

Matilda

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Far and away to the north, nestled within the purplish blue mountains perpetually wreathed in mist, rose the great dwarven keep of Naradhurn. Vast and imposing, it was built as much by knowledge and craftsmanship as magic, a great square monolith of feathery grey granite. Deep in a green mountain valley, it was said that Naradhurn had chosen the spot for his people on first sight, and it was said that of all the wonders he had crafted, his keep was the work he took the most pride in.

Seen from without, the grey stones are built impressively high, each one so precisely fitted into its place to give the overall appearance of being carved out of the living stone of the mountain. Some stones have the runic language peculiar to their builders etched upon them, then lined with precious stones and metals so the lines may remain clear down throughout centuries of wind and weather.

More impressive, to the few invited beyond the curtain walls of the keep to see it, is what Naradhurn and his people did within the mountain itself. Dwarves, as they will undoubtedly tell you, "are a common sensical sort of folk", from the certainty of the stone they work with to the spirits they have bonded to. Great value is put upon that which is solid and sure. So upon the founding of the greatest mines of Myskaria, nothing made more sense to them than to live directly within them.

Twenty three levels into the earth they delved, some with their hand tools and sturdy backs, others using their gifts of earth magic. Levels for mines at the veriest bottom, with a complex scheme of ownership through marriage and kin that only a native born could truly decipher. Levels for gardens, sheltered from the bitterest of freezing winds by stone walls and cleverly designed ceilings open to the sun, nourished by the hot springs tapped from deep underground through an ingenious system of clay piping. At ground level a grand courtyard for stables and livestock there was, open to the sky and embraced by stone, that all might feel the soft grasses of blue and green between their toes. The next grand level held the great forges for the founding families, for not only was it a point of pride for each family to sponsor the artistry of a smith, it was a necessity for social and material standing within the community.

A clan without a smith was seen as the poorest of the poor in all the ways that mattered.

Down beneath the living halls, under the forges and the market square and the apartments teeming with activity, where no beams of sunshine could find their way down, little Till listened to the slow, grudging sound of water moving through the stone. It wasn't the joyful tinkling of a fountain, nor the natural, gushing flow of the river.

To the undergrown dwarven girl, it sounded as though both the stone and the water were rending their very spirits to pieces with the regret of parting.

Cold, clammy, damp, dark- all of these were as nothing to her, and the wells were certainly not the only areas of the keep that could have been spoken of with the same words. When she first spoke of how sad

it made her to hear stone mourn, Auntie had pinched her sharply, thin brows drawn together as though they, too, were hurtful, squeezing fingers.

"Na, na, leave the child with me, missus," came the stern rumble of her grandfa's voice from the best place by the fire. Auntie had been so startled to hear the great hero's rusty voice that she fairly flew to deliver the overly opinionated child to his lap and quit the apartments altogether for some specious errand. She left in haste, far more fearful of incurring the revered man's wrath than what would befall another of her indifferent stews being left to its own devices on the hearth.

In spite of being in the warmest spot at the fire, Till trembled, scarcely able to breathe at the thought that she had been so very bad that the old man had to take a direct hand in her punishment. In the nursery at night, Cousin Mindun told them tales of Grandfa, about how he had been the mightiest of warriors that led the clan into battle and watched everyone die before having his face ripped off and eaten by a wolfskin, only to be spat back out cause it was too tough to chew. "So the healers stitched it back on again while he was asleep. He slept for years and years and even now is cursed for being the only one of the Durane family that went to war that lived. He's also very brave and saved the old thegn's life, though, so everyone bows to him and you'd all better, too!" And the stout, even squatter than usual (for dwarves, anyway) boy had held up a warning fist to shake at the smaller cousins who had dared to disturb the old warrior's rest.

Keeping her eyes respectfully down as she was taught, Till tried to sit ever so quietly and as still as she could, but for the trembles she couldn't stop on top of the fur rug on Grandfa's knees. Sometimes, even when she was very bad, as long as she sat very quietly, and was really truly as still as stone, grownups tended to forget whatever bad thing had happened and maybe even about Till altogether.

The thing about staying ever so quiet and still is that it was hard for Till to do for very long. Especially when there wasn't anything interesting to look at, and she'd been looking at the grubby hand me down shift that had been her older cousin Nandurath's once. She glanced away from Grandfa, but that was just a bit of the cold stone floor next to his chair.

Biting her lip, Till very slowly turned her gaze towards Grandfa, waiting for a poke or a pinch or the harsh bark of "Hey!" he would sometimes call out to get Auntie's or one of the older cousin's attention when he wanted something.

But it never came.

So slowly, she let her eyes drift towards Grandfa's chest, covered with grizzled, matted hair. Till stared into the fierce tangle of silver and black that was Grandfa's beard for a long moment. Then, a wondering came on her of the most urgent sort, the kind that she had to know if it was, in its own way, like the water that had had to tear itself from the stone. Till absolutely had to know if Grandfa's beard was as soft as the fleece she saw sheared from the sheep. Surreptitiously, she reached out a hand, not to grab as other children would, but just to softly stroke the grizzled cascade. When he chuckled in surprise and

Till felt the rumble within his chest, only then did she dare look upwards, her big, dark blue eyes round in panic for not having stayed good and quiet and still.

In truth, the little girl had been still just long enough that the old man had almost drifted back to sleep with the unsolved puzzle of the child placed firmly to the back of his mind for solving at a later time. There were a great many things he deferred to a later time these days. Seeing that this tiny girlchild was so afraid of him smote his heart, and he cuddled her tightly to his chest, "Na, na little one," he said, in a much softer tone than she'd ever heard before. "Rest you easy, and let's think about this for a minute, hey?" To his surprise, she clasped her arms around his neck and dug her pointed little chin into his neck, her breath tickling the fine hairs there and making him laugh, something he couldn't remember the last time he'd done.

That was the first time that Till knew she felt something magic happen, when her eyes met the old man's and simple love wound itself around her heart. Grandfa's chest rumbled again, and now her delighted giggle joined it.

"Well then, little miss," he said, poking his gnarled finger into her belly to make her giggle again before settling her into a perch on his knee where they could see eye to eye.

His face had always been the most frighteningest part about Grandfa before because of Mindun's tales, what if they hadn't sewed it back on just right and it came off again? Surely it would hurt to have your face fall off after it was bitten off, and there'd be ever so much trouble. But as the wondering about the beard had gone so well, and since Grandfa hadn't said not to...

The same curious hand that reached to touch his beard, and she now lay against the livid scar that ran from his temple down to his jaw. It was so warm to the touch, and nothing but a bumpy line, really didn't look like anything had been chewed at all. Or maybe the healers had been that special, which they should have been for a hero that saved the thegn. "Does it hurt?" she asked, pulling away with alarm when he twitched.

This made the old man grunt, a different kind of rumble as he took her hand reassuringly. "No, little miss, it doesn't pain me na more. Can we talk about what you heard down there, fetching the water for Auntie?"

Till looked down at the enormous paw swallowing her fingers, found a finger of his she could wrap her fingers around to swing back and forth like she did with her friend Hildy while she thought about how to say it just right. "Rock doesn't want to give up the water. It thinks water should stay, so water has to pull and tear itself away to be free, even though it hurts. I don't like hearing it." She shuddered as even the remembering of the hearing went down her back.

Grandfa hugged her to his chest when he felt Till shudder. "I don't know that it'd be easy to hear that, no miss, I don't." He stared at her again, trying to place just which depleted branch of the clan had

produced this unlikely fair haired girl child before dismissing it for more immediate concerns. Running one finger along her brow and down the side of her face, he peered into her eyes and gave a small huff. "So it's you, is it? Innit that something amazing?" he said, almost to himself.

"How do you mean?" Till asked, looking up at him with a furrow of her blond brow as doubt that she was being understood crept in. "Are you making fun?"

Looking down at this girl, this Till, golden haired with those dark blue eyes framed by a halo of gold lashes, her bottom lip caught between her teeth in worry, the old man sighed, knowing that undoubtedly she had been teased for her hand me down state if nothing else. He knew the girl's auntie wasn't a bad woman, just one with too many children clinging to her skirts to raise and provide for after the wars had claimed too many of their clan. Even as the old man excused the woman (for she was family by marriage, not blood, and a bad match by all reckoning), it had dismayed him to realize that not only couldn't he place this little girl's parents among the clan, he didn't remember even seeing her before. For a weary moment, he wanted to put this one of the too many orphans they had made down on her feet and tell her to go play quietly in the corner. The chair was warm, his battered body deserved its rest, not to be fussing after the family affairs that would surely take care of themselves in due time. In the next moment, he sighed, a sound that, to Till, had much in common with the water fleeing the smothering stone. In all her innocence, her words had marked her as one of the special ones, and they needed a different kind of care. He knew what the little girl was and what must be done now. For the clan, for the girl herself, maybe even for his own self, and he took a moment to settle his mind on how best to begin. He squeezed her to his chest before speaking, and he settled her back on his knee and leaned forward so they could talk eye to eye. "No, little miss, I promise, I will never make fun of you."

He rose stiffly, putting her up onto his shoulders before that common sense part of his mind had time to wonder if it was a good idea or not with a soft groan. "This is a big thing to talk about, so I'm going to make you as big as you need to be right now. Sound right?"

Till was giddy at seeing their familiar apartment from such a lofty vantage point and spent some time looking about herself before answering. "I feel big enough to put on the armor and stand a watch from here!"

That startled a roar of laughter from Grandfa. "Well, then it ought to do for us to visit your grandam's forge, wouldn't you say?"

Till clapped her hands in delight before putting them firmly back on Grandfa's shoulders. "With you, I'm big enough to go and see?"

He patted her knee with one hand while taking up his walking stick with the other. "Little miss, sometimes you have a day where you grow tremendously, all at once. Today is one of those days for you, so I think we see if it happened that today you've grown enough to go all on your own." They navigated

from the clan's Great Room down the long entryway tunnel and out into one of the communal pathways that led to the heart of the keep.

Looking down on all the people scurrying about the passages was so thrilling that Till forgot to ask if this sudden growing business was going to hurt. She also forgot all about the stone and the water and her Auntie's mean fingers and the unpleasant odor coming from the dinner pot for want of water (at least according to Auntie. Till thought it wouldn't have smelled good even if she had been faster to fetch the water). The doughty old warrior had to keep one hand on his walking stick and the other on his surprisingly adventurous granddaughter as she began to twist about, her head whipping from side to side in fear of missing something new to see. The unlikely pair had to offer Mistress Aggy their apologies after she was rapped sharply in the shins by the walking stick gone awry during one of Till's acrobatics.

"Here now, what's all this about, m'lord? Decided to take on a squire, is it?" Even though the words were gruff, the tiny woman with a blue kerchief over her riotous red curls had a twinkle in her eye for them as she rubbed the abused leg.

"Augh, a thousand pardons, Mistress, this youngun has just about made up her mind to grow up to be the tallest of us all after this day's work," Grandfa said, giving a brief bow that made Till giggle with delight as she made her bow as well.

"And quite the shield maiden she'll be, do you come round the shop when it's time to get her outfitted." Mistress Aggy winked, and drew her skirts aside to make her curtsy, furry bare feet visible. Till gasped and tried not to stare; it was easy to forget Mistress Aggy wasn't truly one of them. Before another word was spoken, Aggy was hailed by a shout from her store front so urgent that she scurried away on those fuzzy feet with barely a nod.

Grandfa watched her go for a moment before turning back to the long, sloping tunnel that led up to the forge level of the keep. It was coming to the late meal hour, and there were far fewer folk out and about. Without other people to watch, Till began reaching up to let her fingers trail along the ceiling. The cool, smoothed stone didn't have much to say. It had given up all its secrets to another's hands and knew it was beautiful, a masterwork that did not need to waste time with little girls without the proper manners.

Abashed at the rebuff as cold as only stone can be, Till folded her hands atop Grandfa's head and rested her chin on them, humming some half remembered tune. In time, they came to the door with their crest gracefully etched into the soft grey granite, where they paused so he could use the brass knocker to tap politely after setting Till gently on her feet.

Till had been as far as this before; all the children had on the Great Teaching Days. On those days, there was a great breakfast feast that everyone helped prepare. Those too young to have found their magic yet were taken round to all the places they might one day hear the call. The Gardens kept them fed, lovingly tended by the earth and water acolytes. To hear the song of the air they were taken out to the keep's walls to see the watchers that sought all the answers to the mysteries of life from the night skies. For

fire, they visited the vast communal kitchens, always the high point of the day, due to the head warder sneaking them all a few extra sweets.

But to see the insides of the forges- well, that honor was reserved for those that had affinities for both earth and fire. It was a rare commingling of magics since the war, with some of the lesser clans facing the difficult decision to lend out the coveted space. For a clan to be smithless equated to a loss of prestige, as one could mine the precious ores without any magic about them at all.

It was the Smiths that bore the responsibility for taking simple ore and shaping it into one of the wondrous creations that were prized across Myskaria. Weapon or armor, shield or mirror, fine wire to be bent into graceful, pleasing shapes, down to the humblest cooking pot, all required a Smith's hands to create. Without a Smith, a clan had very little to offer to trade with the outside world. While the Thegn would never let his folk starve, the shame of having to collect meals from the pauper's pot drove some clans to lend out their sacred spaces for a price.

"In, in, in, don't let the heat out shuffling in here, old man!" The voice startled Till, being unlike any she'd ever heard before. It had the ring of steel striking steel, the hiss of a beaten rod being quenched. When she stared up at Grandfa, he just snorted and pushed the stone carved door open.

"Cantankerous old crone, that's what you are," Grandfa replied good naturedly as he drew Till into the room, closing the door firmly behind them.

Except for the glowing embers in the hearth and heart of the forge, the great room of stone was dark, with just the barest edge of a chill. Unlike their apartments, these walls were plain and unadorned. There were no great tapestries to stop the cold harbored by the stone from seeping in, no color, no life. The very air had the stale scent of a place that had been closed up, shut away, forgotten, and left to be lonely. Till looked around, puzzled and wondering who's voice still echoed here, who could dare be so disrespectful to the revered warrior. She spun around, taking care to keep far from the fire. Seeing the child's confusion, Grandfa took her hand and laid it carefully on the stone workbench.

Till felt a slight tingle at touching the bench, at once welcomed but with a shaken finger too, for absenting herself for so long. The fire leapt joyously to life, casting their shadows large upon the bare walls and high ceilings, and Till gasped to see how tall her shadow said she was now... Grandfa had been right! Then she sensed, a drawing back as though surprised before the strange metal voice spoke again.

