Bryne listened to all the time – to tell me he loved me. I would whisper it back and I know he heard it. Even just as a prayer... I know he felt it.” We sat there in silence for a while as Nali let her emotions wear down her face. “I just love falling in love so much.”

I got up and hugged my sister and thanked her for sharing the moment. She would have told everyone and anyone. The simple act of bringing up the memory was enough to bring out the tears of joy. The definitive decision that defined the rest of her life. That brought her her daughter Rhodiola and made every day better than the last.

“We were thinking about taking Zori to the penguin sanctuary, but I don’t know if we have the time.”

“You should go!”

“Yeah you’re right.”

Chapter 11

Whispered Words

“Did you get me a gift?” One of the most unfortunate questions I asked Lumi. We were still young and lost in the city. Learning to live with each other. Looking past the faults and filling the gaps with our love.

“A gift?” It was the first time we celebrated Frithlic Nyun together. She wasn’t familiar with the theatrical version of gift giving practiced in the morning at the Kumris. The expectation of a room filled with presents under a decorated tree.

All Lumi wanted was a little red envelope and a nice dinner. The meal was more of the gift for her. Finding a way to capture the taste of a feast. Flavors from home somehow, somewhere in Veranum.

“For Frithlic Nyun!”

“Oh are we doing that?”

“Well, I would think so.”

“My family doesn’t make a big deal out of gifts like that. We usually just do the red envelope thing.”

“What?” I didn’t know any better back then. I still lived in a world where what I thought was normal was normal for everyone. At the very least for people in Besniwod. The idea that my family could differ so drastically from that of our neighbors wasn’t something that entered my head.

“Yeah, don’t most people in Besniwod do it that way?”

“Not my family. Giving gifts is practically the whole point of the holiday!”

“That’s weird.”

“You’re weird.” Our sarcastic cute insults were dangling dangerously on the side of misunderstanding. I can now safely admit how I was hurt by her words. I wanted to lash out and snap back. But I wanted to be with Lumi even more.

“It might be silly to you, but it’s an important part of Frithlic Nyun for me and my family. And I got you something you know. There’s a box over there under the tree.” We had a small tree that could fit under our chairs. A simple way of adding some flavors from home while we spent the holiday far away from home.

“Oh... Thank you.” I was the wrong kind of speechless when her reaction wasn’t what I wanted. I spent months thinking of the perfect gift and wrapped it up tight a few weeks before the holiday. A crystal snowball in a clear box with both our names engraved on the side. Definitely a bit overboard, but I thought she’d find it beautiful and meaningful.

“I know it’s a bit much...” Lumi quickly adjusted her reaction when she saw how much it meant to me. She shifted gears to fully embrace my version of holiday celebrations and happiness. At least on the surface. Enough to show me she cared. Truly cared.

“I love it Swefen! Thank you for thinking so much of me... It’s just... I didn’t get you anything so I don’t know how to feel.”

“Oh... don’t worry about it. I don’t really like getting gifts anyway so it’s no big deal.”

“I did get you this though!” Lumi raised up a little red envelope with some traditional well wishes written on the side. It meant a little less to me than a well thought out gift so my reaction was also underwhelming. “You don’t like red envelopes? Didn’t you love getting them as a kid!”

We slowly realized how we were both trying so hard to make each other happy. It was the perfect lesson in what it meant to live together. That was one of the things we

loved about each other. Always learning more about where we were from and who we were. What was important to our families – to us.

Years later when we were planning to have kids, we decided early on that we would help them experience those tastes of where we were from. Learn about where they were from. But that realization came at a cost. We couldn't simply pretend to understand and silently hold our grievances. The unmet expectations were growing from whispered regrets into mountains of mourning.

At that time we were still living in the cheap apartment in a rundown part of the city. Crumbling stones with no view of the ocean. Just a massive wall all the way up to the central spires. Every moment felt more unsure than the next as our life was left in the balance. Anything could have tipped the scales in either direction.

Tumbling into the sea or being squashed by the city walls. Neither option left room for much of a future. For us. We never really talked about it, but we could feel it. We knew that we could find a way to call Veranum home. A new home. But the draw of something simpler was impossible to deny.

Settling into a life back in Besniwod. Not having to struggle to fit in for less than half the life we once knew. Or so it was taboo until the scales were too heavy to bear. The straw or the pea or the elephant or the curse. It didn't matter how we worded it, we needed to discuss the future.

"I don't know if we're ready." Honest desire set against another meal getting cold. We lacked the energy during that period to do anything more than the bare minimum. The weight of infinity always knocking on our door.

We had already been together longer than most any other couple we knew. We were also one of the last to move on to the next stage of life. Drifting between promises and wondering if all the uncertainty was worth falling in love.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think it would be good to raise kids here?”

“It’d be hard to find somewhere with a better education system.”

“But they won’t really know about Besniwod.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I think it is.”

“Well, we’ll visit fairly often.”

“It’ll never be the same for them.”

“We can try though!”

“It won’t be enough.”

“So are you saying we should just go back?”

“Would you let us?”

“...I don’t know.”

“So no we won’t.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Then let’s move back to Besniwod.”

“No...”

“See... you’ll say any lie you think I want to hear!”

“That’s not fair! You’re not listening to what I’m saying!”

“So we can move back? I think there’s a house near my parents’ place that we could buy.”

“Lumi...”

“So it was a lie again.”

“You don’t think it’d be better here?”

“All I want is for us to have a normal life together. We’re struggling to have that. What should I expect from you?”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“You always make excuses. It’s so hard to talk with you!”

“Lumi... I love you.”

“Then help me with our life.”

The discussion elevated to tears and we ended the night in a rash of angry exchanges that never found their resolution. The truth of our regrets only settling deeper into nightmares. We had both changed. It was hard to say what either of us wanted. Or really it was hard for me to say what I wanted.

I was lost back then. It took far too long for me to realize how much it was hurting not just me, but Lumi as well. I remember seeing that only at my most desperate. After one of those frequent fights. Curses flying from our lips. I slammed the door on the way out and just started walking through the city streets.

It was cold and it was raining. I didn’t care. My jacket was still at home and Lumi would surely be angry at me for catching a cold. I didn’t care. I found myself on the outermost wall of Veranum looking out to the sea. Across the strait. It was a long drop to the water. Waves crashing in a steady rhythm guarding that realm beyond. I didn’t care.

And then it hit me. I was shivering in the cold as the rain froze my spine. My selfish anger driving me to the point of insanity and back again. I walked home with the sniffles

and Lumi refused to open the door. I slept at our friend Agum's place. A sympathetic soul from Besniwod.

We were both sorry when the rain broke and we found each other again. Our hands once again finding the space between the fingers where they were most comfortable. The reason why we fell in love and stayed together. The indecision poisoning everything else was a problem for us to solve together.

When Rwen was born the bits of that lingering doubt instantly disappeared. Zori only heightened the sensation. Every time we see them happy about either gifts under the tree or another red envelope from a relative, we are both happy.

We eventually came to terms with creating a new life for both of us and our family in Veranum. We could both agree that no matter how or no matter when, we wanted the kids to be able to appreciate a taste of where our family is from. Where they are from.

"Dad!" Rwen would call me into his room a few months before Frithlic Nyun. "Are these enough?" He had gotten out and ordered bundles of red envelopes for me and Lumi to send back home. We were all more eager to keep things normal during the first year of quarantine.

"It's more than enough Rwen. Don't forget to act happy when Mom gives you one though!" I rubbed him on his head and we laughed as all the envelopes were put into a bag. Stuffing and shipping them would be a Frithlic Nyun miracle that me and Lumi would need to work on in our own time.

"Hey Dad!" Rwen called me back into his room and pulled out a stuffed snowball with Zori's name written on it. "I got this too... Do you think Zori will like it?"

"She'll love it, don't worry son." Rwen cared so much about his sister even if he teased her. Zori was still too young to care one way or the other about any gift, but we

would appreciate the thought. Maybe that's the Kumri in me thinking about how it looks and feels to the audience but I don't care. It would make us all happy and that's what's important.

"We're still on for Sunday barbecue with Agum right?" Lumi yelled from the kitchen as she sorted through the schedule for that week's meals.

"Of course!" I winked at Rwen as I turned around and moved to help her sort through our supplies. Among the groceries were the government issued rations. Some new initiative meant to ease the pains of quarantine times. "I saw they're having a special this weekend so I hope you're extra hungry!"

Our solution to the woes of mismatched expectations was living in how Rwen thought the holiday was supposed to be prepared. Something for both traditions. As long as an effort was made the intention would be appreciated.

In the end, I'm sure Rwen and Zori both feel a stronger connection to Veranum than they ever will for Besniwod. That's a part of life. If it weren't we couldn't tell them stories about how half their heritage is from Saint Denali and the other half from Saint Himavan.

Chapter 12

Sunday Barbecue

Agum Gernan was one of our closest friends in Veranum. A year older than us and much more bold than us, he helped us figure out the city when we first arrived. Not only did he already have a map of the streets in his head, he had a unique appreciation for the troubles we would have coming from Besniwod.

If things were different and we had just met in the village it's unlikely we would have been friends. We lacked similar interests and didn't have much if anything in common. Other than being from Besniwod. And that was enough.

That's how it goes when you're away from home. Simply learning that the person you're talking to is from where you're from is enough to become fast friends. There's this strong unspoken obligation to help each other out. Maybe because we know the city won't.

Agum was blunt and brash but genuine in his desires. He was also one of the first people to really push me and Lumi to get together. He saw early on how we looked at each other and wanted to see that spark ignite a long lasting love.

And so he did just that. Helping us find a routine that involved each other and giving us the space we needed to build a relationship. The longest standing one was Sunday barbecue. A nice way to blow off some steam before another week of studies at the local university began.

I don't think we ever thanked him for all this. The comfort of a sympathetic soul to ease the transition into city life. I bet he was happy to have people to share it all with too. It was rare to meet others like us from the village. Much less people around the same age who were at least at the same stage of life.

“How much did it cost?” Agum would always start making conversation with the owner. The conversation didn’t have a clear beginning or end. Subjects were just picked up and dropped off whenever they felt like it.

“Only all my savings!” Endle Tavas was his name. He was a middle aged man who moved to Veranum from Nistilon. He would make jokes with us. Something he started to help us get over our hesitation when we first entered as doe-eyed customers confused about what to order.

It was only a matter of weeks until we were regulars who would have seats saved. We went there every Sunday for nearly decades. The order could shift but there were always the staples. A nice plate of meats and a bottle of spirits or two.

We ended up becoming good friends with Endle. He originally came to the city hoping to find work across the strait. When that didn’t pan out he opened the restaurant and the rest was history.

“Endle you’re a bold one! But the good cuts and stronger spirits are worth it right!”

“If I were your age I’d say it’s more the women who are worth it.”

“Amen to that brother!” Villagers who moved to the city would always feel nostalgic for home. We could all understand the benefits of the city, but people from there would struggle to appreciate what we missed from home.

“So it’ll be your usual order?”

“Put some extra spice on the beef and pickled cabbage today.”

“Coming right up!” Endle would leave to prepare the food himself while we waited with a half empty bottle. When we were in a particularly good mood it wouldn’t be strange to order a bit more and stretch the third bottle late into the night.

"I thought you didn't really like spicy food Agum?" Lumi would ask the obvious question as I struggled to feel like I could follow the interaction.

"Tonight's a special Sunday barbecue so it'll be fine."

"What's so special about tonight?"

"We're all here together again! That's special enough!" Agum would use the same line every week and put a twist on the order. I think he wanted to help introduce new flavors to our palette. It worked but it did come across as a little forced.

"Come on Agum... That joke is never funny. Swefen tell him how lame it sounds."

"Yeah it is a little lame."

"Ah... Don't bust my balls like that!"

Agum always had a passion for helping others. He could be crass and drank more than his fair share, but his heart was always in the right place. I think what it took for me to really notice just how much he cared was the first time I was dangerously ill in Veranum. I could barely move and felt bad for canceling the Sunday barbecue plans.

Lumi was on her way to make sure I was okay while Agum went out of his way to make sure I had a traditional meal. He even found some way to source the ingredients needed for our more traditional remedies.

While my fever ran high and the exact details of that time have been lost in the fog of the sickness, I'll never forget it. That was the first time me and Lumi spent the night together. She was so worried for my health that she didn't want me to be alone. She stayed by my side and held my hand as I tossed and turned and grunted and groaned.

"Swefen! What are you doing on the floor?" She found me on the floor when I didn't show up at our usual meeting place. It wasn't like me to be late for Sunday barbecue. The

holes in my memory begin to paint a strange picture of the events. I was blacking out and drifting in and out of consciousness.

“...ugh...”

“Swefen can you hear me?”

“...uurrrrrggh...”

“Swefen!”

It's not hard to see how I could have passed out somewhere dangerous in an unbelievably uncomfortable position. In my dreams of the moment I was most concerned with any trouble I was causing Lumi. I was trying to impress this girl. Shyly flirting with her and remaining clueless to her reciprocation.

“I'm.... fiiiiine....”

“What did you do with Agum last night?” While retelling the story it may seem like an odd leap to make, it made perfect sense at the time. Agum was the older friend showing us how to live a real life. He was so much wilder than either of us, taking us out to parties and bars and waking up with worse and worse hangovers.

She looked over me and was satisfied this wasn't a case of self inflicted agony. She carried me over to a more comfortable spot than the hard surface of the floor. My bed or some kind of chair? All I remember were the blankets piling up and bundling up like the nests I used to make with my sisters during Frithlic Nyun.

Sometime after that she spoke with Agum and he went out to find medicine and a meal we could share in my cramped studio one room. She truly cared for me and made me some tea and a simple soup while we waited for our friend.

Agum returned with meats and medicine and Lumi prepared a mini feast. Although I could barely eat it was just the right treatment. I've never been as sick as that day. I may

feel the odd cough and even a cold, but it's always manageable and usually only lasts until supper.

"Did you give Swefen something strange to eat... or drink?"

"Nothing Lumi! He didn't even go out with me last night so don't blame this on me!"

"I don't believe you."

"I'd cover for my bro, but not when he looks like this!"

"Whatever."

"Aye aye captain."

"Agum shut it."

"Yes *ma'am!*"

Agum tried to play it cool but he really did care too. They shared that respect. I don't remember if they talked about anything during the meal. I just slipped in and out of sleep as the day turned to night and I ate what I could, washing it down with more medicine and tea.

After Agum left Lumi held me tight for the rest of the night. She made sure I had enough blankets to fight the cold. She used the extra ingredients to prepare the local soups and stews we made in Besniwod. Anything to ease the pain of the overbearing illness.

Then all I remember is falling asleep holding her hand. The most comfortable feeling in the world. Our fingers interlocked and our hearts connecting in a steady rhythm. That was the second time we really felt what I'd call love. First on the train leaving Besniwod and then this time when she took care of me.

An unspoken longing and a lasting desire. The way our hands fit perfectly within each other. That was the moment when we could no longer deny our feelings for each other. That was when we found eternal warmth to last a lifetime.

We were there for each other. It didn't matter how far we were from home as long as we could reach out to each other. Holding hands and knowing everything is right. In a way that was when we created a new home together. That would always keep us together.

We continued the Sunday barbecue tradition until the start of quarantine. Agum ended up leaving the city around then and we haven't heard from him since. The kids grew up knowing who he was and calling him Uncle Agum.

"Uncle Agum!" The last time we saw him was at Endle's restaurant. The same order made for decades. Agum grew to find new twists by letting Rwen or Zori add flavors to the menu. Endle enjoyed the game even if no one at the table ended up enjoying the taste.

"Yes Rwen?"

"Have you ever been across the strait?"

"Rwen, I don't think anyone here has been across the strait!" Agum laughed as he smiled at Endle. The old man sighed and brought out another bottle, letting it down beside Agum in a twist of fate only they could understand.

"On the house."

"Come have a toast with us!" Agum reached out for a chair and set it beside Rwen. "To the best chef in all of Veranum. May his spice be as blessed as his unlucky lot in life!"

"I'll drink to that!" I motioned to Rwen that it was okay to take a sip of the spirits as Lumi kept an eye on Zori to make sure she didn't try to imitate our actions.

"What is this stuff!" Rwen spit out his shot across the table and we all erupted into laughter. Lumi found a similar humor in the situation and we started another night of

storytelling. Encouraging Rwen to share any fun stories he had from his own life. Zori was too young to do much more than babble, but she was sharing what she could in her own way.

“I’m going to get into a university across the strait! I can’t wait to see what life is like out there in the rest of the world. Don’t you want to see the world Uncle Agum!”

“Rwen. I wish you all the luck in the world. If you succeed let’s meet back in here in 50 years and I’ll pay for the whole meal.”

“50 YEARS! That’s like forever!” The table let out another round of laughter as the next plate of meats finished its searing. We kept that up for far later than we should have. Ending the night with an expensive tab Agum paid for without us knowing.

We haven’t seen him since then and we weren’t too share where he went or what he was doing. Rwen was confused he swam across the strait. Be it in a boat or with his own arms. My son believed Agum to be that kind of person.

Chapter 13

Midday Mass

Saint Vinson's church was covered in all the familiar Frithlic Nyun decorations. Crystal ornaments forming webs for Her pet spider Bikeshi. The building was one of the oldest in the village and doubled as a school outside of services and holidays. The cultural center of the world for locals.

There was even a bit of controversy when they added an extension to the school outside the church. Not for any secular reason and not for any religious benefit. There simply wasn't enough room for the slowly growing population. Generations and their habit of wants to grow to fit the dimensions of every wall.

The building itself was made of strong concrete in a style similar to the train station. Otherwise nondescript stone raised on stilts to protect against the cold of the ground. The windows and the outer wall was, however, much more ornate than any other structure in Besniwod. Images of the Seven Saints and their miracles. A horde of spiders working for Bikeshi as is Her will. The window above the main entrance was a large stained glass that depicted Saint Vinson Herself in all Her glory.

The wall ran from the bottom of the steps all around the building, leaving space for a beautiful snow covered yard. There were several trees running wild along those edges. A symbolic piece of art for our people. Saint Vinson's Triumph on full display as we saw our future manifest.

The main door added to that defiant act. Built mainly from imported wood at a time when such an order would be impractical at best and everyone thought impossible. And yet here it is. We did it.

And it worked well. To this day you can see the original carvings along the archway. Sacred symbols to Saint Vinson and proof of Her flame guarding the halls. When I was young I used to think it was some kind of design to help keep the snow out of the church. Something believably generous for a building so many people would be walking in and out of, but the truth is Besniwod needed that warmth in its heart. Her warmth.

The archway led past a threshold and into a large room that splintered off into smaller halls. There was a small indoor garden in that first room. Exotic flowering plants representing each of the Seven Saints. The different flowers would lead down specific halls for anyone looking for that specific shrine and its prayer room.

The Kumris would usually follow the Crimson Columbines. We'd then stop at a small room with a small statue of Saint Denali. Mom and Dad – more so Mom than Dad – liked to save a few specific prayers for our ancestral saint. Usually something specific to our family's health or career. The only significant change in my lifetime was how Mom added special lines to the prayer after Nali was born. Specific hopes and wishes for the lesser saint's namesake.

Lumi's family, the Juas, would follow the Fragaria flowers to visit Saint Himavan's shrine. In a similar way to how Nali's name came from the saint, Lin's daughter Frezy took her name from the flower. The poor girl must hear that story every time our family's get together.

"Frezy! Like Saint Himavan's flowers? That's close to how we named Nali!"

"Mom, she's already heard the story."

Any priest stationed in Besniwod – and I suspect other villages as well – was required to become an experienced gardener in order to win over the esteem of the villages. It was an important part of making Saint Vinson's church feel like a welcoming

home. All the plants needed to be carefully cared for. Watered and raised. Given the right amount of attention to blossom and bloom.

It would also be the priest's job to make sure there was one path that stood out in the first small room and its hallways of different flowers. There needed to be no question about how someone could find the main prayer hall. An absurd idea given the layout of the building.

Walking straight ahead brought you into a massive opening topped with a dome. Open to the public at all times with pew after pew filled with prayer books and soft lights raining down from the stain glass windows. Reverence for the altar and the giant state of Saint Vinson.

She was immaculate and beautiful. She stood with Her arms stretched out to the eternal flame – Her flame. She wore a robe of furs and a crown of crystal jewels. Her pet spider Bikeshi was dangling from her elbow, threads spun round and round to better hold the warmth. We were all included in the fires of her unending love.

"Swefen did you find the dreamcatcher?" Seeing the statue must have reminded Lumi about the lost gift. I still hadn't found the time to look through our luggage. We were already moving everything to Lumi's parents' and it would be a hassle to check with half our luggage in one place and half in another.

"I'll look for it later."

"Swefen if you lost it..."

"I didn't lose it!" Our voices were raising suspicion as the rest of the family started funneling into the pews. Rwen and Zori looked over with those worried faces. I waved my hand in a defiant motion to keep them quiet.

"You better not have."

“Everyone find a seat quick!” Mom did her best to settle the mood and have our large family prepare for a moment of silence. We were all making our way from the shrines of the lesser saints. Kind gestures and well wishes left in those halls. My kids knew the drill but I doubt they understood how much it meant for the more religious members of the family.

We didn’t denounce Saint Vinson or support anything close to blasphemy. Religion just wasn’t as important to everyday life in Veranum. There were no designated prayer times and we never really went to the local church.

In Besniwod Saint Vinson was a natural extension of life. The church was where we gathered if we weren’t going to the market. Even if you didn’t care for the shrines or the statues, the flowers were still beautiful and worth visiting. There was also an old library filled with now ancient texts to help the kids at school. It was a practical place and not just some overpriced building meant for grandiose bombast.

“Peaks as distant as the space between stars!” The priest stopped by our seats to offer a traditional greeting. His robes were covered by an extra layer of furs but his face wore a brightly beaming smile. “And glory be to the most sacred of saints, our gracious savior Saint Vinson. She has blessed me with the honor of meeting with visitors from afar!”

“Agum? Agum Gernan?”

“Brother!”

“You’re a priest now?”

“Was there ever any doubt to my holiness?”

“Would you call me brother if there wasn’t?”

“Hah! Much has changed since we last met. That much is true. When I quit Veranum I decided to walk another path. A pilgrimage if you will.”

“Is that so? I remember it more as you leaving the city without so much as a goodbye.”

“To err is as human as sin. And I assure you I have sinned. I have suffered. We all have and we all will. We do not pray to absolve, we pray to understand ourselves and our flawed flesh. Our mortal wounds. To understand what it feels to stand atop Mount Vinson and feel Her eternal blessing.”

The Agum Gernan in my memories was always vaguely religious but never this devout. I remember him talking about wanting to go on a pilgrimage but I always assumed it was a joke. I definitely hadn't learned of this new start at our local church in Besniwod. People change in strange ways though so maybe Agum's transformation shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did.

“It's been a long time since we've seen you. A bit of a surprising place to meet up again!” Rwen was maybe even more excited than us to see his Uncle Agum again after nearly half a decade. Zori mostly know him for stories but understood she should share the emotion.

“There are no surprises in a house of the Seven Saints!” Agum bowed and walked up to the altar to start the service. His movements were with the same confidence I remember but the context was so different. “Now join hands in a prayer as I welcome my dear friends Lumi and Swefen Kumri with their wonderful children Rwen and Zori to Besniwod. As Saint Vinson teaches us, may this Frithlic Nyun bless the wind upon your back and the stars above your skies.”

The sermon was otherwise the typical stories about Saint Vinson's Triumph and how She gave us Frithlic Nyun. The kids had never experienced a performance quite like that

and were in awe at the dramatic retelling of an epic war only won by the grace of Her flame.

There were a few more private rituals in the halls of the lesser saints after the service ended. The Kumris went to revisit Saint Denali's shrine and the Juas revisited Saint Himavan's shrine. Lumi and the kids stayed with me in the pews as we relaxed against the warmth of the eternal flame behind the altar.

"Feeling better already?" Lumi looked at me and smiled as the clouds in my eyes were clearer than the days before.

"I guess so yeah.."

"That's good."

"Lumi...?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you." Lumi leaned in to whisper in my ear, giving me a soft kiss as she reached out to my hand with a tight grip. More said in the shared memory of how it felt for our fingers to touch than any words could ever express.

"Mom... Dad..." Rwen started getting up, helping his sister Zori find her footing on the floor. "Let's save that for later. Preferably not in such an inappropriate place."

"Young Kumris!" Agum walked up to us in a loud voice and open handed greeting.

"Uncle Agum?"

"Rwen! I'm a man of the cloth now, call me Father Agum."

"Okay... Father Agum."

"I can see Lumi in your eyes! Both as a mortal man and a servant to the Seven Saints, let me tell you how lucky you are to live with their love in your home!" Agum shook

Rwen's hand harder than he was prepared for. The odd way of wording what was an awkward subject for any child only added to his confusion.

"Yeah... sure."

"And Zori? You look like you're twice as big as the last time I saw you!" Agum turned to face Zori as she hid behind her Mom.

"Zori be nice to Uncle Agum."

"Lumi please, she should call me Father Agum."

"B-but aren't you Uncle Agum...." Zori was confused by the outgoing priest and his familiarity with the family. She didn't have clear memories of our Sunday barbecues together and only knew him as a character in our stories.

"You are right I suppose Zori. I shouldn't tell you what to call me and I was Uncle Agum to you much longer than I've been Father Agum. I can also see you share Swefen's shy personality." Rwen laughed at how well Agum understood his parents. "Swefen's gotten over that seasonal sickness? Your dad knows how to put on a strong face – believe it or not!"

"Father Agum, you knew Mom and Dad when they were little right?" Rwen was curious about what stories there were to share about his parents. The last time he met Agum he was still too young to think to learn about our embarrassing stories.

"Not so much when they were little but we were good friends once upon a time in Veranum. I'm sure you remember how we would always go to Endle's restaurant. How is Endle anyway?"

"We haven't been back there since that time with you."

"By Her flame! That was nearly five years ago now!"

"Closer to four, but it's been a while."

“So you haven’t heard from him.”

“Not since that day.” There was animosity in my words, but not exactly intended. I was hurt by Agum’s sudden disappearance and didn’t know if I was ready to accept this new version of my friend.

Lumi reached back for my hand and we knew we shared that same thought. But it was neither the time nor the place. For now it was nice to see Rwen and Zori meeting their Uncle Agum again.

“So you knew them from when they went to university in Veranum?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Don’t forget to tell Rwen about how you dropped out.” I blurted out something mean not really knowing why. Throwing a punch at an old friend.

“Swefen... I’m terribly sorry about leaving you and Lumi without a good word goodbye. Circumstance and fate rarely align and what matters now is that our souls found meaning in this life and not another.”

“I’m just not used to my *bro* speaking with such cryptic words.” Agum laughed in understanding and reached into his pocket for something, pulling out an old bottle filled with paper. The bottle was the spirit we used to order at Endle’s but only Saint Vinson knew what the papers were.