"Liar! This is not my Maddie. How dare you bring another to me!" Away all the wanted feelings Till had been awash with went, and the room was cold and dark again, the fire dying back down to sullen embers.

"Na na, spirit, if we had our Maddie, you know she'd be right here. But this is Till, and I bet if you will settle yourself down..." Grandfa's voice was soothing and wheedling in a way Till had never heard

before. Grandfa didn't have to do more than make his wishes known to get what he wanted for anything from anyone ever.

Before another word could be spoken, the heavy door whooshed open, and it seemed to Till that she could almost see the faint impression of a leather aproned woman, fist on hip, pointing the way out. Till looked to Grandfa, ready to scurry out as fast as she could. He gently placed his hand on her shoulder and laid a finger alongside his nose.

"Alright, missus, it's a surprise, I know and I maybe caught you not at your best. It is awfully dusty in here. Mayhap we shoulda gone over to Clan Mareith's forge, their smith being maybe more suited to spotting the gift in the younguns, what with so many from the clan being brought up in the ways, like." Only then did Grandfa very slowly begin shuffling towards the door, leaning much more wearily on his gnarled stick than he had on the long walk through the passages. "You know, Tilly pet, that's exactly what we ought to have done, but that you begged and begged so to see the family forge, and with 'em pretty big eyes I just have the hardest time saying no."

Something in Grandfa's eyes told her this was a game to be played. Acting like she'd received that scolding that Auntie had started, Till hung her head and whispered softly. "I'm sorry to make you come all this long way from the fire, Grandfa. The Mareith forge is ever so much closer, you were right."

The outline of the apparition became more solid even as the firmly set jaw became less so. The owner of the voice had no color, but it looked to be an oddly transparent shape of a woman. She was taller than both Auntie and Grandfa, taller than even the Champion. Her face was long and thin in a way that made Till think of the murals from the before times, yet she was undeniably one of the dwarven people. Even without color, Till could see the spirit was as uncertain as Auntie making up her mind over whether the stew in the pot could be stretched another day or not. Her fist fell from her hip, and the hand pointing the way out was not so firmly pointing as it had been.

"Well. I suppose you did come all this way," she said, with the air of one considering a great favor.

"Na na, don't be troubling yourself, we'll just whisk ourselves out of your way and leave you to," Grandfa twiddled a finger around the floor, "well, whatever it is you do these days besides sit and wait." Till noticed he was suddenly able to put on a bit more speed as he nudged her towards the still open door. It wasn't until she'd put a foot out of it into the hallway that the spirit relented, flinging her hands in the air with exasperation.

"Damn you to seven bloody hells, old man! Bring the child here and set her upon the bench so we can see what's what." As Grandfa hastened to obey while hiding a grin in his beard, the spirit rummaged through her apron pockets til she found a most unlikely contraption and placed it upon the little girl's golden head. It looked like a warrior's helmet, only instead of guards to catch and turn aside a blade, it erupted with so many long, thin appendages that it made Till think of a spider as they reached out to her.

The mental image was only reinforced when the slender legs began moving of their own accord, becoming more solid and filled with detail every second. One of the legs held a seeing glass to the spirit's face, and as she peered through it to observe the child, Till gasped to see her eyes were the same dark blue as Grandfa's.

The same shade as her own.

Whatever she saw through the glass did not appear to please the spirit much. She drew back, humming deep in her throat, casting dark glances at Grandfa and the banked forge in turn. Meanwhile, more appendages sprang forth from the helm, one pair extending up to anchor itself to a tool rack that it might hover above Till's head, one pair with a measuring stick, another plucking at Till's hair before yet another set turned her around on the bench to face the wall while it unbraided Auntie's work of a week ago. Before Till could so much as blink, her hair was re-braided into a wonderfully intricate coronet with little shining strands of thin wire, with yet another appendage from the helm holding up a mirror for her approval.

While all this went on, Grandfa stood with his back to them both at the far end of the long table, one hand laid heavily on the polished granite of the workbench. With bent head as though could not bear to watch, Till began to reach a hand out to him when the spirit laid very firm and real hands upon her shoulders and peered into the child's face.

The long features of the spirit froze, then her graceful fingers gently touched Till's face. "Ah, little beauty. Such a path before you," she said, her voice just the softest hiss of fine chains drawn to their lengths. Abruptly, the spirit's form dissipated into mist as she slid through Till (a sensation that more tickled than anything else) and Grandfa to stand before him, face reforming into the same kind of look Auntie gave the fishmonger to begin the serious business of haggling.

"It'll mean more spent on the ether."

Grandfa's face remained impassive. "Tell me something I don't know. You'll have to produce as soon's as soon can."

The spirit's form faded further, becoming as insubstantial as smoke, with her voice likewise thin and thready. "With a brand new smith and me doing without for so long?"

The walking stick scuffed the floor as Grandfa turned back towards Till, and she could have sworn she saw the tiniest twitch of his wrinkled eyelid in her direction. "Be hearing ye, missus, the adage that ye canna git blood from a stone?"

The spirit scoffed with more vigor than she should have had before dropping to nearly a whisper. "I suppose I recall where there is some easy make work for beginner's exercises what might yield a few gold pieces."

One corner of Grandfa's beard quirked upwards as his eyes remained locked to Till's. "And it might could be that I know where Maddie stashed one last bit of the magic, against hard times, doncha know."

The spirit sighed in relief, returning almost to the same solidity she'd shown before. "Two things, sir. And I will not be wheedled 'round, you understand?"

Grandfa turned back to face the spirit. "Tell on, then. Man can't agree to what he doesn't know."

"Too bad that doesn't seem to be the case for women." The spirit gestured vaguely in Till's direction before Grandfa raised his hands to stop her from saying more.

"Peace, spirit. The doing was not of mine, and it did grieve my heart as sore as yours, yes, I know, not," he said, raising one gnarled hand to stave off the flurry of words that the spirit was about to erupt with, "that I've come to share the memories as I ought to have. You'll get 'em soon enough as I can't see dragging myself round here forever."

This seemed to shock the spirit into silence, but only for a moment, and when she spoke again, there was a peculiar sadness intermixed with hunger. "So you've decided then?"

"I have. Just now, and would prefer to speak no more on it. The day passes, spirit, what will you?"

"The claim cannot be fulfilled until she is of age. If there is any dissent from The Lady of the South, I shall speak to it."

Grandfa glanced at Till as though trying to gauge how much of the words she understood. "Agreed, and not necessarily opposed to the notion, just glad I'm not having to tell her ladyship what's what."

The spirit nodded briskly, then whisked herself to stand protectively beside Till and laid a possessive hand on her shoulder. "From here on, she is mine. Whatever problems in Clan Durane, fact is you have kept ill care of this little one, our best hope to carry the magic forward. I will raise her as she ought to be, with love and listening, and not whatever that *person* you've permitted into the clan to do to her. For all of her notice of the signs, we may have lost this little one through sheer stupidity. Earth, and fire, and water!"

Till blinked to hear such things said of her Auntie, but didn't know what she could have said to excuse her to this being. Before she could do more than just think she should speak up, the spirit was already shooping Grandfa out the door. "She knows her own way home, when she's ready."

With a rush of hot air, he was gone, and when the spirit turned back, she had formed herself into a little girl, just Till's size. The girl-spirit took her hands and drew her to sit down on the floor, just as though she was Hildy. And, like Hildy, she rummaged in her pocket and drew out a bouncing ball and a half dozen jacks. Wordlessly, they began to play, and it seemed to Till the spirit was watching her hands very carefully.

It wasn't until after Till won a game that the spirit spoke again. "The first thing for you to know is what not he nor anyone else may ever know. Stedi, my name is Stedi, and among my kind, names are power to conjure by."

Till sat back and thought about this very strange day and what it meant. One hand went to touch her prettily braided hair, the strands glossy and soft beneath her questing fingers. She thought of the words she'd heard, that Auntie was bad, that Grandfa himself had done wrong and that this spirit girl, who could bargain with Grandfa and win, was now going to take care of her.

"Are you my mother?" She finally asked while staring down at the floor. Of all the strange words that had been spoken, these seemed too heavy to bear the answer to, laden with fear and hope.

The spirit sighed. "No, child. But there is one that very much wishes to hold and love you like your mother, in time. Somehow, she knew about you long and long ago, and she waits for you in her enchanted bower, far to the south." Stedi reached out a hand, fingers too long and slender to belong to a little girl, it was a woman's hand sized down. As shy as a doe, Till gingerly reached out to allow her hand to be taken.

"When can I go to her? I don't want her to be waiting and lonely because of me."

Stedi smiled, as though charmed in spite of herself by the earnestness of her new charge. "She is very wise, and knows that all things come in their proper time, even such looked for days as when you shall go to see her fairy realm in all its beauty and wonder." Now she was stern as she said, "But she would be most displeased to know that you would share the name of your guardian spirit."

Till gasped, her eyes wide, before placing her fingers over her lips and shaking her head.

Stedi's little girl face relaxed, and she rolled her eyes comically, as though very relieved at Till's agreement. "Now that we've settled that, we can begin."

"Your first lesson, young Till, is that you shall always find that which you seek."

The next days were a blur as playing with jacks became new games of weaving wire. Laying her hands upon the fine, smooth metal while Stedi whispered to her to feel this, to heed that was a better game than any Till had ever played. And it was play, to coax the metal into new, pleasing shapes by listening to it. She learned the small, sweet voices of the wire much more quickly with the spirit to guide her; Auntie

had to come scratch at the door irritably to get Till home for meals and sleep. The little girl was so fascinated by the work, by Stedi, by having someone show her the way of all that she'd heard, that she was apt to neglect the other, equally important facets of underground life.

Grandfa had her excused from the chores, and said that Till's time at the forge served her better for schooling than aught else. He did wag an admonishing finger at the new apprentice Smith to remember to observe the feast days, but the shine of pride in his eyes took all sting from the scolding.

Before she knew it, Till had several small hair adornments Stedi and Grandfa said were good enough to sell. By then, it had been many weeks since she had felt the sadness of the water and the stone, and still, that was in the forefront of her mind now.

In her learning about what it wanted, how it was best shaped, and listening to the voice of the wire, it had become like a friend. The idea of parting with any piece of her work brought a lump to her throat, for who else could appreciate that tricky bit of learning here, or truly understand how a particularly graceful curve had taken a whole day of arguing with Stedi to get just right to what she and the wire's voice could see and the spirit couldn't?

After Till found the words to explain how she felt to the spirit (for she could not imagine saying no to Auntie or Grandfa on any topic), Stedi surprised her by wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"Little one, your big heart is your greatest gift. I wish I had magic words to match your magic hands, but here is what it comes down to, and always will. The work of your hands," and she touched each finger in turn oh so gently. "It will be of great value, the highest value in all the lands. Were you not marked to go to the lady... ahh, well, that's another topic for another day. For now, let's just agree, you and I, that you can feel any way you want to about letting these little lovelies go. But only by letting go can we be able to buy ore that you may continue to learn."

Till frowned at the floor, brow furrowed mutinously. "Could dig ore on my own," she murmured, so softly that her voice barely rose above the cracking embers.

The spirit frowned for a moment before taking the girl by the shoulders, peering down at her face and giving her the smallest of shakes. "Could, but it would take up time that could be spent here, with me, learning how to listen to it. Anyone can dig the ore, but few can shape it like you can."

As Stedi had intended, the lure of companionship and new knowledge won out in the question of her work being sold on, though Till insisted on giving one hair pin to her best friend Hildy to celebrate midwinter. For the first time, it would be a true gift of Till's own hands instead of the sad parcels of stale cookies Auntie made up for the required pleasantries of the season. That left eleven pieces for Grandfa to take to the market to sell as Till surreptitiously wiped away a tear that escaped as the apartment door closed behind him.

Auntie sniffed as she looked down upon the graceful barrette, depicting a quizzical bear, still clutched in Till's hand. "Really too valuable for a little girl, I don't know what he was thinking." Taking the piece from the girl, Auntie held it to the firelight to admire it.

Till bit her lip, alarmed by the unpleasant glitter in Auntie's eye as she placed the barrette in her own hair before walking to the mirror to admire the look of it.

Without meaning to, without knowing the what and how, Till pictured what she would like the metal to do. It was a spiteful thought, and something about it must have shown on her face, for Auntie looking at her scolded her for needing a bath and shooed her on her way to the tin tub in the scullery set aside for that purpose.

When Grandfa came home that night, it was with a brace of broiled rabbits, fresh fruits, and breads still warm from the ovens. As Auntie took the bounty from his hands and marshaled the other children in preparing a fine meal in celebration, it was noticed that she kept rubbing absently at her hair.

Or, more specifically, at the silver bear ornament Till had made.

Sometime after his noisily greeted, triumphant return, Grandfa had pulled Till aside from the bustle to show her the ores he had managed to barter for hidden in his leather satchel, he did not take notice of the purloined ornament. His attention was focused on Till's delight as together the old man and little girl looked over both the refined and unrefined metals.

Till could not stop running her fingers over the pieces, hearing a deeper tone for the iron, the softer voice of the silvers and golds. This hunk of silver longed to have its blues uncovered, while the gold wished to be the rose of a dawning sky. "I don't know that color," Till whispered as she stroked it, "so I shall have to go to the battlements and look at it. We will do you up right, all of you beauties."

Yes, yes, yes, the stones whispered back, yielding to her gentle fingers ever so slightly, answering Till's promise with one of their own. All through the impromptu feast that made the clan's apartments merry with appreciation for Till, the girl kept reaching to absently pat the unassuming satchel left beside the hearth.

It wasn't until much later that Till heard Grandfa's voice in that place between sleep and dreaming.

"Whatever ails you, woman? Can you not be still and let your hair be?" He took another pull from his tankard, enjoying a better drink than his ill assorted daughter in law would ever be able to brew.

"Sorry, good father, I would not disturb your peace." A flurry of movement as Auntie retreated to the shadows, beyond the old man's gaze. Her fingers still worked furiously to find the catch that would loose the wire from her hair.

It took several long moments for Grandfa to speak again, and when he did, it was with such banked anger that Till came all the way awake again.

"That little child cried over parting with her first work, but did it anyway that we might all stay fed, and here I see it glittering in your hair. How did that come to pass, missus?"

Sputtering and denials. "Some nonsense over how it was for that Hildy she's all ganged up with, a most unsuitable, hoydenish companion for..."

The tankard slammed down onto the chair arm. "She's of quality folk, and not yours to judge for how it ought or ought not to have been, and since when did you learn to turn up your nose at folks what are kind to our children?"

Silence now, and Till rolled over ever so slightly, being careful not to nudge the much smaller Adia (who snored fit to wake the dead if rolled on to her back) to be able to see.