“I saved this for the day when we finally met again. I would write to you and Lumi but I was far away from anywhere that could send mail to Veranum. So I kept them with me here in this bottle. The last one from that night.” Agum extended his arm and grabbed mine, forcing me to take the bottle from his hand. “Take it and read it whenever you so feel inspired. I hope it helps you understand my decisions.”

“So you traveled really far? Did you really swim across the strait!” I didn’t mind Rwen hearing Agum’s stories, but I didn’t want him to get lost down a desperate path. He really wanted to live that dream of studying across the strait.

“The only way you’re getting across the strait Rwen is if you get your grades up!”

“Sweffen always was one to weave his words. But to answer the earlier question, yes indeed I dropped out of university in Veranum. I still lived there for years as I’m sure you remember. I took a job as a fisherman just before they increased quarantine measures and closed the ports. I was an amateur fisherman stuck out at sea forced to brave the waves. I couldn’t right say where I ended up, but it was somewhere far away. I used the stars to guide me to Mount Vinson. That’s where I came face to face with Saint Vinson and Her flame. She then guided me home and I took up the role of priest.”

“I see.” Rwen didn’t really know how to react. Agum was a true believer and it sounded like at least some of his story couldn’t be true. Strong conviction was outside his vocabulary and the doubt in his voice was obvious.

“I don’t expect you to understand but I know you can feel Her presence too. In every candle and every prayer She guides us all. Maybe even back to Endle’s restaurant in about 45 years now wouldn’t it be?”

“You remembered that!” Rwen was back to his younger self. Excited that his Uncle Agum intended to keep such an absurd promise.

“So *bro*... I mean *Father Agum*. Did you also fight alongside Her, aiding in Saint Vinson’s Triumph retroactively?” My jokes can get too political. I hoped it was the kind of thing Agum would enjoy. I was never too sure how much of what his stories were played up for show and how much was at least in part true. Either way it didn’t matter and he was happy where he was now. We could make up for lost time later.

“If you want to hear about my pilgrimage and my vision, all you need is ask my brother!” He wasn’t wrong. Another time maybe, but I didn’t want to walk down that path with the whole family waiting by the wooden frame of the main entrance to the church. Lumi also wanted to visit the markets and I wanted to show the kids the central square. Any and all holy retribution would need to wait for the next Sunday barbecue.

“I’d love to hear all the stories but everyone’s waiting for us.” I motioned to the familiar faces getting ready for the rest of the day.

“It really was nice seeing you again Agum!” Lumi shouted out towards the back of the church as she gathered the kids towards the door.

“You’re always welcome at Saint Vinson’s church. And make sure Rwen and Zori are well bundled up before you go!” Agum had the last laugh with a few genuine well wishes as we walked under the archway and its wooden frame to the world outside.

Chapter 14

A Web of Tents

Besniwod's central square is electric with activity during the civil twilight hours. While a good many people attend the midday mass, there are many keen merchants who know to setup and open their shop beforehand to catch the faithful.

It probably wouldn't feel like Frithlic Nyun without it. The plaza and its lines of tents. There were designated areas for all the stalls. It could get sloppy as the wind shifted walls and the ice lined the stones, but the way it was designed none of that mattered. The important bits were there.

Two major cross sections from the train station to the other side and from Saint Vinson's church to the other side. In the middle was an open section for the First Tree. And if you stood in Agum's spot at the altar past the pews, you could see how Saint Vinson's eyes were looking straight at the sacred tree.

Crystal tears dripped down from its branches. The ornaments played tricks with the light as they hid among the icicles and what was left of the original wooden tree. It acted as its own sun, reflecting light at odd angles and becoming a beacon at the very center of the village.

The branches were connected to each other with threads made from local furs. If you followed the web all the way to the top, you could see how they all connect to a crystal spider at the top of the tree. Saint Vinson's pet Bikeshi.

We told the children Bikeshi could better control the hordes of spiders from that vantage point. Shining light into the shadows of darkness and making sure every home could celebrate the holiday.

Those who were a bit more proud of Besniwod said that the design of the square went even further. They say when you look at it from above you get another view of a spider web. Bikeshi in the middle on top of the First Tree and the market tents making up the web of local furs.

It made sense in a way. Most were of similar sizes. Enough to fit a stall of three tables and a family of four or five. Seeing that from a different vantage point would surely be a great way to ignite images in a true believer's mind.

But I had a hard time thinking the merchants and their wares were placed anymore conveniently than what they could sell. There was also a clashing counterpoint to the imagined holy web.

Coming from Saint Vinson's church, just past the First Tree there was a much larger tent. Over three times as large as the usual market fair, the special place was reserved for performances and other grand gatherings. Community activities safe from the cold.

Also the kind of place where you could very likely hear someone say that the whole square looked like Bikeshi's web from the sky. That's how people are. Telling the same stories out of comfort more than belief more than half the time.

"Do you think Agum is okay?" Lumi was the first to raise the question that should have already been asked. Our old friend was someone new. I thought it wasn't my place to question his decisions but the road he took to get there felt like it had more than a few holes in it.

"If he's happy with this life then why should we care?"

"Swefen! He's our friend!"

“Is something wrong with Uncle Agum?” Rwen’s ears perked up at our concern for someone he looked up to. The hint of adventure and the outgoing personality were both worthy of admiration, but I wasn’t sure I wanted my son to emulate the man I once knew.

“He’s just changed quite a bit is all.” I brought Rwen closer to me as the wind picked up and the feel of its biting cold swept across our faces. Lumi took to pulling Zori closer as she struggled to stand upright with all the extra layers.

“He seems pretty similar to how I remember him.”

“What do you remember of Uncle Agum?”

“He was always loud and full of energy like that. His stories were fun and you remember how he’d let us add to the order? Even Zori when she could barely talk. I don’t think you’ve let me order for you two since he left actually...” Rwen starting thinking about the times we went out to eat. He was right but I wasn’t ready to admit such an open defeat.

“Well don’t let his stories get to you too much. He’s had a hard life it seems and as luck would have it chance was on his side.”

“So you don’t think he was saved by Her flame?” Rwen gave a wry smile as light reflected off the First Tree. He was a smart kid and at least sometimes knew how to push the right buttons without going too far. He just often went too far with the wrong people and that got him in trouble.

“I would accept a miracle. If Saint Vinson guided Agum here then who am I to judge. I just don’t want you to take that as an invitation to become a fisherman tomorrow!” Rwen laughed as we all understood my point. I didn’t mind my son feeling inspired, I just didn’t want him to sell himself short.

“What about what he used to say? How he set the two of you up and watched you fall in love?” Rwen turned to face us with red cheeks and a curious expression. He knew it was true but wanted to hear us admit he was right.

“Did Father Agum really make Mommy and Daddy fall in love?” Zori was invested now and that demanded a clear answer.

“That part is true.” I looked over to Lumi and she grabbed my hand in that familiar way. The kids laughed at our passion and I pulled everyone closer to catch up with the rest of the family as we fully entered the central square.

The whole area was naturally protected from the harshest winds. The first explorers and later inhabitants set up building structures lined up at a single meeting point. Making an L shape and guarding what was inside.

As time went on and more buildings were added to the village, they walled it in completely. Only tunnels at the corners leading to the outside and the more difficult paths. The way out to where my parents live on one side and up the slope to where Lumi’s parents lived on the other.

Looking at how they made a complete square of the complex, it would have been hard to keep Besniwod as nothing but that collection of buildings. We were in dire need of expanding into new territories. It’s likely those needs just happened to align with the new reforestation projects of the time.

Generally, everything someone needed to have a good life could be found in one of the buildings around the central square. If it couldn’t, the market was sure to have whatever you needed that was harder to find. If it didn’t, well then what you wanted was more or less thought to not exist anyway.

For day to day life though, it was already more than enough. For us. It was Her flame. Her grace. Our life. From the food in the cafeteria to the barber shops sprinkled in the floors of the surrounding buildings. We thrived in the wilderness.

“Are these walls like the walls in Veranum?” Zori asked a controversial question without knowing it. Protection in the form of large stones in its simplest form is similar from one place to another. You just wouldn’t ever really want to say that to a villager.

“These buildings are nothing like the walls in Veranum!” Dad was of course the first to respond. He always was if someone in the family crossed the line into politics.

“I don’t think she meant it like that.” Lumi’s dad Tamu was quick to come to defend his granddaughter. His position and his career was less prestigious than anything Dad had ever done, but he had an appreciation for building a better understanding. His beliefs and convictions were just as strong, but he made a concerted effort to understand that other side. Especially if it involved his family. “I’m sure Zori’s only ever really seen large stone structures like this in the walls of the city. I’ve never seen them myself, but I assume in Veranum they also protect against the wind and the cold.

“You’re right about that but it’s still not the same.” Conversations with Dad would often end like that. He didn’t like admitting he was wrong even when he did. You learned to shrug off the absurdity and appreciate him making any effort to back down.

“I doubt Veranum quite has a place like the cafeteria though!” Tamu broke up the stifled resignation with another quick remark. Something that would build upon the pride everyone had for Besniwod.

“But there are cafeterias in Veranum?” Zori spoke up again in an innocent act of defiance. Rwen lightly tapped her on the arm to try and get her attention. Make her

understand that she should stop bringing up these things while her grandparents were around.

“I’m sure there are, but not like ours!” Tamu let out a big laugh and Mom moved forward to bring Zori into her arms. She didn’t care who was right or wrong and just wanted to spend more time with her granddaughter. It was a smart move. Dad may be unwilling to back down or walk back his opinions, but somewhere in his heart he wanted the same. Seeing Zori would help remind him of that as we walked through the rows of tents.

The cafeteria was different if not in form but in function for everyone in Besniwod. One of the main meeting points. I realize that’s something that feels right is repeated, but that’s how we thought about it. The main meeting places were where you pray, where you’re entertained, and where you eat.

It was also one of those inexplicably special buildings, built out of one of the first habitats directly across the central square from the train station. The seating and the room took up nearly the entire far wall. Windows facing in to look at the square and a thick layer of concrete on the other side. I can’t imagine the first people to live here thought we would eventually move out past the building. And yet we did.

The signs were clear and early as the structure rose up first. Homes and businesses and businesses in homes rising higher and higher as new floors were added on top of the cafeteria. The villagers began asking for windows facing out to have a view of the land. Our land.

With the forests I imagine the youngest generation can’t even understand why there are some places with no outward windows. Just in my limited lifetime expectations have changed so much. I’m sure someone from an earlier generation would feel the same way

about how I grew up. Living in a wooden cottage next to an endless frontier. Essentially sleeping in the hay.

We would spend most of our time closer to the central square though. Going to barbers somewhere in the halls. Finding new restaurant around the bend and up unexplored floors. You could live your whole life running around the buildings from the train station to Saint Vinson's church to the cafeteria and back again. Never taking a step outside. Never realizing how cold ice and snow really are.

Maybe that's what Dad saw as Saint Vinson's Triumph. How people in Besniwod learned to get along with no need for protection from the city. The village itself protecting its people from the harshest winds. We embraced the continental life. All our buildings on stilts in the constant fight against the hoarfrost. The central square filled with a web of insulated tents.

Chapter 15

Slippery stones

“What did you want to get at the market again?” I couldn’t remember needing anything but there seemed to always be time for at least window shopping. I thought it would be good for the kids to see the market, but I didn’t want to get trapped into a shopping spree only to buy a few extra snacks.

“Oh nothing in particular, but I do want to see what seasonal treats are on sale!” Lumi winked at me as she motioned for her sister Lin to join her in a new adventure. When I let out a small sigh Lin was ready with a remark.

“Hey! If my sister wants to look at every tent she can!” Lin grabbed her sister by the arm and got ready to drag her off through the maze of tents. My mother and father-in-law, Lochu and Tamu, would be soon to follow. They always had fun spending time together and finding new flavors to bring to the next meal.

“Careful Swefen! Lumi is a beautiful girl and you should treat her right!” Lochu cared deeply about her daughter. The remark may have sounded harsh to some, but it was her way of letting me know how much she saw me as soon as well. She would give the world and more for us to live a more comfortable life.

“Lumi you love that fried dough don’t you?” Tamu was quick to find a better distraction in a distant tent. Along with the array of imported goods, there was also a selection of special Frithlic Nyun recipes. Treats and snacks like roasted chestnuts, candy canes, and fried dough dipped in cinnamon.

“Ooh let’s go get some! Swefen look after Rwen and Zori, we’ll be back soon and bring them a few snacks too!” And they were off to fill up their arms with the flavors of the

holiday. My niece Frezy waved to her mother Lin and rejoined her cousins. Rwen and Rhodiola were surely having fun gossiping about their teenage lives.

But parting ways with Lumi in the central square brought up some old memories. Nostalgic in a weird way. When we would leave the train station holding hands before needing to secretly separate and meet our families. Before we were an old couple. Just two lovebirds too shy to admit their feelings. We'd find a secluded space where the air was still frozen against the dim light in the sky. Warm air falling out of the market tents protecting the tears in our eyes.

We would hold each other in our arms and say our goodbyes. Meeting each other again at the end of the visit and finding peace in the way our hands fit in each other on the train back to Veranum. That same comfort we found when we first left Besniwod together. Our feelings always thawed no matter how covered in ice and snow.

Butterflies of the past. A foggy distraction thicker than the frost. I wonder how much of that is lost between generations. I know these memories of how I feel don't reflect how Mom and Dad do at all – or any of my sisters. For Rwen and Zori they only have the loosest of connections. Brief impressions focused on these holiday trips to see the family.

Lumi and I sometimes worried about how well the kids could keep up. Between the slippery stones and frigid cold, we wouldn't blame them for feeling a little lost. And so there I was. Again. Ready to explore that web of tents after the midday mass sermon. Nothing really to buy but all the world ready to spend. A short walk through the stalls in a world of Frithlic Nyun wonder. Snow covered stones between warm tents. And the colorful lights stringing from one to the other, connecting to the tree and reflecting off the crystals. Bikeshi protecting us all with Her threads.

I'm sure it looked rather rough and makeshift to my kids. They were used to a more organized system of heaters and pipes. Human inventions conquering the entirety of the elements. It was different here. A softer touch that fell within the limited budget.

A few generations ago merchants began putting down wood panels to protect their floors from the cold stones below. Furs were then laid down to form a comfortable carpet warmer than some beds. The walls were also lined with those warm blankets and furs. There was a pattern to the shapes and colors that gave them all a distinct look and feel. It felt like home. It was home for many of the merchants. Whether from tragedy or choice, they often lived in their tents.

The necessity of it all would lead to finding new ways to keep them nice and warm. Comforting and even more like home. The real star of it all was the furnace found at the center of every tent. Built into the roof as a chimney and a support. When the central square was at its most active the whole place radiated with that heat.

"Grandma Kumri! I'm hot!" Zori was getting annoyed at having to wear so many coats. Between the walking and the heat from the tents, you would hardly believe there was ever need for concern.

"I know Zori. Just keep your jacket on for now. You can take it off once we're inside one of the shops!" Mom always tried to be nice. Too nice at times. Zori needed a stern command and was tugging at her zippers to try and catch some of the cold in the air.

Every market tent played a similar risky game. Exposing more and more of their stall to the elements to better catch the eye of a passerby. It made sense in a way but one mistake and it would all be over. A lack of fuel or a hole in the wall. Either would spell defeat for the family inside. And there were few places to take refuge.

For the most part everyone knows to pay proper respect to nature. Protection was never guaranteed and testing that faith was a losing game. There were other ways merchants attracted customers as well. Organizing the inside to match what was for sale. Racks of hats, crates of berries, hang dried meat, and much more.

The divisions were more along the lines of what was locally sourced and what was imported from the trains. Villagers were willing to pay a premium for local lumber and freshly mined ice. Either out of support for their neighbor or as a way to avoid paying more taxes to Veranum.

You could tell there were more and more exceptions made during Frithlic Nyun. The imported goods of exotic fruits and barrels of gas making the perfect combination of pragmatic and meaningful. It didn't help that the supply was irregular and hard to predict.

It all depended on the trains and their schedule. On what could be shipped from Veranum and how well the communications ran from the city to all the way past Nistilon. It should be no surprise then that a simple trip to the market would also spark political opinions.

"We're losing the spirit of Frithlic Nyun selling off all our lumber." Of course it was Dad who couldn't hold his tongue any longer.

"I know it's sad isn't it? I remember when we were little the quota was strict and people respected the resources more." Mekoti knew how to play into Dad's views and they would often wind each other up when these topics came up. It was annoying and unsolicited, but none of us could say they were completely incorrect. It was more the righteous attitude that invited contrarian responses. The way an older sibling tricks the younger to do their chores. Just the right words to get under your skin.

“People have to make a living.” Nali was a brave sister to challenge the inevitable tirade that would follow.

“Providing for your family is one thing, destroying the environment is another.” Dad is passionate about naturalism. There’s a certain irony in how he sees the current reality as a natural state though. Noble as it may be, it is very much the result of reforestation and other government funded projects. There was a lot of money invested into artificially creating the nature he so valiantly wants to preserve.

“Destroying your family is one thing, providing for the environment is another.” Nali’s words stung worse than the coldest wind in the dead of night. We all had a silent understanding of how Dad could be distant. How he showed his love in odd ways. How he would defend a stranger more than he would us siblings. It was a confusing mess of emotions and intentions that we tried to avoid.

“Nali!” Dad turned on his heel and stared at his youngest daughter. “Nali! Are you saying I don’t care about you?” He raised his arm in anger as his voice became his own father’s. “Are you calling me a liar!”

The world stopped turning as gravity pulled us all to the ground. The weight of the weather and a total loss of control. A step too far toward oblivion with only Her flame to guide us home. I prayed to Saint Vinson in that moment.

“Dad stop!” My second sister Bryne left her husband’s side to restart the world and its routine. In a surprising show of sympathy she pulled Dad back into his own voice as a terrified look of horror flashed across his face. No harm was done. Nothing escalated further than words. And yet. He struggled to express his apology. And nothing was said.

“Aldor! Don’t! Especially not in front of little Zori!” Mom scolded Dad in her usual fashion. His pride further melting as he saw the fear on Zori’s face. He didn’t like the

monster he could become. He didn't want to share the burden of the shame either. It often meant he felt lonely in that battle against who he was.

We all knew it but no one said it. The rule of law too strong within my family. The path of passion too strong in his heart. The best we could hope for was an uncomfortable acceptance and sometime later an honest appeasement.

We listened to the sound of the wind for a moment instead. Something to calm the scene and help us walk through the web of tents. I reached out to Nali and she shook in fear as the frozen blood left her body. We all had our annoyances and misfortunes, but rarely did they bubble to the surface in such spectacular ways.

In the confusion that followed we let our focus drift to Rwen and his cousins. "Yeah in the city they'd have a building like 50 times as tall!" He adapted quickly, trying to look cool. Playing up the differences between Besniwod and Veranum.

"No way!" Rhodiola was always a bit more naive when the cousins got to bragging. She contrasted Nali's intelligence and Tamir's confidence in unexpected ways. That's not to say Rhodiola lacked in either, just that she was more reserved than the family expected.

"We can even get gas pumped right into our apartment."

"We don't even need pumps to get gas up to our homes. I guess city people aren't strong enough to carry barrels up a few flights of stairs." Lin's daughter Frezy on the other hand was sharp as a knife with her quick witted sarcasm.

"That's not true! I could carry a barrel all the way to Grandma Jua's house right now!"

"You wouldn't."

"We're not buying a barrel of gas." I had to interrupt before Rwen asked me to waste money for something that would probably just further hurt his pride.

"Well... I bet you can't beat me to the First Tree!"

My son was eager to show off. He wanted to prove that he wasn't just a sheltered city boy. He was proud of his heritage in Besniwod. It was a part of what made them friends and helped everyone enjoy the holiday season.

Zori on the other hand struggled a bit more with the transition to life in the village. The thicker coats and snowy paths made it difficult for her to walk at times, never mind run a race. Mom was helping her along with Dad now trying to stay by her side as well. They wanted to make sure she never missed a step. Enjoying the pride of the village and the feeling of the holiday.

"You really grew up like this Daddy?" Zori asked just before tripping over her feet and falling face first into a pile of ice and snow.

"Zori!"

"It's okay I have her."

"I'm okay! It's okay!"

Chapter 16

Dorub Chol

Nothing is ever begun or finished. The world will always keep spinning. It's up to us to not get dizzy and fall off. Remembering the past. Finding our place in the context of the noise. Relaxing into a routine. Holidays with family. Sharing an eternal love. Keeping those closest safe. And continuing the cycle again and again.

Instinct took control when Zori hit the ground. I knew she was already opening her jacket to deal with feeling a little too hot. If that was too much and she found herself too cold. Frostbite or worse. A bump on the nose. A hit on the head. Anything at all would be more than I could handle.

I picked her up and brushed off the flakes of snow on her head. Nali and Mom were close by wiping off her coats and making sure she didn't have any ice touching her skin. Her cheeks were red and she was more confused than scared as the fear on my face spread to her own.

"Quick in here!" A voice called out from a nearby tent. Like many of the other shelters in the plaza, this one was covered wall to wall in blankets and furs. The ground was safely covered with local lumber and skins and the furnace were burning brightly through chunks of chopped wood.

"Dorub Chol?" I recognized the voice as an old classmate. We were once childhood friends, growing apart over time. I don't think we'd seen each other since before I moved to Veranum. I remember hearing he wanted to work in the hunting trade. It seemed reasonable that evolved into a market tent in the central square.

"Swefen Kumri?"

“It’s been a long time!”

My sisters and Dad were making their way into the tent as Mom and Nali worked with Dorub’s wife and son to set up a seat for Zori. They stripped off her top layer of coats and put on several more layers of freshly dried blankets.

“Is Zori okay!” Rwen came in with stomping feet followed by his cousins Frezy and Rhodiola close behind. He was out of breath from the race to the First Tree and the chase back to the tent to check on his little sister.

“Zori slipped but she’ll be fine.” Rwen pushed me aside, not fully believing my words. He moved to comfort his sister as snow dripped from his boots. He probably was wishing it had been him to fall during the race. Nothing serious but some way to transfer any pain away from Zori.

“Do you have some soup or tea for Zori? She should be fine, but coming from Veranum it’s better to play it safe.” Mom was already taking charge of the rescue effort. Providing the remedy and tending to the wounds.

“Yes, yes! I understand completely. Kruos! Belek! Bring out some tea for the Kumris!”

Nali got up to help Dorub’s wife and son as they shuffled through some boxes behind the main counter. They were looking for enough cups to serve the large party crashing their tent. The warmth of the furnace worked wonders to calm all our nerves. We were soon taking off our jackets and settling into the chairs spread out along the outer wall.

“She tumbled on the stones outside? I told them they need to add more salt to the paths. I’ve even petitioned for a wooden path on the main walkway, but you know how stubborn the city can be.” Dorub was the first to try to bring up more idle conversation.

Once the excitement settled it wouldn't be long before small town gossip began. There's a lot we could have said as old friends, but life deals us all different hands.

"Your son Belek is about the same age as Rhodiola and Rwen?"

"Rwen's your boy? They're probably the same age – maybe a winter or two a part."

Dorub looked over at Rwen to try and guess how old he was. "And that's right! Nali Kumri got married. The Taptal boy if I remember correctly?"

"Yes. Tamir Taptal is my husband. We got married a long time ago now."

"So I guess you're not a Kumri anymore?"

"Well, we named the cat Kumri to keep the name in the house at least."

"That's a fun compromise." Dorub laughed at the thought of his own familial compromises. Even in the little village of Besniwod when two families come together they create new traditions. There are always twists on customs and small changes to rituals.

In Veranum they'd think it fantasy. Something about a new golden era in an attempt to find peaceful warmth. I wouldn't think it a bad thing if that were true, but it's certainly simpler than that. It's more about how we see each other as sharing the village first and any secondary differences are just that, *secondary*.

That may sound like an old way of thinking and I wouldn't be opposed to calling it so. The issues arrive in the emotion behind the thought. How those in the city they tend to have a simpler view of Besniwod. Religious farmers at best and backwards survivalists at worst. The positive traits that stem from that were quaint and not something that anyone would think worth adopting.

"You got into the hunting trade?" I looked over at what Dorub was selling to see an assortment of furs and skins. More than what was possible to locally source, but you don't start a conversation with an accusation.

“You remember how I used to talk about that?” Dorub found a seat near me as Nali and his wife gave Zori some soup. She was fine if not a little overwhelmed by all the sudden attention. Her jackets were a little wet and set up to dry as everyone took a good moment to calm down. “Those stories we used to tell as kids.”

“Yeah I remember.”

“Well that didn’t really work out.”

“What happened?” There are those times when you’re trying to catch up for someone and you begin to realize how much space there is between you. Sometimes the memories fill the gaps but there can be a few missteps as both sides try to find their footing.

“You see much hunting around here city boy?” Dorub let out another laugh. Everyone who still lived in Besniwod shared the humor but I failed to fully grasp the meaning.

“Weren’t they trying to hire out a bunch of work in the field?”

“That they were. Clearly they invested more than it was worth. I would have been better off moving up to Nistilon and working at the penguin sanctuary!”

“There’s no work at the sanctuary.” Nali’s husband Tamir made a rare remark at the mention of a topic close to his expertise. “When I was stationed there they already were making five people do jobs that only needed one. It was good to have the employment but still a stretch and a half. It all needs more time to mature if you ask me.”

“That’s the feeling I had.” Dorub rubbed his hand across some of the furs and Dad held in his opinions. We all knew he was like that. So passionate but then so quiet when we were in the company of new people. Strangers. Others. It is who he is.

“So where do all these come from then?” But we were also wrong at times. He was a master at weaving in the right word while seemingly being diplomatic.

“Imported of course. Saint Vinson only knows from where! I only care about the quality of the material and how well it holds in the heat. I couldn’t give a damn where they’re from as long as people buy them and they work like they should.” Dorub’s point of view was more common in the market than other places in the village. Their lives depended on swallowing pride for another sale.

“Daddy... are we going to visit the penguin sanctuary?” Zori then changed the mood to a different flavor of guilt. I could barely remember if I even told her we would visit, but with everything else on my mind it was hard to keep track of what was what and where we would be when.

“If we have the time, Zori.”

“But you promised!” Did I promise? I didn’t have the heart to be the bad guy after seeing Zori slip and fall like that. I didn’t want to lie either. I just kind of stared at her as I thought of something to say.

“I’m sure Tamir could get you cheaper tickets.” Mom looked over at Dad. Her attempt to get him to add to the peaceful conversation. “Even if you don’t have time over the holiday you could make a weekend trip out of it or something.”

“That’d be okay too Daddy!”

“And you’d be okay with us skipping over Besniwod to visit the penguin sanctuary?”

“We could come too!” The idea was getting more ridiculous as the details developed. I knew the dream would be hard to realize but in truth I wouldn’t be against the idea.

“So we’ll meet up in Nistilon over the next long weekend.”

“Sounds like a plan!”

“Thank you Daddy!” Zori gulped up the last of her soup and tossed off the extra blankets Mom and Nali had placed over her back. She leaped up to hug me and found an uncomfortable seat on my lap.

“So are we invited too?” Dorub joked as the mood swung back to the current hour.

“If you would want to come you’re more than welcome, but it’d be on your own time and your own dime.”

“Here I was expecting the big shot from Veranum to finance all my vacations.” It was in those remarks that we remembered how we became friends. The shared smiles and outlook on life. No need to explain the details and appreciating the odd and the awkward for what they really were.

“Thank you for your help Dorub!”

“It’s nothing.”

“So you’re in the fur trade instead of hunting?”

“Yeah. I was with the hunters for a while but I prefer the life of a merchant.”

“You’re still living in your old house? One of the units above the cafeteria?”

“Hah!” Dorub held his stomach and slapped his knee. My information was painfully out of date. “I moved out of there nearly three decades ago! We bought one of the cottages near your parents’ place but it was destroyed.”

“So you live here now?”

“Yeah... We’ll build a new one in the mixed stone and wood style. Probably closer to the central square to make it an easier commute.” The market tents were more than capable of being reasonable habitats, but they were far from glorious. When the weather turned particularly sour or a home was destroyed, it was common to stay in the tents rather than move somewhere else.

“Well let me buy something off you to help with the new home.”

“No don’t bother. In fact just take this one. A gift for Frithlic Nyun!” Dorub handed over one of his furs, wrapping it around Zori’s shoulders before helping her put on her coats and showing us the way out of the warm market tent. We shared a few more polite exchanges with his wife and son before continuing our walk through the square. “Don’t forget to stop by again before you leave!”

That snap back to reality is always a little shocking.

Chapter 17

Snow Covered Wine

“When are we going to the cafeteria!” After talking up the cafeteria so much it was a constant comment on the tip of Zori’s tongue. And to be fair, we did mention how we used to always have at least one meal there. It was the unofficial point when we would switch hosts. Moving from my parents’ place to Lumi’s parents’ place.

We learned that was the least painful way to deal with how we spent our time. My family cared much more about the beginning of Frithlic Nyun and Lumi’s cared much more about the end. It honestly couldn’t have worked out better and I imagine the discussion is worse when both sides of the family want to share the same time.

So before we fully moved into the Juas and their house on the hill, we would have a nice meal at the cafeteria. That large hall directly across the way from the central plaza. The old sign at the front of the large hall was covered with snow. The windows were all frosted over. But that just made it feel more like home. I could smell the taste inside just by taking in the sight.

Ridni would have already prepared a new batch of his mulled wine. It was obvious from the first feast he was proud of how the flavors turned out and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a nice blend. With so many people milling around the central square, he had to spend a lot of time at the cafeteria fulfilling orders.

When we finally walked up the steps and into the welcoming warmth, Ridni was there to greet both our families. More than just the drink, he had a whole table set up for us all. All smiles as we witnessed him in his comfort zone on the job.

The memories and stories of that same image made it harder to fully keep the present in focus. It was only with that clouded vision that I noticed how much older Ridni was. Greys turning white and a beard thicker than his hair.

The inevitability of age is a cruel joke of life, but it didn't bother Ridni. He smiled deeply as soon as he saw Mekoti and her latest wrinkles. They were silently reliving that memory of when they first met. Falling in love all over again as their eyes drifted between each other.

And then there was the smell. It was perfect for the holidays. That thick air of sweet stirring wine against the smoldering wood flames of the fireplace. A homely comfort I can only associate with Besniwod.

Nothing was more distinct than that smell of local lumber. I forgot how much I missed it. Veranum may have more heat in the city than any single house in the village, but it's all gas. The more organic aroma of our wood can only be described as comforting. As home.

That's not to say Besniwod didn't rely on gas as well. There was a limited supply of lumber and it was an honor and privilege to burn it in such large a quantity. There must have been some special deal to fit out the big community center with a wood burning stove and fireplace. Something to reflect our local pride. Evidence that reforestation was bearing fruit and worth the investment.

"Swefen! Zori! Rwen!" Ridni leaped from the counter to make sure we were properly well met. His excitement never limited by weather or age. Lumi was off with her sister and parents browsing through the market stalls again. At these midweek transfer meetings they would usually arrive second with treats and offerings. A way to thank my family for letting us all go as we spent the rest of Frithlic Nyun with them.

It all still looked the same. Well mostly the same. There were the obvious signs of further aging. Worn down tables and chairs. Missing regulars who moved on. But most everything was still in the spot. The way I remembered. The bar and its long counter against the outer wall and right at the entrance.

When Mekoti took me here to meet Ridni all those years ago we had a small table near one of the windows in the far corner of the room. When we came with the whole family like this there would be several tables shoved together, taking up a whole section of the window looking out to the central square.

Someone, more than likely Mekoti, planned out the seating arrangement so we would all have enough space. I like to think Ridni then made sure we would be by that same window. The one from their love story.

The easier explanation was he wanted everyone to have a view. I think the truth was closer to my first idea but he'd never admit it. Ridni was like that. Subtle in bringing up those old memories in quieter ways. Something people may or may not appreciate but they definitely would enjoy.

Looking out the old window brought back the memory of seeing Lumi play in the snow with her sister. They were always so close. The little games and teasing. It was the same in our family growing up. And I'm sure it's the same for Zori and Rwen.

"I'm so glad we had a chance to come here! Zori hasn't slipped on any more stones in the market? They really get too slippery and something needs to be done about it."

"Zori's fine. She's already used to the weather too!"

"Now that I find hard to believe. She didn't inherit your weak immune system?" It was a running joke among everyone who knew me. I was known to get and stay sick more than most people. I was already over the seasonal cold, but the joke still stuck.

“I have a special batch of mulled wine prepared to warm you up Swefen. The same recipe as that batch I brought over for the feast. Mekoti! Come help bring it out, please!”

A nice drink would be good to warm up my body. Ridni and Mekoti quickly returned and began pouring cups to their brims. We then let out the loudest of cheers. We were home. Home for the holiday. Home with family. Welcome once again. Saying goodbye again.

“And don’t get me started on how Umbali got that ridiculous job at the station.” There was finally an ounce of passion in Dad’s voice for something that wasn’t politics. I guess teasing his brother trumped the more abstract causes he so loved to champion. “The bastard really knows how to talk his way into a situation doesn’t he.”

The rowdy storytelling led into more dish-swapping with baked buns switching to steamed buns and plates moving from person to person down the table. We even skipped over the mealtime prayer, more excited to get to talking and sharing the less formal meal together. There are no strict rules about when and where such prayers should be said or heard, but with Frithlic Nyun being intimately connected to the Seven Saints, it’s commonly expected.

Saint Vinson Herself is credited as the source of our life. Her flame is our gift and is very much believed. The tales of Bikeshi and his horde also spark more than the imagination, at least in the children and the devout. Doubt is not exactly shunned, but it’s a trivial task to try and sort the endless list of unknowable phenomena. Our scriptures and stories are good enough and have helped us survive for generations.

People ask questions though, especially the aforementioned children. I can remember when Bryne asked an almost blasphemous question once. It was big enough a

deal to stay with me all these years. The contradictions in our beliefs aren't meant to be overcome. It's more a way to define and defend a stronger faith.

"Mommy? So we're naming my new sister after one of the Seven Saints?" Mom was pregnant with Nali at the time. Her stomach bulging as we made plans for welcoming the newest member of the family into our home.

"Bryne... for the ten thousandth time, we don't know whether we're having a son or a daughter."

"I know I'm getting a sister."

"Bryne..."

"But why Nali?"

"Saint Denali is the saint who holds our heritage."

"Yes... but I don't understand why that's a good name?"

"Saint Denali is sacred to our family. The scriptures tell of stories where how the Kumris followed her stars all the way to Besniwod."

"That's impossible. How can there be a mountain so far away!"

"But you can sled down mountains right?" My contribution to the discussion was appropriate for my age. I couldn't quite follow the details of the argument, but I could tell Mom was feeling a bit off trying to explain something inherently illogical.

"You think we can sled down a mountain and across an ocean? Swefen, you need to pay more attention in school!"

"Bryne don't pick on your brother."

"But he started it!"

"It's okay Mom..." The misunderstanding was bubbling up into angrier sentiments. Bryne always had a short temper and was prone to those kinds of sudden outbursts.

Everyone always said how much it reminded them of Dad, but I'm not sure that made Bryne or Dad ever feel any better.

"Bryne, just please consider how the name is important to our family."

"Okay." Bryne was quiet for a moment before asking another impossible question.

"Mommy? Why do we call them the Seven Saints?"

"Well, that's their name."

"But look!" Bryne raised up her fingers on her hands as she counted off the names of each of the Seven Saints. "...Saint Himavan, Saint Denali, Saint Vinson! That's Nine!"

"Yes, but those are the Seven Saints."

"That doesn't make any sense..."

"Bryne! That's not how we think of it!" Mom stumbled in her steps. She was getting too worked up for her pregnant body. "You might not understand now, but one day you'll see that the Seven Saints are less about counting and more about meaning something to the village and our family. The names matter less than our prayers to them."

"Then why name my sister Nali?"

"Bryne... We don't know if the child will be a boy or a girl."

"She's my sister."

"...Just please respect the Seven Saints."

"Okay..."

How someone explained, justified, or believed in the details of the Seven Saints was highly personal. As I grew up I came to think of it as how you learned to be an adult. Some things just needed to be accepted as unreasonable and unanswerable. Wasting time trying to find the missing pieces to a puzzle that never made sense could be dangerous. We

needed to learn to respect Saint Vinson just as much as we respected the cold climate. Through that divine respect we found infinite warmth in our heart and in each other.

Rwen and Zori probably struggle to appreciate just how important it is here. They have a vague idea of how to avoid being disrespectful, but they didn't grow up praying to survive another winter and working closely with neighbors if anyone fell on hard times.

That's not to say people in Veranum feel no connection to the Seven Saints. Religion is still important, it's just not a daily fact of life. There's no reason to pray for survival when the city walls protect us from the dangers outside.

The different mentalities could easily clash, but Rwen and Zori understood how to play along. I can only assume the cousins would talk at length about their beliefs. That's when there was likely harsher criticisms and hurt feelings. They needed to experience all of that to grow into proper adults though. Both my kids and my nieces.

The absolute truth never really mattered to me, and Me and Lumi never really made a conscious decision to raise our kids outside of religion. It was more like we never had the strongest of convictions and life just got too busy. There also aren't really any churches in Veranum that do things the same way we do in Besniwod. It would never feel the same even if we tried. We'd be back in the village for Frithlic Nyun at least. That was our original plan. Going back every year. I wonder how much missing out on that during quarantine has affected Rwen and Zori.

They were aware of the Seven Saints but lacked that visceral connection my family probably expected. We taught them the proper prayers, but they could only recite them with a wavered confidence – not a natural response.

"Oh it looks like the Juas are here!" Mekoti caught my attention and helped me relive that same memory again. Lumi and her family just outside the window. She was picking up

snow to make a snowball and throw it at her niece Frezy. Lin didn't look too happy at her youth being relived by her daughter, but there was a nice nostalgic flavor to the scene.

Tamu and Lochu had their arms full with all the snacks they'd bought at the market. Ridni got up to open the door and I moved to help carry in the treats. With a burst of cold air the Juas found their seats at the long table at the far end of the room. They had bought meat jellies at the train station bakery and sunflower seeds shipped in from the city at one of the market tents.

"Looks like Swefen is well enough to help carry in the snacks and keep drinking!" Tamu raised his freshly filled cup and prepared a thankful toast for my family. Lumi rolled her eyes at the switch between a joke about me being sick to an offer of alcohol. She was fine with celebrations but didn't like when people went overboard. With no Agum to blame she could only direct that disapproving feeling at me.

"Your cup's still full!" She smiled at me with no malicious intention. I found myself falling into that kind of bad habit. Defaulting to the negative and expecting Lumi to be upset with me. The truth was she respected and loved me and knew I could take care of things on my own. Even if something happened to the kids, she trusted me to take care of it properly – even when I didn't trust myself.

The afternoon stretched the hours with a few more cups of Ridni's mulled wine and several more platefuls of snacks. We were having fun enjoying the warmth and each other, reliving the past and making new memories in the familiar setting of the cafeteria.

"You mean people don't get arrested for drinking here?"

"Well yes, but not exactly Rwen." Tamu looked at his grandson with great care as he tried to explain how this wasn't a drink to get drunk and just a way for everyone to feel at home. "We're just happy to see you."

“So you’re not drunk?”

“No of course not!”

“I mean... are you really?” Nali spoke up as she sipped on a mug of hot tea. The table erupted into a more comfortable laughter as another round of stories leaped from chair to chair. Embers danced in the fireplace at the sound of each syllable, following the rhythm of the words from exaggerated explanation to dramatic conclusion. The truth mattered less than the time.

“But you can’t fool me, I know despite the name it still gets quite cold over in Veranum city!” Tamu was growing more comfortable after Dad told another tall tale about somehow finding enough firewood in one outing for an entire winter season.

“How are Rwen and Zori dealing with the weather?” The kids looked at me for an answer to Mom’s genuine question. They were dealing with it fine but didn’t know if this was some kind of Besniwod trick that required a carefully worded reply. It wasn’t, but they were smart to look to me first before saying whatever was on their mind.

“Coram you know how it is in Veranum. They have all that new technology and have always had the pipes to pump fresh gas. I heard they eradicated the grippe with all those fancy gadgets!” Tamu tried to take the pressure of the kids with a mostly correct response.

“A fancy gadget can’t cure a cold stomach!” It was Lumi’s mother, Lochu, who came in with a rebuttal. She was passionate about traditional remedies and local ingredients. It was a short hop from there to something even more political. Comments on what and where the city government invests its money. So I stole a glance from Lumi before the conversation turned sour. It was better to avoid the topic and end the meal on the dark side of uncomfortable. That’s not to say Lochu wanted people to feel uncomfortable.

Everyone meant well, but if it turned into a battle of whose mother provided the best advice we'd never leave the cafeteria.

Every question had a traditional answer. Usually involving some rare plant and a prayer to Saint Vinson. The rules could slightly shift and the words were ever changing. All it took was the mention of a lesser saint for the conversation to spiral into a battle of history before agreeing that Saint Vinson provided the best cure of them all.

So I thought it better than to hear the inevitable debate about whether it was Saint Himavan or Saint Denali who held the perfect recipe to help someone with a cold. I had no desire to test their faith and hear a thousand reasons why one way was better than the other from both sides.

"Whenever I get a cold I try to get one of those soups Tamu likes to make and one of those teas Mom always brews. They can be hard to find in Veranum so usually we stock up when we see them."

"How long can they sit in storage?" Lochu was on to focus on the next possible point with a problem.

"Is it really that hard to find such basic things in the city?" Mom joined in with a related complaint. At least they wouldn't argue with each other. That was how I learned to handle those situations.

As trade routes developed and reforestation advanced, there was less and less of a reason to rely on the traditional methods. But that rapid development also made it easy for every villager to blame any changes on the city. So they'd claim the good ones with personal pride and say the bad things were all a result of negative influence from the city.

I didn't care how correct the idea was. I was just happy to see them getting along. Both my Moms. There was also some truth to what they were worried about. Ingredients

could go bad and it was odd how uneven the trade routes made the exchanges. It was much easier to find pieces of Veranum in Besniwod than bits of Besniwod in Veranum.

“The world really is changing isn’t it.” Dad was tipping the scale back to the political as the conversation drifted away from the worries of remedies.

“You can say that again!” Tamu looked over at Dad and shared another sip of mulled wine. Everything really had changed incredibly quickly. Dad would never have moved to the city. His father never would have been able to move to this city. And my great grandfather before that wouldn’t even think it possible in a dream. I don’t think it’s wrong to say life in Besniwod has gotten better as a result of all the modern developments, but it definitely is a change and people will always be stubborn.

“And what about you Swefen?” Dad shifted the focus of the table back on me.

“What?”

“Are you sick again?”

“You always were sickly weren’t you?” Nali patted me on the back and placed both her hands on my head. She held my cheeks and forced me to look her in the eyes. I hadn’t felt sick since the first few days after we arrived. I was probably still sleep deprived and was suffering from nights of strange dreams, but there should have been nothing physical.

“Daddy’s sick you can tell.”

“What’s that Zori?”

“Look at how he’s trying to hide his back!” Zori had a way of noticing things about myself that I wasn’t even aware of. Slight changes in how I carried my weight or how I walked telling her all the things I tried to hide.

“I’m just tired.”

“We’ll get some soup for you.” Nali was already looking at Ridni to see what was available in the kitchen. She really lived up to the saint’s name. How much she cared finally answering Bryne’s question about why we named her after Saint Denali.

I wonder if Rwen and Zori have the same questions or if it just sounds like a normal name to them. I suspect it just sounds like their aunt’s name and nothing more. Everyone in the village probably saw that as a bit strange, but I think my kids are better for it. Learning to accept different realities as all being normal. They even get just enough of a taste of how it felt for me and Lumi.

Visiting Saint Vinson’s church for midday mass. The spectacle of choral chants and sacred scriptures. The prayers and shrines that all play a part in Frithlic Nyun. We at least gave them a small window into how we grew up.

I can’t imagine they got much out of the sermon. The theatrical bombast, especially with Agum taking the performance to the next level. I think they enjoyed the talk about Saint Vinson and Her triumphs were entertaining and interesting for them. How Her guiding wisdom gave us the will to continue living in the harshest cold past the tallest mountains.

After hearing about my friend’s religious awakening and unbelievable pilgrimage, I found myself questioning how much of it I thought was real. There are many who hold every word as absolute truth. People I love and respect. At the very least I can accept it as a part of the holiday. Something that helps make coming to Besniwod every year feel a bit more like home.

“I guess being home just makes you sick.”

“Oh... don’t be like that.” Another typical exchange between me and Bryne. Some may see it as nothing more than antagonistic, but if someone else were to speak the same

way to either one of us, we'd be the first to defend each other. The odd ways siblings can simultaneously share mean spirited fun while also sharing an absolute love.

By the time we finished everything it was dark outside. We would all see each other again soon enough, but this was one of those first final goodbyes for me and my family. We wouldn't be staying in that old wooden cottage again until next year at the earliest.

"If the penguin sanctuary is fully booked you know you always have a room at home." Mom gave me a deep hug as we headed for the exit. She was already missing the house being full.

"I know Mom. And don't forget to bring that coffee cake to the big feast at Tamu and Lochu's!" There was still a lot left of the holiday even though this felt strangely sad. My simple statement was enough to remind us all of that.

The cheer in the air is always at its highest when the temperature outside is at its lowest. That was one thing every family could agree on no matter their heritage. I like to think it's often like that. No matter the path, every new family is happy to find a balance between heritage and home.

Chapter 18

Willing Compromise

Swapping between families and traditions wasn't always so smooth. The obvious signs of how we did things slightly differently was always there. That time I got Lumi a special gift only to be met with a stupefied expression and an envelope in return.

I can remember telling that story to friends in Veranum much later on. They really struggled to see how two people from our tiny village could have such surprising differences. But I think that's just the thing. Two people from Veranum are likely to have more in common than two people from Besniwod. They've adopted a new culture and a new way of life while those in the villages hold on to their heritage.

And it wasn't like we didn't know or participate in those other traditions. I think it was more we didn't expect the person closest to us to not expect the same things. We just assumed that we already knew everything important to our hearts.

We talked about it years later with Agum at one of our Sunday barbecue nights. Endle prepared our usual table, but there was nothing to celebrate so we were only having a relaxed meal before beginning a new week.

"Remember that story about how I got Lumi that crystal snowball?" I asked Agum an odd question between bites of marinated strips of beef.

"You mean how you went way above and beyond what anyone would expect that early on into a relationship?" Lumi laughed into her cup as her face turned red. She was hiding some of those details for years. It didn't really matter, but it was nice to hear it said.

"But I thought she just didn't know how my family does Frithlic Nyun."

“Bro... You’ve told me how your family does that whole slow performance under the tree thing. I don’t think any other home in Besniwod quite does things that way.”

“I guess... plus we do give out those red envelopes too. I just never saw it as the focus of the holiday.”

“Sure. I think everyone has their favorite part. Some families focus on fireworks, some on the feast, some on the tree, and some on the envelopes. There’s probably an infinite combination of things. I could imagine some even having a special moment just for Bikeshi, making a million tiny spiders out of little puffs of fur.”

“You think people do that.”

“I don’t know of any, but nothing would surprise me.” Agum looked over to Endle. “Hey Endle! How do people in Nistilon celebrate Frithlic Nyun?”

“It’s the same as in Besniwod!”

“Midday mass, a big event in the central square, feasts and all that.”

“More or less! It’s only really different here in Veranum. They have a thousand times the money and put on one big show then pretend it’s all done and good for. Easier than spending a week offering up prayers I suppose.”

“So there you go. Does that satisfy your side of things too Lumi?”

“Close enough I suppose.”

But there were always more surprises. Always more discussions and disagreements. Something left to argue about. Another gift forgotten or a misunderstanding growing into an ongoing problem. It could feel like the different heritage and different families was more a convenient excuse than a real explanation.

The issues we had were probably more similar to other couples than we’d like to admit. It was hard to gauge since we didn’t really know of any other families split between

their village and the city. For the most part it would be the entire family leaves behind that life or eventually they go home. We chose neither and lived with the awkward consequences.

It was never so obvious than when we were setting the foundation of our family. Stability in a new apartment with a real view of the ocean past the city walls. Back when we still only had Rwen and he was just a small boy.

“So we’ll be spending Frithlic Nyun with my family right?” We were planning our yearly trip back to Besniwod and figuring out how exactly we would split our time during the holiday.

“Are you serious Swefen? We’ve spent the last three Frithlic Nyuns at your parents. It’s not fair to give your family all the attention. Especially with Rwen now.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It sure sounded like it.”

“Do you really want to do this Lumi?”

“Watch it Swefen.”

“Lumi.” She closed her eyes and clenched her fist. Thinking back to that night I needed to find shelter at Agum’s. Standing on the outer wall and watching the waves crash. Finding a locked door in the rain as I walked further down the streets.

“Swefen we can’t raise a child who only knows your family. I can’t do that.”

“What are you even saying? I would never say that!”

“You didn’t say anything but you sure did a lot.”

“I’m just trying to figure out how to get us settled back in Besniwod. We can stay with your parents if you want.”

"I just don't want it to be one sided!" Rwen would start crying if our fights went on for too long. His tears would bring us back to more reasonable tones, but the issue still wasn't resolved. It was wrong of me to plan so many trips without considering the last time she had a chance to spend real time with her family. I could feel the same weight Dad must feel after one of those ridiculous outbursts. Embarrassed at the mistake but unsure of what to say. Paralyzed by the choice and finding the easiest path to appeasement. Doing nothing and letting silence fill the void.

It took a lot of effort on my part to break those habits. The righteous indignation burning in my heart was a fire that burned for generations. I could never fully put it out, but I could at least attempt to direct the passion.

"It was simpler before, wasn't it?" I leaned on Lumi and rubbed her. She brushed me away as she helped Rwen with some snacks and his favorite stuffed toy. A fluffy snowball with his name on it. Something Lin had gotten for him when he was born. It was so worn now but he still loved it more than any of his other toys.

"I know you didn't mean to hurt me, but I just wish you'd think about my family too."

"I do think of your family."

"But somehow we've ended up spending most of our time with your family. I don't want to feel like I have to choose between you, Rwen, and my family."

"Lumi you know that's not how it's been."

"Can you just promise me that we'll spend at least half our time in Besniwod with my family?" Another heavy sigh. Rwen looked up with a concerned face as he slowly shoved more pieces of those crackers in his mouth. He was such a shy boy. Quiet as a mouse but so much emotion in his eyes.

"I promise."

“I’ll be mad if you’re lying again.”

I never intended to lie or mislead. When I reached out for her hand and she felt that sensation once again. Fingers interlocked as we found comfort in our memories. In our love. I think that’s when she finally believed me. When she knew I would make an honest effort to change. And I did.

Everything mixed and matched in uneven, sloppy patterns. I made sure that trip was different and our time well shared. Awkwardly making exits and moving from house to house. Maybe the least relaxing Frithlic Nyun of my life, but Lumi and her family truly appreciated every moment together.

I’m sure my own family could understand as well. There would be light banter and complaining about how we were leaving early, but that’s a part of growing up and working on a new family. New traditions and new routines that fit our lives.

The rhythm became more natural as the years went on and we all learned which part of the holiday our families cared for the most. There was a balance that seemed to find itself in how we do things now. The solution was always there; we were just so focused on the consequences we couldn’t work it out.

Sharing warmth is much more in line with what Frithlic Nyun is supposed to be about. An answer that more than matches those images of Saint Vinson passing Her torch rather than having us steal Her flame.

Packing for the trip was hectic for different reasons this last time. Five years under quarantine and we were no longer used to the departure dance. Our old system of double checking bags and giving every gift a place was slow and rusty. The confusion only built on top of itself as we started running late. There are very few passenger trains from Veranum to Besniwod.

“Zori! Rwen! We need to leave now!” I shouted out to the kids as I stood by the door with the pile of luggage at my feet. We were carrying nearly three bags for each person. And an extra piece of luggage filled with nothing but snacks and gifts. After being away for so long the demands were high and Lumi was never one to not deliver.

“I’ll look after the kids you start bringing the bags down okay?” Lumi didn’t want me to just stand by the door and if I had nothing else to do I could help speed us along that way. She was always less worried about missing trains and schedules than I was.

“Alright, that sounds like a good idea.” The logistics of working together were smoother even in that stressed state. We were cramped and excited to see both our families like we used to and there was no pressure to impose on one or the other. “Lumi?”

“Yes Swefen?” Lumi rolled her eyes at my goofy expression. She knew exactly what was coming next as I leaned in and grabbed her hand.

“I love you Lumi.”

“I love you too Swefen.”

Chapter 19

Oval Shaped Homes

The entire village of Besniwod was harder and harder to define. The main section was the clearest. The central plaza and the surrounding buildings. The train station, Saint Vinson's church, the cafeteria, and so on.

The enclosed central area provided limited access to other roads and an outside beyond. Built as underpasses or tunnels through the main buildings of the square, they led out further into the wilderness. But not too far. The path between the church and the cafeteria led to an area the government used to test out those wooden cottages. Ones like my parents' place.

They were a little more than a five minute walk from the inner walls of the plaza and marked what most thought of as the limit of the village. At least in that direction. Since reforestation took root, the area was now covered in trees. Very specific paths were maintained to help make it easier for people coming and going through the main section of Besniwod.

That was especially important as a kid. Walking up and down that path to and from school nearly every day. In the pitch black of the coldest months and the civil twilight of the warmer. It was well lit for most of my lifetime and never dangerous outside of the low temperatures. Or it felt that way to me.

The project was deemed a failure though and construction of those wooden cottages was put on hold indefinitely. The ones that were around were still bought and sold, but when they were destroyed or damaged beyond repair that was it. Dorub's new house wasn't just probably going to be a mix of stone style and wood, it definitely needed to be.

Like all the new houses in that direction it would be built closer to the village and follow those new laws and regulations.

On the other side of the square there was an older development project. Started before reforestation was even a dream, settlers began thinking about building habitats into the hill across the train tracks. They tell us that's originally why they chose this spot for Besniwod. That hill protects us from the worst winds.