Auntie was knelt before Grandfa's chair by the fire, where he was trying to find the catch on the barrette himself and murmuring in admiration. "Tell me now, and dinna be thinkin to lie to me. Did the girl put this in your hair?" He seized the stuttering woman by the chin, forcing her to look him in the eye.

"No sir," she said, and he dropped her chin in disgust and waved her away before going back to his tankard.

"More the fool you. Had she bestowed it upon you with her own hand, even begrudgingly, it would have been the best of luck you've found since you flipped your skirts at my son, who, dim himself, decided to notice."

Auntie's face was far redder than what being by the fire would account for, and she turned quickly away to hide it in a dim corner. "It pulls and burns in turns. Can you help me get it out?"

Grandfa snorted. "No, indeed, I can't. And it's right glad you ought to be that that's all it does."

"Wait, do you mean it could get *worse*?" Auntie's voice was climbing past the polite quiet time voice and Grandfa hissed at her.

"Dinna be wakin 'em, they need their rest for growin and shouldering what we done left 'em to shoulder. What a day to see, that you'd steal from your own clan, and from a child of your clan to boot. I ought to turn you out, so I ought." To Till, he didn't sound so angry anymore, just tired. One long pull was enough to finish off his evening drink, and he rose stiffly, setting the tankard into Auntie's hands.

"Child did that without touching it. Without touching you. Think on the gift that takes, missus. She coulda told that wire to unwrap from your hair and rewrap itself 'round your neck, had the fancy taken her. It'll only be removed by cutting the locks or by her hand, the choice is yours."

Till didn't hear Auntie's reply- sleep had been held at bay for as long as it was going to wait for her, filled with dreams of all the shades of the blues she knew.

Barhardnein

## Barhardnein

The night's words were forgotten entirely when she crept from her bed in the predawn chill. Till was quiet, not just due to not wanting to wake the cluster of cousins that lay sprawled in a pile of blankets and shawls on an old rag rug before the fire. There was something about that time of the day that had always made her want to tip toe, to whisper in the stillness as though it was as fragile as the fanciful glass vessels that came from the elvish traders.

As she reached the main hallways, there were rather more people than she'd reckoned on being abroad in the earliest part of morning. Till's heart began to pound in worry that the hour may be later than she'd thought, and she began to run as fast as she could. The metal needed her to see this; she did not want to face Stedi unprepared for the next lesson, the first real lesson of getting to work true ore.

When Till stepped out onto the parapets that faced southeast that she might see the color of a dawn sky, she ran at full pelt directly into a dark haired older boy. With a loud *bonk* that may have been comical had anyone been watching, the two cracked heads together painfully.

The impact caused Till to, if not exactly fall, at least sit down very firmly on the cold stone.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing his forehead with a leather clad hand. "I'm so sorry, are you all right?" A kindly lad, he had been lucky enough to keep his feet and held out his hand to Till. His face had the broad brow common in their kind, and his wide mouth was just then twisted into a rueful, good humored grin for their mishap.

Till remained where she was for a moment, blinking repeatedly to clear her vision of the sudden tears. While she really wanted to wail out with pain, it wouldn't do to act so babyish when she was to be the Ladysmith of Clan Darune. Swallowing her outcry, she accepted the hand up gratefully. "I think so," she replied. "I need to see the sunrise, where is the best place, do you know?"

The young man had been clucking and gingerly touching around reddened place on her forehead amidst the explosion of curls that would raise in an awful bruise by midday as well as any other injuries Till may have incurred, and raised a brow at the odd question. "That's what brings you running the parapets? To see a sunrise?" He cocked his head to the side and raised a brow, as though wondering just how hard the little girl had hit her head. Now that he took a second look, he saw that she truly was a very young child. He looked around for a minder in that way folk will when they know they are absolutely not the right person to handle a small child, and someone that is should be nearer to hand than they were.

"Yes!" Till said, her voice urgent as she noticed the lightening of the sky. "If I don't see it today, I'll have to wait all the way until tomorrow!" She threw her hands out to bat him away as she spun in a hopping little circle, trying to find the best vantage point on her own. Her voice was sharp and piercing as panic edged it more to a wail, and the lad was stuck between two terrible choices- deny her and let her grow

louder or help her to be sure she came to no further harm and maybe she'd scuttle away satisfied as swiftly as she'd arrived.

Mystified, he chose the lesser of two evils and lay aside the spear he'd been standing watch with and seized Till's hand to pull her over to a view he himself often admired.

When they reached it, the golden light was reaching its first fingers down into the deep valley below. Pink and gold shades drew lazily across the sky, and the young watchman was charmed by how Till held her breath, eyes wide as she clung to the gray stone crenel work. She stood, barely breathing, motionless as a statue herself until the colors faded and day began in earnest.

Only then did she sigh and step back down, or indeed, take any note of the lad's hands on her waist that had been supporting her for some minutes.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were still there. Thank you ever so much, but I must be going now." She spoke so quickly all the words of thanks ran together as one as she dropped a brief curtsy. He bowed reflexively, reaching out a moment too late to try and stop the child before she pelted away.

"Wait!" he called out after her, and the girl whipped around impatiently.

"ThankyouagaineversomuchbutIREALLYmustbegoingnow!" She bobbed her head hastily, and was gone back down the stairway so rapidly that he could only shake his head and hope she came to no further misadventure.

The lad stood the rest of his watch a bit anxiously, resolved to visit the clan's apartments to inquire about the child's welfare, and indeed, why she had been out alone at all. Something about her made him smile—the blond curls so rare among their people, her very businesslike air of being about a task of utmost importance, how utterly entranced she had been by a simple sunrise.

He didn't get to spend much time with the keep's younger denizens, not even when he was their own age. His father was strict and stern, insistent that his son and heir adhere to all traditions as rigorously as he himself did.

That meant, for Barhardnein, son of Hardhurn, son of Naradhurn, that standing a watch as soon as he had a finger's length on his beard was expected. Once relieved for the day, Barhardnein was similarly expected to report to his master of the moment.

While mining and smithing were the key occupations within the keep, his father the thegn frequently set forth with the opinion that a thegn must understand all the works of his people. "My auld father did say that you cannot know one's mind without knowing the work of their hands and hearts!" This was repeated any time anyone brought up the rigor with which the heir apparent was raised. The fact that no one could remember Naradhurn saying any such thing was tactfully not mentioned.

In truth, Hardhurn had been well named, for he was a hard man. He had been little more than a boy with the beginnings of a beard when his father was slain in battle. There had been little intrigues, petty rivalries for the boy thegn's attention that he determined would have no place in his domain once he was a man. Some called him black of hair and blacker of heart, while others would quietly offer the opinion that the thegn asked naught of anyone that he did not ask of himself.

An admirable man, but a difficult father to please, as Barhardnein knew well. This season he was a baker's boy, and when he called to mind what he knew of Clan Durane, he knew what gift would be most appreciated at their door.

Feeling a bit adventurous, there was a spring in the lad's step as he finished the reporting of his hours on the parapets and by the time he reached the broad main hallways that served as the market thoroughfare, he was whistling. Not for the first time, he wondered what it would be like to have a little brother or sister to tell stories to. Or at least a little cousin to sit by the fire with and hear them tell about their day.

The little girl from Clan Durane had been an appealing little moppet, all rosy blushes and those riotous blond curls that made him think of sheep's wool. She should have been asleep for a few hours more before going to attend the children's lessons, not up amongst the soldiers.

With a smile and a promise of an extra half hour's help, Barhardnein procured a loaf of still warm bread, laden with fruit and nuts as well as a tiny stoneware crock of honey. His mouth turned down at one corner even as he thanked the baker for her generosity of spirit; his season as a woodsman and honey hunter had quite altered his taste for the stuff. One particularly off putting encounter had ended with a slain bear and several pairs of wet breeches with various excuses made after. Part of him wondered if the baker had heard the tale and included the honey a'purpose to tease him before dismissing the embarrassing episode. He shook the uncomfortable memory away, and fixed his mind to thinking of how it would be to be welcomed with such a fine gift.

Greeting folk with absent nods, still in his guardsman's leathers, Barhardnein made his way down the ever winding concourse to the apartment levels. He started to wonder at the wisdom of what he did; would he be upsetting the grizzled head of the clan? Of course he must make it clear that he meant no disrespect and that this visit was in no way a critique of how the clan's children were being raised.

The cadence of the pleasantries matched themselves to the patter of the young dwarf's gait as he made his way through the now largely quiet hallways.

Brightly lit by a beam of sunshine that played upon a cataract of water, the central turret that held the apartments' crossroads of the great clans was at once airy and imposing. Here the walls were sheathed with dark marble, unlike the granite of other floors. Clan devices were engraven within the great doors that hid the tunnels that wound their way to the individual sets of living quarters. Statuary of notable

family members was scattered around the ledges and niches created by some outcropping of stone impossible to understand from the outside, but vitally necessary to some dynamic of space within.

Barhardnein took a moment to observe the founder of Clan Durane, a stoutly built shieldmaiden. Her curling beard flowed to brush the tops of the hands resting upon the pommel of a great hammer. What struck the lad most about the effigy were the bare feet, also with a notable amount of bushy tufts of hair. He nearly smacked his forehead in exasperation with himself as he recognized the source of all those blond curls. His father had once mentioned to one of his advisors that Clan Durane's mixed blood had yielded the results they had sought, but at the time Barhardnein had not understood the reference.

Once, there had been more ties of family and fortune between dwarves and halflings, with intermarriage common enough not to be overly remarked upon. Such progeny were often blessed with fire and earth magicks that made superior smiths. And if there should also be a bit of understanding of water as well... there was no limit to what such a smith might be able to create.

But then, the war had come, and many things changed.

The lad stood there, the loaf cooling in his hands as he wondered about this ancestress. Had she fought in that fierce battle for this keep? Or was she a warrior for some other cause from some earlier time?

Her face had the broad, good humored brow and jaw of most dwarfs, but there was something about her grin that spoke of mischief. Barhardnein wondered at the artistry that put such life into stone before suspecting that the lady may have created it herself.

With a shake of his head, Barhardnein took a deep breath, trying to rekindle what had felt like a spark of adventure. Was this what it felt like to look out for others, he wondered as he tugged the door pull and tried to order his features as befit a dwarven man. A little grim, with a mouth that almost sometimes vaguely seemed to be capable of smiling.

The door unceremoniously flew open, with a small, crooked mouthed dark woman peering out with wild eyes. Her appearance was so greatly disheveled that Barhardnein's gaze went to the water clock- had he misjudged the hour so badly as to find matrons still abed?

A moment's further glance in the inhospitable silence showed that the woman was in fact dressed in dull homespun wool, it was just a matter of her hair being all awry. Great clumps stood out in all directions, as though some great tangle had had to be pulled from the usual plaits and the woman had been surprised before being able to do herself up properly again.

"Apologies, Mistress, for.." and the lad stopped. What in the world could he apologize for, exactly? The hour was quite proper for calling, and morning warming drinks shared with neighbors were common. Whyever was the woman staring at him in such a way?

More startling was when she threw herself at him, clutching his vest in a deathgrip, her rapid speech a whisper and a wail all at once. "Did you bring the shears? Oh tell me that you did, it doesn't matter anymore truly it doesn't it doesn't it doesn't!"

It took several minutes to pry the woman from his leather jerkin, with a younger and more hinged child coming to relieve him of the bread and honey. His face was so similar to the woman's that it must be her own son, Barhardnein thought, yet he showed no great care for the woman's distress. In fact, the younger boy ignored her entirely, drawing the heir down the long hallway past several closed and dusty doors that spoke of long disuse.

Before he could gather his wits about him or spot the girl from the parapets, a dozen or more children streamed from all around and past him. They were armed with honey drizzled chunks of the loaf, chorusing their thanks for the lovely breakfast. And, alarmingly, leaving him alone with the lady of the house, who plainly had not been in the process of assembling anything like a meal at all.

"Hurry and be done with it, boy!" she snapped, turning her back on him and seating herself upon a stool.

"Madame," he said, trying to find his best manners and gentlest voice as one does when dealing with the unexpectedly insane. "Done with what, if I may ask?"

"The bloody pin, boy! Cut it out!" Now there was no attempt to control the wailing as she buried her face in her hands.

Now able to put eyes on the problem, Barhardnein rubbed the back of his own head in sympathy. Caught within the dull, oily hair was a spritely, clever little twist of silver wire. And twist was the most apt word, he thought, watching as it writhed and jabbed. It caught more strands of hair with every rotation, the scalp reddened and near to bleeding from what looked like many attempts to seek out and dislodge it.

He cleared his throat, staring down for a moment to beg Gayania's forgiveness for the lies he was about to tell. "Madame, I am loath to take a blade to such lovely tresses. May I have your permission to coax the pin from your hair?"

That provoked another long wail from which he was able to piece together very little sense. 'Wretched brat' and 'magic handiwork' and 'shaven bald' kept coming up at odd intervals. Being a reasonably intelligent young man, Barhardnein began to put together the disparate puzzle pieces, and laid his hand to the pin, only to jerk it away at the metal's unwillingness to be touched. Even years later, he was hard put to explain just what it was like other than a cat giving a warning hiss before scratching.

As though sensing imminent eviction, the pin began to twirl rapidly, picking up any and all tresses, more than it should have been able to hold while the woman howled in pain. The lad stared, eyes going wider as he began to think the woman was right. "Can you not ask the smith that wove the metal to remove it?" he asked, after pulling the woman's hands from her face and holding her wrists in an iron grip.

"Better to be bald than ask that little witch brat!" And the woman shoved him away violently before covering her face to weep into her hands.

Shocked by the words and the vitriol behind them, Barhardnein sat down on the floor with a thump. Dwarven women were usually prideful of their long hair and the intricate braided styles that could denote clan membership more clearly than any stitched or etched device. Then the last piece of the puzzle fell into place, and his concern became cold courtesy.

"Madame," he said after a long moment's pause, then cleared his throat. "Madam, I regret to inform you that this is not the service for which I came to your door. I am quite sorry that I will be unable to assist you. Could you be so kind as to tell me where I might speak to the man of the clan?"

The tears and whimpers stopped. By making such a request, he had relegated the matron's status to that of an errant child, not capable of speaking for herself.

The effect was more bracing than a brisk slap. With a similarly icy demeanor and clenched jaw, the woman stood and pinned her shoulders back. "I must apologize for the poor welcome you have found this day, sir. I mistook you for the tailor's lad." Her chin wobbled uncertainly before she inhaled deeply through her nose and lifted both nose and chin higher. "As for the house father, I cannot imagine any business a quarter bearded boy would have of interest to him." She rose, quite grandly with her swollen face that she now turned towards the fire, leaving her back to a guest. "You may see yourself out, *sir*."