At the time they must have just finished completely a full circuit around the central square. Turning it into the courtyard we know it as today, but the population would surely grow and people were eager for expansion. I can bet the logistics of transporting more stones was also a nice way to ensure more people had jobs. Work for a generation as they figured out what exactly to do with the people who called Besniwod home.

The unique architecture that they came up with for the new development won prizes and was lauded inside the walls of Veranum. Oval-shaped stone homes built into the hill itself. The front section could be easily raised above the ground while the back could find further insulation from being dug into the ground.

The design further benefited from giving every household a makeshift second story or something like a balcony. The bit sticking out from the hill that was technically the roof but was very easy to walk up to. The space also came with the addition of a yard. Both were seen as pretty massive upgrades from the often cramped quarters of the apartments around the central square.

Everyone was proud of how successful the entire new neighborhood became. A fresh new flavor for Besniwod as families moved into their new homes. One of them being a distant relative of Lumi's. And so she grew up in one of those homes. The Juas still lived

there today, at least Lumi's parents. With how the stone walls were passed down for generations it was expected to eventually go to her sister Lin if we stayed in Veranum.

The project was eventually scrapped though. The oval homes seem to be too expensive to build and rely too much on imported stones. These days any work on them is relegated to repairs. I wouldn't be surprised if they're even swapping out some of the stones for local lumber. A way for the village to get back at the city for abandoning the design.

The people who lived there were especially close to each other as a result of all this. Working hard to keep the stone laden paths up the hill free from ice and snow. Nobody wanted to see one of their neighbors slip and fall down to the central square. Kids loved it though. They would roll and sled down the slope as far and fast as they could.

"Mommy!" Zori reached out to Lumi as we approached the stone path across the train tracks. We were worried the memories of how she fell in the central square could grow into an exaggerated fear. My family would bring it up every time they saw her, dramatizing the events for each retelling.

"Don't worry Zori. Grandma and Grandpa Jua always make sure the path is nice and easy to walk on. The neighbors help too you know! Like Auntie Lin and Uncle Akit! And I'll make sure Rwen and Frezy check for any extra slippery stones every day, okay?" But when Lumi bent down to make sure little Zori wasn't afraid she was met with rosy cheeks and a cheeky smile.

"No Mommy! I want to slide down the hill!" Zori laughed as she began running circles around her mom. I smiled at Lumi and we shared one of those sympathetic sighs. It can feel nice to know the kids aren't dealing with a problem we thought they may have. But it was another headache now keeping Zori safe from herself.

“Rwen. Keep an eye on Zori alright?”

“Ok Dad.” Rwen was busy talking with his cousin Frezy about some new drama on the radio. The shows were always changing and I was already out of touch. I was happy they could connect over it though, even if I didn’t understand why they liked it.

Fortunately, all the talk about keeping the stones safe wasn’t hyperbole and Zori would have to really try to slip and fall. I was more worried Rwen would want to show off and get hurt in the process. Keeping him on guard duty for Zori helped ease both worries at once.

Everyone says he’s shy, but he could be incredibly reckless. I think that’s what fuels his dreams of going abroad. It reminded me of Agum. The young Agum. Not this new saintly one. I feel bad about dividing him up into two people like that. It has to be the wrong way to think about it. But how else can I remember him as he was and not as the pious priest at Saint Vinson’s church.

“You’re going to love this year’s feast!” Lumi’s dad Tamu was outside of everything else, also a good cook. The Juas had shifted careers several times throughout their life and that led to them becoming experts in a wide variety of skills. Not least of which was food.

“Did you get the fish?” Lumi was pulled away from Zori by Tamu’s words. Our daughter was fine and didn’t need any consoling. She was free to go back in time and become the young girl her dad once knew.

“You haven’t been home in five years and you thought I wouldn’t have it? Even if we needed to keep it frozen for over half a year I’d have it ready!” Tamu’s words were as genuine as his heart. He loved Lumi so much and would give her the world if she asked.

"I can't wait Dad!" Lumi started skipping up the stones. She told me about how she used to do that with her sister. Up and down to and from school and church. They would make it a race and try to sneak in snacks.

"What do you have there?" Lumi's Mom Lochu would see them coming up the stairs and into the oval shaped home. Lumi and Lin both shared extra guilty faces as they sloppily held their hands behind their backs.

"Nothing Mommy!" They would shout in unison as they rushed past the dinner table and into their room. Lochu knew what they were doing but loved her kids more than she felt the need to scold them.

"Don't ruin your dinner! Daddy's working hard to cook that fish out of season!"

"What!" Lumi came back out with sweets hanging out of her mouth and still holding some in her hand. "But I thought we had to wait until Frithlic Nyun to eat that fish!"

"Daddy found it for you Lumi! A special shipment came in from the city."

"That's amazing! Lin did you hear that!" Lumi would then hype up the meal to her sister as Tamu began making dinner. The whole house would smell like her favorite dish. It was only much later that she realized how much money it must have cost. An out of season catch somehow making its way to the Besniwod market.

"I can make you some as soon as we get in as a snack. You'll have more than enough during the feast as well!" Tamu shouted toward Lumi as she opened the door to her childhood home. The repaired wooden door welcomed us into a new home.

"Rwen, Zori, Frezy! Come in and get out of the cold!" Lochu shouted to the kids as everyone scurried inside, leaving me and Lin alone outside. We didn't often have moments like that, but we did appreciate each other's company. She once shared with me how she

hated how I stole her sister's attention away, but learned to love me for how happy I made her at the same time.

"Is Akit coming over later?" I asked the simple question as we slowly walked up the steps. Her husband wasn't with us at the time so I assumed he'd be joining us a little later.

"Yeah, he wanted to take care of some business in the markets before coming back here."

"Ah I see." Looking at my sister-in-law I couldn't help but wonder if I was ever going to find that dreamcatcher. She looked obviously pregnant at this point. We both knew we wouldn't be back before the baby was born. "I don't think I know the story. How did you and Akit meet anyway?" I tried saying anything to keep those thoughts away as we stood on the top step. Taking a moment to have a more private conversation before walking inside.

"Well we've been neighbors for as long as I can remember. We're around the same age too. We started spending more time together after school and one thing led to another. It's a simple story but it's good enough for us."

"You're living here with Tamu and Lochu?"

"Yeah. We thought about getting an apartment in the central square but it's better out here. With no new developments planned it's also nice to know the kids can grow up in a real home."

"And I guess you'll take over the business as well?"

"Well, someone needs to stay here and take care of our parents." One of those painful truths. Living in both worlds and satisfying neither. Traitors who abandoned family and home for a mediocre life in the city.

Those were harsh thoughts and the worst possible reading of who we were. Who we are. Not everyone shared that criticism or gave voice to that critique, but it did exist. And it was the loudest in my own head.

“It’s not like that Lin.”

“I know... It’s just been so long since Lumi came home.” She was right and there was no real response to give. Even if our hands were tied behind a quarantine, time moved on. We couldn’t go back and make up for the lost holidays and years. All we could do is make the most of what’s to come. I needed to find that dreamcatcher to make up for what was done.

“Let’s go inside and help sort out the luggage.”

“Alright. And Swefen... We all love you and your family.”

We went inside and began sorting through the mess of suitcases and bags. Somewhere in the pile I was sure we could find the gift. I needed to. I needed to make up for the lost time. I needed to show Lumi I loved her family as much as her family loved me.

Chapter 20

Fuller Than Full

Agum was the first person to warn me about how different a feast would be with Lumi's family. Everyone in Besniwod exaggerated their hospitality and made wild claims about how they served the strongest ale, the thickest grog, and the more flavorful mulled wine. What I never considered is that somewhere in the village needed to be the best at all those things.

And that happened to be the neighborhood of oval shaped homes on the hill across the tracks. Where Lumi's family lived and where she grew up. The lines of how and why were blurred by history and covered in the seasons of snow, but there didn't need to be a good reason for it to be true.

"Swefen. I know it's going to happen. When you go back to spend Frithlic Nyun with Lumi's family. Trust me, you're going to be fuller than you've ever been in your life." We were at the usual Sunday barbecue spot and already on the third bottle. The looser lips of a drunken night in Endle's restaurant tended to lead to more emotional exchanges.

"He's right Swefen." Lumi was hiding her mouth as she laughed through her drink.

"I've grown up going to Frithlic Nyun feasts! I know everyone pigs out! That's the point!"

"They do it a little differently where the Juas live. Back me up Endle!" Agum called over the owner to offer more evidence. I failed to see how it would help. A stranger from Nistilon wouldn't know much about a neighborhood in Besniwod.

"What are you on about?" Endle wore his confusion on his face as he walked over and took note of the empty bottles on our table.

“Agum is drunk and crazy. He wants you to tell me about our village.”

“You know I’m from Nistilon not Besniwod, right?” Endle picked up some of our empty plates and began shuffling back to the kitchen.

“No, no, no... Just hear me out Endle. I don’t think Swefen is ready for a Frithlic feast at the Juas. Right?”

“Who are the Juas?” Endle put down the plates and got ready to try and decipher the meaning behind Agum’s ramblings. He was trying his best to play along with the conversation, but it really was too local for him.

“Lumi’s family.”

“Okay...”

“Well it comes down to the lesser saints.”

“And who do the Juas claim as their lesser saint?”

“Saint Himavan!” Lumi answered in a drunken shout. She was proud of her family and her heritage. While there was next to no way Endle would know the Juas by name, he could be familiar with other families under saint Himavan.

I think that’s what Agum did. He rolled the dice or had talked about it before, but it’s safe to say Nistilon worked in a similar way to Besniwod. We had a way of dividing up between ourselves into neighborhoods and sections that were mostly from one lesser saint or another. The people who lived in the oval homes on the hill were overwhelmingly from saint Himavan’s heritage.

“Aaah... I see.”

“So you get it right?”

“Swefen you’re going to have the feast of a lifetime!” Endle and Agum shared a laugh with Lumi smiling softly at me, she thought the confused look on my face was cute.

The owner went back to work and we ordered another bottle. The memories aren't nearly as clear after that, but we seemed to have had a great time.

I was pretty embarrassed by the incident for a long while after. How I somehow knew so little about my home. Sticking mostly to my family and the edge of the village that hugged the forest and the frontier, we'd explore the restaurants and shops in the central plaza complex, but it was never an exchange of familial expectations. And I don't think I ever went up the hill with the oval homes. There was no reason to. My family was on the other side of town.

I would say I still didn't really get how differently we viewed the importance of being a host until we were throwing our own party in that run down apartment. I could somehow explain the feast back in Besniwod as her family putting in extra effort to impress me rather than just the normal way things were done.

"Swefen are you going to help me or just sit there!" Lumi yelled at me from across the room as I lazed about reading a new book and writing down my thoughts. A scholarly exercise that could be done at any time. She was busy preparing all the ingredients for the feast we were putting on.

"Do we really need to go through all the trouble of cooking so much?"

"Why wouldn't we?" She looked at me like I was stupid as she began cutting up more vegetables and we heard a knock on the door. "At least get that would you." I slowly got up making a lot of noise to show how annoyed I was at having to move.

"Agum? You're here early?"

"I wouldn't want to let Lumi do all the work! Plus I brought some specialty goods from Besniwod!" Agum was always doing things like that. Finding the one ingredient we couldn't find and coming over early to help with the cooking and the cleaning.

“Thank you Agum. Start cutting up the meats and we’ll get the stove on to help with the heating. Although with so many people I doubt we’ll need to keep it very hot.”

“Yes ma’am!” Agum received the usual look of disapproval but his help was more than welcome. I tried to contribute but mostly just got in the way. We never really fought about the lack of effort on my side, but it was clear there was a mismatch in how we thought a host should act.

Seeing how our families did Frithlic Nyun helped explain it all, but didn’t answer the question of how our kids should behave. There was little to no expectation from people who grew up in Veranum so I leaned heavily into fully embracing the lesser saint Himavan and having extravagant meals that went way above and beyond what anyone asked for.

“Rwen! Keep the pot stirred and let Zori help with what she can!”

“Dad Zori can’t even reach the counter!”

“She can at least stir the pot! Bring up a stool and she’ll have fun with it!” We shouted back and forth in our modern kitchen. Lumi was out getting a few last minute supplies. Our house was the unofficial meeting spot for the Frithlic Nyun feast during quarantine.

Our neighbors from a few floors above and below would crowd into our home and we’d spend the night sharing recipes and memories from our village home. We were the only ones who hadn’t grown up in the city and they found even the most mundane details of our life to be exceptional.

“We would have to rush from the church back home. If we were out for more than a few minutes we could end up with a dangerous fever and miss out on weeks of school.” I would tell them one piece of the puzzle and Lumi would nod her head as she remembered a similar feeling. “Even when it’s warm it’d probably be too cold for you lot used to the city!”

They really couldn't believe our lives were like that. I like to think it helped them understand how Frithlic Nyun made families so close. A chance to think less about survival and more about living life. The excess of food and leaving fuller than full were gifts in themselves.

And every feast would end the same way. Saying goodbye and putting the kids to bed. Settling down with Lumi and reaching out for her hands. Fingers interlocked and feeling perfectly matched. It didn't matter how much we didn't understand about each other as long as we learned to live and love together.

The last sips of drink slipping into pleasant dreams on most nights. The distinction between irony and sincerity mattering less as long as we had fun. The longstanding traumas and overarching worries only coming to haunt me on that first trip after quarantine ended.

Falling from the peak of Saint Vinson and hearing the prayers of everyone on the continent. Reliving old memories and past regrets. I lost the dreamcatcher and was a hunter on the run. Stuck in the wild and sleeping in the hay as the world turned faster and faster.

Her flame, our prayers, dreams from beyond. I could only just make out the riddle as the letters formed pictures in my mind. Words to make me think thoughts. Music to make me feel feelings. A song to make me feel thoughts.

Chapter 21

Final Feast

If there were a way the Juas really differed from my own it would be in how expressions were most honest within the family. Lumi was used to letting raw emotions flow in and out of conversations within the protection of those close to her. Anger, happiness, despair, and confusion as welcome at the dinner table as the stacks of plates and piles of bottles.

That really came across in the extravagance of the feast. Making sure everyone never needed to lift a finger for an extra bite and keeping every cup full to the brim. Those details on the importance of comfort as an emotion are how the unexpected guest could leave feeling like they'd never had quite so much in their entire life.

There were also simpler superficial differences in how the room was prepared and what was expected from the seating arrangements. Hard to say how much of it was a result of the oval-shaped home and how much of it was passed down from pre-migration history. It didn't matter either way.

The result was an absence of the multiple tables I grew up with. There was no kids and adults table, just one large round table in the middle of the dining room. There was a smaller platform about an arm's length in from the edge that could spin around the table as well. The design was meant to give everyone their own eating space, while making it convenient for each dish to make its way to every guest.

With the different table came different rules about who was supposed to sit where as well. The vague ideas of a place of most respect – the seat for the host – and the seats

following an order of esteem, going down the aging line until you reached the youngest members of the family.

Generally it would be Tamu Jua acting as the host so he'd take the seat on the opposite side from the main door. On his sides would be my parents as the oldest most esteemed guests for the night.

Directly across from Tamu would be Lochu and on her sides the next most important guests. In this case likely me and Lumi. There were detailed rules for every spot, but within the family such specific expectations were largely relaxed in the name of finding a spot wherever you thought would be the most fun.

And taking the wrong seat wasn't some grand offense in that setting. It was like if the wrong person sat at the main adult table in my parents' house or if an adult sat at the kids table. Nothing inherently wrong but it could feel a little off.

Since Lin was usually invited to the feast at my parent's house it was typical for my sisters to be invited to theirs in turn. Even Uncle Umbali was known to show up as a semi self-invited guest and fill in one of the spots on the side as Tamu and Lochu worked quickly to find extra chairs.

More than different seats, the younger generation also had a different expectation at the Juas. Rather than being relegated to a separate table and walking back and forth for food, they were meant to fill in any between spots and took up the role of unpaid staff. Filling cups and picking up plates as the adults shared stories and bragged about how their kids were the best at something or another.

The way they served everything was significantly different as well. Rather than placing large chunks of meat and an assortment of side dishes spread out across two tables, Frithlic Nyun at the Juas was about multiple courses. Tamu would motion to his

daughters and then his daughters would give their husband's a look. Akit and I would then get up and bring out the next plate and place it in an empty spot on the spinning platform.

We were supposed to turn it to face the guests of honor first who would take a portion before moving down the line. That's all getting ahead of the night and its many dishes. Before we ever sat down for the final feast there would already be several snacks out for us. Something to nibble on as we waited for all the guests and the main course to finish cooking.

The typical snacks in the neighborhood were some kind of meat jelly, roasted chestnuts, sunflower seeds, and home made sausages. And it was never long before the first toast was made and we could begin eating. The smell of freshly cooked meat filling the room and providing the extra bit of hunger we would surely need. I saw it as a different take on the moment of silence. I hope my family did as well.

"Good health and good times!" Tamu would conclude a somewhat formulaic speech as a heartfelt thank you to his guests – to his family. As if on cue the first dishes would arrive and the evening would turn into a bustling turnstile of flavors and stories.

No matter however many specific dishes were on the menu, it always ended with a fish. Something freshly caught from our local lakes rather than brought in from the bay. Reliably having a catch like that is a relatively new phenomenon for Besniwod. Our parents' generation would have been happy with six month old cans and here we were eating a real bounty. The fish and its flavors added to the feeling of progress and fortune we hoped to find in the year ahead of Frithlic Nyun.

"Besniwod sure has changed since we were young." Tamu would always try to find some way to connect with my parents, especially Dad.

"They call it progress but I don't know how well the name fits."

“Life certainly is easier for the new generation. Before the revolution it was difficult to have enough food to eat.” The history of the comment was mired in the politics of progression. What Dad called unification some called revolution. Both refer to how Veranum started a new initiative around the time of my grandparents to bring all the villages under their control.

It wasn't always a peaceful transition and it was clear their goal was to start the reforestation project. There is a lot of truth in the benefit it provided. Besniwod may not exist today without Veranum's intervention. We were always loosely connected to the city and something about a war across the strait changed the way the government viewed the villages.

Regardless of who may have been right or wrong, the politics of progression were a good way to get Dad worked up. Tamu was simply trying to reminisce about the old days. He viewed the harder times with nostalgic eyes, but was grateful his kids grew up not having to worry about their next meal.

“Well, unification may have built better railways, but just look at the old engine. One stunt to get it up and running. But they haven't touched it since!” Dad was attempting to walk that thin line of being righteous and diplomatic. Putting his views into a common complaint for everyone in the village.

“You never forget to remind us which side the Kumris were on.” The air chilled at Tamu's comment. A few generations ago it would not have been out of the question for our families to fight on opposite sides of unification, for and against the revolution. Me and Lumi's generation were well past it, but I can imagine our parents grew up with more than a little animosity.

“To the greatest fathers in all of Besniwod! Dad, we may struggle to see eye to eye but your passion is admirable and your conviction worthy of Saint Vinson’s blessing.” I suddenly stood up to try to defuse the situation. At the Juas it’s normal to break up the mealtime conversations with a call to arms in the form of an enthusiastic toast. I just didn’t quite know what I would say, more worried about avoiding an inter-family argument than preparing a nice speech. “Tamu, you raised the love of my life and have always been a role model for how to be a caring father. I know our village is small and the nights are cold, but we get through the harshest winters and the darkest nights by working together. That’s Saint Vinson’s Triumph and the true spirit of Frithlic Nyun. You both taught me that by being a bright star in the sky, making me a better father for Rwen and Zori and a better husband to Lumi.” The room went silent as I flirted with the religious in an obvious plea to both sides of the family. In my heart of hearts I didn’t care who was right and who was wrong as long as we made it through the final feast. Maybe it was me still being tired from the stress of the trip or fatigue from my ongoing fight with those nightmares, but all I could think to do was raise my glass again. “Cheers for another perfect feast with all my family!”

Dad and Tamu relaxed into calmer poses and said their own toasts in turn. They knew it was better to live for our future than be damned by a past beyond their control. And fortunately we were all soon saved by the mandatory desserts. Eight of them to be exact. They supposedly related to the Seven Saints. That same old game with numbers and how they simultaneously are strict and abstract. Convoluted explanations for what was more simply tied to our common heritage.

“You know Mom...” My second sister Bryne was referencing that old story we knew all too well. “I never did learn to count all the saints the right way.”

“Oh Bryne I’m sure you’re just joking.” Mom shut down the idea of a conversation on how we defined the exact number of saints quicker than Bryne could ask any other questions.

Thankfully the last desserts arrived before any more protests could begin. A rice pudding with generous amounts of cinnamon. Tamu always added a surprise for a lucky family member. He gathered almonds or some other nuts from the market throughout the year just for this occasion. And on the day of the final feast he’d carefully and secretly add one to a bowl.

There were folktales about Saint Vinson’s pet spider Biksehi using his hordes to gather the nuts and give them away as gifts for another season. Seeds of all kinds were often associated with good luck and fortune. More importantly, it was a fun and silly game of chance to see who was the luckiest person at the table.

Lin’s daughter Frezy would be the first to get up and start putting down the bowls of porridge on the table. I’d try my best to give Rwen a signal before he needed to contend with Lumi’s glare. One way or another he’d get up and bring Rhodiola and Zori with him to help with the rest of the bowls. Then the competition would begin.

“Can I spin the table first!” Zori quickly learned to love getting into the game of it all. We tried to do something similar at our home in Veranum, but we didn’t have a big round table. While it was generally considered rude to spin it out of turn, no one had an issue with letting Zori play. She would surely remember the night if for nothing else than the fun she had making the table go round and round.

“Go ahead Zori!” Lochu smiled at her granddaughter and Zori’s eyes lit up in excitement. The bowls moved around and around until she reached out to suddenly stop it at a seemingly measured location.

“Okay! Let’s see who got the almond!” Zori was pulling out all her secret techniques to try and win the competition. “Who won! Who won!” She was just as quick to admit defeat as it became clear there was nothing but dessert in her bowl.

No one at the table was coming forward which was a pretty good sign it was one of the older relatives. The kind of person who wouldn’t really care – or didn’t care to know right away. It also provided the right catalyst for a new game where Zori could try to figure out who was trying to hide the fact that they had the almond in their porridge.

“My porridge does taste a little funny...” Mom was a bad actor, but that only made it harder to tell if she was trying to hide her winnings or just trying to tease Zori.

“Grandma Kumri! Did you win?”

“I don’t know, maybe you should come over here and check.” Zori jumped up and dashed over, spilling her bowl as she left. She grabbed Mom’s spoon and began stirring her dessert to look for the precious almond nut.

“There’s nothing in here!?”

“Oooh... Maybe you should try yours again.” Mom looked to Rwen and I could see the game they were playing. Half of Zori’s porridge was spilled all over her spot at the table, but there was more than enough there to hide another almond.

“I already checked and I lost.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure! I’m sure!”

“Just check again for Grandma Kumri.”

“...fine.” Zori slowly walked back to her seat and stuck her spoon into her bowl expecting nothing but the clinking sound of hitting the porcelain bottom. Instead, her spoon struck something else. “What? I won! But I thought I lost!”

“Hooray Zori!” The table all cheered for her as she went all smiles and raised the almond into the air.

“I won! I won! I bet it was Bikeshi sneaking it in!” We all laughed at the odd reference. It was the kind of thing my grandmother would say – my mother’s mother. I’m sure hearing it warmed Mom’s heart. Little Zori was giving her mom’s soul new life for another generation.

I’ve learned to love these moments. Even the uncomfortable ones when Dad and Tamu drag us into a political debate. It’s better to have a memorable moment where you did something wrong than to have been too scared to do anything at all. Besides, Lumi thought it was cute how hard I tried to keep the peace and appreciated how much I respected her family and all her saint Himavan traditions.

I honestly enjoyed every moment of the feast. It wasn’t always easy for me to feel so naturally at home with Lumi’s family though. Learning to get over the differences in how we celebrated the same holiday was part of falling in love and living together.

The only way you can really do that is by being honest with each other. Learning and growing and realizing you will always be there for each other. My biggest fault there was leaning way too hard into being polite when Lumi and her family just wanted me to be comfortable and happy.

It got to the point where I would be afraid to speak about how much I had a distaste for certain dishes. Tamu would go on and on about how it was a special catch or an imported spice. I’d have to sit there and find the courage I needed to take a single bite.

There were many memories where I would take the wrong step as well. Thinking a joke could be made when it couldn’t. Expecting the same reaction from Lumi’s family that I would get from my own. Understandable enough but always embarrassing to remember.

Even simple things I didn't think could be cause for concern sometimes stepped on an unknown taboo.

"My little sister Nali always found it funny how she got her name. The rest of us have pretty standard names for Besniwod but she gets a name from one of the Seven Saints! My dad says it's a thing they sometimes do in our family. Our way of showing respect to the lesser saint." Complete silence in response to my words.

"Swefen..." Lumi tried to draw my attention away from the hole I was digging.

"They even decided on the name before we knew whether she was a boy or a girl! My second sister Bryne would annoy them saying she already knew, but how could she really."

"That's very funny." Lochu answered in a diplomatic smile followed by an uncharacteristic silence. I looked over to Lumi for an answer and she shook her head in disapproval.

"Do you know nothing about the other saints?"

"I know all the Seven Saints!"

"Yes, but have you ever thought about why you never met someone named Himavan?"

"No..."

"We think it's unspeakably rude to use the name of our lesser saint as your own. It sounds arrogant at best. We know your family and others don't share that tradition though, but please keep it in mind before bragging about blasphemy."

"Blasphemy?"

"Maybe not the right word... but it just sounds bad okay?"

"Okay..."

"Don't worry about it Swefen. I think it's a great story and your sister has a good name." Tamu was always more than accommodating. He was someone who simultaneously held tremendous pride in his Saint Himavan heritage while also being very understanding of the existence of other ways of thinking. I always respected him for that and how warmly he welcomed me and everyone else into his life and home.

"But if you want a better story about actual blasphemy..."

"Swefen... please don't."

"Relax Lumi it's fine." It probably wasn't fine but I was already a little drunk and desperately wanted to impress Lumi's family. "So when we were going over the name Nali, I can remember Bryne asking my dad why we call them the Seven Saints when there's nine of them." My comment was again met with a stunned silence. I wasn't sure if or how I had offended and just shyly looked over at Lumi for an answer. All she could do was shake her head as Lochu tried her best to save the conversation.

"Well here's the thing Swefen, the Seven Saints are like a giant tree. That's why we have the First Tree in the central square. Each branch is a different saint with Vinson standing strong at the top." Lochu's explanation was very different from what my parents told us. I was a little awestruck at how her understanding not only contradicted what I was taught, but seemingly was just as right.

"I guess that makes some sense."

"But you have to remember the Seven Saints are not trees. These are sacred mountains whose peaks are well defined. All of creation can be traced to one of the Seven Saints and we are all a part of them."

I can see how Lumi was right all along. It would have probably been better to drop the subject before trying to make a light joke on heretical childhood misunderstandings.

But any lingering embarrassment from those memories melted away. The smell of the next course bringing me back to the final feast.

Everyone around the table enjoying another round. We were all so much older now, but our bonds were just as strong. There was a warmth in the formality. Comfort in the ritual.

I doubt I'll ever have the same natural reflexes as Lumi, but as long as I can appreciate the emotion behind the gestures I think we'll all be happy. Perhaps Rwen and Zori will fare better and have a more instinctual understanding of it all.

There was a time when I would hold on to those unreasonable ideals of understanding everything and everyone. Digging into all the reasons why we were happy and we were sad. You learn through the years that it's not always worth looking for an answer. Everything erodes and we only find a constant in Her flame.

I learned it's better to simply accept a new definition of normal and do your best to be a good person. Pushing beyond that quickly leads to folly. That was a big step I needed to take in order to feel like a true part of the Juas and their family.

Chapter 22

Special Broadcast

Desserts would be devoured and any leftover rituals would be served in due course. Be it hours or minutes, eventually Lumi's house would relax into warmer hours of entertainment. It was common for the adults to stay at the large round table. More drinks and dishes to be served as desired as parlor and poker games began.

It always felt like the exact rules to the games would change from one year to the next, but it wasn't such a big deal. Arguing about which was the right way to use a Joker and an Ace was a part of the fun. Spirited conversations in more ways than one. And as the bottles grew emptier it wouldn't take long for some spice to be added to the mix. A spot gambling in a pragmatic test of luck and fortune.

The kids were obviously meant to move away so the adults could unleash their rough edges. Usually that meant finding some space in the nearby living room. Someplace where they could listen to the yearly broadcast. Live shows full of spectacle from the city. The reception wasn't always the best with everyone and anyone tuning in, but it didn't really matter what was seen or heard. It was simply comforting to have it there.

And as the hours stretched later into the night, it was more and more likely for rash decisions from the adult's gambling would lead to obscure arguments. The flexible rules also meant flexible excuses. A way out if you started losing and an easy target for understandable complaining.

There would also always be that one aunt or two uncles who took the whole thing a bit too seriously. They'd get their comeuppance either that night in their losses or during

the next dinner when everyone shared the embarrassing stories and worked out a way to ensure future losses.

“And another round to Umbali Kumri. I swear you’re a professional!” Auntie Iscald shouted across the table, more complaining than complimenting. Uncle Umbali was known to be a bit of a gambler but that wasn’t even the largest half of his vices. What really bothered my aunt was how he seemed to navigate the rules.

“It’s all in the cards!”

“So you’re hiding some extra cards up your sleeves?” Bryne would chime in with a retort for the rest of the table. An uncomfortable laugh shared with another cheer. People really were questioning Uncle Umbali’s skill. One of those *how is he cheating* moments.

“And before you ask... No. I’m not cheating!”

“That sounds like something a cheater would say.”

“If you don’t believe me, ask my brother. Aldor? Would I ever cheat at cards?”

“Yes.” Dad wasn’t the same kind of swindler as Uncle Umbali. He was a strong man of his word who believed in the absolute truth. Justice as an objective fact – if only everyone would agree. His answer sent laughs down the table and raised another point of contention.

“You wound me! I guess that’s the Kumri way. A man ratting out his own brother!”

“What do you mean? I know who you are and I can see you hiding cards like you did when we were kids. Dad used to call you out on it too!” They were moving away from a shared joke and into more uncomfortable territory. Hinting at some of those old scars that often led to people not getting along. Like politics but worse. And of course Dad was spearheading the direction of the discussion.

“Ask Tamu if he’d stick up for his own brother!”

“Don’t bring me into this!” Tamu laughed as he dealt out another hand. The betting had already begun and I suspect this was Uncle Umbali’s real trick. While everyone focused on whatever ridiculous words were coming out of his mouth, he was coming up with a plan for the round at hand. He wasn’t cheating in the way he was being accused, but he was playing with an advantage.

“So if Cheyot came to you and confessed a crime you’d just send him to Veranum to rot in some prison?”

“My older brother? That Cheyot?”

“Yes!”

“We don’t condemn our own family like that.”

“See Aldor! I told you!” Cheyot was a bit of a black sheep in the Jua family. He was a known thief and became a burden for their name. After losing his home in an avalanche he became a merchant and decided to simply live in his market tent. He talked about wanting to take up some of the subsidized work farther down the railway line. The new frontier project. Highly dangerous and meant for people with nothing to lose.

“That’s not fair Umbali. I would say the same about you. If some stranger came up and asked me how much of a bastard you were, I wouldn’t let them stand with their feet straight. That doesn’t change how we speak about it here. We’re all family so it’s different, right?” Dad was trying to make sense of his own thoughts as he worked to not admit defeat. I’m not sure which he cared about more. Being correct in his logic or saying the right thing.

“I agree there Aldor.” Tamu said with a smile as he turned his cards over to reveal his winning hand. Umbali was shocked to see his tactic fail and spilled his drink over his own cards.

“Seven Saints! Dammit! I spilled my drink again!” We all laughed at the new memory that was sure to be shared at the next big dinner. That was what the pace of the night was. Maybe we’d switch up the games or some people would leave to join the kids in the living room, but the atmosphere was always the same with that mix of conversations.

Everything could of course also be heard by the younger members of the family as well. They would be playing less serious card games and switching up the rules quicker than rounds could end. In their own way, they let the same topics come up. Accusing someone of cheating and trying to work together to win.

“You cheated!” Zori raised her voice loud enough for the whole house to hear. She was keenly aware of how the older cousins would try to play tricks on her. The easiest mark and the most gullible member of the family.

“I’m not cheating that’s just how the game is played.” Lin’s daughter Frezy cooked up a lie to try and calm down the scene.

“No. I know you’re cheating!”

“How could you know I’m cheating?”

“Look! You accidentally gave me your cards!” Zori turned her hand over to reveal a well shuffled surprise. A winning hand clearly meant for someone else fully on display. She figured out the dealer must have screwed up the fix and called it out as soon as she saw.

“Oh no...” Rwen nervously laughed as his dealer position drew in all the cousins’ eyes.

“Rwen! Were you trying to make Zori win?” Frezy moved closer to Rhodiola to prepare for any need to team up. It didn’t really matter how Rwen answered. Either he screwed up dealing himself the winning hand or he looked like he was cheating to help his little sister.

“I think I screwed up a bit...”

“You can say that again!”

“Yeah Rwen! I don’t need your help!”

I could only look at Lumi and smile as they forced Rwen to pick up all the cards and start shuffling again. This time under the close watch of his sister and cousins. Those same back and forths year after year. The script was likely to change as the kids grew older, but the sentiment remained. I could feel it with my own siblings and we could see it in our parents.

Throughout the whole night Ridni would get up with Mekoti and Lochu to brew a little more mulled wine and bring out more snacks. If it got real late, leftovers would be brought out as well to give the guests more to nibble on as cards and bets continued to fly across the table. Even after being fuller than full, something about the holiday invited even more.

It just wouldn’t really be Frithlic Nyun without food and snacks. The ever present meat jellies of the season and various nuts and seeds shipped in from afar. Homemade sausages finished just before we arrived in Besniwod. Tamu would spend over a month looking for the perfect ingredients and the right meat before cooking up something new, ready to share a familiar flavor or perhaps something new with all the guests.

And everyone had their favorite snacks. Lochu cared a lot about catering to all the individual tastes. Without anyone asking, she would get up and bring out a bowl of chestnuts for Lumi and salted crackers for me. Although it’s hard to say they were my favorite, I did enjoy the crackers and I more than appreciated the gesture.

The night would continue like that. Conversations about everything and nothing. Games with new rules and old cards. Toasts for the host and all the guests. Like my parents’ place, people would just settle into a bed or find a nest when the fatigue set in.

The rest would slowly get quieter as the broadcast filled the space between with its songs and dances.

I remember Lumi explaining all of these feelings – her family traditions – to a colleague in Veranum. They really don't understand how all of this is normal for us here in Besniwod.

"I didn't know you get broadcasts in the villages."

"It's not the stone age you idiot." Lumi had a short temper for people who were ignorant. It was common for people in the city to think village life was like something out of an old story. They thought our home nothing more than frontier outposts. Our existence only serving to help the government with resource extraction or highly experimental science.

"Do we really waste taxes on cables that far out?"

"You know the giant radio tower? What do you think that's used for?"

"I mean... anything but random entertainment for a tiny village? Don't the mountains block the signal anyway?"

"Have you never seen a map of the continent? They set up relays to help with that sort of thing long ago."

"I never paid attention to the boring subjects in school."

"Our life is not a boring subject!"

"Okay, not boring. Useless." Lumi was about to boil over as her colleague dug a grave deeper into the dirt. The sad truth was that those words and that way of thinking were widespread. Our existence was seen as a piece of neat trivia at best. People from Veranum thought of us with a sense of condescending superiority.

It was next to impossible to convince them they were wrong. They were all so sure that their preconceptions of our life were correct. To the point where they would take any suggestion to visit Besniwod as a harsh joke.

"Listen. You were born in Veranum so I know it's hard for you to get it, but think about how proud you are of our springtime city. Something as simple as having the pipes run above ground is seen in the same way as radio signals reaching the villages." I could only hope the comparison would help them find a way to understand. Some sliver of pride for our people. Solidarity in our shared continent on the planet.

"But that's just practical! Watching broadcasts is entertainment and completely unnecessary for some outpost in the middle of nowhere!"

"You don't think they say that about Veranum across the strait?"

"Who cares?"

"Exactly."

I grabbed Lumi's hand and we left her colleague to soak in those thoughts. It was unlikely to immediately make an impact, but all I could do is hope the next time they wanted to insult our home they would at least think twice. An overall unlikely scenario, but it was all I could do. All we could do. That's how we survived.

Eventually the show would end and the radio would go quiet. A few people will have lingered at the table. More than likely too drunk and definitely too stuffed. It may be seen as excessive but it was a part of Frithlic Nyun. A part of a celebration of who we were.

Not only did we have the means to host two major feasts over the holiday, we did so every year. A time of year free from whatever other responsibilities likely were waiting on the other side of Sunday. For a week or more all that mattered was that we were a family – that we loved each other.

Or maybe that's a roundabout way to excuse myself going to bed drunk as my kids found a way to make a nest for themselves. Either way the next day was definitely beginning with a strong headache. Lochu would likely provide an old remedy. The same one Lumi made when I was sick in Veranum. No matter the pain waiting for me in the morrow I would be warm, happy, and comfortable with who was there.

Chapter 23

Frithlic Warmth

A stone splitting crack in the sky. Cold air flash freezing the room. The last bits of fish iced into desolation and destruction. The round table cracked into uneven pieces and the living room littered with cards and spilled snacks.

At least I wasn't alone. Lumi and Rwen were with me as I breathed in. And then they weren't as I breathed out. Thick furs appeared on my limbs and covered my body as the walls further crumbled. The hill down to the central square now a steep cliff of ice and snow.

My legs weren't listening to my commands and my steps were stuttered. I fell down to the tracks in a tumble and a twist. An inbound train sounded its loud warning horn and I scrambled to find my feed. I couldn't take the next steps forward.

I struggled in the snow. All it took was one slip and I began rolling again. Toward the central square. The market tents were all dark. Cold against the purple sky ringing out in echoes of all the colors of the aurora. The lights were being pulled into the First Tree, following a web spun by Saint Vinson's pet spider Bikeshi. Crystallized emotions against the relentless onslaught outside.

Then one tent lit up like a candle. A signal in the storm and a guide for my soul. Dorub's tent. I could see her shivering inside. Zori. Even under those expensive furs her little body didn't stand a chance against the strength of the cold.

I couldn't run fast enough and the furnace never sparked. The sky was engulfed in a blinding light as I saw the Saint Herself grace my vision. There isn't much sleep in that eternal night. Pockets of light rarer than the end of the twilight on the horizon.

It was too much beyond reason. I woke up in a cold sweat. Another bad dream. I was way too stressed about the dreamcatcher. But I couldn't shake the feeling it was something more. Something cosmic. A sign from a vision.

My breath was short and it took a moment to realize where I was again. The worst part of these dreams was how they were so disorienting. Lost in my own mind and waking up somewhere new every few days didn't help. There wasn't much sleep to be had one way or another. The house would be waking up early for more celebrations.

There was a bit of a neighborly competition to see who was the most dedicated to the holiday. Beyond the sea of lights and endless stream of flavors dripping down the hill, there was that crackling sound. Whoever was the first to brave the weather and begin lighting them off – throwing in a colorful firework or two for good measure – set off an alarm for the entire village.

The winner was crowned the fiercest of them all. We didn't mind the noise. It sounded like the holiday. Tamu and Lochu would invite their grandchildren to join in the fun after breakfast. The first step was opening all the groggy eyes and waking up the living room filled with nests.

Mountains of dumplings and a symphony of firecrackers to start another day of Frithlic Nyun. Before we could do anything outside we needed to have another meal. On top of cooking the feast and stuffing the sausages, Tamu spent the last few days wrapping up and bundling hundreds of dumplings just for this moment. Hungry or not, we would all be eating until we were too full again.

“Rwen, Zori, Frezy, Rhodiola! Come over here and eat!” Once the sound of firecrackers was in the air, Lochu would call the kids down to start the day nice and early. There was another game to go along with the typical flavors of meats and vegetables. Like with the porridge pudding desserts the night before, some of the dumplings held surprises for a lucky few. Mostly a little money, but it wasn’t rare for Tamu to add different jokes as well. A spicy pepper or a surprising chestnut. Anything to get a smile out of his family.

“I won again!” Zori’s voice spiked as she bit into a piece of money hiding in her dumpling. “I’m the lucky one!”

“That you are Zori!” Tamu would smile wide enough to cross the table before a different surprised voice yelled out.

“What’s in this?!” It looked like Uncle Umbali wasn’t as used to the trick dumplings and was enjoying an extra spicy meal to start his hungover morning. We all laughed as he gulped down three cups of water.

The rest of the dumplings would be eaten like that. Little surprises jumping out from someone’s seat and everyone sharing in the excitement. The anticipation in the reaction to see what exactly was won was almost as much fun as getting one of those special dumplings yourself.

Once the table was cleared the next act could start. The older generation trying to bring out sets of stockings and quietly putting them on the table. They were stuffed with small gifts mostly for the kids. Most important of all was how they included a special rare delicacy – if not in form then in symbol.

A fresh fruit hidden somewhere inside. It was next to impossible to grow any fruits naturally in Besniwod. Even with the latest developments in soil technology, the ground

didn't seem to be able to handle the complexities needed for nourishment. But humans are funny in that way. Seeing the impossible as a challenge to overcome.

Tamu found his own answer over the years of quarantine. He missed the taste of fruits and the smell of flowers so much he transformed the roof of the oval home into a greenhouse filled with flowers and fruits that had no right existing in our village. The special lights needed to keep them alive were difficult to source and expensive to buy. Never mind all the water and time needed to care for the roots and leaves.

Every stocking would have a piece of fruit from Tamu's own garden symbolizing a deep hope for our future. It was all simultaneously different in execution while being similar in intention to what I had grown up with. Even though there was no tree, there was still that feeling of waking up to a surprise with the family.

Rather than focusing on the performance of giving gifts, Lumi's family and most of her neighbors focused on the other half of Saint Vinson's image. The ornate envelope filled with well wishes. It's hard to know how much of the red envelope idea comes from that and how much from pre-migration history, but it doesn't really matter in the end. The kids would of course be expecting to receive their little red envelopes filled with well wishes in the form of money. This would also be the time to give any other gifts, in line with what I would expect at my parents' house with the ceremony under the tree.

More plainly said, this would have been the perfect moment to give Lin the dreamcatcher. The best time for good intentions and proper well wishes for the new baby. But I guess I really either forgot to pack it or lost it somewhere between our apartment and getting off the train. If only I had checked the bag one more time.

"Grandpa Jua, Grandma Jua, happy Frithlic Nyun!" The youngest generation started with the elders as they made their way around the room to ask for their envelopes. They

repeated the lines in turn as they sat on their knees and bowed their heads. A full show of respect as was the expected custom. I doubt my father-in-law and mother-in-law cared too much about the accuracy of it all, but I know they appreciated the effort and thought it was cute.

“Zori, Rwen. You two took the time to visit us from so far away. It is always the best gift in the world to see you in our home.” Lochu was honest with her emotions and earnest in her actions. Doing her best to let my kids know how much they were loved and how much they were welcomed in Besniwod.

“Thank you Grandma Jua!” The kids would then move on to the other adults in the room, asking and expecting more red envelopes. We never really taught Rwen or Zori the rules, but they somehow knew the correct level of respect needed for every member of the family. From the sarcastic expectations of Uncle Umbali to the formal politeness needed to survive my second sister Bryne.

“Auntie Lin! Auntie Lin! Happy Frithlic Nyun!” Zori quickly learned to put on an extra cute face whenever she asked for an envelope. She knew how to play the game, raising her hands clasped together as she repeated her greeting.

“You’re trying too hard to be cute Zori.” Lin smirked a snide smile as she handed over Zori’s envelope.

“Thank you Auntie Lin!”

Lin then looked over to me. I knew she was told to expect a gift. I still didn’t have it. Lumi spent all that time making it but I didn’t have it. The embarrassment of that struggle finally reaping its harvest. I truly missed the mark at the most important moment.

I let it get to me too much. Rethinking mistakes and wondering how I could have fixed them. At my worst I feel like it must have an effect on how Lumi thinks of me too. The screw up who can't remember her sister's gift.

With the added stress of coming back to Besniwod I just didn't know what to do. There were too many things to remember. Too much needed to be checked. My world came crashing down and I was reminded of a buried memory.

Zori had just been born and we were hoping to have a date night out for the first time in a very long time. I can't even remember what the plan was now. The details that were once the deciding factor forgotten while the pain of my mistake remains.

When we arrived at the venue I realized I forgot the tickets and the show was already sold out. There may have been a way to sneak in or otherwise find something else to do, but in the end we just went home disappointed.

"I'm sorry Lumi... I thought I had them."

"You're always like this Swefen."

"I've just been a bit distracted. I was looking forward to it as well."

"Are you starting a fight now?"

"No... I'm just disappointed in myself."

And that was all it took to have our eyes meet again. Neither of us actually cared about the date. Somewhere along the line we got more focused on the plan than each other. The whole mess was a silly overestimation in how much either side cared.

"I just want to spend time with you."

"Me too."

I remember expecting there to be a worse consequence for my silly mistake. I was the one who ruined the night. I caused us to miss out on some fun. We didn't have our date because of me. But in the end neither of us really cared as long as we were together.

I reached out for her hand as we stood at the back of the line with no way to get in. That old feeling. Even after two kids and decades together. It never got old. Our fingers finding the comfortable spots in our hands.

"I love you Lumi."

"I love you Swefen."

Tamu was calling the kids outside to have some fun setting off fireworks and firecrackers. He laid out long strings of them and had the kids take turns lighting the fuse. Zori was too little to participate for the most part, but he had already thought of that.

"And for you little Zori, I have something extra special!"

"What Grandpa Jua?"

"Take this and wave it around like a magic wand." It was one of those sparklers that were mostly harmless but always fun to swish and swirl around. It'd be hard to find a kid the world who didn't like playing with the light and writing out patterns in the air.

"It's not doing anything?"

"Wait a second Zori." Tamu laughed at his granddaughter's impatience. Getting out his lighter and letting it begin the show. "There you go now go have fun!"

"Woooooow!" Zori was more than amused and carefully watched by Lochu and Mom. It was true that sparklers are mostly harmless, but that's not completely true. Between four eyes and two grandmothers, I think that could be redefined as more than completely though.

Rwen had a blast running back and forth from the fuses in the snow. Making a race out of it with his cousins as the loud pops and cracks rang out through the whole village. If anyone was still asleep they were awake now.

The rest of the morning would be spent visiting neighbors and relatives up and down the hill. Letting off more fireworks and firecrackers as the mood called for and inevitably sharing more meals as the kids asked for more red envelopes.

Being a small village we all knew who they were even if my kids weren't quite sure who these people were. An uneven relationship they didn't fully understand, but were more than happy to exploit.

Maybe not exploit, but definitely enjoy. The emotion writ plain on their faces as the cold air outside became less of a problem against the warmth of the season in all those stone oval homes on the snow covered hill.

Chapter 24

Carefully Played

Everything washes away in the desert of ice and snow. Those were the legends we grew up with and the reality of our forebears. They say it all changed with the success of reforestation but the old ways still defined much of daily life.

All paths still at risk to be covered in snow or frozen over with ice. Decorations and ornaments left outside would soon meet the same fate. We all learned to work together to make sure they kept their color and shine.

The common effort needed to not only survive, but thrive in the village. That feeling was an important part of Frithlic Nyun. Peaceful warmth shared between us all. Magic in our hearts and feasts on every plate.

It's hard to know exactly when, but at some point the people of Besniwod began coming together to put on their own performance after the final feast. Shows that would never rival the nightly broadcast in execution but definitely did in spirit.

There wasn't exactly a set schedule, but you were never confused about the day of the festival when you were awakened early by the firecrackers. The biggest tent in the central square would soon be ablaze with activity.

Dad always had strong opinions about the specific things we needed to attend. At the very least the yearly production of Saint Vinson's Triumph and a set of songs from the local musicians. He was so stubborn and particular about things like that. We were going anyway so it didn't much matter and wasn't worth fighting over.

This year the play was first and featured a questionable grade of local actors. Before we even entered the tank I could hear Agum hyping up the crowd with a rousing

introduction to the story. Reciting an embellished version of our history leaning heavy into the Seven Saints.

“And lo did the Seven Saints crown our savior Saint Vinson upon the peak of that holy mountain. She did raise her hand in an offering to the dark sky and blessed our soldiers on the eve of Her triumph. All those who prayed for Her guidance found themselves with a newfound clarity. Sanctified as they bloodied the battlefield one last time.”

“Daddy... why did the people need to fight a war?” Zori whispered in my ear as the crowd began cheering for Agum to continue the familiar story. She was already a little shy and Agum’s dramatic retelling, while pleasing to everyone from Besniwod, was a little scary to Zori.

“Ask me again after the play, okay Zori?” Lumi gave me a sideways glance in response to my misdirection and half-answer. The truth was complicated to say the least. What we call Saint Vinson’s Triumph eventually led to a civil war that ended with unification – or revolution. There were generations between the two, but bringing up the history of one would lead to explaining the other. It was a messy topic since everyone on the continent could agree with the glory of Saint Vinson’s Triumph, but opinions were more mixed about what came after.

People like Dad blamed the war for the lack of control they seemed to have over their own destiny while people like Tamu saw it as a historical fact and only desired stability for his and other families. I was less than keen to dive into the subject within earshot of either of them.

“And so Saint Vinson sent her sacred spiders down the slopes of Her domain – Her mountain peaks obeying the orders and following in spirit and in kind. Bikeshi’s web

denying passage to all but the most righteous and all but the most deserving. With Her holy wind at their back our soldiers won the war and paved the way for the first Frithlic Nyun.”

Zori was a little uncomfortable with the conclusion. I could see Rwen finding such a violent end to the tale feeling strange to him as well. This was our reality in the village but it was usually much more softened in Veranum. The holiday had clearly shifted everywhere to being more about spending time with the family and bringing in the new year. We just held on to the older stories in the village.

“From those ashes we would rise. We would triumph. By Her flame and Her eternal blessing did we become a people worthy of Her name. And every year’s end and year’s beginning, she keeps us safe and warm against the howls of the wind and the bite of the cold. The fire in our homes and the blanket upon our spirit. May she ever guide us to our family for another feast. Amen.”

“Amen!” The crowd let out their fervor in the prompted response. The cheering and the clapping all a little overwhelming for Zori. I got up and brought her outside the tent to look at the First Tree. The shock on her face almost had her to the point of tears. We could forget that she missed out on growing used to these shows. Missing the last few years of Frithlic Nyun in Besniwod.

The way we did it at home in Veranum was nothing like this. We never really saw plays or that sort of thing and would usually use the day after the final feast as an excuse to be extra lazy. Rwen and Zori would use the time to play with their new toys, mostly resting until they started at school in a few days.

“Daddy why was everyone so happy?”

“What do you mean Zori?”

“That story was so mean and everyone was so happy... I saw Grandpa Kumri with the biggest smile ever!” She was right that Dad was sure to show more emotion toward the public play than he was like to show at anyone in the family.

“It’s nothing to be scared of little Zori.” I picked her up and let her see the First Tree from a higher vantage point. “It’s just like this tree. Something nice and pretty to look at. And it reminds us all about those warm emotions you think about when you think about Frithlic Nyun.”

“I don’t think about fighting when I think about Frithlic Nyun!”

“Zori...” I didn’t have a good response for her. Was this how people in the city saw us? Borderline savages with a lust for war. I wouldn’t blame them if all they witnessed was an exaggerated play, but they were missing the message. Out here in the village we had no choice but to fight. A losing battle against nature. A drama about the war our people once won was a way to build up hope for a longer victory over a more powerful foe. None of that would make sense to Zori though.

“What is it Daddy?”

“No one here is going to fight a war. The play is silly and a little scary. I must have forgotten how scary it gets. Daddy’s sorry for making you have to watch all that.”

“It’s okay Daddy I forgive you.” That dry honesty of a young child. I didn’t know if she was sarcastic or sincere, but I supposed it didn’t matter. As long as she was feeling better. We’d deal with the nightmares later I suppose.

“The next show will be different. It’s just music so there’s nothing to feel scared about.”

“That sounds booooooring.”

“It’s not, I promise.”

“You promise?”

“I do.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Zori wiggled out of my arms and I let her back down. “If it’s boring I’m telling Mom!” She scrambled back to her seat and was as cheerful as ever.

“Everything okay Dad?” Rwen came out from the big tent. “Mom sent me to check on you but I just saw Zori run back inside. Shouldn’t she be walking? These paths are dangerous.”

“You’re not wrong Rwen. You’re not wrong. Let’s go back to our seats and watch the next performance.”

“Alright Dad...” I’m sure the behavior seemed odd to Rwen but he didn’t need to know the details of why Zori was scared. He’d take it upon himself to protect her and then we’d have to make it a whole ordeal. Inevitably bringing it up to Dad and having to hear his convoluted explanation for why it was an important political message that every generation needed to learn.

Thankfully the local musicians were of a higher caliber than the local actors. Although they were amateurs. Merchants and teachers and tradesmen and more. They were passionate about the traditional arts and well known around Besniwod. The group would regularly practice at being performers at dinner parties all over the village. More a chance to spend time together than a means to master the craft, but they managed to get both done at the same time.

I’m sure their folksy style and lack of real training would come across as sub par to the professionals in Veranum. For us it was more than enough. It was perfect in its imperfection. The musicians would also rotate over the years. As one generation aged out

another generation would age in. Picking up the instrument or skill of their parents and learning to play the old songs.

It looked like there were quite a few changes since the last time we'd been back in Besniwod. I recognized some of the faces as old friends. Classmates from those years taking the path to Saint Vinson's church for school.