Barhardnein stood slowly, his head reeling from the swirl of chaos that had been his morning. And for all his concern and courtesy, this strange woman who kept such poor care of children as to allow them to wander abroad at all hours was now throwing him out of her parlor?

Patience had been stretched to all limits, yet he still stood at attention in the military way that was second nature and bowed before taking himself back down the tunnel.

He managed not to slam the door, but only just.

This was not a situation that any of his experience had prepared him for. That that would be true of even the wisest of his tutors didn't occur to him until much, much later. Barhardnein snorted at his earlier moment of pride that he was learning what it was to be a man, to look out for others. "Can't even manage to mind a little girl child!" he muttered to himself.

He paced the main passages trying to decide what to do. That he must find Clan Darune's head of household was obvious, it was the how that eluded him.

Visiting the apartments again was immediately dismissed. He wanted no more encounters with that... person.

Speaking to his father would mean shame in all directions. Himself, for allowing the situation to unfold as it had without finding some diplomatic solution. The Clan Darune, for unceremoniously casting out the thegn's heir. The lady's predicament would become known, and whether she was daughter or good daughter, it would be the clan's shame for generations.

And that poor little moppet child, who'd been so perfectly mannered, if a bit wayward. To have to grow up in that ill kept home, with the magic in her so strong.

It was that thought that made Barhardnein stop dead in his tracks and smack his forehead with the heel of his hand. "How stupid!"

From behind him came an old woman's raucous cackle. "At least you're seein it early on, like, young lord! Did you let the love of your life slip twixt your fingers, then?" She laughed again, not altogether unkindly.

Grinning sheepishly, Barhardnein gave the woman sitting on a sun dappled bench a bow. "Na na, grandmother. I'm much too young to think of it for one, and for two, I put my faith in my father's wisdom for when it comes to courting."

The woman's silvery braids bobbed for a moment and then she returned his grin. "Wisdom, folly, faith, wonder... love's found in all those, lad. Remember it if you can!" And she seized his hands, spinning him in an odd halting dance step, singing out an old tune before releasing him to continue cavorting down the corridor, those she jostled in passing smiling benignly after her. She was still singing, casting the words back over her shoulder.

Shaking his head, Barhardnein had to chuckle when he realized he was pointing in the direction of the forges.

Exactly where he should find the patriarch of the clan, working diligently away at this hour.

The sharp tang of hot metal filled the air on this level, he found it both attractive and repulsive as he always had. He had achieved journeyman smith status the year before, and had been seldom at the anvil since. Since he did not possess the magic, the heir was considered a lesser student and taught only what was necessary and that had greatly influenced his outlook on the lessons. He walked past his own family's forge with scarcely a glance, eyes cast forward to spot the device of Clan Darune.

Once found, he rapped his knuckles politely on the metallic plate. As he expected, it was the moppet herself who cracked the granite slab open, one blue eye peering through. "Who calls, please?"

Her solemn manners made him smile as he sketched her a bow. "Barhardnein, son of Hardhurn, to see Clan Darune's father, if I may."

The blue eye went very round. "Please to wait, my lord." A quick bob of the golden curls and the granite slid shut again.

Baffled, Barhardnein settled himself to wait. He heard an oddly whispered conversation, high and frantic as though there were two young girls in the forge, panicked and deciding what to do.

When it was evident that the father of the clan was not available, Barhardnein tapped the plate again, clearing his throat once the panel slid the fraction of an inch open. "Could you perhaps take a message? I would like to return tomorrow at the second hour past noon to have a word with the clan father."

"Yes," she said, a little hesitantly, then again with fervent nodding for this unexpected solution. "Yes! That will be fine, thankyousomuch!"

The door slammed shut again, and Barhardnein found for the first time in his life (though assuredly not the last) that sometimes, in the face of extreme absurdity, all one can do is throw up their hands and laugh.

When he returned the next day, Barhardnein did find the patriarch in residence at the forge. "Come, come!" the old man called at the first tap.

Granted permission, Barhardnein entered the treasured forge of Clan Darune. In a society that accorded rank by the amount of space granted, it was surprisingly roomy, large enough to fit two or three masters, and a handful of journeymen and apprentices besides. Had it been made available just to the two of them for this interview?

Puzzled, the lad found the patriarch crouched in the furthest corner of the room, away from the red hot glow of the forge proper. He was rubbing his thumbs over a slender rod of metal and staring at it critically. Without warning, he thrust the rod into Barhardnein's hands. "There, lad, tell me true- what color do you see there?"

A part of him wanted to throw his hands back in the air and begin to laugh again; would he never have a normal conversation with any member of this clan? But then, he looked at the smooth metal in his hands. "It's the pink gold of the dawn, grandfather, and a lovelier shade I have never seen."

The old man seized Barhardnein's hand, rod and all, and wrung it quite thoroughly. "It is, isn't it?" He peered into the lad's face, clearly needing to hear it again.

"Yes indeed, grandfather! Truly, your apprentices will have something to learn from this!"

"Apprentices?" The old man looked confused for a moment. "Ah, young lord, tis an apprentice's work, this! Can you imagine what she'll create when she's a master?"

"Truly?" Barhardnein was in awe. Finding the heart of the ore and drawing out the shading was, to some, a waste of time and not at all the point of working metal. His own master had once scoffed quietly at such a claim, only to mention to him later that it was a common complaint rooted in jealousy.

Any of the smiths working with magic could bend the metal to their will. To discern the will of the metal and make it a partner in the process of creation was something else entirely.

No wonder the grandfather of the clan was so giddy. The esteem and honor that would be the Darunes in the coming decades, their status would rise high. They would be able to regain their seat on the Trader's Council, and the children would have any master they wanted to study with for the asking.

It was as he stood there, absently rubbing his thumb over the silken finish of the metal rod that puzzle pieces started clicking into place.

A little moppet at the forge that had also been up on the parapets just before dawn. The empty forge in the middle of a work day. The pink gold apparently apprentice made steel sitting in his hands.

"Great Gayania, that moppet girl made this- this is why she was up alone on the parapets, she said, to see the colors!" Barhardnein pointed the rod at the old man accusingly. He looked around for evidence of other workers, but all of the tools in the usual places on the workbench were sized for a small hand.

A very small smith... or a dwarven girl child.

The old warrior took the metal away and replaced it upon the bench, where more rods of blue and copper shone before turning away. "She told me all about meeting a fine young man up there, and it didn't take long to put together who's been callin to the door. So the way I figured it, I could choose to meet with you and trust you, or avoid you and have questions asked where it may not be prudent for answers to be known just yet." With a grumble, the older man pushed a stool towards the heir with his walking stick before pulling another stool up for himself. "Sit."

Strictly speaking, Barhardnein was used to being treated with a bit more deference than this, but his mind was of such a swirl that he sat before thinking about it. For a whole clan to have to rely on a single smith was considered very poor luck. To have that smith be a single girl child, however gifted she may be, was reason for every piece to be devalued and sold for far less than its actual worth. The story about the keep was that the old patriarch had been selling trinkets of late that had been uncovered from a hoard of early works belonging to his late wife was clearly manufactured to prevent the clan's bargaining from such predatory practices.

The subterfuge was working well- their mythical hoard had become the talk of the Keep in recent weeks. Barhardnein even remembered how his mother had asked his father to look over what was available as

the Darune Ladysmith had been a noted master of her art. Even her works from her time as an apprentice or journeyman, had great value, centuries after her passing.

And he'd stumbled onto the very secret that Clan Darune needed to keep, clearly not merely as a matter of pride or profit. He thought of all those children, faces alight as they had latched onto a single warm loaf of bread and pot of honey as though it were a great treasure. By that as well as the stoic face of the old warrior before him, this secret was a matter of the clan's survival. He swallowed hard, ducking his head and rubbing one hand across the back of his neck, watching the old man closely from under his brows. Composed, calculating, the gaze was taking the heir's measure.

For just a moment, Bar wished he had some pretext to edge outside the old man's reach. Old, yes. But by the way the grizzled patriarch tightened his grip on that walking stick, Barhardnein saw the warrior within. He waited as patiently as he could.

"Seems we have a problem here, you and I." The old man sighed, resting his chin against his hands clutching the stick.

"Lord Darune, I see no need to speak about your... ahh... circumstances." He waved his hands around at the forge lamely.

"Mmph. Don't feel much like a lord, havin to lie and sneak about, and so old I could be your father's grandfather, so go on and call me Grandfa like everyone else does, and I'll call you Bar. Don't do to put too many fancy words on plain men with a plain problem if'n its gonna get solved, hey?"

The sense of being taken into confidence as an equal by the old man made Bar sit up straighter on his stool, inclining his head in appreciation for the old man's candor and trust before meeting his eyes. "I don't feel like I need to tell anyone about this, Grandfa. It's not as though anyone is being cheated, not really. The workings that have been sold were advertised as apprentice work, after all."

If the old man smiled, it was so deeply into his beard as to not be noticed. "And that's exactly why. If'n I'm trading on the reputation of the house, well it ent unearned, doncha know. And I expect in times to come, our little Till may outshine even my Maddie."

"What's more important jus now is how you got wise, if you don't mind my askin." A steady stare of Grandfa's narrowed eyes made it clear he wasn't precisely asking. Bar went over the hints and clues, most of which came down to being in the right place at the right time and hearing what was said. This conclusion was voiced by Bar with a shrug at the end of his recital.

"Make a fine thegn one day, ya will, lad. Whilst there's some luck to you bein in those places, you also had the wit to see folk, to piece the jagged bits together to see enough and guess the whole tale. An that's what a leader oughts to have. Your own grandfa did, bringin us here and plannin out this whole place."

Bar blinked, then peered at the old man closer. "You knew my grandfather?"

Grandfa snorted. "Course and I did, lad. Was among the first to settle here, helped dig down the twenty three, and me and mine made war when he called."

Anytime he asked his father about the folk that had come before, the thegn would irritably wave the questions away, bidding him to tend to the great histories committed to stone. For all it was held holy by their people, Bar found that the words left there were just as cold and unfeeling. Whole lives could be disposed of with a series of dates that gave no sense of who the people that came before were. Many times he had wondered if he was at all like the great Naradhurn. Had he also slept on his left side? Was his weapon of choice a spear, too?

Most of all, what would he think of his grandson and any chances he had of fitting into the very large shoes he left behind with his keep so empty?

Bar bit his lip, wanting to ask all these questions and a thousand more besides. Before he could form a single one, Grandfa was leaning forward and tapping a finger on his arm.

"Before we git to talkin bout all that, though, I wonder if you might help an old man... well, untangle a problem, you might say."

The late meal in the Clan Darune quarters had the air of a brewing storm. The dark slate table had been brought to a bright polish, with pewter plates and cups all around. The meal itself was a joint effort at best; the eternal indifferent stew sat to one side in favor of the suckling pig that the eldest son of the house had managed to bring home. The younger children were full enough of awe (and pork) that it did not occur to them to mention this was not a typical repast in front of their guest. Bar had thoughtfully provided a great wheel of a mellow golden cheese that went well with the ale and fresh baked bread with Mistress Aggy's compliments.

The thegn's heir sat at Grandfa's right, asking questions about the times before. The gaggle of children (Bar was able to get a count of fourteen once they all sat down, making him think of a row of baby birds) were mostly silent, with their large dark eyes filled with wonder. The young hunter, a newly grown bristle of beard barely reaching beyond his jaw made a show of sipping from his cup of ale and asking a question of his own from time to time.

It made Bar smile a bit, which turned into a chuckle when he exchanged a brief glance with Grandfa. They both buried their beards into their ale mugs so that young Thrandur would not suspect. The lad was in his third decade, clearly too young to be treated like the little ones, but not quite ready for the responsibilities of a man of the clan.

Of the moppet, very little was heard. Bar spied her at the far end of the table, amongst the youngest at the auntie's right hand. Her usually expressive face turned into her plate, with little chatter for the auntie's overly bright conversational gambits.

The memory of their previous encounter fresh in Bar's mind, he, too, avoided the matron's gaze as much as politeness would permit. He hoped that she had been in too much of a state to remember him as not being the tailor's lad from their previous encounter, and for her part, she was just as willing to act as though she was meeting the heir to the keep for the first time. The real difficulty was the headscarf that she had swaddled 'round her head and sides of her face. It was an unbecoming mustard yellow, wrapped so many times that it brought to mind an unfortunate association with diapering cloths. And though dwarves are a sturdy, doughty people, the thickness was so extreme as to make her look as though her head was twice its normal size. When combined with a blotchy, red complexion, the overall effect was less than attractive.

He waited until the children were dismissed to quieter versions of their games so the men could sit by the fire with their pipes before attending to the business at hand. Thrandur joined them, as relishing of the prospect as he was of his ale. The tankard was half full and set on a small stool as the lad had chosen to sit upon the rug instead, stretching his much darned socks out towards the fire.

To Bar's surprise, the moppet wandered away from the younger ones and sidled up to be taken upon Grandfa's lap. She was welcomed to her chosen perch, where she proceeded to ignore the pipe smoke and conversation in favor of unbraiding, combing, and rebraiding the old man's beard.

"It's a fine brood you have, Grandfa. Makes me wish I had brothers and sisters and cousins of my own to grow up with," Bar said, resisting the urge to tousle Till's hair.

"Mmph, it's fine for a winter's night when they are snug in their beds, somewhat louder when the sun forgets when it's time to sleep and the younguns with 'em, but that's just what all children do. Four different fathers and mothers, all gone in the wolf wars. If'n we still had my Maddie, oh, she'd have them sorted out with matches made already. Born to manage, that one was, and I don't think there will be a time when I don't miss her."

The three by the fire raised their tankards in salute and drank solemnly. Bar let the silence draw out for a long minute before he began. Of all the types of diplomacy he had been taught, this would be the most unique exercise he'd been put to in his six decades.

"Heard tell in the marketplace that an apprentice cache of Master Maddie's work was found."

Thrandur sputtered into his cup and Bar bit his lip hard to keep his expression one of polite inquiry. By his reddened cheeks, it was evident the lad knew the clan's secret, but not how to keep a bland expression.

Grandfa gazed at the ceiling and blew a large smoke ring before Till exasperatedly tugged his chin back down and started the braid she'd been working on over again. "Happens that we did, young master. You know, stone has its secrets, same as us. Her bein so wise in the ways of Gayania, mayhap she enchanted a few corners here and there, that we might have somethin put by in hard times."

Clever, thought Bar. And certainly not beyond the lady's abilities, it was a way to explain how more and more treasures suddenly turned up. "My lady mother did bid me look at anything you had available; of all the pieces gifted to her over the years, she is not fortunate enough to possess anything from the hand of Mastersmith Maddy Durane's."