It can be hard to know if you really remember someone or just wish you did though. So I held back my intuition and focused on the two I was sure once sat next to me for at least half a year of lessons back then. Namely the conductor Vuli Tussock and Krin Kuhun. The new conductor and the latest second chair respectively. We were all in that group of friends with Dorub, but I couldn't remember what they once said they planned to do with their lives.

What I do remember was how those two were the ones that planted the idea of going to university in Veranum in my head. There was a time when all four of us thought we'd be there together, but I was the only one to actually go.

Unlike with Dorub, who for all I knew was dead until a few days ago, I'd invited these two over to my parents' place for the first feast a few times but they were always too busy or had their own plans. We had grown too distant and I wasn't even a vague priority. That's an unfortunate part of life. Finding excuses as you forget why someone was ever even your friend.

Those darker thoughts soon melted away as the band began to play the old standards. Familiar tunes the crowd would obviously know and have no problem singing and humming along with. Dad especially loved hearing the songs he already knew. Something about the reinforcing comfort of it all made him feel good and he wanted to share that with us. And share it with us he did. Every year.

After the show I wanted to find a moment to speak with my old friends. I didn't need an excuse, but it felt like it'd be better to have a question prepared. So I thought up something vague and artistic that a musician would take too literally. A way to get the conversation moving even if no one but them could follow what was being said.

"Hey Krin! Krin Kuhun!" Krin lowered his violin and looked out into the crowd to see who was shouting his name. His eyes widened as he saw who it was.

"Sweffen Kumri? You're so old!" He laughed as he moved to shake my hand. He was right. We hadn't seen each other in decades and I'm sure the last time we spoke I was a bit more fresh faced with a lot more hair on my head.

"Time has a way of playing tricks on your body doesn't it."

"I guess it does for you! I still look the same as when I had 20 winters."

"Yeah?"

"No seriously! I feel as young as ever." He didn't look as young as ever, but we didn't know each other well enough anymore. I couldn't make a bad joke at his expense. Maybe he really believed he still looked the same and who was I to let him know otherwise.

"Krin, did you play that last piece a little differently?"

"I didn't know you knew music that well?"

"I don't really."

"The technical details are in how I played with the key. Twisting the notes of the scale and whatnot. I tend to find the darker colors more interesting so it's fun to find ways to make it clash while still complimenting the music. It's like adding sarcasm to the piece or a joke to the song."

"I see..."

“Ah you never were a musician. It’s great to know you could hear that we were trying something though. I think that’s a grand accomplishment already!”

“You’re getting too artsy with the explanation!” Vuli Tussock made his way over from the conductor’s podium after hearing our introduction. He laughed as he joined the conversation. “It’s been a good while Swefen. Everyone only wants to hear the same twelve songs and it helps to mix things up. Keeps it fresh and fun for us as well!”

“Ah so it was your idea to make the change?”

“I guess you remember some things about us still.” Vuli laughed again as we thought back to one of the last times we spoke. It would have been him who first started saying we should all go to Veranum. He always had crazy ideas but never followed through.

“Why would we want to spend the rest of our life in this boring old town!” Vuli was trying to get a rise out of all. Or maybe just show us how cool he was. One of those teenage emotions that is everything all at once.

“I’m fine with it here.” Dorub even back then had a simpler plan for his life. “I’ll become a hunter and sell that stuff or something like it. I already have the girl; I just need the money.” He met his wife Kruos early in grade school and they were friends for as long as anyone could remember.

“I guess that sounds fun.” If Krin was the shy one I was the silent one. I just stared at Vuli as he blathered about all the plans for finding a university who would accept us. In my head I had already moved there and didn’t need to hear anything more.

“I think you’ve changed up the set order as well?” I was running out of musical questions that could sound convincingly authentic. I had noticed the slightly different order but it could have been some official change that happened during quarantine.

“Yeah we have the traditional church songs as well as some new popular hits from Veranum.”

“There was an international tune in there as well?”

“Oh yeah! Everyone knows it now so I don’t even think of it as being foreign.”

It was funny hearing Vuli talk about those changes so candidly. Both he and Krin could trace their heritage to the same lesser saint. I would have expected them to cite that as the reason for the change, but it seemed more to be just something they thought would be fun to do.

“We’re used to playing all over Besniwod so there’s no single lesser saint we try to cater too.” This must be a conversation he’s had many times to know what I was thinking. My thoughts still the same as every other common villager even after a lifetime in the city. “You see more differences in the food than the music anyway.”

“So I guess you focus on music to avoid the discussion about who has the best food.”

“You could say that.” Vuli laughed as he thought about how long those arguments could go on for.

“But it’s obvious that Saint Blanc has the best food culture out of the lesser saints.” Krin was less attuned to what was an appropriate public statement it seemed.

“I disagree!” Lumi overheard Krin and decided to join the conversation. Such an outrageous accusation couldn’t be left unchallenged.

“You know the hams and porridge all came from Saint Blanc.”

“Sure, but the best stuff is all from Saint Himavan.”

“Like what?”

“Everything! From the fish to the dumplings to the sausages and the desserts!”

“Saint Himavan is associated with some amazing dishes, but what about the important meats! It’s not Frithlic Nyun without a glazed ham!”

“Whatever. If you think ham defines Frithlic Nyun then that’s your problem.”

The argument settled into laughs, but there was more than a little tension lingering in the cold air. These rivalries meant more or meant less depending on your family and how important specific aspects of the culture were to you. Food was clearly one piece of the puzzle that everyone wanted to claim as being their most important contribution, but it’s impossible for that to really be true.

It didn’t help that the origins of certain dishes and their recipes were lost long ago. What people remembered was probably more original to Besniwod than a faithful recreation at this point. However, while the details were forgotten, the emotions and the feelings were as strong as ever. Clear, distinct lines for what people thought they should feel strongly about without knowing how to exactly define or defend it.

“I’ll give you it seems dumplings are best made from families with Saint Himavan heritage, but I have to stop you at fish. You can at least agree Saint Blanc’s methods at least rival your own. I would say they’re better, but I know your family enjoys them.” Vuli stepped up to defend the lesser saint. He was much more diplomatic and calculated in his words. His work creating a new set and planning performances carried over into how he spoke about the mixing of our traditions. If nothing more, he provided room for the conversation to relax whether or not Lumi agreed or disagreed.

That feeling of warmth penetrated the frozen air. That was how Vuli captured the spirit of Frithlic Nyun in the performance. A balance of who we are and who we desired to be. All baked in a marinade of familiar holiday cheer, the subtle differences only seen to add flavor rather than subtract from the original chef’s contribution.

Dancers in colorful outfits were catching everyone's attention and we needed to move along to not block the view. The same stories steeped in tradition but this time told through dance. And there was no priest guiding the crowd's thoughts. It was a calmer way to appreciate the story of Saint Vinson's Triumph.

I was happy to look over to our seats and see Zori enthralled by the show. Or maybe just the colorful ribbons the dancers were using as they leaped from one side of the stage to the other. Vuli and Krin quickly waved goodbye and joined in the next performance, providing the needed rhythm to keep everyone on time.

A chance for more personal reflection of the season. Knowing the history behind it all could turn into a lecture, but in the moment that was far from my mind. Seeing Zori smile and appreciate the same story that almost made her cry was the point. Something special in mixing all those different definitions of warmth. Carefully playing the right song at the right time.

Chapter 25

Happily Ever After

It had been a good few years since the last time I was in that big tent for the Frithlic Nyun performance. Until quarantine I hadn't gone more than a year without being there. In just five short years it felt like so much had changed.

Zori was growing up into her own person and missed out on those earliest memories of the songs and plays. They were distinctly different from what she thought of as the normal way to do Frithlic Nyun and probably would forever think that way. Rwen had more of a chance to grow used to coming to Besniwod as a child so I imagine it's what he expects. Although I wouldn't be surprised if he grew out of it and slowly but surely both of them stop making the trip all the way to our small village in the countryside.

But being back there again. Seeing friends I hadn't thought of in years. Seeing Agum the priest guide the main performance along. It reminded me of one of my most cherished memories. Filled with embarrassment but a defining moment of my life.

It all started after Agum felt he had successfully made good on helping me and Lumi find each other and fall in love. One of the rare Sunday barbecues when it was just us two at Endle's. Naturally he wanted to talk to me about Lumi.

"Bro! How long are you going to make her wait!"

"What are you talking about?" We were so used to the same order we ended up drunker quicker than we anticipated. I guess that worked in our favor considering the flavor of the conversation.

“A girl like Lumi could have any guy she wanted and you’re making her wait to marry you?”

“I’m not making her wait...”

“Then why haven’t you asked her!”

“The time’s not right...”

“What does that even mean!” What did I mean? I didn’t even know but it sounded like a good excuse. I knew I wanted to be with her and yet it felt like I needed to wait for... something. I didn’t know what.

“There’s no real right time.” Endle joined in as our conversation grew to fill the restaurant. His age came with a certain wisdom we felt obliged to listen to. “If you love her and you think you’ll spend your life together, you just have to make sure it gives her a good story to tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Women love being able to share that kind of thing. How they were surprised and knew what was happening all at the same time. They like being able to brag about the person they love. Don’t you?” Endle was right but his words twisted in on themselves. Agum saw the confusion and tried his best to translate it for his best friend.

“Bro... Just make sure she’s happy and you can’t do anything wrong. Stop waiting and ask her!” That was the chorus for the rest of the night. It must have struck a chord because it wasn’t long after that I built up a plan and bought a nice ring.

Thinking about that memory made it all the more sad I missed Agum in the big tent. He was a busy celebrity in Besniwod. The new priest who put on a wild show. His personality fit the role and his shoes fit the stage. I’m sure we’d find another time to catch up.

My plan boiled down to knowing all too well how those performances went. After the play the musicians would take the stage. There was generally a set order to the songs. Everyone knew when and how they should be played.

Each of the Seven Saints would have a piece dedicated to their heritage. The biggest and most famous traditional songs were of course about Saint Vinson, but you could get a feel for which lesser saint meant something to which family by how people perked up at the first few notes of certain songs.

I took extra care to listen for it during a special visit many years ago. I wanted to wait for the most famous song about the lesser saint Himavan and then I'd ask her the question. I'd get down on my knee and reach for her hand in the way that made us comfortable. Say the words with a wavered confidence followed by fireworks and fireworks going off near the First Tree. She would say yes and I'd put on that diamond ring on her finger. I had been hiding it for months and could barely breathe at the thought of the plan finally coming together.

I had known for years I wanted to marry Lumi, but the practicalities of life outpace even the strongest heart's desire. So when it came time to actually propose, it would be more about the words than the fact of the matter. We were always meant to be together and I wanted that to be what we were. These conflicting emotions led to me overthinking every action. Paralyzed in the moment when it mattered.

"Let's go watch the new play!" I said it with an awkward smile as I fumbled around with my coat pockets. Poorly attempting to hide what was inside.

"I want to get some mulled wine at the cafeteria first! Although they can't seem to get the recipe right..."

"Yeah let's do that instead."

With days of delays and feeling less and less sure of myself I thought it better to wait. And wait. And wait. And then we were already home at the apartment. So I needed to come up with a new plan. On the spot. Romantic gestures left back in Besniwod, I thought to call her out to the dirty old balcony where we had a halfway decent view of the city. My heart left my body and I held out my hand as I fell to my knee.

Lumi was initially annoyed I had called her out so suddenly to the balcony. We had just spent a long time on the train and we both mostly wanted to go to bed. Her mind was set on how best to prepare for the next tomorrow. Items 3, 4, and 5 already needing to be checked off before settling down into a comfy bed.

“Lumi Jua... will you marry me?” Her eyes widened. Her face illuminated by the moon and the few stray city lights. She never imagined but always expected I would ask her... but maybe not like this. A moment’s hesitation but not out of indecision, more shock at her life’s desire being fully recognized.

“Ask me again.”

“What?”

“Ask me again Swefen!”

“Lumi... Lumi Jua... will you marry me?”

“No... I want to hear you ask again first!”

“Lumi... Come on.”

“Swefen!”

“Will you marry me?” I looked over at Lumi as I remembered my failed plans and we shared another smile. I reached for her hand and our fingers found their favorite spots. Interlocked between each other with a new comforting ring added to the recipe. Such a

mistake ridden path leading to our perfect life. Maybe that's what Frithlic Nyun was really all about.

At the next Sunday barbecue Agum wouldn't let me off the hook. My initial plans and the final execution were so clumsy and lazy all he could do is give me a look of disgust as he raised his glass in a congratulatory toast.

"You're lucky to be with a girl like Lumi. Not many women would put up with your crap."

"Thank you Agum!" Lumi joined in the toast with a smile and we all shared a laugh. Maybe more of an awkward laugh on my end, but I appreciated the sentiment and the honesty.

"So that's the story you gave her to tell people?" Endle overheard the conclusion to the tale and felt the need to add in his own scolding. "You better come up with a lie she can share or you'll hear about this the rest of your life."

"Come on Endle. It's not that bad!" I pleaded with the owner and he answered with a bottle on the house and his own toast to the happy couple.

"You have to promise to make it back here at least once every five years. I have to hear how your story goes now." We laughed but I think he was serious. It'll soon have been more than five years since we'd last seen him. That final goodbye to Agum at the start of quarantine.

I think he'd forgive me now though. Our life was good and Endle knew I was a good father. Maybe he mostly wanted to see if I'd be able to forgive myself. I suppose that's a harder lesson I struggled with to this day. Whether it was the proposal or the dreamcatcher, I seemed to catch myself off the beat and out of tune.

Chapter 26

Remembrance

The cold always catches up and wins. The wind always gets the last laugh. Everything freezes in the frost and the fog. Those who lack respect for the dire, the absolute, the inevitable truth – they are met with doom and destruction. Nothing less. Nothing more.

That fear is needed to survive the seasons. Religious fervor wrapped in pleasant prayers. Good intentions paving the way for grave sins. The pragmatic laws of the wilderness. Nature is hostile. Life is fleeting and fragile.

You either learn to respect the limits of flesh or pay the price in pounds and ounces more. Life in the wake of mortality. We tip the scales with the help of Her flame. Our hope for balance and order. Stability in heavy seas. An anchor ever guiding our hearts and our souls. I would struggle to find anyone on the continent who disagreed with that.

Those from the city may see it in a different light. More sympathetic to a calmer way of life. All a question of circumstance more than an indignant disagreement. Yet I couldn't escape the look of fear in Zori's eyes after she watched our famous play. Were we the savages they see us for or was it really just perspective and perception?

The rules are never rigid. The Seven Saints are ever present but it falls to us to break their rules. A choice. A mortal choice. Nature plays by different rules. You cannot even think to choose to break them.

It always felt like Frithlic Nyun pushed that boundary. Daring man to find more hope in this life. Reminding us of how Saint Vinson protected our will and our mind. She guided our thoughts and kept our sacred vows pure. Far from the ritual of church and prayers,

She gave us the courage to challenge nature, be it fireworks in the dark of a cold night or searching deep in the once-impossible forest for a nice looking tree.

We would really do that growing up. The cottage was already on the outskirts of Besniwod. Close to the forbidden frontier. The trees were calling out to us with a song in the wind. Inviting the passerby to get lost in the branches. Finding refuge in the needles and leaves.

That was one of the best bits of the season – of the whole holiday. At least as a kid that's how I remember it. Our family working together, forging new paths through land no human had ever seen. All to find a nice way to decorate the house for Frithlic Nyun. Filling it with gifts and giving it clothes to match the holiday.

With little more than twilight guiding us through the shadows it was a dangerous game hardly worth the prize. You could blink and it'd be dark. Eternal dusk shifting to blackest night and welcoming that inhuman cold. Nature commands the only real respect in our world. Without Her flame we'd have given up generations ago.

Her infinite wisdom brought me into another echo of space and time. Suddenly here and suddenly there. A concert hall in one of the topmost spires. A campfire with the neighbors on the hill. Sunday barbecue with Agum and Lumi. In the woods behind my parents' place.

Bundled up in coats and furs just like little Zori. I could feel her pain. Being so small with so many layers made it hard to walk and annoying to move. Especially through a forest filled with ice and snow.

Mektoti and Bryne were there too, we were all out in the woods with Mom and Dad. Nali wasn't there. This must be some time before she was born. I remember doing this every year though. Grandpa would always talk about how he can't believe they lifted the

ban during his lifetime. He would go on and on about how he grew up with the same government issued decorations passed down from his parents.

“You wouldn’t believe what I had growing up! The same plastic tree year after year. They said it was cost effective and close enough but we all knew they were lying! They’re always lying but what can you do.” His rants would move between making some kind of definitive statement to walking it back to a gentler acceptance. “But at my age I would say the hand-me-downs are even better! Who wants to go out in the cold for a tree you throw out in less than a month!”

Older generations always speak about their past in such oddly nostalgic ways. Simultaneously complaining while also clearly missing how it used to be. I know Dad is the same and I bet if I asked Rwen and Zori they’d say I am too. Even though I know this abstractly it’s impossible to control my emotions in the moment. Some memories just take hold of your mind and leave reason to the wayside.

“How’s this one look?”

“That one’s way too skinny Dad!” Mekoti and her opinions were loud even when she was young. She was always the top adviser on which tree was right and which was wrong. It was meant to mimic the ideal Frithlic Nyun. We wanted something that looked like the First Tree in the central square.

It symbolized the same message. Man’s victory over nature. We were able to take something wild and place it in our living room. The idea was to inspire hope for the future. An image of peaceful warmth in our hearts.

“How about that one?”

“Come on Dad. Don’t be so obtuse!” Mektoti always liked using the new vocabulary she was learning in school. She was a serious student who would have been welcomed at the top universities in Veranum City.

That academic path didn’t end up quite panning out and she found peace in Besniwod. For many years she was the glue that held the family together even. I imagine she once held onto a deep sense of regret and dread not taking the chance to explore the wider world outside our village. But I know those emotions relaxed the moment she met Ridni.

“We’ll take the next one no matter what it looks like.” Dad was always rather distant. Although that’s a bit unfair to him, but it’s the closest word to describe how it felt. He would put in an effort to comfort the kids, but there was always a limit. Not just on his patience but on how much he would share. There is an incredible loneliness in it all that I never realized until much later in life.

“Aldor! We can’t keep the kids out for this long!” Mom would always stay further back with me and Bryne. That was how we would line up through the forest back then. Dad in front, Mekoti close behind. Me and Bryne hanging onto Mom a little farther back. All us kids were the entire world to Mom and her priority was always our health and our safety.

As a parent there I can see a different angle as well. Trying to find a way to keep me and Bryne from getting tired. We would bicker over anything even in the best of times. Throw in a little fatigue and we were one misstep away from a full blown tantrum.

Something about the scene was off though. The color of the sky wasn’t right. The feeling of the snow was wrong. This wasn’t a living memory. A mere shadow of how I once felt. An illusion of my own making.

“Bryne?”

“What Swefen?”

“Why are you so mean?”

No. I never had the courage to ask a question like that when we were little. Especially not in front of Mom. We antagonized each other but I was younger so I took the brunt of the pain. Perhaps it was her way of getting back at Mekoti. Payback for the tricks her older sister played on her. I doubt I’ll ever fully understand. I just know that the childish insults and pranks would leave a lasting impression on my soul.

Right on cue the sky lit up in a flurry of lights and lifted me to a bird’s eye view. My mind clearly upset with my questions and growing awareness of the dream. The forest transformed into a snowstorm with a shower of colors from an impossible distance away. I rode that Aurora to the top of Mount Vinson and looked out to the coast.

I could see my apartment in Veranum. Just over the outer walls, my family nestled inside their beds, softly sleeping in a blanket of bright city lights. Then the earth began to tremble and the snow began to tumble. An avalanche across the continent erasing everything in its path straight off the map.

This was a dream. This is a dream. This is a dream. Repeat it and keep calm. Another one of those dreams. Just a dream. Only a few more seconds as the avalanche fell into the ocean and I was washed away with the icebergs in a soupy sea of memories.

The panic I felt as I fell with the ice and snow woke me up with a gasp. I was in Lumi’s old room in the oval-shaped house on the hill. That moment where you regain consciousness is confusing. It feels like time has gone backward and in a very real way it has. Given a second chance to do it all over again.

If only that were true. I could find Vuli Tussock and tell him not to spread rumors about what it's like in Veranum. I could tell myself it's not worth leaving Besniwod. I could stay with my family.

Fleeting thoughts that cause much more harm than they do any good. Especially when I moved my arm and felt Lumi still sleeping. Her eyes closed as she breathed steadily in a soft sleep. Her face as peaceful as an angel and her presence calming to my soul. She was my everything and I was glad for it. Odd dreams and stranger confusion melting away as I felt her warmth against my body.

Zori and Rwen were sleeping in a nest near the foot of our bed. Zori, as usual, found my old toys and sprinkled them around the room. There were a few stuffed penguins, gifts from Mom, that she brought to sleep with her. They were tucked into the blankets and even Rwen was hugging one. My children fast asleep in the mess of a nest.

Once awake I'm sure Rwen would act annoyed. His little sister stealing blankets and scattering toys everywhere. But for now he was peaceful and content. Happy to share the nest with Zori and the penguins.

Those teenage years were rough. Rebellion trumping reason and a proverbial rule of cool. He was a good kid though and I like to think we had a good understanding of our expectations for behavior. There would always be some tension as he grew into his own person, but I think he'd move away from these years knowing how much we cared.

A lot of his pretensions from the city were less important here. He would brag to his cousins at first and they probably found it annoying, but that would shift into holiday spirit and joy. Rwen also took good care of Zori, making sure she was safe – at least when he wasn't distracted.

They needed all the sleep they could get too. All the Frithlic Nyun celebrations could take a real toll on the body. Meeting all our family, learning and relearning the names of neighbors and old friends. It was nice but it could also be exhausting.

Neither of them were very used to our way of life. Turning my parents' old wooden cottage into a rambunctious and rowdy evening of laughter and fun. Watching the large round table spin round and round as course after course made its way from the kitchen to the counter. More dishes than desires continually served throughout the day. Roaring laughter that could shake the foundations as embarrassing stories were retold and old arguments broke out over both the serious and the mundane.

All that activity kept us warm as the cold wind begged to be let inside. That's how villagers thought it should feel. Some nights it's not so windy though. Although having a Frithlic Nyun without howling winds is about as likely as Uncle Umbali staying sober through supper.

Things do change as we get older though. It was subtle, but I could tell there was less and less of an emphasis placed on the offerings and prayers to the Seven Saints. It was never out of place, but simply a minimized detail. I'm sure the older generations would blame it on modern influences from Veranum. I can't say they're entirely wrong.

But before I could goad Dad into getting into any of that, we needed to get out of bed. I wanted to try my hand at making homemade sausages to impress Tamu. People often joke about the relationship with their in-laws being antagonistic and uncomfortable, but I never felt any of that. I could feel like I was woefully inadequate when he whipped up a meal and grew his own fruits, but that's a different topic entirely.

We'd be making a trip down to the market so I could find a sale on some meats. Lumi would be with me so we'd end up taking at least an hour checking all the desserts

and snacks as well. It was our turn to add to the feeling of Frithlic Nyun with our own appetizing flavors.

She would surely be worried about any lingering pains from the night before. And if not a hangover then she'd want to check to make sure I wasn't coming down with another seasonal cold. The kind of sniffing that runs down the spine and slows me down to a crawl. Walking in the cold never helped much with either, but I had none of the usual symptoms. We should be fine. Everything should be okay.

Nothing is so far from the central square to make it much of a hassle. We make a big deal of the temperature, but during Frithlic Nyun it's barely anything to really cause trouble. They were more playing that game of being a little too cautious. Unaware of how our sensibilities changed. And even then I think it was less about how easily I got sick or how we were used to more modern heating systems.

It was just easier for them to talk about those things than it was to put any undue pressure on the kids. Rwen and Zori were in a strange land and everyone in the family knew it. People in Besniwod are far from unaware of how Veranum sees them. Backward country folk who live like they did more than 100 years ago.

They didn't want those walls to be built around Rwen and Zori and the rest of the family, instead taking pride in things they knew would impress the little ones. The big reforestation project funded by Veranum's continued investment in the continent's future. A symbol of self sufficiency that constantly struggled to stand the test of time.

A part of that attitude came from the new modern trend of blending the old with the new. Making the most of both local lumber and imported stones to ensure the best chances of survival. While woodworking was still a new industry, masonry was an oft touted pride of the people.

Politics of taxes and imported materials aside, Besniwod learned to use those stones better than most anywhere else in the world. Some of the stoneworkers were even so renowned as to receive invitations to Veranum to consult on the city walls.

Even Dad was proud to call our people pioneers in that regard. Making the most of the early surplus to live on a new frontier. People from Besniwod take the kind of official decree that spells doom for the entire population as a challenge.

Some believed it to be our destiny. They would cite stories and scriptures about how this was our path – sometimes even *Her path*. With how vague the reading tended to be I think you could make an argument for it to mean anything. Regardless of how it was read, it meant a lot to people. It helped them feel safe. Comfortable. At peace and at home.

Saint Vinson, sacred savior and protector,

Stars above light the way home.

Triumph over evil, let live peace in our heart,

No further frontier, no higher peak.

Gift upon our land, gift unto our people,

May she accept our prayer, our warmth.

Amen.

There was never enough of that protection to go around. During Frithlic Nyun that sentiment definitely changed. The village streets set ablaze in celebration. Every family, every neighbor, every friend, everyone worked together. From the loud *bangs* of firecrackers to the endless streams of colorful lights, we all played our part in the holiday – in our own protection.

From the First Tree and its spiderweb of icicles and crystals to the abandoned cottages deep in the woods, everything lived and breathed that seasonal spirit. When the snow piled too high to see the banners and lights, we wiped it off or added more to our walls to keep the well wishes strong and alive.

Our homes became a constellation in the ice snow against the dim midday sun. To an outsider's eye it may be hard to see much more than a besnowed town, but for us it was the deepest expression of our passion.

Chapter 27

Saint Vinson's Triumph

The war defined survival. The countless men and women who laid their lives bare on the battlefield to push all the way to the shores. Not stopping until they were far across the strait and our people safe behind the walls.

The bloodiest fight was during the time that would become Frithlic Nyun. On the highest peak of the continent. A vantage point to find victory. The great general Jofurr Gunthalf called out to the Seven Saints in turn. One by one he screamed with all the power of his soul and was met with nothing but the cold bite of the winds. None answered. The lesser saints were not listening.

It was then that Saint Vinson descended with Her lights – Her flame. Guiding what soldiers remained to village after village. Her crystal spider Bikeshi commanded his hordes to spin a web of railroad tracks that would lead from the mountain to the tallest spires of the city.

There Jofurr would create a new nation in Her name under our own rule. There was no fear in the decision. He would erase himself from history for the sake of all the people on the continent and usher in a new era. Unification and revolution. Like snow falling on freshly laid foundations it all melted into the same story.

In time there was no more great general. Only Saint Vinson remained. Her triumph was our victory. Without a word she calmed our panicked minds and soothed our weary souls. That was the only truth we needed to survive.