"Quite a tangle," the old man said, drawing in a quick breath and avoiding Bar's gaze to keep from a guffaw from escaping. "Good-daughter! Come you here, woman!" he called over his shoulder before leaning in conspiratorially. "She has the last piece an' took such a shine to it that I don't know if she can bear to part with it, but surely we can ask."

The yellow piled figure stepped closer, still beyond the fire's light. "Yes, goodfather?"

"Here now," Grandfa said, gently tipping Till from his lap. "Young Master Bar here would like to see that piece of pretty your auntie has in her hair. Could you be so kind as to take it out so he might have a look?"

Till gasped and looked up at Bar, color rising in her pale little face, her mouth a perfect o of surprise. "You really want to see?" she asked, her head cocked to one side. "You won't make fun?"

Bar shook his head seriously. "It's bad luck to make fun of the work of great smiths. It's like giving insult to a bard; you never know when or how it'll come back on you, but come back it will."

"I never heard that," Till said, cocking her head at him skeptically.

"To be fair, I've had more time to hear things than you have. You've what, two decades?" He watched, amused, as she stood to her very tallest height.

"Not quite yet, and we don't come of age halfway through another decade at least. It's so long to wait!" She sighed, long and gustily for that long awaited day. Bar again wished that he had a little sister like this to spoil, then shook himself and came to the point.

"Could I see it now?" he asked, careful to sound just a little wistful, as though he expected her to say no.

"Guess so," she said, slowly walking over to where her auntie was rapidly unearthing her head from the lopsided mustard pile of cloth. The three men sitting by the fire took a great deal of interest in their ale cups and studiously avoided even a glance in the direction of the retrieval efforts. Bar felt a very soft tug at the nape of his neck, as though the skin was being lightly pinched by cold fingers. It took a great deal

of resolve not to peek round, but the sensation fled as soon as he allowed himself to absently rub at the top of his spine.

Before he could dismiss the feeling as nothing, Till was placing a truly exquisitely delicate piece of woven silver wire into his hand. Turning it over in his hands, Bar saw the stylized form of a seated bear depicted in enigmatic spirals. One upturn of an end of wire gave the bear's brow a quizzical tilt that rendered it more comic than fierce, making him smile with delight. The little girl shifted anxiously next to him, and Bar raised his eyes to hers.

"A remarkable piece, this. I know it's bad bargaining to say so, but to say anything else would be dishonorable to the gifted hands of the smith that crafted it." Bar lifted a brow at Grandfa, tacitly acknowledging the true artist in the only way he could and extracted a generous price from the purse at his waist.

Looking back to Till, he saw one of her slender fingers touching the bear's head gently, as though she was stroking a living pet. To his dismay, her eyes brimmed with tears, even as her lips curved in a smile. "He's a good bear," she said softly before putting her hands determinedly behind her back, gazing up at Bar solemnly.

"He's a very good bear, and I see you're very fond of him," Bar smiled back before placing the coin in her hand, then reached up to carefully place the pin in a junction of Till's braids. "And so I insist on making you the gift of him, though I do ask that, once you happen upon another trove tucked away, that is," he said hastily. "That I be permitted first pick that my dear lady mother not be too disappointed."

Till gasped, her hands going to the pin and then to her face before she clasped them before her. "Really truly? I get to keep him?" she whispered.

Winking, Bar leaned down confidentially. "Really, truly little miss. I can't take your bear away, and I hope you'll wear him and remember me."

Now the tears did streak down the girl's face, and Bar didn't know what to do beyond pat a shoulder with a weak 'there there'. Before he could reach out, the moppet surprised him by dashing the tears away with a fist before performing a near perfect curtsy. "Thank you for your kindness, my lord. I shall treasure him always." With that, she scuttled back to the safety of her grandfa's lap, spilling the coins into his hands.

Grandfa surreptitiously wiped a tear into his beard before reaching out to clasp hands on the deal. "We'll not forget or disappoint, young master, and it's Till here that is best at uncovering such things. Ain't the creativity of younger minds a blessing?"

Business done, the rest of the children rejoined them to hear the stories by the fire, making for a warm, convivial evening quite different from what Bar was used to. The newly freed auntie managed to collect

herself enough to bring a night tea around. Soon enough the tea rendered the smallest of the brood ready to be scooped into their beds without protest. Till could barely take in the stories or the tea as she kept reaching up to touch the little bear pin.

As the hour grew late, Bar rose, thanking his hosts for their gracious attentions. It seemed to him that all the family by the fire was sorry to see him go, and he found himself warmly invited to return again soon. Thrandur clasped his wrist as an equal, Grandfa gave his shoulder an extra hearty buffet over their conspiracy's success.

And Bar could have sworn, in that moment before he turned to go, that the little bear nestled into Till's golden hair had just the barest hint of a contented smile.

Bar turned his feet homeward, feeling a pleasant glow that comes from doing a good thing and feeling not only right, but seen and appreciated beyond all measure.

Titania

## Titania

The queen woke in a tangle of hair and sheets, damp with fear and heart pounding.

It wasn't often that the old dreams troubled her now, and after breathing deeply to reacquaint herself with the here and now, she pulled on her bedrobe and went immediately to the scrying pool.

The hour was either too late to be considered night or too early to be considered morning; in any case, there were few bodies about, and none of them would dare impede the Fae Queen in dishabille at any time.

Inky black were the waters, with the barest kiss of starlight. Titania tapped her forehead with her graceful fingertips, annoyed that she had forgotten it was the dark of the moon.

Water scrying was her preferred method, yielding and adapting to the desires of the viewer. It was what was comfortable and conformable to her will, but the last thing the Queen of Air and Darkness would ever be was blind.

Titania leaned back on her couch, and thought upon the runestones of the earth for a moment. She pictured them in her hand, the cool surfaces smoothed by the elements, and then by her patient polishing. How many years had she walked this world to find each individual stone? She was sure Puck could have told her, along with songs in the epic style that would have made the remembering a pleasurable echo of those days when the world was new and full of possibility.

The leyline under her feet pulsed, a gentle lapping at her ankles as though she stood by some long forgotten lake or sea.

*Yes, she thought. You remember too, so long as I have you two, I have everything I truly need.*

The sensation of water receded, and Titania sighed. She longed to sink down into it and let the raw stuff of magic claim her. What would it be like? Floating upon a dazzling surface, or falling down into the depths? After all of her time working within the element of water, it was inevitable that the senses would blend.

She wondered what she would feel if she began spending more time with fire as her element of choice, and a shudder went through her thin, angular frame. It seemed like something needlessly painful, like something Erdu would do, to purify himself with the flame or some such nonsense. Titania's lips twisted into a sour smile imagining it, from Erdu's pious, stoic expression to Danu's agony at being severed from her twin and forever alone cloaked in a bowed head of acceptance.

Yes, that would be how they would offer themselves up when their ends came, as martyrs in a greater cause that existed only in their minds, with the lack of will or imagination to control their destiny or punish the true culprit.

The queens' mind abruptly left that thought behind as deliberately as slamming a door. She was wasting time, and worse, shirking away from what needed to be done.

Clenching her jaw, Titania turned to the ebony box she secreted in an obliging tree hollow near the throne. She swallowed hard as she drew out the two candles, one of incandescent opal, the other of darkest jet. They were cool within her fingers, pliant to her will and the will of the flame to come.

In spite of herself, Titania stroked the opal candle lightly. "It's pointless," she said softly as she cupped it within the palm of her hand. "You know it, I know it, yet I cherish you nonetheless. Is it well with you?" She held it to her bared breast, nestling it against the beating of her heart that it might know she spoke true.

Confused impressions played out behind her closed eyelids as she rocked the candle to her. Rimmed in flame, she saw herself, mounted and armored in lines of exquisite grace and beauty, she was feared and worshipped by all that saw her. It was glory, it was doom, and all followed or removed themselves from her path. She saw Puck's face, battered and bloody at what she knew was her own behest. And the leyline, the very heartbeat of magic was aflame with violet sheets of fire set to consume all before it.

Struggling not to fling the precious artifact from her with these visions she did not want, the queen slowly drew the candle from her flesh, noting the small patch of raised flesh that had been burnt by the contact. She took a deep breath and willed her heart to a gentler tempo. "You see?" she murmured. "Gone, now, so back to sleep, my lovely. Worry us not further for that which shan't be done, for it cannot be undone."

Slowly, oh so slowly she replaced the opal candle within its soft bag before drawing forth its jet companion and placing it within the silver chased crystal holder. The silver binding of the cut stone was the thinnest of blue tinted wire, etched with runes of focus. The queen spoke their names and traced them with one fingertip, calling the magic to fill them and make them glow softly green with a deep hum.

Pausing for a moment, the queen cast her mind back to her nightmare, trying to decide if it had been more or less menacing than those of seasons past. Unable to come to a determination, she drew forth her circle of working from the earth around her throne. Once called into service, it lit up with the same glow as the runes upon the candle holder, with a hum that was an octave deeper, almost a subliminal rumble felt at the backs of the ears and throat than a sound to be heard.

The enchanted glade was perfectly still; for a moment it made Titania feel lonely. It had not always been thus, that the queen was so unattended during such a working. She shook the images that threatened to surface away and tended to the matter at hand.

"What say you, beloved of fire and flame? What comes that stirs me from common rest?"

The smooth length of darkest stone flushed in bands of color- deepest jeweled tones of blue, green, and purple smudged its surface, echoing in small spits of flame. Bemused, Titania reached out and chased the waves with her fingertips, purest snow white in the darkness.

The images she wanted came at her bidding- a blond girl child would soon ride south, a motherless daughter who needed care only she could give. Great happiness would follow, a time in which there would be no dreams to disturb her, only peace and the joy of giving the best of oneself.

*How long?* she asked.

The flame sputtered again, as though shrugging. And the queen supposed it had been a foolish query as far as the artifact was concerned.

She soothed it, and willed it to show her what it would. That caused another little hiccough, the obedient tool was not used to such a request. The flame guttered low and for a long moment, the queen thought it would snuff itself out and stroked it with her thumb to coax it.

The ember shot a pillar of flame and smoke to the sky, causing Titania to take a step back in surprise. Before she could speak, a great Vision came upon her.

It was a perfect pillar of some black, dense metal she had no name for. The runes were etched in liquid ether collected during a moonless, pitch black night so as not to be visible to the uninitiated before being lovingly scribed into the surface, each character drying to transparency as it bathed the metal. As if that feat was not enough, the metal was the work of a mastersmith, not quite dwarven, not quite fae or elven, but beautiful beyond belief in its stark simplicity and perfection.

It was not the working of a sole practitioner like herself, no, this had taken many hands. This had been a year's worth of an unbroken chant that rang like the beating of hammers upon the forge.

Oh to be a part of such a crafting, so many minds and spirits directing the elements, it must be glorious, it must be...

The vision broke off sharply as the queen imagined what it would be to lay hands on such a powerful artifact, and the absence was as pain. Titania gave a small cry as it faded from her, wishing she'd seen just a little more of who had brought so much together for a single purpose.

Just after dawn, Scamper found her crouched in the soft earth, tears still drying upon her face. The protective wards had dissipated with the morning's light, and he stepped heedlessly across the formerly stout boundaries, rushing to his queen's side.

"Dearest lady! Please rise, it is not meet that you be found so," he patted frantically at her hands, drawing the closure of her robe together. While not entirely unfamiliar with magical workings, he was shocked to see the queen so beyond her senses after a conclusion.

It took some minutes, and Scamper was almost on the verge of sending for the healers when the queen's eyes fluttered open. She shook as though with chill, and he hastened to cover her with the fur lap robe he kept always near.

"Help me to my chamber, I shall remain within this day."

"At once, beloved queen," Scamper replied as he helped her to rise. Something about his queen was eerily calm, but also forlorn, and he pressed himself against the side of her leg, wanting to offer whatever comfort he could. Usually she had little patience for this and would shoo him to find something productive to do.

Instead, she pulled him into her soft bed with her, holding him as a child might a comfort toy. Beyond shock, all Scamper could do was to stroke the wild, questing tendrils of hair, murmuring endearments until the queen slept once more.

He gazed upon her face then, tear stained and so heartbreakingly young and pale.

Whatever could she have seen?

Matilda-

## Matilda

It had been a trying day all the way round. Auntie was out of sorts due to just being out of bed from another ague, for which she roundly (and perhaps rightly) blamed Nandurath for, seeing as he had come home from working the mines with the sniffles. Her many loud complaints about the management of the household during her illness had woken Till from a very sound sleep. Upon arriving at the forge, she found Stedi also very out of sorts, quizzing her student on first season apprentice level knowledge and becoming quite tetchy if Till's responses were slower than she thought they should be. It was as though she feared Till had forgotten everything she ever knew about working metal.

And her best friend Hildy was in a fret over her imminent coming of age ritual and nothing would do but that they skived off for the afternoon to lay in the meadow and speculate endlessly on what would go wrong and how badly it would affect what came to pass after. To her credit, Hildy did manage to plan the whole illicit outing well. From raiding the pantry for cheese, fruit, bread, and a truly terrible bottle of wine to knowing which guardsman would turn the other way so two girls could slip out the side gate, Hildy was very composed for someone seemingly so frazzled about tomorrow. They made for the small meadow on the far side of the tree line to fall to the grass, their skirts billowed out about them most improperly as Hildy fretted.

That Till herself had said not a single word about her own future went unnoticed and unremarked upon. When she was still a little girl, she had pestered Stedi over and over to tell her about the Queen of the South and what would happen when she went there. The spirit had been endlessly patient and answered every question as best she could, but there was never any new twist to the tale. When Till was of age, the Queen's messenger would call for her so that she might go to court, where the fae queen herself looked to act as Till's own mother would have in helping her to find her destiny. It was a promise that had been made at the very founding of the Durane line, and it would be kept.

Till reckoned there were two key points that had made it easier to put that day to the very back of her mind. There had never been anything particularly mysterious about it. And it was entirely and utterly inevitable that this fate would come to pass, so what was the point in fretting over it? The thought made Till smile wryly at herself. Only you, she thought, would see nothing at all mysterious in being spirited away to a fae court to uncover a mystical destiny. On the rare occasion that Grandfa referred to the uncertainties of the future, it was with dismissal. "A long ways off, that is, and we be keepin our minds on what's real and solid in the here and now, thank you very much!" Sometimes he'd also give Till a pat on the head, commenting, "And this girl's got her head on straight, to be sure. No miss ish vaporings or dreamings or wonderings about what tomorrow holds."

In some ways, Till envied her friend. Every step of Hildy's life would follow the way of the dwarves, set down in stone. Within the moon, she would don the earthen brown robes of Gayania to be presented to the priests, who would murmur polite words about callings and signs that would ostensibly prove Hildy's destiny was not among the dour faced priestesses.

For a moment, she tried to picture the fiery haired, quicksilver, freckle-faced Hildy as a staid and proper adept. Carrying the tools, ministering to the sick, teaching the children the ways of their people in hushed, patient tones. She leaned back on her palms in the grass, tilted her head to one side, and stared at her friend for a moment, long enough for Hildy to notice.

"Have I grown fangs and claws, then?" she asked with some asperity, rising from where she'd been lain back to better observe the clouds to prop on one elbow.

"Not yet," Till replied thoughtfully. "I keep watching though since Auntie called you a hellspawn that time we used her stockings to strain the seeds and pulp out of our gilberry juice."

"Oh, goddess, I'd forgotten all about that!" The smaller, pale girl collapsed back into the grass, peeling with laughter. "We were terrible children, truly," Hildy said with mock penitence.

"We? I don't recall coming up with any of the mischief on my own. Not the time we hid the kitten in her bed long enough to prove she wasn't truly allergic, she just didn't like cats, or the time we swapped the cut potatoes for turnips in her stew when your clan father came calling to dinner so they'd be inedible lumps, or.."

"Enough!" Hildy cried out between giggles. "All right, it's possibly a point that I had some of the ideas, but I never would have been brave enough to try them without you." In one of her mercurial changes of temper, the girl flipped onto her belly and seized Till's hands in hers. "I don't know how to find my brave without you. If I should be called into service," Hildy began.

Till pulled a hand away to wave it dismissively, while squeezing the one that remained in hers to reassure. "Nonsense, we've always spoken true to each other and I don't see a reason not to now. We both know there's no world in which Hildegard of Clan Dusten becomes the most unholy priestess of Gayania known through all the ages."

"You're sure of it?" Hildy said, her dark eyes searching her friend's face. To her surprise, Till heard real worry in her voice.

"I am," Till said firmly, even as she squeezed Hildy's hand tightly. "Have you felt a call, is that why you're so fratchety?"

"Oh no, just the opposite." Hildy drew a deep sigh, releasing Till's hand to pluck aimlessly at blades of grass, avoiding her eyes. "Sometimes... sometimes it's hard to be your friend, Till. Not because you aren't lovely and wonderful and so kind to me in spite of..." she said in a rush.

"Never mind that," Till said. "I never cared about what the old witches said, and neither should you. You didn't have a say so in how you came to be, none of us do. So on to the rest of it, what do you mean?"

A thoughtful frown, an expression rarely seen on that particular face, lingered for some minutes. "You are always sure."

Till burst out laughing in surprise. "I'm always what?"

Sitting up, Hildy folded her legs and put her elbows on her knees, her expression both mystified and serious. "I don't know how else to say it, Tilly. Maybe it's working with the metal with such an exacting master. You have to know everything before you do it, so you are always prepared for anything. I never know what's going to happen next or what I'm going to say or do about it, but it's like you... you've got everything planned out and you're just walking through steps of a dance you've learned since before you could walk and that only you have the music to."

Till squirmed inwardly as she rose to her feet, shaking random bits of grass and twigs from her skirt. "It's all an act, Hildy. That's what I'd like my life to be, but it's actually the exact opposite."

"What nonsense! Your birth month is just two months after mine, and you'll do the same thing- put on itchy robes to present yourself to a gaggle of old women that smell like beer brewing, and they'll pretend to think about it for a minute before they say no no, Gayania would never call such a talented smith, so back to your old forge you go. Meanwhile, for all the kind words you're saying, we both know it'd be like the old witches to decide I should wear the robes in penance for my parents... well, being my parents. And never again know what it is to laugh or dance or run or lay in the meadow with you and look up at the clouds and just.. Live."

The bitterness in Hildy's voice made Till blink and wonder if she'd overheard some of the gossip about that very thing coming to pass, and a good idea it was, taming that wild hoyden girl before her blood would tell. While everything was supposed to be decided within the ritual, by the goddess herself, everyone knew that worldly opinion or intervention had been known to sway the judgment. Looking at the dejected set of her shoulders, Till decided it was likely Hildy had overheard some kind of speculation. That the priests were unlikely to want to deal with the chaos a Hildy could create hadn't entered into anyone's minds before their tongues started wagging. It was a sign of her general upset that Hildy had mentioned her parents at all; it was a topic she preferred to ignore whenever possible.

A sudden prickling in her eyes and nose came with the realization that she couldn't truly empathize with her friend because no matter what the goddess or the priests did or didn't say, she'd never go before them anyway. Grandfa had come into the forge one bright afternoon the past winter and gruffly informed her that it had been taken care of and not to worry about sewing a robe for the occasion.

For just a moment as Till felt the vastness of the differences between them, she wanted to shout at her friend. She wanted to tell her how afraid and miserable and lonely she already felt, not even knowing when the Lady would get around to calling her, and that she didn't know what would become of her in the warm places of the south that were always kept green for the Lady.

With her heart pounding against her ribs, Till breathed deeply, trying to find words that were both true and kind. They had always understood one another at heart, and while she couldn't blurt out the reality, she knew that someday she'd be gone and any words that were between them now would not just soothe in the moment but possibly be remembered for a long, long time. She took a deep breath and spoke.

"Living is what you make of it. Anyone can look at an unknown path and be afraid... or you can look at it as a new adventure. Truly, Hildy, it is not your way to fear anything, but to look for the best of what can be had. If you want to be a priestess that goes about barefoot in the gardens to feel the earth's call, to make up wild dances to the tunes of the droning hymns... well, mayhap you'll start a new fashion. If anyone could, it's you. Just like it's up to you how much you want to worry and fret about it as you go on. If you keep up like this, you'll break out in nervous hives and be a real sight when all the keep is watching."

There was a long silence during which the girls both looked down at their feet. Till bit her lip, wondering if she'd gone further than Hildy's sense of humor would follow. When she dared to glance over, Hildy's sturdily built form was curled into a ball, arms around her knees and flaming head down about them. Her shoulders shook ever so slightly, and Till felt ashamed of herself.

"Hildy, I'm so sorry," she began, and then heard that Hildy was *laughing*. Relief and exasperation mixed until Till found herself laughing, too. They went on for several minutes, one infecting the other just as the hilarity began to die down.

"I could just see it," Hildy gasped between sputterings. "Oh, I would drive them to leave the abbey within the month."

"Maybe two," Till said, after a considering pause, her face so serious that it made the laughter start all over again.

"What would I do without you, my good, sensible, Till?" Hildy asked, smiling at her fondly. "You know just what to say to lift me up."

"Mmmm, well, I need to actually be lifting you up," she replied as she rose and offered her hands. "It's nigh unto dinner time, and you know how Auntie gets if she feels she hasn't enough help, smithing or no smithing."

As one, they slowly walked back to the shadowing grey walls of the keep, making small repairs to hair and dress for the preservation of their near adult dignities. "It's nonsense, really, especially as Adia actually enjoys cooking, does it better than Auntie ever could, and would be over the moon to get the hearth to herself without Auntie hovering and commentating."

The image of her dark haired younger cousin came to mind, her tiny frame perched on a stool Nandurathurath had made her so that she might reach the food preparation areas. She did love to cook, and had a gift of finding ways to make the same old staples interesting when winter reduced the availability of fresh food. It occurred to her that she probably would never see the day that Adia didn't need the little blue stool anymore.

It was a thought to swallow hard against. Ducking her head so Hildy wouldn't see the tears that threatened, Till pretended to smooth an escaped strand back into the perfectly braided coronet of her hair. The wire of her little bear always held perfectly, but it soothed her to run a finger over his ear, as though he could feel it. For the first time in ages, she remembered that the little bear was supposed to have been a gift for Hildy. It had seemed inappropriate to give him away after the thegn's heir had paid for her to keep the very first pin she'd ever made just because she loved it. Part of her wanted to give it to Hildy as something to remember her by, while the greater part of her couldn't imagine giving up her bear. She wondered if it would be considered a silly little girl trinket when she went south, then she decided just as swiftly that she did not care.

For all the things she was giving up- stolen afternoons getting grass stains on her feet in the meadows with Hildy, watching Adia finally grow tall enough to not need the stool anymore, sitting with Grandfa by the fire at night, seeing what manner of mate Nandurath would bring home one day- this piece she would keep.

The girls parted with a quick hug at the huge entryway with the stone edifice that held the main water clock. Hildy had yet to visit the market square for essentials her clanmother had charged her with fetching, and Till had decided she wasn't quite ready to go back to the living quarters yet.

Alone with a lot of thoughts too heavy to think, Till went to the forge, and was relieved that Stedi remained wherever it was she went when she was exasperated with her pupil.

Till had spent most of her waking hours in this room since achieving her mastery in the past two years. It was crucial that she build a reputation under her own name, and that she might stockpile a valuable cache to help support the clan after she was gone. She looked at the hoard of glinting metal and stone, portioning out in her mind how many seasons it would last, if it would provide for the nuptial celebrations for Nandurath and Adia, the last of the cousins to be matched. The apartments would be empty if they went to live with their mates' clans, with just Auntie and Grandfa until the clan's heir was chosen.

It was a difficult position, to be responsible for all of the family's welfare, but Grandfa had done well by all of them. In the usual course of things, he would have been succeeded by his firstborn son or daughter. If all parties agreed, it was possible for a spouse to take up the doings of a clan they had married into, but Grandfa had not chosen to pass the mantle to Auntie for all these years. Till thought it unlikely that he ever would- it seemed as though he was waiting for the right person from the next generation.

Such were the thoughts that occupied Till's mind as her hands sorted through the drawers, running her still slender fingers across spools of wire. As she had been taught, the form she wanted the metal to take was held carefully in her mind's eye, and she merely stroked the possible materials. Once she felt the now familiar frisson go down her spine, she pulled out the spool to find a lovely green, like the leaves in the springtime. It brought a smile to her face as she forced all other thoughts out of her mind to focus on the creation at hand.

Unspooling the wire, she whispered softly, asking it to soften the coil as she ran her finger along it. Minute vibrations passed from her hands to the wire and back again. It had been a while since she'd had time to craft what she had in mind, and the wire needed some coaxing. She and the material warmed to the task at hand as she spoke to it of the image in her mind, shaping the now compliant wire with her thoughts alone. Some coppery tones wanted to come out, and Till drew upon them by telling all the best of the color she had seen.

"How lovely you'll be," she murmured as the piece hovered over the worktop, shimmering in the dull glow of the banked forge. It spun with a bit of a flourish, and Till's brow furrowed as her fingers shaped tiny pieces of wire to add in the fine details in the way that only a true master of the metal could.

"Confounded woman!" Grandfa shouted as Till eased in the door. She felt the contentment and peace of time spent working begin to fade, and she sighed for it while trying to find a smile.

She paused in the long hallway, peering around the corner to draw the sights and smells to her. There was very little change in her years in most ways; the stone walls carved by Grandfa side by side with his father always made her feel safe from all harm. The little niches still held oil lamps, statuary, books that everyone agreed were important but no one read, and today Adia had filled the space nearest to the door with a sparse and somewhat struggling arrangement of spring flowers. Till ran a finger over the bravest bud that was seriously pondering opening its petals and wondered how late the season would be for Adia's bounteous summer arrangements would grace the shelf.

At the end of the hallway, the family coat of arms worked into a tapestry that had been made by her great great grandmother hung far enough out from the wall and all the way to the floor to be a good hiding place. Nandurath had grand ideas about carving behind it to create a small alcove for private conversations that Grandfa had, surprisingly, agreed to.

"Be nice to have a spot not open to all and sundry handy to the main room, that," he had said when the plans were drawn up. Auntie had countered that there was a perfectly good private office that could be opened and aired for use, but it had been quickly dismissed.

"No sense to it, missus. With the younguns goin on to their lives, we don't need a vast space to worry over with everyday heatin or keepin up with. We got enough room with you and the girls havin the one set of chambers to sleep in and me and Nandurath havin the other." While Auntie had heard only what was said and went away with a sour frown, Till heard what was not and had sat and laid her head against Grandfa's knee after this pronouncement. What she'd heard was his disappointment that most of the clan had married away, choosing to take the arms of their spouses rather than bringing their spouses into Clan Durane.

Till smiled sadly at the tapestry, wishing for a moment that she had been the one to bring a spouse home to the family before casting her eyes forward, always forward to the great rugs that covered the stone floors of the great room.

As the cousins of the family began hunting, they had taken it up as a competition to see who could bring home the largest, lushest fur rugs that Grandfa not catch a chill by the fire. With nine of them vying for the honor and attempting to better their original offerings, not an inch of the stone floor was visible under a wild patchwork of wolf, deer, and bear hides. One particularly adventuresome cousin had gone along with one of the trading parties and brought back a rare snow white shadow bear hide that had the place of honor across the wide entryway, that all might be dazzled by the richness and beauty of it. Meridun was so proud of the fur that he still refused to sully it with his boots when he visited, but always leaned over to give it a proprietary pat and complimented Auntie on keeping care of his gift. And vehemently denied every hint or accusation that he had traded for the rug rather than hunting the beast himself.

Till would glance at Meridun's wife during the comment, to see her face pucker into aggrieved lines, and wonder how long the rug would remain as one of Clan Durane's treasures. Or how long til Meridun was forced to make another journey north to procure such a fine rug for his wife and her clan.

Aside from these gifts, and even after all the years Till had been acknowledged as the clan's smith, Grandfa insisted on living modestly, putting away sums of gold against future need. It had been a point of some contention over the years, as the expectation was that every member of the clan within the apartments contributed to their upkeep. Tithes were due the thegn on the work of their hands, as well as those for the vast apartments and forge space they enjoyed. The forge had become self-sustaining in the second year of Till's apprenticeship, with all the back taxes caught up. That was the year Till had been able to splurge on any material and ether needed, and Stedi had been able to manifest much more solidly, the better to teach the arcane nuances of her art.

Most of her cousins, as they became aware of the money coming in and hearing Auntie's complaints, felt they should be living more in a style keeping with the more prosperous dwarven names. It was old fashioned to have all the family in a single great room with its two hearths and sleep dormitory style besides, they complained. As they were expected to give half of their earnings to the clan, most felt that should give them a voice in how the funds were spent.

Grandfa did not agree. The meals upon their table remained the usual simple, hearty fare. Their clothes sewn by Auntie were of wool and leather rather than silk and velvet. And the elegant, closed sets of apartments with room enough for all to have their own space remained closed and dark. "If you choose to live under another clan's roof, then you may decide for yourselves; Durane folk have long learned the lesson that simple is best, for all things of the world have a cost," he'd say, and his gaze would linger on Till for a moment too long before turning back to his adversary of the moment.