I often wondered about the inconsistencies. Why a benevolent being would damn us to the cold continent. To err is to sin is to be human. Passing thoughts lost in the snow or dreams showing me visions of a history better left forgotten.

And at the end of the day we all had a story about how we ended up in Veranum. Mine was no more worthy of Saint Vinson than Jofurr himself. That's how I thought of it at least. Saint Vinson's Triumph was what allowed us all to have a reason to go on.

"How did you end up in Veranum again?" Once we were regulars I learned from Agum how to start a conversation with Endle. Just opening up with whatever came across the mind. The old owner was from a village even further down the tracks than Besniwod. I remembered he wanted to move with his family but the details always get jumbled in my memories.

"You mean why did I fail to make the move across the strait?" Endle had a good humor about his lot in life and was open to talking about the discrepancy between what his plans once were and what his life now was.

"I guess you could say it like that."

"Let the man call it what he wants!" Agum shouted out as he chewed on a piece of spice filled beef. He was already drunk and prone to going on one of his infamous rants about his past. Vulgar but always entertaining. Some story about how he had a new adventure with a girl or lost a bet with the boys.

"Agum! If Endle doesn't want to share we shouldn't force him..." Lumi was always so passionate. She had a talent for being assertive while sharing our same sense of curiosity. We complimented each other like that. Comfort in the space between competence. Sunday barbecue as a way to make the city feel like home. The whole of it gave the week a steady rhythm and a regular pace.

“Naaah! Don’t think twice about being rude! The story is simpler than you’d think. I’m from that tiny village Nistilon. The one further down from Besniwod that makes your town look like a full blown city. The only thing we have going for us is that penguin sanctuary, but that’s not real work. Every year feels like a gamble out there. Like we’re struggling to feel Her flame. Eventually I just stopped praying.”

“Did anything happen?” Agum was suddenly serious, carefully wiping his face and letting his beef sit and go cold. His whole demeanor changed. Posture straightened and hands placed in a polite position on his lap. He even leaned in to hear more of Endle’s story.

“Yeah... My wife protested and threatened to leave me! But that wasn’t the worst of it. Strange things started happening. And I felt like we were no longer welcome. Like Saint Vinson herself was pushing me to leave. So we packed up and hopped on a train with all the money we had left. Veranum was giving out subsidies back then for those who failed to get a visa to go across the strait. So I figured we’d be alright.” We were all captured by Endle’s words. Open blasphemy yet somehow he was still alive.

“But that’s heresy...”

“Yes Agum it is. Oh Saint Vinson, smite me now if you can hear me!” Endle laughed as he pulled out another bottle of spirits to join us for the last hours of the night.

“Aren’t you afraid of her wrath?”

“No. I’m much more afraid of Her triumph.” We sat in silence for a moment before Endle raised his arms for a toast. “To the village youth in Veranum, may they find peace in the warmth of such a fine city!” That was the first time I can remember talking about religion with an avid non-believer. An unapologetic blasphemer who truly didn’t hold the Seven Saints to be sacrosanct.

We had so many questions and Endle was willing to listen and answer every one. He wasn't trying to convince us to leave the church but was open to discussing his own thoughts if we wanted to listen.

Over the years it became a staple conversation. Whenever the topic came up Agum would be ready with a new way to convince Endle that he should repent. And they were never nearly as effective as he hoped.

Once the kids were here we didn't bring it up as much. It didn't seem appropriate to hold such heated debates with a younger generation around. Too easy for them to confuse passion for anger and more than anything we wanted them to grow up seeing our friends as their friends.

"Do you know the penguin sanctuary?" Rwen came to a Sunday barbecue prepared with a question. He was in the later years of grade school and making good impressions in school. We had plans to have another child but Zori was more a dream than anything real at that point.

"I do Rwen! My parents were there when it was built if you can believe it!"

"Wow! I thought that was like ancient history! We learned about how it was sooo long ago in school and I just saw it was in Nistilon and that's where you're from right?"

"That is where I'm from!"

"So you've played with the penguins?"

"Maybe when I was little. I can remember taking the kids there once upon a time too, but it's all been so long. I've visited the zoo here in Veranum many more times than that run down shelter in Nistilon."

"But it's different here isn't it?"

“Yeah...” I gave Endle a look. I didn’t want him to go down the road complaining about his old home town. I didn’t want Rwen to associate the worst of us with any village. Endle was free to have his distaste for it all, but I couldn’t have my son hate his family.

“Well, I want to play with the penguins at the sanctuary.”

“Get your parents to take you then!” Endle was good at playing the game as well and the payback was swift. He knew we went back to Besniwod for Frithlic Nyun and he knew planning a trip to Nistilon at the same time would be a headache and a half for us.

“Grandma Kumri loves penguins. We could probably convince your family to take a trip up there.” Lumi wasn’t helping, but she was like her own parents. Willing to do anything to make Rwen happy.

“That’s right! We’re going to the penguin sanctuary! We’re going to the penguin sanctuary!” We visited the penguin sanctuary in Nistilon that year when we were in the village for the holiday. It was easier to take and plan the trip than I expected, but I’m always like that. Dreading the slight change in the routine even if it’s on the way – or more than a little out of the way.

It feels like Dad. Being stubborn and sloppy with emotions. Letting the sentiment linger long enough to hurt those around me. I needed to get better at catching myself before I built up so much personal regret for no reason other than a sense of shame that only existed in my head.

When Zori was old enough to learn about the penguin sanctuary she of course asked Endle the same questions. Something about that place just spoke to what kids wanted to do.

“Uncle Endle you’re from Nistilon?”

“Ah it’s the year we learn about the penguin sanctuary is it?”

“How did you know!” Zori was more emotive than Rwen from a young age. She swung her hands around in a swinging motion to show her surprise. Her brother moved to calm her down and rolled his eyes. I answered with my own look. We both remembered him asking the same questions not so long ago.

“Although I don’t know if I can really say I’m from there anymore.”

“Why?”

“Well Zori, I’ve lived more of my life here in Veranum than Nistilon at this point.”

“But you’re from Nistilon.”

“I guess you’re right.” We shared a short laugh thinking about what Zori was saying. The idea of the kids not being *from our home* was unsettling. It was clear they would more than likely call Veranum their home and none of us really know how to feel about that.

“I’ll always be from Besniwod.” Agum spoke up as he readied a toast. “To the village youth in Veranum, may we find peace and warmth forever more!” He smiled at Rwen and Zori, meaning to include them in the statement. That was how we’d end up thinking about it. Regardless of how my son felt he would always be, at least in part, from Besniwod for us.

Endle and Agum of course worked with Rwen and Lumi to get me to promise we’d visit the sanctuary as well. A promise I’ve yet to keep, but it’s more complicated than they think. Or maybe I make it more complicated.

Mom loves penguins and visiting Nistilon to see them all in that massive shelter. Everyone else in the family has fun with it too. You can spend the whole day watching them waddle around and gossiping among themselves. It is fun and entertaining even for the most jaded of us.

But there's a museum. Dad hates the museum and it sets him down that political road. The penguin sanctuary was built in response to the wider worries of reforestation. Destroying their habitat and forever changing the climate.

The government wasn't blind to the issue and created the sanctuary as a way to preserve the old nature. A vestige of the world from before Saint Vinson's Triumph. Dad, of course, didn't think it was nearly enough. His ideal world was integrating the desert into our designs for reforestation. A dream that may not be impossible but was certainly over the capacity of the limited budget.

"Would you ever go back?" Agum raised an interesting question during that last Sunday barbecue. That early quarantine time there was a lot of talk about where we would be stuck. Getting locked in the city or making the move to indefinitely live with relatives in the village.

"I don't think so. There's nothing for me in Nistilon." Endle answered with a tired expression. Business was doing poorly and we were the only customers of the night. We were maybe some of the only customers the whole week. The food tasted old. Like he was holding on to too much supply.

"I can't imagine thinking like that." Lumi looked over to our kids with a smile. She was a good woman who cared for everyone in her life. She didn't choose me, I didn't choose her, we chose each other.

"Don't you still have family out there?" Agum pushed the subject further as we ate through the dishes and drank through the bottles.

"Any family I care about is here with me in Veranum. Aren't you afraid I'd be smote if I stepped foot out there anyway?" He let out a good long laugh and we shared one last toast.

“To the village youth, may they find the answers they’re looking for!”

I think Agum and Endle got into a fight at the end of the night. We left them at the restaurant as it got too late. Rwen and Zori were already up way past their bedtime, but we always made exceptions for Sunday barbecue. School or not, spending time with our extended family in Veranum mattered the most.

Finding that peaceful warmth was how me and Lumi learned to think about Saint Vinson’s Triumph. Any other history or grander story mattered little as long as we could raise our family with love and care. Her flame gave that to us and we would be forever grateful for the gift. The signs are always there even when we only find them in retrospect.

Chapter 28

Tastes and Colors

In Veranum we would decorate the whole house for Frithlic Nyun. A simpler shade of white lights strung up around the walls. A fake plastic tree with a smaller stature in the corner. Reforestation hadn't yet reached the city in the same way it did my parents' yard.

It didn't matter for Rwen or Zori though. Especially Zori. She thought of it as the magic of the holiday. The feeling of warmth with all of us coming together to spend a few weeks together. No work, no school. A few feasts, fireworks, and the old shows lulling us to sleep.

The way we did it now was the result of decades of compromise. We would try so hard to bring Besniwod into our apartment in the early years. There was technically a way to get a real tree and even keep it in your home, but the paperwork was nearly endless and it would be seen as a ridiculous waste of resources to all the neighbors.

You never get used to not having the right smell. The alternative materials never capture and hold the scents in the same way. I credit it to the cooking. The way the wood remembers the air. Rwen probably knows it from coming to Besniwod but to Zori she's only ever really known how we did it in Veranum.

I learned to understand how those details never truly mattered. I think that's how most people felt. We had our own way to decorate and celebrate and it was enough. More than enough. It was good.

The real spectacle was in the effort the city government made. Grandiose performances, incredible fireworks, and special threads spreading from lamppost to lamppost. The parks would be full of the seasonal colors as well and all add to that formal

feeling. They would even import a massive tree from across the strait for Frithlic Nyun. Set it up on the uppermost layers of the city and crown it with a giant glowing spider spinning a glowing thread that draped down the city walls. And maybe that was it. It was impressive and undeniably beautiful, but it lacked soul.

Or was I back there. I could see Rwen and Zori rushing down the halls of our apartment building. Hands clasped in grace as they pleaded for more red envelopes from the neighbors. Those innocent eyes flipped the switch in my reality. Haunted for another night.

The dream collapsed into the floor. An earthquake commanded by a higher power. Veranum crushed into a snowy dust. All the innovations, all the technology, all the warmth meaning nothing in the moment. The natural order was mightier than all.

I fell down that wave of destruction back all the way to Besniwod. Passing sacred mountains as I sped down the train tracks. By morning I'd find myself still at Lumi's old house. Rwen and Zori asleep in their nest at the foot of the bed. My distorted dreams. Too much stress. Another day in our snowy village.

Time moves faster than my memories. Harsh winds and dim sunlight shifting shadows until we ride another aurora sunrise. We would all be up sooner rather than later. Enjoying another amazing meal made by Tamu. Lumi and Lin would be talking about finding more snacks. Lochu would be silently taking notes, making sure she bought every one. Every single one.

"Mommy why don't we decorate our home like they do here?" Zori asked a simple question while we ate. An otherwise quiet morning. We were taking it slow. Looking down the hill to the train station and the central square.

"We do decorate. You remember all the lights and the tree?"

“Why don’t we put colorful lights all over like they do here though.”

“You don’t like our lights?”

“It’s not the same. I mean it looks different.”

“Do you not like how they do it here in Besniwod?”

“No! I think it’s so much better!” Different paintings of the same holiday. It was nice to see Zori learning to love our home. We all shared a smile that morning. I wasn’t sure how Zori would react to how they do things in the Besniwod.

Culture evolves at uneven paces and there were often differences between people in the city and people in the villages. Adding generational divides into the mix only makes it harder to find that well fought common ground.

“You know we have the same banners as they use here?” Rwen offered up his own opinion to help his little sister understand. “And if you’re talking about getting a real tree forget it. Would you really want to drag that all the way up to our apartment?” He didn’t know the specifics of how we used to march through the woods in search of the perfect holiday tree, but he had heard the stories enough to know that it wasn’t as pleasant as we hoped it sounded.

He was right too. On both fronts. Lumi and I put in a lot of effort to keep the spirit of Frithlic Nyun alive in our apartment. It wasn’t perfect and was far from comprehensive, but it was our way of bringing the old traditions into our new home.

Truth gets lost in all the mix of emotions. I doubt Zori could understand how most people in Veranum never even left the city for Frithlic Nyun. What she knew from our home was definitely less exciting than what she was seeing out in the countryside.

Even the venerated midday mass. A priest like Agum would never find work at a church in the city. Even though almost everyone worshiped the Seven Saints it was all

more subdued. A quick change to say a prayer because it's just what people do. They weren't asking to survive like people were in Besniwod.

Even the most devout true believer in Veranum couldn't muster half the visceral emotion you needed to offer the simplest of prayers at Saint Vinson's church in the central square. It was impossible for them. Their life was nothing like what we lived here.

"You're right Rwen. We put up a few things and help bring the holiday spirit into our home." Or maybe that's all a lie I just keep telling myself. There are pockets of intense celebrations in Veranum. I could be blind to what they view as more important since for me, what's most important is finding a way back to Besniwod to visit my family.

"Yeah, but it's nothing like here." Lumi and her timely contradiction helped dip the mood back into a happier holiday atmosphere. She was good at doing that. Stopping the spiraling and helping our kids focus on the more important matters of the day.

"I suppose so."

"Are you feeling sick again?"

"I'll manage."

The only thing left on the menu was to bring in the new year. It was the tail end of Frithlic Nyun and everyone was a little tired by the time it came to that last meal. People enjoyed talks about the new calendar and how they shifted the year.

There had always been more than enough politics at that point so people played along with any topic. Something to help wash down the full course meal yet again. Sometime in the afternoon Nali and Lin would be coming over with their families. They liked letting the cousins get as much time together as possible.

Mekoti and Bryne would arrive a little later with their husbands Ridni and Tarris. They liked focusing on the pies and other desserts while Tamu wrapped up more dumplings.

Before long the whole house would smell like a feast and it'd be hard to wait for my parents to arrive and begin eating.

The nostalgia of it all wrapped up like cobwebs in my mind. When me and my sisters were little we'd always try to leave the house to get out of cooking and cleaning. Sneak out the back door – the same one we still used to go out and set off fireworks.

I'd chase Bryne – or she'd chase me – to the edge of the woods. We'd have our rebuttal ready with a volley of snowballs. Then it wouldn't be long before Mekoti and Nali carved out their own pit to throw more snowballs with an added chorus of laughter.

We would spend as long as possible out there playing. Even if it was cold it didn't seem so bad. I'd go as far as saying it felt like an important part of the holiday. I can imagine the reality was Mom being scared about how we were keeping ourselves warm. She'd be sure to force us inside to drink extra hot soup and fill up on thick yogurts and bread.

The details of the memories are probably lost in how it felt to be young with no responsibility. Carefree with an uncertain future where anything was possible. Unfortunately, life has a way of moving faster than your dreams.

That's doubly true in Veranum. Chasing clocks and cashing checks for that perpetual better tomorrow. Yet whenever we make the trip back home it feels like what was *better* is back in Besniwod. Somewhere in an impossible yesterday.

I know better than to get lost in that feeling. We remember the good times so much better than the bad. Still. I can't shake the feeling. Like I lost or forgot something along the way. Being back here always brings back that comfortable feeling I only remember having as a child. But there was a reason why I left. Why we left. There had to be or I'd be stuck with an empty nothing.

“Dad, are you okay?”

“Yeah it’s nothing Rwen.”

“Daddy...”

“Yes Zori?”

“I think I might have made you sick.” Kids always surprise you. What could Zori have done to think it made me sick. Something small I didn’t notice that she regretted. I needed to keep a straight face no matter what she said. It was important to take her seriously even if it seemed anything she could say would have to be on the ridiculous side of reasonable.

“How could you have made me sick Zori?”

“...I might have... I might have forgotten something....”

“What did you forget?”

“The dreamcatcher! I thought I packed it in my backpack but I can’t find it now and I’ve been scared you would be mad at me. I don’t want you to be sick Daddy!” Zori lost the dreamcatcher. Or she thought she did and she blamed herself for me feeling stressed. It was cute and I was a little frustrated, but mostly just relieved.

“Zori the dreamcatcher isn’t that important. Come give Daddy a hug you didn’t make me sick.”

“Really?”

“I promise.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Zori started crying as she dug her face into my chest. Rwen looked over at Lumi to see how big of an issue forgetting the big gift really was. Lumi was a little annoyed as well, but we both cared more about Zori than the dreamcatcher. We could always give it to Lin next year or figure out a way to send it on the train.

I also hate to admit it, but maybe Zori was right. Those strange dreams and the extra stress seemed to be a result of me worrying so much about forgetting or losing that gift. I was starting to think it was a curse and I'd lost my protective charm.

I held Zori tightly and reached for her favorite flavor of doughnut. It was a more recent addition to the Frithlic Nyun traditions. Relaxing with a long breakfast of baked goods, especially doughnuts. I remember the surprise when I learned not everyone in Besniwod did the same.

"Doesn't everything do something like this?"

"No way!" Ridni laughed as he sat us down at the long table by the window at the back of the room. Finding out I didn't know my own hometown as well as I thought I did was a surprise. Never mind finding out at the cafeteria.

"I don't really know where it's from either." Mekoti added as she helped hand out the plate of doughnuts. We all started laughing as it became clear this was a unique Kumri family tradition that none of us understood.

"Well it's definitely not something we do. I'd only ever heard about it after I spent the holiday with Swefen." Lumi added her own context to our confusion about its origin.

"I made us start doing it!" Nali answered in kind with her own explanation. "I just wanted doughnuts and Mom and Dad always gave us what we wanted during Frithlic Nyun. I don't know why they kept doing it though!"

Since then Lumi's parents always made sure we had doughnuts every morning while we stayed. Less than healthy and not even my own real desire, but I appreciated the effort to take on my family's quirks as their own. We were in the more relaxed half of the holiday anyway. It was okay to bend the rules as long as we were comfortable. A gentle reminder that we're all here together.

Those last few days always bleed and blend into each other. The mix of comfort and joy are like the moment me and Lumi moved into a long lasting relationship. Even now, all our years together were marked less by promotions and individual accomplishments and more by the birth of our children.

Rwen and Zori were our everything and we held hope for the future thanks to them. I can remember the moment. When we were finally making sense of our own world and our planned trips back to Besniwod were a yearly affair.

We were out to eat at a more expensive restaurant. Something along the outer wall of the city looking at the sea. Halfway through the meal I got one of those weird looks on my face. An order slightly off or the kids complaining about their perfectly cooked meal. It doesn't matter what it was exactly but the moment is frozen in my mind. It was all so perfect.

"Lumi. I really love you."

"What Swefen?"

"I love you Lumi."

I expected a sarcastic reply as she pushed me to deal with the kids but instead she stopped and looked me dead in the eyes. She reached out for my hand and our fingers fell into the spaces between each other. It was like that first time leaving Besniwod when I knew she was the one.

"I love you too Swefen."

Change is a part of life though. The future only safe when we look for guidance from Her flame. The uncertainty is a part of what makes us who we are. Who we were. Who we will be. I believe that's the point of coming home – back to Besniwod – to celebrate Frithlic Nyun. And maybe that's the point of Saint Vinson's Triumph and the goal of Veranum as a

springtime city. Our children will find more in common with each other than the differences carved out by a past they can't control.

Or maybe I'm getting way ahead of myself. I just hope my kids enjoy spending Frithlic Nyun with our family. I hope to give them as good of memories of my home as my own. Finding happiness being together with everyone.

"Daddy! Daddy! Look what I found!" Zori suddenly came running back from her nest holding Lin's promised gift – the dreamcatcher – in her hands.

"Wow Zori! I thought you said you lost it?"

"I lied... I just couldn't remember and I've felt bad about forgetting." Zori let her hands down as she was flooded with the guilty emotions of regret. Punishment enough in my mind.

"Don't worry Zori. We just have to think about how we're going to give it to Auntie Lin now! So where was it then?"

"I found it in the nest!" I guess Lumi taught Zori and Rwen to call them nests after all.

Chapter 29

The Marriage

We held the wedding in Besniwod. Off season, off the tracks, and for some, off the record. We invited over half the people we could remember – people like Dorub Chol and the others – but of course less than half would actually show up. A part of the nature of becoming an out-of-towner.

That's how some of them saw us. Traitors and deserters when the village needed us most. Or rather, that's how we thought some of them saw us. More than likely misplaced guilt grown from our own unresolved issues. It didn't matter then.

It was time to celebrate a new life together. Our love for each other and the unending adventure we were sure to enjoy. A wild ride through tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. We had to break the news at Sunday barbecue first. Our closest friends and strongest allies for the life we'd built in Veranum.

"And of course you and Endle are invited!" I ended the toast raising my voice for the whole restaurant to hear. I didn't care if it was a little off color. I wanted them to know I loved Lumi and was marrying her soon.

"Well, I'll be there for sure! I haven't been back since I left so it'll be nice to see all that's changed." Agum played with his empty glass as he thought about how much the train ticket would cost.

"Thank you for the invitation but I'll have to politely decline." I suspected Endle wouldn't want to attend, but we had to ask. "I'm not sure Besniwod would take too kindly to a sinner like myself." We all laughed at his exaggerated excuse.

“You really are lucky Swefen!” Agum pulled Endle over to at least enjoy a round of celebrations before getting back to work. And that round lasted all night until morning. All the usual suspects coming out to play. Those old stories we had to hear. An intense argument about nothing between Lumi and Agum.

That was who we were. People happy being with each other. Comfortable with the truth of who we were. Not feeling like there was any hidden meaning behind the words. We could simply be. More than anything anyone could ask for.

The day of the ceremony our parents went way beyond what we wanted. One of those *not sure how much is for us not sure how much is for them* situations. It was nice, but we never expected a grand performance at the big tent by the First Tree.

The old priest was elderly and frail. He would always be lost between his glasses and the scripture. The image of piety for an older generation. Agum ended up not being able to make it and of course Endle never even looked at the tickets.

The rest of the seats were the familiar faces we already knew. My sisters and their husbands. Lin and her husband. Uncle Umbali and the other Aunts and Uncles. Mom, Dad, Lochu, and Tamu waiting for us outside the tent.

The music started and we knew we were there to put on a show. It was still the old musicians then. I invited those old friends but none of them showed. Time widens the space between everyone.

The old priest mumbled familiar words I can barely remember. All that was in my head was the beauty in front of my eyes. Lumi Jua. The love of my life. The only person that mattered in the whole world. She moved her lips in perfection, saying everything I wanted to hear.

I replied in kind and we shared the deepest kiss and the most intense of celebrations. Into the dark of night and the edge of another twilight. We were there. Together. For each other. The whole party slowly moved through the tunnel between buildings to my parents' old cottage on the outskirts of the town.

They prepared fireworks and toasts and nests and music and more. They even knew about our tradition in Veranum and had a barbecue out in the yard to capture that special flavor we made for each other.

Tamu and Dad had a very serious drunken discussion about how so much of the marriage was families coming together. Not just the lovers but the joining of everyone.

"This means we're brothers now you know!" Dad shouted at a volume inappropriate for the hour.

"I wouldn't have it any other way!" Tamu answered as they raised their glasses once again and we put more meat down for the hungry few with room in their stomachs still. The emotions were stronger than the power of nature that night.

We were blessed by Saint Vinson. Her flame keeping us warm and igniting a passion to last a lifetime. That was where we were. That was who we are.

When the routine started again and we were making our way to another Sunday barbecue, Agum was full of nothing but excuses.

"Lumi. Swefen. I'm so sorry! I tried to get a ticket but I just couldn't afford it!"

"We would've helped you out. Hell, Endle would have helped you out!" Lumi was making the obvious statements to make Agum sweat a little.

"I know, I know!"

"Do you now?" Endle stopped by our table to offer another congratulations and challenge the accusation.

“Don’t be a hardass! You would’ve helped Agum out.” I gave him a tough look and he laughed at the attempt.

“You’re half right at least. And I guess that’s worth a reward.” He pulled out a special dish he seemed to have prepared in advance. His gift to us for missing the wedding. It was the perfect combination of our flavors. Lumi’s eyes lit up as the spices danced across her tongue. My mouth watered simply at the scent.

“How did you do this!” Lumi asked first as Endle laughed his way back to the kitchen. For all his flaws and all his failures, Endle was a good host and an excellent chef. He knew us well and catered to the exact tastes we would expect.

In another life he would have been the one manning the barbecue at my parents’ old house. I could picture him shouting at a random passerby to gather some pieces of wood from the nearby forest. The confusion on their face only half as good as the flavors he’d bring out of the meat.

“I really am sorry.” Agum was uncharacteristically apologetic. His usual confidence shattered. He would have moved the world to help his friends and yet he failed here.

“Don’t worry about it Agum. We’ll make it up sometime.”

We’re still waiting to make it up I suppose. The way time gets ahead of us. With him being the priest at Saint Vinson’s church it would be easier to bring him along, but it feels like it’ll never be the same.

That’s okay though. The real prize was calling Lumi my wife. Starting a new life with her and raising two wonderful children. Our family being a piece of that world we wish we always had.

Chapter 30

Safe and Sound

I had pleasant dreams for the first time since arriving in Besniwod. I really was the lost hunter in those old stories Grandma would tell. The dreamcatcher helped ease my mind, stopping the nightmares for good. It doesn't really matter how or why. I'm just happy to have woken up feeling refreshed and full of energy.

All that was left was the final goodbyes. It was sure to be more dramatic this time. We were gone for so many years this time around and they wouldn't be able to hold back the feeling that the same thing would happen again.

At least the politics would be gone. I was glad to be removed from all of that in a way. Disconnected from the important matters of the village. That didn't help my image though. The man who gave up his hometown. At least in Besniwod.

Sometimes I felt like we should just go to Saint Vinson's church and be done with it. Neutral ground for everyone to join as we spent the night sending our well wishes and saying our farewells. As a child I would have found that to be an adventure and a half, but I can see why that'd never work now.

Maybe that's why our parents' homes never seemed to change after all this time. There were a few new stone and wooden repairs. Clutter shifting from corner to corner, but overall it was still the same house – still the same home. Still my home. Still Lumi's home.

The same place we knew as kids. There was the same small room just past the front door to shake off your snowy shoes and put up your coats. Even if the layout was different both me and Lumi could feel that familiarity. The way you knew how to navigate the walls

without any lights. Tip-toeing around tables and desks to sneak a snack in the hours long past midnight.

At my parents' house, my room still felt like my room. It was big enough to fit all four siblings when we were growing up, but these days it functioned as a guest room. Us kids would need to scramble and make a new nest somewhere in the house when we had guests. Mekoti and Bryne knew all the best spots. Being good big sisters, they would almost always be sure to save them for me and Nali.