It wasn't hard to guess that he meant the pact they'd have to keep with the Lady of the South. And so the great room remained as it had always been- a great wooden table for the meals that were eaten from pewter rather than silver. Mismatched chairs carved with the names of those that had favored them, and mayhap a bit of carving, or paint, or gilded inlay, or a cushioned seat. Eleven chairs that stayed empty for most of the days of the year, save needed favors or absentminded affection bring their owners home again.

"A brace of roast chicken will be fine for midsummer supper, there's no need to roast a whole boar when you know there'll just be the five of us sittin to the table!" Grandfa thumped the arm of his armchair by the warming fire irritably with a fist. Till stepped briskly into the room, laying her capacious leather odd and ends bag on the table even though it made Auntie frown.

"Dinner's soon," she said, pointedly glaring at the bag and giving it a poke for good measure.

"Yes ma'am, I've something for the meal and something else besides," Till said in the soft, contrite tone Auntie preferred from all the girl cousins. "What's the fuss, Grandfa?" she asked, turning and stealing his padded footstool to sit on that he might see her clearly in the light.

His ruddy face darkened and Till understood that Grandfa was aware of all her ability to get around him, and he hadn't meant to be gotten around at all. Having learned the art of imposing faces from a master, Till put on Auntie's frown now, cocking her head and raising a brow that it might be more impactful.

"Fine," the old man said, throwing his hands up with a sigh. "Yer auntie has some notion of askin the whole clan in for the hollerday, that we might get folks rememberin to come callin more often with this outlay of unnecessary spendin."

"Well," she said, darting a quick glance to Auntie's thunderous visage as she stirred something savory at the cooking hearth, "You know as well as I do that with all doors to stand open, it's quite *possible* some of the clan may come to pay respects." She held up a hand and began ticking off visitors. "Mistress Aggy visits everyone, Hildy, too, and Bar comes sometimes. Meridun will come, if only so his wife can make sure the rug it still there."

The old man's brows drew together as he scowled at the fire. "Hmph." He gave a slight twitch, as though he wanted to cross his arms but wouldn't betray that he was now very much on the defensive with attacks coming from both sides. But, being the wily warrior he was, Grandfa found a new angle of attack.

"A boar, though, woman!" he bellowed, turning back to Auntie. "Tis not like you'd think I'm goin to be huntin that myself, hey?"

Now they had crossed into dangerous territory, and Till held her breath to keep from giggling as she watched Auntie marshall her own argument.

If Grandfa was skilled in the art of tactics, Auntie's weapons had always been in the form of words.

"I can't say as I know if'n you wished to go a'huntin for boar," Auntie said loftily. "Seein's as you've done naught but shout about it, it's not as though we've had a chance to offer opinions, Till n me." She sniffed with a bob of her head.

"Surely you weren't takin it into your head to *buy* sech a thing!" Grandfa shouted.

Auntie turned to Till, a bemused frown on her face. "Been noticin, have ya, that Grandfa's hearin ain't what it used to be? I surely didn't say any sech thing, not in the last quarter hour this bellerin has been goin on and on. Truly, tis all to the good that we're so lucky as to have ourselfs one of the first places with its thick walls. I do hear tell down to the lower levels, you can hear all that passes in another's home."

Grandfa laid his forehead against his fist and sighed. "Bloody woman, what scheme are ye about? I'm just a man what's had a long day at the market stall, trampin back down the halls to my supper only to be told and not ast about this notion of a peg on the bloody table! Speak ye plain or let an old man be!"

With great dignity, Auntie laid her large wooden spoon (her second weapon of choice) upon the countertop and wiped her hands on her apron. "What your Grandfa didn't hear me say was that *I* have obtained a boar for the hollerday, not that I *thought* you should hunt one or pay the thegn's lads to do so. And I shall not have it sold so that he may stack more coins in his hoard!" She was standing before his chair now, her fists firmly planted on her ample hips. "Tis my home, too, old man, these four hunnurd years, and with Aida about to come of age and Nand of courtin age, I shall host the hollerday as I please and be damned to what you think is suitin!"

Just then, Aida burst through the heavy door, her frets over being absent from the dinner finishing in the oven echoing down the hallway. Auntie turned back to the cooking hearth with a 'so there' sort of nod that, at least in her mind, declared her the unequivocal victor in the battle of the boar.

Grandfa sputtered into his beard in his outrage. "Who do ye... what in the, not the point a'tall," he growled. Till was touched to know that, even now when she was considered an adult by all, the old man refused to curse as though she was still a child. She nearly laughed out loud before catching herself and ruining any dignity he might recover from the contretemps.

Instead, she drew closer and laid her hand on his arm, speaking very softly. "Grandfa, let Auntie have her way this once. It'll be such a lovely memory, cause you know if Auntie puts about that there'll be a boar,

everyone will come. It would be nice for us all to be together before, well, you know." She gave him the soft smile that hadn't changed since she was a very young girl, able to see the whole world from atop his shoulders. Grandfa has always been able to fix everything that was wrong for her, and she kept her smile affixed to her face even as her eyes filled with the sudden tears she could not cry.

"Ach, little one, I shoulda known you'd be feelin the change of the times," he said, looking over her shoulder for Auntie or Adia before dabbing at her face with the gentlest of touches. "And of 'em all, you're the only one that can get around me like my Maddie." He grasped her shoulders with a small shake and reached for his stick to rise and head to the dinner table.

Grasping the hand Till offered, Grandfa levered himself out of his armchair. "So I'll just hesh my grumbles and we'll let it all be, then. For now, let's see what Aida has for us today."

"A roasted chicken, stuffed with grain and eggs, potatoes, gravy all on fresh baked loves, thank you very much!" the youngest cousin said pertly as she placed the grand serving platter that was very nearly too heavy for her to lift so fully laden upon the table with a flourish.

As though summoned by the announcement, the outer door banged open again to admit Nandurath. "Oh, that is a lovely aroma that is not at all like stew... little sister must be at the stove again!" Rushing down the hallway, dark haired Nandurath swept Adia off her stool and gave her a hug. "It's a great comfort to the miners of the world to come home to such a fine meal, and someday you'll make a lucky man a fine wife!"

Adia hugged him back before administering a smack of her wooden spoon. "No, thank you! I'm just grand where I am, thankyouverymuch! You should be out finding a smith wife to help poor Till at the forge and not fussin over me catchin a husband, and me so young yet!" She threw Till a wink as she chivvied her older brother to the sink to wash the fine stone dust from his hands, face, and beard before sitting down to the table. Barely three feet tall and still three years shy of her second decade, it would be a long time before Adia was considered a marriageable age, even if she had been so inclined.

To stop the bickering before it could start, Till reached for her bag. "But a fine meal it is anyway, and I stopped by the marketplace and traded for a flagon of wine to go along with it!" She extracted the bottle and put it beside the platter before turning back to give Grandfa a knowing look, one hand still in her bag.

"Oh," said Grandfa, with a marked lack of enthusiasm. "How lovely of you, goin to the trouble and all. You shouldn't have."

Till looked to her cousins with a grin and a wink before looking again to Grandfa with a polite smile. "It's not the best on offer, but it's supposed to be an especially fruity pressing of three years back."

"Hmph," said Grandfa, settling into his place with a wince, observing wine and roasted fowl with a jaundiced air. "Gonna move that bag off'n the table now, girl? You're takin up space for the passin." "Oh yes," Till answered, whipping it away to hang from the back of her chair while extracting a parcel outside of the old man's line of sight. "I'll just pass this to Nandurath, shall I?" And she held a large bottle of Mistress Aggy's finest nut brown ale out as though she was offering it to Nandurath.

Catching the spirit of the game, Nandurath nimbly came around the table and fell to his knees before Till. "Oh, dearest cousin! That you have gone to such efforts for such unworthy creatures like myself... I don't know what to say!" He cradled the bottle in his hands, alternating between clasping it to his chest and holding it to the light that he might admire the color in its tinted bottle. He may have gone on for quite some time in the same vein but that Grandfa cracked him in the shoulder with his walking stick.

"Bring you that here now, boy! Doesn't do to be wasting Mistress Aggy's ale on the likes of you, but if you mend your manners, I may spare you a cup. Here now, Till, what's the occasion that you'd go all out of your way to wheedle Mistress Aggy for us?"

Till placed the bottle on the table, squarely in front of Grandfa and kissed him on the top of his head before fetching his favorite earthenware mug from the shelf. She peered into it cautiously and sneezed as a bit of dust tickled her nose. "Phew! I could say just because it's been so long since we've had it about. Let me just wash this out," she said, ducking out to the scullery and giving herself time to think. As far as she knew, only she and Grandfa had any idea her time at home was limited.

Setting the hastily washed and dried mug down before him, Till gave a shrug that was much more Hildy than herself. "Guess I got the spring in my blood."

Grandfa took a long pull from his mug and sighed contentedly. "Pity spring only comes the once a year, all the more reason to enjoy it, I reckon. Thank you, lass," he said, giving her cheek a peck. "Extra lengths for you as well as money from your pocket. Appreciate it."

She caught his hand and held it to her face before releasing it and cleared her throat while seizing his plate to fill with portions of all that sat on the table. She caught Adia giving her an oddly speculative look and took care to introduce only mundane topics for their dinnertime chat. Auntie wanted to know about the weather, as all this spring fever had her of half a mind to go collect fresh grasses for a layer in their mattresses.

"Mmph. Terrible notion, missus. Give us all colds like Nandurath," Grandfa shook his head.

Auntie raised her pug nose into the air and snorted. "Then mayhap I shan't get you any, no reason for the rest of us to not enjoy a breath of outdoors when we lay down to our rest."

The youngsters at the table exchanged looks- for Auntie to answer back to one of Grandfa's pronouncements in front of all the children, even mildly, was a new development. The old man's face was frozen for a moment, before he shrugged and took another long swallow of ale.

Nandurath chose this moment to clear his throat. "Happens I may have caught a bit of that spring fever, too, Auntie, Grandfa."

"Gracious Goddess Gayania, what have you done?" Auntie demanded, raising her spoon, ready to bludgeon. Nandurath's gaze skipped to Grandfa to intercede, but he only leaned forward and refilled Nandurath's ale cup.

"Won't stop her from hittin ya if ya earnt it, but maybe it doesn't need to hurt as bad," Grandfa said.

"If'n he doesn't get to splainin right smart, it'll hurt plenty bad," Auntie said, rapping the pewter spoon across Nandurath's knuckles.

"Hey now!" he yelled, pulling his hand back rubbing it gingerly. "Tryin to tell yall I found a lass to court and you come after me like I ain't workin the mines with my own pick yet."

The table erupted into chaos. Adia erupted from her chair to hug her brother, who had leapt from his chair to avoid further violence from Auntie, while Auntie let out a wail of "Praise the Goddess!" and Grandfa began calling for order by clanging his walking stick against the table and bellowing for quiet. Till alone was too surprised to have any reaction at all, beyond her mouth opening and closing several times.

"No mattern how much hair grows in m'ears, it don't do to stop the noise of yall when you get into a yellin mood, so's it don't. Settle down now and let the grown up ask the important questions." Nandurath sat back in his chair and let Adia stay on his lap.

"Now then. Could you love and be good to her and her to you?" Grandfa asked, pinning his grandson with a stern stare.

Nandurath nodded. "Yes, to both. Bout my age, ready to see if she can give the keep smiths. Doesn't have the magic herself, mind," he said, with a shrug for that consideration, "but runs strong in the family, like."

"Mmph. You and Till come to the study after dinner," he said, staring pointedly at Auntie and Adia, "and we'll have talk about it a'fore things go too far along, hey?"

Nandurath started to open his mouth and Till kicked him under the table in clear warning. "Yes, Grandfa," he said, his voice slightly strained as his eyes watered. A glance down the table showed Auntie's round countenance stiff with insult, and Till theatrically smacked her forehead.

"I almost forgot!" she cried, putting down her fork to rummage in the bag on the back of her chair. "Not fair to only get presents for the lads, as it were."

Adia's dark eyes, framed by long, long lashes in the way that made her look even younger than she was, lit up. "I thought the wine was for us, though?"

Finding what she sought, Till stood and made her way to touch the tip of Adia's nose. "Mayhap that was for me and Auntie, miss, for when did you ever start enjoying the taste of wine?" She longed to give her a hug and kiss her forehead, but knew it would make Auntie's eyes narrow with suspicion.

Well, more than they already were.

Restraining the urge firmly, she handed both Adia and Auntie small cloth bundles tied with twine. "All the live long day I make serious things, but today, I guess I wanted to make something just for the two of you to have pretties. I hope you like them."

Auntie stared at Till, the round lines of her face broken by her mouth hanging agape. Without the habitually furrowed brow and sour tilt to her jaw, she was much more approachable, and almost pretty. For just a moment, Till saw what her long gone uncle must have seen when he chose to bring his bride into the clan. Her deep set eyes went from Till to the tidy little package, and she laid her hand over it in such that Till was afraid Auntie might push it away.

She laid her hand over Auntie's with a small pat and an encouraging nod before leaning closer to whisper. "Please, Auntie, it can only be yours." Years of scoldings, proddings, and tempers Till forgave in that instant. For the first time she understood how difficult it must be for Auntie to have worked so hard in the clan that she made her home in. Instead of becoming the respected matriarch after the children had been raised, she was even now regarded as just a newlywed widow when she'd done her best to make the best of things for all of them.

Past caring about what it would look like, Till pressed her lips to Auntie's temple with its errant threads of silver. "Go on then," she said, and sat down in one of the many empty chairs next to the stunned woman.

Every so slowly, Auntie untied the twine to reveal a familiar hairclip. Instead of being a quizzical little bear of woven wire, this was a stern mama bear, a protective paw raised over the head of a curious cub that clung to her while another peeked around her flank. Outlined in subtle spring green with coppery tones for the bears themselves, the lines of the mama bear were as fierce as Auntie's most bellicose glare.

"Oh, child," Auntie said, a bit breathlessly in a soft tone that they very seldom heard. "A work of art that catches so at my heart and you act as though it is but a trifle." Her head came up, fingers still tracing the fine wire work, and when her eyes met Till's, they were filled with tears. Auntie's mouth opened and

closed several times before she lay the piece aside and rose, fitting Till into the hollow of her shoulder and clasping her tightly to her breast. "You've the best of hearts, good daughter, and I will wear your bear proudly." She gave a mighty sniff before releasing Till, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand. "Now then, set it by your own hand that it might bring luck, hey?"