Mom and Dad had their own suite past our room with windows looking out to the backyard. There was an enclosed balcony attached to their larger room. Dad was inspired and turned it into something of a greenhouse, growing exotic flowers and plants to add some green to the white atmosphere.

He took the most pride in those little green peppers for spice and a few leafy garnishes for texture. It started with a seed he bought at one of those market tents. He was always trying his hand at growing a real garden even when we didn't have the space. That didn't stop him from trying though, and I remember how he turned our house into a jungle for a short while.

The only problem is we didn't have enough nutrients, water, or sunlight to support so many plants. They all withered and he needed to start anew the next Summer. When he saw Tamu succeed where he failed, he swallowed his pride and tried again, focusing on hardy plants that easily grow.

"Swefen! Bring everyone into the kitchen for a nice warm meal!" Lumi's mom Lochu called from the kitchen for the next meal. I snapped back to the oval home on the hill.

"What's for lunch Mom?" I called Lochu Mom when we were together. It may get confusing to some but it made us all feel much closer and more together.

“Fresh yogurt with the catch of the day boiled into a stew. We’ve made up some pancakes and I believe there’s some sweet sauces to go with them.”

“Ew.” Rwen scrunched his face in disgust as he heard the menu.

“Yummy!” Zori leaped up and rushed to the kitchen at the mention of some of her favorite local dishes.

Kids can be so different. I don’t know why Rwen doesn’t like the more traditional Besniwod cuisine while Zori has no problem eating and enjoying it. I can understand how it’s different from the palette they were used to in Veranum, but we tried to make both of them appreciate the food we grew up with from a young age.

Although when Rwen was young we didn’t do a very good job of introducing more traditional cuisine. It can be hard to find the right ingredients in the city and there aren’t many restaurants that specialize in the kinds of things we think of as local. Even when you find it, the flavors often don’t match well with what we’d expect in Besniwod.

The difficulty we used to have in finding the right food is a big part of how I ended up finding the courage to ask Lumi out on our first date. We had been living in Veranum for a while already and were spending a lot of time together. Whatever the circumstances may be, you tend to stick with people who share something with you. The stronger that shared bond the stronger the pull of gravity.

Even after getting accustomed to city life and learning to live with the differences between Veranum and Besniwod, there would always be that feeling that we found nowhere else but in Besniwod. It doesn’t make much sense. Veranum City offers more than our village ever could and yet it could never completely satisfy our expectations.

The old recipes from home never quite matched up to what they made in Veranum. It would have been easier if I didn't enjoy any of it. Being more like Rwen and genuinely disliking Mom's cooking.

Unfortunately, I wasn't born a city boy and it didn't take me long to crave that cooking. The unique way to prepare meats and milks or the special way it all made you feel warm and toasty, no matter the weather outside. Anyone from Besniwod would share the sentiment. The convenience of the city a nice perk diluting what we know as home. That was what drew us together. We knew we could find home within each other.

Sitting down for lunch and seeing Zori enthusiastically eat every bite while Rwen politely poked at his stew warmed my heart. It all reminded me why I cared so much. My wife's smile sealed the deal.

"Lumi, It feels good to be back home."

"It sure does."

It's strange how things work themselves out. The unbelievable amount of effort it takes to find what is a specialty dish in the city was a staple here in Besniwod. Practical and traditional defining the meals themselves.

Chapter 31

First Date

I quickly realized I would have trouble finding the right restaurant and would need help from Agum. He was older and knew Veranum much better than either me or Lumi. Being from the same village, he would also completely understand the homesick flavors I was looking for.

Agum was like that. He always knew how to find the right ingredients at the right time. Well versed in the markets and loving to stir up trouble. If it meant reaching our goal he would be down to do it. I didn't know it then, but being good friends with Endle probably made it a bit easier to find the perfect restaurant as well.

All this to say, Agum was the first person I talked to about my plan. About asking Lumi out on a date. About making us officially a couple. A decision he wanted me to make that would impact the rest of my life more than I could have ever known.

"Well there's Upas not too far from here."

"Upas?"

"Yeah they do something called fortunate food."

"You think they have some inland specialties?"

"The menu has them. Things like meat jellies and a boiled fish stew."

"Those are more like Frithlic Nyun foods."

"Bro! I don't think you'll find anything else closer. Don't be such an asshole!"

"Yeah that should work I guess..." Agum had a blunt way with words that made the simple answer more obvious. A good friend for when I got into my own head. He was right too. It may not have been perfect but it was the best option.

“Look, I’ll ask Endle what he thinks and see if the restaurant sucks. If it does suck maybe he can prepare something special for you. So if there’s one dish you absolutely must have to impress Lumi, tell me now or forever hold your peace.”

“Who’s Endle? And don’t say it like that.”

“A good friend of mine. And is it already too early?”

“Come on Agum.”

“Well, I’m still waiting for a suggestion.” He was right again but my mind was blank. I only had this vague idea of *home* that I wanted to find in any of the dishes we ate growing up. Asking for something specific somehow seemed beyond the scope of what I was prepared to request.

“What about... you know that beef stew where they keep the bones in the bowls.”

“Of course!”

“See if they have that.”

“They’ll have it on the menu by the time you two arrive. Either at this new place Upas or at Endle’s barbecue shop!”

Agum is my best friend even if we don’t always share the same values. And I’m glad I remembered the stew. Lumi mentioned her dad would make it for her family growing up. It was meant to help keep everyone warm while adding a few more special flavors that aren’t typically found in Besniwod.

In the end Upas didn’t pan out, but Endle came through and was preparing the dish just for us that night. So later that day when I spoke to Lumi I knew exactly what to say. Mention the beef stew in passing and try to get her to go to our Sunday barbecue spot with me. The perfect plan I was sure to nervously execute.

“Lumi...”

“Yes Swefen?”

“Well... there’s something I kind of want to ask you.”

“Is it about the exam coming up? We’ll be studying together like we always do!”

“It’s not that...”

“What is it then?”

“Well...”

“Well what?”

“I’m sorry...”

“Come on Swefen stop being weird.”

“I’m just a little nervous.”

“Nervous? Why would you be... oh... oh!”

“We can just focus on the next exam.”

“Some place to eat?”

“No. I mean... Agum talked to Endle and our Sunday barbecue spot will have that dish you like – something like that beef stew with the bones – the thing your dad would make in Besniwod?”

“So it’s a date?”

“Yeah.”

We spent nearly four hours at Endle’s restaurant talking about our thoughts on life. How much we never expected to miss Besniwod. How we would like to stay in Veranum after graduation. It didn’t take long for us to start making plans to return home together. A smart decision out of convenience more than the budding relationship – the lie we told ourselves to not feel so embarrassed.

“So Swefen, we could go back together for Frithlic Nyun!”

“Yeah that’d make sense! It’s a pretty long train ride so it’d be nice to have some company.”

“Yeah... plus we usually go back on the same train anyway.”

“Well not Agum, but you and me. Might as well start planning it together though.”

“You want Agum to come with us?”

“No... I mean if he was going to Besniwod.”

“Yeah that makes sense...”

“Don’t worry about it. He stays here in Veranum over the holiday anyway.”

“So just the two of us?”

“Yeah.”

“I like that.”

A few more bites and an extra ounce of dessert and we were crowding in on closing time. There was still an air of overly polite gestures, but an unmistakable bond was also taking form. Those feelings of joy that I first felt – holding hands to soothe the pain of leaving home. It was something more now. Its own thing. I found my own reason to look for happiness in her beautiful eyes.

“I like being with you Lumi.”

“Me too Swefen.”

I could smell it all in empty bowls of beef stew and frozen yogurt still in front of us. We weren’t in an out of place restaurant down an off street in Veranum. This was our home. As long as we had each other we had a home.

Chapter 32

Little Nest Makers

We were all sat around the table again. The big round one at Lumi's parent's house. The oval home on the hill. Tamu was telling a joke about the latest wares in the central market. Apparently there was a tent trying to pass off some special honey that never expired.

"You'd think the guy was talking about them going extinct!" We laughed at the old fear, thinking back to all those pre-migration legends that we mostly only hear about in songs. Life before Saint Vinson's Triumph is always thought of in terms we can't really feel or understand.

Like a distant fog rolling over an endless sea. Yet there is a commonality in it. How we can laugh at Tamu's joke and move on to spreading the honey over warm pieces of bread. The ships sailing across the strait carrying containers larger than some of the houses in Besniwod. The livelihood of a few city blocks worth more than the entire village.

Material goods on a global route only stopping in Veranum for the latest exchange rate. We didn't ever know the details and all that came to my office was a spreadsheet of detached data. My part in the machine was less important than the wealth it brought to my family.

If Rwen and Zori could grow up healthy and happy then the world beyond my reach would simply stay there. I was content being able to make the trip to Besniwod and hear Tamu's jokes. Groan at Dad's inevitable political discrepancy. And smile as Rwen and Zori playing around with their cousins to build the night's nests.

At the end of the trip we were always fully adapted to the cold as the memories and the dreams started mixing together. We all shared new stories and retold the old. Teaching Zori how to set off fireworks and firecrackers. Watching Rwen learn a new card game from Uncle Umbali and the cousins. Listening to wild stories, half imagined and definitely embellished.

Spending time with old friends and seeing Agum as a new person who was somehow still the same. Watching shows in the central square and feasting day after day. The last item on the menu was a candlelit show in that famous central square.

It always needed to be there. Somewhere where we could waltz with the inherent danger of nature. And if perchance the weather offended, it took but the big tent and all was mended. We'd find a way inside, warmth nearby for all to hide in.

The performances were the same regardless of where they were held. A finale that symbolized the beginning of our goodbye. There was one thing left. One outstanding emotion and a missed opportunity that had all but ruined the entire holiday – at least for my mind.

The dreamcatcher was found and needed to find its way into the rightful owner's arms. So we would have to find her in a similar house on the hill. Oval shaped stone home dug into the ground. The biggest difference was found on the roof. Neither Lin nor Akit had any desire to build a functioning greenhouse from scratch.

Lin's daughter Frezy answered the door with a characteristic smile. She was surprised to see us at the eleventh hour of Frithlic Nyun. We were all but prepared to get on the train as a crowd formed at the entrance. I imagine she half expected us to break out in song, bringing the flavor of carols in some new traditional form.

"Is Lin here?" I asked with a shy voice for someone over three times Frezy's age.

“Yeah... I’ll go get Mom.” Frezy looked at Rwen with a question in her eyes. A way to ask why his dad was being so weird without saying any words.

“Have you eaten?” I asked another awkward question as I looked in at their dinner table set for three.

“Uuuh.... No....”

“Frezy! Let them in! We’ll get something prepared!” Lin moved with the elegance that only very pregnant women are capable of. She knew that if we were there at such a strange time there would be no need to cook and it was all about the appearance of being polite more than actually doing anything polite.

So we came in and Tamu and Mom were soon busy in the kitchen. They stirred and they cooked enough for the whole party and we were soon sitting at their smaller round table. They made all of Lin’s favorites. Mackerel and casserole. Dumplings and sweet potatoes. Anything and everything to make sure she was happy and healthy.

“Lin, we have something for you by the way.” I brought up the idea when dinner was dying down. It was a smaller gathering. Just my parents and Lumi’s family. After so many nights of moving around the village to keep everyone together, both sides of the family felt less obliged to attend every event.

“Oh?” Lin looked over to me with a smirk before checking the intention with a second glance over at Lumi. She knew who was the true brains and the brawn of the relationship and trusted her own kin over the bumbling boyfriend who stole her sister’s heart.

“Yes... Zori should have it with her. Zori, go ahead and give Auntie Lin her gift.”

“...Okay.” She still felt bad for losing the dreamcatcher. I don’t think she understood why it was an important gift or what it meant to our family. Zori just knew it was important

to me and Lumi – to her family. Without the details it was just forgetting something that made us sad and that was more than enough reason to feel guilty.

“Come over here Zori.” Lin answered with a softer smile as Zori sheepishly walked over to her aunt. Zori was actually fairly close to Lin and enjoyed trying to mimic her expressions. She thought her overly serious reactions were funny but really it was about how close Lin and Lumi were. Zori loved her mom and wanted to find a way to share that closeness by learning from her aunt.

“Auntie Lin... Rwen and Mommy made this for you back in Veranum. I helped Daddy find the stuff to make it too! It’s a dreamcatcher you know... for the new baby!”

“Thank you so much Zori. Everyone. If I remember correctly this is one of Saint Denali’s traditional gifts. I always liked how it feels close to Saint Vinson’s spider.” Lin was calm with her gratitude but sincere in every word.

“Auntie Lin... Does she have a name yet?”

“Well Zori, we don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl, but we do have a name. Kiria.”

“Kiria? That’s a pretty name!”

“We think so too!” My brother-in-law Akit joined in the gratitude. He was a serious man who cared deeply not just for Lin but for all the Juas. He and Lin were raising their daughter to be a good person and we all knew they’d put the same care into raising little Kiria.

Rwen and Frezy were busy giggling to each other as they whispered back and forth. Without hearing anything I knew he was telling his cousin about all the drama behind losing and finding the dreamcatcher. One day it’d become their own embarrassing story to share and retell during a future Frithlic Nyun feast.

It was never overtly said, but we could all feel a hope for the future with the new child. An emotion that meshed well with the creeping regret of leaving. Preemptively missing everyone. Getting over our petty differences and enjoying the company of each other as we thought about Kiria. How the baby could be a toddler by the next time we came home.

It always happens so fast. They move from being fully dependent on you to drifting further and further away. The saddest part of being a parent is learning to let go. I never thought about it like that when I was growing up. Even after moving to Veranum I didn't think of it as leaving. I was naive. We were both young and naive.

First came Rwen and the most incredible panic of my life as Lumi began screaming. We needed to rush to the hospital and the pain never stopped. She told me it was the worst, most intense pain she felt in her life. And somehow it was worth it when we saw Rwen.

"He's so beautiful!" Lumi smiled through her tears as the baby was brought into our world. He was quiet and thoughtful from those very first moments and cuddled up to his mother with perfected instincts.

"Rwen." I said the name we chose as I stood as close as possible to my wife and newborn child. I reached out to his little hand and he clasped onto my thumb, barely fitting his fingers around the finger. It was all so perfect.

We left the hospital a few hours later with our home forever changed. Our son and our home from then on was no longer in Besniwod. Rwen learned to walk, talk, and become his own person as we moved from a cheap apartment in a rundown part of town to our current home with a view of the ocean past the outer wall.

The first time we brought him to the village both our families couldn't stop giving him attention. The first city born Kumri. The first Jua from Veranum. He made history for our families and they were both surprised when we told them we saved something special just for Besniwod.

We brought little Rwen to Saint Vinson's church for a naming ceremony. The local priest feeling a bit out of step at performing the ritual for someone who seemed to be a foreigner. That was our life. Feet in both worlds and somehow finding solid footing.

With Zori we were not only more practiced, but Rwen was old enough to take on some of the household responsibilities. The rush to the hospital and taking care of his mother. Making sure everything important is packed as we wait for the baby to be born.

In the first moments though it was already clear Zori was her own person. She came out crying with her eyes ready to open wide. She didn't stop crying either. After Rwen we expected all babies to be easy but Zori proved us very wrong. We were lucky to get a good hour's sleep when she was a newborn.

All our trouble keeping her calm only invited more unsolicited parenting advice from our families back in Besniwod. I knew they meant well. I know Lumi knew they meant well – although she had a harder time hiding how annoyed it made her.

Rwen was not as strong willed in that familial forgiveness. He would bark back if people got overbearing. People would say he got it from growing up in the city and it only made him double down. I think he gets it more from Dad than anywhere in the city though.

And our family was whole. We made our nest and filled it with our own memories. Rwen and Zori loved their home and learned to appreciate the life we once lived in the inland village. It would never be the same and they would sometimes struggle to connect with people in Besniwod, but I believe it smooths out in time.

Chapter 33

Finding Family

I didn't have any dreams the night before we left. Just one of those lay in bed. Close my eyes. Open them. Now it's morning kind of night. I couldn't even tell you where we ended up spending our time. We changed hosts so often and I got used to hopping around to whoever and wherever invited us.

Despite how tired the trip was making me, I was sad it was almost over. We all were. The scent of our departure was in the air and it tinted every interaction. The last mulled wine together until we saw each other next year. The last argument around a big table. The last prayer at Saint Vinson's church. The last distant sunset before the twilight ever fully reached the sky.

Wherever we ended up we packed as best we could like usual. Folding up the blankets of the nest and checking twice for any lost toys. No matter how thorough there was always something forgotten. I didn't mind too much. Just another reason to come back.

We would have another round of laughter and merrymaking that evening in the central square. Live performances and enough drink to drown the sorrow of any goodbye. It was a bittersweet nostalgia that we feared and eagerly anticipated.

Everyone coming to show true emotions in good faith at least once. We were all so desperate to say the obvious truth, but struggled to say the right words. I explained it all to Zori once when she asked me why Frithlic Nyun was a holiday.

"Well, you know the story about Saint Vinson's Triumph and the importance of the Seven Saints?"

“Yes Daddy but that doesn’t explain why it’s a holiday for our family!”

“What do you mean Zori?”

“Our family isn’t one of the Seven Saints! Not even Nali!” I laughed as I remembered a similar conversation with Nali when she first learned the names of the saints. She spent a good few months thinking she was an actual incarnation of Saint Denali, much to the confusion of my family.

“So you mean why do we choose to celebrate this holiday?”

“Yes! Exactly that!”

“I don’t really know Zori. But I think it’s as good an excuse as any to spend time with the ones you love.”

“So it’s just random?”

“No. Not random.”

“Okay...”

“It’s an important holiday for us. The most important holiday as we celebrate the new year. Maybe it’s harder to understand here, but in Besniwod do you know how they say someone’s age?”

“Like how old they are?”

“Yes!”

“Like four *years old*?”

“That’s right Zori!”

“I don’t get it Daddy....”

“In Besniwod we don’t say years old. We say someone has a number of winters. So it’d be four winters old or having four winters. Frithlic Nyun is a celebration of life after another winter!”

“Okay...” I mostly made up my reasoning, but it sounded good and I believed people in my village held a similar enough way of thinking about it. If nothing else, it would help Zori appreciate the holiday as a special way to celebrate the year and spend time with family.

“Just remember the true meaning of Frithlic Nyun is believing in each other.”

“Okay Daddy...”

We would visit the First Tree later in the afternoon. That special spot in the center of the central square. It was originally some kind of experiment and the story goes they tested experimental soil at that exact spot as the founding of the village. Something that could eventually be used in terraforming inhospitable climates.

“They found the right formula for the soil but forgot about another key component. At least at first!” Dad was always more of a naturalist and loved learning and understanding how to make things grow. Growing up it felt like half our house was dedicated to keeping the inside green.

“What did they forget Grandpa Kumri?” Rwen enjoyed learning from Dad and he knew we sometimes struggled to get along. Maybe that helped the two of them find a connection to each other. They were so different in their ambitions but similar in their passions.

“Light!” Dad pointed up to the dark sky and smiled. He made his hand into a circle and then held it up to the lamp above the tree.

“Ooooh. That’s cool!”

We shared another smile as we looked up at the strong light shining on the tree. I remember Grandpa telling the story of when they started the campaign to add those lights to the forest. It wasn’t a forest then though. It was what would become the forest.

Lumi's dad Tamu also loved nature and growing plants. I'm sure it's been said, but he turned the roof of their home into a greenhouse and filled it with all sorts of seeds. I knew she heard the same stories growing up. Maybe not caring, but intimately familiar with those same stories of cross bred trees and experimental soil.

"Did your dad ever tell you about how they forgot to think about the light?"

"Yeah... every time we visit the First Tree."

"My dad does the same."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Most people don't really care for the details as long as it works."

"Yeah. Agum always just calls it a miracle." There was a moment of silence as we thought about talking past each other. We were newlyweds then and Lumi was just pregnant with Rwen. The future seemed scary but we were sure we could face it together.

"Do you still have many friends in Besniwod?"

"Yeah I guess." We sometimes wondered why we only met each other once we left the village. We were always in different circles growing up. Our friends in Veranum would never believe there was enough distance between us to make such a thing possible, but such was our reality.

"You think our dads will tell that same story to Rwen."

"Oh I'm sure of it."

We had one last night before it was time to ride the train home. After the last performance in the central square we just relaxed at her parents' house. The oval shaped home on the hill. All that was left was that preemptive homesickness that sets in when you're about to leave someplace you love.

People are strange. I remember we shared a similar feeling before leaving Veranum. The kids complaining about having to make the trip and me and Lumi sharing a silent agreement that it would be easier to simply stay in the city.

But it was always worth it in the end. Remembering just how much we loved each other and our families. If it cost us nothing more than me possibly getting a cold and some political whining it paid for itself many times over.

Chapter 34

Catching Dreams

There were abandoned cottages deep in the woods. Frozen over and buried in snow. Failed experiments at the cost of country folk life. The source of many a childhood fear. They would be filled with hay as the cheapest of graves.

My great grandfather made his living doing that job. My grandfather atoned for the sin by championing reforestation. My dad felt the guilt in a passion for environmental justice. And I gave up on the family line for the sake of raising a family that could be happy.

I could only dig myself out one handful at a time. Slowly making my way to the window and seeing the quiet scene outside. Pristine white on every horizon. Ice carved paths running straight to the First Tree.

A mesh of webs being spun by Bikeshi guided my vision. I walked with the harsh winds. They howled at my back and gnawed on my limbs. My heart was long since numbed to the pain. My mind as blank as the snow covered village. Except that one tree. The First Tree.

And then She descended from the highest peak. Her grace. Our savior. Saint Vinson. Her flame. She was there to save me. I served Her and no other. Her hand extended the eternal flame to my soul. No words. Just a smile. Her crystal spider crawling up to her crown and all was done. All was made right.

Rwen and Zori were fully grown. Adults in Veranum. They were happy and healthy as they found careers in their respective studies. Zori would rarely make the trip back to Besniwod but took her family to Nistilon to play with the penguins every few years.

My son was more filial and would make trips back to our village for the rest of his life. Finding a wife and a life with a woman from Besniwod, he was happy. She was happy. That's what was important.

Lumi and I. Me and Lumi. Our love was eternal. From that moment on the train until after our death. We loved each other. We found peace in that love and forever were striven to share that emotion with any and all who would listen.

Saint Vinson Herself absolved me of sin. Her immaculate beauty and undying gaze saying Her goodbye and wishing me well. That dream, Her vision, stayed with me through the morning fog and haze. And we were already back in the warmth of the train station.

Only this time a full party was sending us off. All the in-laws, neighbors, and old friends. Dorub Chol let his wife and kids tend to his market tent as he waited with new furs in his hands. Vuli Tussock and Krin Kuhun at his side. They were set up by the open hearth as a duo act. Playing the songs we used to listen to back in school. The notes dancing on the embers as the sound warmed our hearts against the flavor of the weather outside.

Agum Gernan. Father Agum. He was there in the traditional priest's clothes. He muttered a mantra as a protective blessing for my family. Promising to find us again. Maybe one day back at Endle's restaurant.

We made our way through the nieces and the siblings. Spending a special moment with each as we remembered why we loved each other. Mekoti was last in line and walked us up to the turnstiles with tears in her eyes. Nothing needed to be said to understand why she cried.

And then there were our parents waiting for us for the final heartfelt goodbye. "Make sure you let us know as soon as you arrive!" Mom shouted as she moved in for a hug. She

loved us all so much and wished we could stay longer, but our life in Veranum was calling us home. As much as we wanted to miss the train, it was time to leave.

“We’ll be waiting for you.” Lochu hugged the kids before reaching out for Lumi’s hands. There was no competition between our mothers for our love. They complimented each other’s hearts and warmed our world together.

The tears were already rolling as we pushed through and into the snow covered platform. Uncle Umbali was already waiting with the other station workers as he waved us further down.

In the morning frost I ushered the family through one by one as we waited for the train back to Veranum. The screeching halt and opening doors welcomed an artificial warmth that flooded the frozen platform.

On the way to our cramped sleeper car I noticed a familiar passenger making his way back to Veranum as well. Endle Tavas. He was hiding behind a newspaper but clearly praying with some beads. His family was noticeably absent, but I was glad to see he reconciled some of his hatred for his own home. We would surely talk about it at our next Sunday barbecue.

Lumi and the kids settled into a nest on the cot and tried their best to relax. It’s always a long ride back to Veranum, but at least we could close our eyes with happier thoughts to help warm the cold nights.

That’s how it always is. We go home with new memories thawing in the frost. Misty eyes dropping like dew as we carve out our spots in the cramped sleeper car. I didn’t like to think of myself as superstitious or even overtly religious, but as I sat down on the bench and looked out the window I couldn’t help myself from believing the old stories Grandma used to tell about the dreamcatcher were true.

I was far from a hunter and I don't even remember the last time I saw a real spider, but that little charm seemed to have solved my sleep issues. Blessed by Saint Vinson herself, it really was a net catching my bad dreams. I was just about to close my eyes and let my body relax into the rhythm of the train when a familiar argument broke out.

"Mommy! Rwen told me I needed to make the nest or you would make me sleep in the space between cars!"

"Did he now?"

"Mom! Zori just didn't know what I meant! I was just playing a game. Mom please!"

"Too late Rwen." I got up to show some interest in authority. "You either apologize to your sister or you'll have to sleep on the bench as punishment."

Lumi rolled her eyes as she saw through what I was doing. I thought back to how my dad handled Mekoti and Bryne fighting over the same thing. I sometimes wonder if he was playing a similar game back then.

"Okay fine Dad... I'm sorry Zori."

"Now stop playing tricks on your sister."

"Thank you Daddy!"

Zori came up to hug me as I settled into my spot on the bench. Rwen was truly sorry even if his tone of voice made it seem otherwise. He cared a lot for Zori and siblings just like to tease each other. I found it funny how similar it always was, but I couldn't let them know that.

I remember one of their first fights. It wasn't all that dissimilar. Rwen was getting to that age where he was trying to be cooler and didn't want to play with Zori as much anymore. He was still highly protective of her, but balancing those feelings of love with trying to look cool can be difficult at best and is always awkward, without exception.

"Rwen... Can I play with you?"

"Go away Zori."

"But Rwen... I don't have anyone to play with."

"Well don't play with me."

"Do you hate me Rwen?"

Zori started crying and Rwen let out a long sigh. Rwen didn't want to get in trouble and knew he was being an asshole. He ended up staying home that night to play games with his sister. He understands how much it meant to Zori, but couldn't help but feel annoyed. I guess that boils over in fun tricks like scaring the younger sibling into thinking they'll have to sleep outside if they don't do chores for you.

"Lumi, let the kids have more space on the cot and join me on the bench."

"Okay Swefen."

Lumi came over to sit with me and Zori moved closer to Rwen. She wanted to cuddle close to her brother on the cramped cot. I reached out for Lumi's hand and our fingers fit just right with each other. We were older and yet somehow still the same. We fell asleep like that. Holding hands as we watched the frozen forest outside. The right match for the civil twilight leaving the sky. A perfect ending for a perfect Frithlic Nyun.

"Lumi?"

"Yes Swefen?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."