Stunned, Till took a moment to take the bear from the table and affix it to draw in Auntie's braids firmly. "There now, that should hold fine."

Auntie made a sound between a giggle and a snort. "Your work does, as I recall," she said in a dry tone before turning her attention to Adia.

Having been far too young to remember the incident of the original bear, Adia was staring at the unusual display in puzzlement, apparently entirely forgetting her own package.

"Oh!" she said, stripping the twine all of a rush to reveal a third bear, this one contentedly sprawled on its back, holding a piece of honeycomb made of citrines. "Oh Till, he's such a happy bear," Adia said, a big delighted smile spilling joy onto all that saw it.

"So he is, little bit. I was thinking of how you like to lay back on the rugs with a book once all the chores of the day are done, and there he was, wanting to come out of the metal." Till showed Adia how to work the clasp before drawing her loose braids up to bind them on top of her head becomingly, with the bear shining brightly against the black strands. Adia flung her arms around Till and squeezed the breath from her as she kissed the top of the girl's head.

As she sat herself back into her own chair, she caught Grandfa surreptitiously rubbing at a corner of his eye. He gave her a wink and a nod before asking if an old man had to roar down the hall to get another serving of that fine bird, hey?

Till settled back into her plate, the meal tasting all the better for the simple magic of being shared with folk that had been reminded of what they meant to one another.

The warm, mellow mood made everyone linger at the table, having another nibble of this, another bit of gossip to share. Finally Auntie shooed them all away that she might clear, as she said it didn't do to have the cook handle the dishes too. Adia, who had in fact handled the clean up on many days that she also prepared the meal, didn't question her good fortune, but bolted for her favorite spot by the fire. Even as Grandfa was waving the two elder cousins into his study, Adia had selected a much worn book of fairy tales with a dreamy expression.

"Hmmp," Grandfa muttered, with a twinkle in his eye. "Guess we'll have some privacy beyond doors." He waved them into the much more formal space impatiently.

Here the stone itself seemed to be darker in shade and the ceiling lower, as though the room itself wanted to hunker down and wrap all that was said in the room in a cloak of secrecy. Even the hearth was small, and Nandurath went to it without asking to start the fire that was always laid and ready there. Till picked up the battered pewter teapot with the intent of filling it in the scullery, but Grandfa waved her off. "Dinna be doin that, your auntie will remember that she wants to listen in and find a way past the door, sure as sun rises." He reached into a drawer of the ornately carved black oak desk and extracted a cut crystal decanter along with matching glasses. He tipped them both a wink as he poured out meager shares of the potent amber liquid. "Figure'n if you're old enough to talk about mating, then you might as well have a touch of my Maddie's finest."

"Granddam made spirits?" Nandurath asked, incredulous. While every clan boasted a wine or beer enthusiast, the more delicate drinkables required a greater commitment of time and effort- one which only the more prosperous clans could afford.

"Ah, lad, my Maddie was many, many things. Her time in the south taught her a number of trades beyond smithing, though of course she did that too. Didja know that your granny was also a distiller of perfumes, a painter of portraits, and a fine seamstress as well?"

Nandurath sat in the leather armchair across the desk, holding his glass up to the light. "Was there anything Granddam couldn't do?" he said in a wondering voice. Taking a cautious sip from her glass, Till let the liquid roll across her tongue, trying to let it drizzle ever so slowly down the back of her throat. It was fiery and warmed her from her forehead to her toes.

"Heh, not much. And demons take you if you dared to suggest she couldn't manage something on her own." Grandfa turned his glass in his hands before raising it in her memory and taking a sip. As he lowered the glass, he fixed Nandurath with a gimlet gaze.

"Now, I understand that you are saying you're enough of a man now to be goin on and pickin a wife. And it may be so, and it may not be so. But the fact that you're doin it right and comin to your clan to talk it through means a fair bit."

Grandfa turned the same gaze onto Till. "It means, lass, that he needs to know what's been and what's to come." After receiving her slow nod of agreement, he turned back to Nandurath.

"A number of your cousins have come in and sat in that chair like you are now, and I gave my advice, but no blessing. Ever wonder why that was, lad?"

Nandurath shrugged. "I figured they had offers within other clans they wanted to take, with whole sets of apartments for themselves and grand allowances." He glanced to Till, who was being very careful to give no expression at all. This was one conversation that Grandfa had never had with her at all- like Nandurath, she simply saw the cousins wed and remove their belongings to their new clans.

"Sometimes, that's so," Grandfa said, leaning back in the fine leather of his armchair as the fire threw back odd shadows across the dark walls. "Livin as long as I have has its disadvantages, boy. Didja know you tend to meet the same folk over and over? Priests'll tell you the same souls come back, and used to be I'd scoff at that. I'm not sure I do so much, anymore. One of the curses of livin this long is that you lose too many folk, see too many times folk are takin the wrong steps, and even if you do speak out, they may or may not bother their heads about listening. Cause, you know, you're just some old, old man who has forgotten how life is." Grandfa tapped his meaty finger firmly on the desktop in front of Nandurath. "Times have moved on, they'll say, and that's not how it is anymore." He snorted, blowing a wild tangle of grizzled beard about.

"An I reckon it's true enough, the fashions of the time changes, but I tell you both, the people don't. A greedy man is gonna be a greedy man, and a carpin woman is gonna be a carpin woman. But when a youngster like yourself fancies themselves in love, there ain't no pointin any of that out, cause they are always so convinced they know better."

Spreading his hands in front of him with a shrug, Nandurath smiled. "That's why I'm here now, to listen while you properly advise me like an elder should."

"Mmph, you think you know, and you're the type of lad who never wants to put a foot wrong in the dance. Careful, you are, and that's not sayin that isn't a virtue, so I'm not. And what I'm about to tell you I didn't bother with with all your older cousins, cause they didn't need to know all and I didn't much trust 'em with all the secrets. Since they knew so well what they wanted anyhow." Grandfa raised his glass again, in Till's direction, before gulping its contents down.

"Wasn't no caches, Nand. No bits your granny worked that we found. Ever thing we sold off as her 'prentice workings was always Till's."

Nandurath's eyes went huge and round in his florid face as he glanced from grandfather to cousin and back again. "She kept food on the table when she wasn't even tall enough to see over it, and likely saved us all from some lean times and hard decisions. And she did it all without a word of complaint, just as a matter of course."

"I had no idea," Nandurath said slowly as his cheeks burned. "I guess I never thought about it much, and I should have."

"Mmph, no harm in not thinkin about that which didn't concern you at the time, but now it comes to a crux, you might say." The old man leaned back in his chair, holding the dram of warm amber fluid to the light of the fire. "Your granddam was an exceptional woman who saw much and more in life, and brought knowledge of great value to her clan and her people. Shoulda been somethin of an example, how other clans coulda made their fortunes, and all of our kind woulda been the richer for it."

"But the wolfkin came, right?" Till said, her voice barely a whisper.

Grandfa's face fell into tired lines of remembering as he gave a slow nod. "Then the wolfskin came, and folks traded livin and growin for just survivin for a long time. And folk didn't make the journey to the Southern Court anymore, didn't go looking for alliances much outside the Keep, in fact."

Nandurath shifted, opening and closing his mouth a few times as though he wanted to argue the point, but had no examples to hand.

"Funny thing about alliances and pacts and whatnot... powerful folk are verra generous in their way." The old man rose slowly and moved around the desk without the aid of his walking stick to stand behind Till and place his hands upon her shoulders.

"But for all the mighty and powerful give, they always seem to want what's most precious in return." Till felt tears welling up and prickling at her eyes and nose, making her drop her head away from Nandurath's gaze. It was one thing to know there was a claim upon her, another to feel Grandfa's hands upon her shoulders while he spoke her value after years of hiding it. For the best of reasons, of course, but still, hiding.

"What do you mean? Someone's taking Till?"

Grandfa sighed, stumping slowly back around the desk and resuming his seat as he laid out in his mind how he wanted to say the hard things. "In a manner of speakin, yes. Nothin we didn't agree to, each of us in our turn. Your granddam's granddam wanted assurances that the clan would prosper after her time had come and gone. This was back when the gods walked among us as a matter of course, and we all thought they always would. Gayania and Incindus have stayed close to us by nature of who we are and what we do. Great-great was a canny kind of dwarf, though, and she went unto Titania herself, Mistress of Magic, that her line be blessed by her. And the Faerie Queen parted the veils of time and agreed, with the stipulation that in order to renew her patronage, every so often she would call for a girl child to go onto her as a fosterling, that she might learn her ways and offer service."

Now Till found herself leaning in along with Nandurath. A new part of the story was unfolding, only it wasn't just a tale to be put away and thought of someday in the far future.

"And Till's been called?" Nandurath asked, looking to each of them in turn.

"From the time I was very young," Till said. "When I first started working the metal."

"But that's... that's wonderful!" Nandurath said. "To think that you have the chance to go and honor the clan like that! To bring back magic and learning!"

"But Nandurath," Till said after exchanging a glance with Grandfa, "who's going to smith for Clan Durane?"

He sat his glass down, the crystal making a dull, final thwack against the wood of the desk. "Is that the only reason you're telling me all this family history? Because it means I have to bring a smith to the family?" Nandurath caught them as the old warrior and young woman started to glance at one another again. "Enough!" he said, pounding a fist next to his glass and making it jump. "The pair of you have been keeping this secret so long, given everyone else the chance to make their own decisions and now I'm the one to pay for it, hey?"

Grandfa stood, pointing one finger into Nandurath's face. "What in 'ell decision do you think Till got to make here? When you can tell me how different what you think you're payin for is more than what Till is payin for, I may find it in myself to give a damn, boy." His face was reddened above his grizzled beard as he took a deep breath and stood straight and proud, looking down his short nose at his grandson. "Dinnit tell us you had someone in mind, dinnit hear no gossip that might have helped me know when to ask you your intentions. And if four centuries of livin have taught me anythin, telling a youngun they won't just makes sure they absolutely will and, what's more, that they'll stop an' spit in your eye for darin to think otherwise."

Several expressions crossed Nandurath's face as the finger wagged at him, from angry to abashed to rueful. Till liked him better for sitting in silence for a moment before shrugging with a smile that tried and failed to find his face. "Well, can't call anything there a lie, so much. But you did say 'what I think I'm paying for'... what does that mean?"

The old man lowered his hand with its pointing finger to clasp behind his back as he slowly stumped to stand by the fire, leaning heavily against the lintel carved of expensive purple heart wood. He stayed there, staring into the flames in silence for a long moment. When Grandfa finally spoke he did not turn and his voice was soft, older, echoing hollowly into the cracking fire. "Someday, children, and I know you can't imagine it now, but someday you're gonna be standing in a place like this, head filled with voices on what you coulda done, when you shoulda spoke out, things you woulda done if you'd only known what wasn't told to you. And you'll understand when I say it's a damn cold comfort to only be able to make the excuse: I did the best I could."

Till looked at Nandurath, slumped back in his chair, a hand rubbing at his similarly reddened face. He stared at his feet, and while he opened his mouth several times, he ended up closing it again just as quickly without any sound emerging.

"You did do the best you could, Grandfa," Till said slowly while glaring at Nandurath, who folded his arms and continued to look down. When Nandurath remained silent and Grandfa still stared at the crackling flames, she rose and went to lay a hand upon his shoulder and gave it a gentle shake. "You did, Grandfa."

He snorted and lay his hand atop hers with a gentle pat. "Maybe so and maybe no, you've a good heart, Tilly, to forgive an old man his follies. Coulda sent you south years n years ago, and mayhap I should have. Coulda stepped in as the patriarchal type and arranged matches for the children to try to ensure

we had a smith, but after what me and Maddie got to share, din't seem right." He cleared his throat, embarrassed at a sentimentality that his people would have deemed foolish.

Turning back to face Nandurath, still in his chair with head bowed, Grandfa said, "And it's still your choice, too, young man. See, that's the benefit of letting young folk have their freedom to run as they will workin for you. Thanks to Till havin gone hammer and tongs over the past year or two, there's enough work put by to do us for a long while, so long as we are careful with our coin. Not so many of us left now, bringin the head tax down. And if need be, we can let the forge."

"Let the..." Till began.

"How careful?" Nandurath blurted out over her.

The line of Grandfa's mouth was sour now. "Oh, you've words now, hey?" He snorted, sending his mustache aflutter with annoyance. "We got enough to keep the property and head taxes paid for another ten years on its own if we don't have to use it for other matters. A bit longer if you're able to pick up a spear and stand a watch for the keep on rotation. That leaves the day to day expenses, which would be less if we could marry off your Auntie."

Nandurath rubbed at his ear. "She does manage to find all manner of things necessary that ain't, strictly speaking."

"That she does," the old man muttered, clearly thinking of his earlier defeat. "And to be fair, she expected a verra different life, marryin into a prosperous, if somewhat odd, clan that had all the things she had growin up. Losin all her own folk and all the younguns to take care of for their sake as well as honor's sake... it wasn't no easy path. Maybe I'm more forgivin about it, as I think she also looks at every day and says I done the best I could, and doesn't have even the memories I do to show for it. She's movin into the time of life when she ought to be a matriarch, with all these rooms filled and bustlin and many hands to make her load light instead of an empty hall and fewer to do for. But for want of a more comfortable livin we couldn't afford without a smith, all the younguns she's raised up and left, only callin in on the hollerdays or if'n they think the old man will finally kick off and leave 'em the hoard."

Till swallowed around a growing lump in her throat. Hearing Auntie's life told out like this made her feel small and shabby. To keep from crying, she picked up her forgotten glass and took another drink.

"And unless I miss my guess, that little sister of yours will end up a priestess here before we know it so I wouldn't expect a spouse from her, let alone a smith."

"To Gayania?" Nandurath asked, his tone shocked.

"Na, na, I feel she's not to be outdone by our Till, and will find her way to the port city to the south to don the blue robes."

"Did she say that to you?" Till asked.

"Mmph, not yet. Part of folk thinkin you're a disagreeable mean old bugger is they pussyfoot around you like you ain't got eyes in your head and the lump twixt your ears is naught by dustbunnies long enough that you get the lay of the land before they raise the nerve to come out and speak their piece. And maybe some fine dwarvish lad will catch our little Adia's eye and she'll stay right here, cookin us fine stuffed birds."

Shaking his head, Nandurath rose. "I got a lot to think on, Grandfa. I understand that I don't have to do anything, but damned if I want Sigred to regret choosing to be one of us." He made his way to the door, pausing with his hand on the latch before turning back. "Unless you want to part with any other deep dark secrets of Clan Durane tonight?"

"Tcha!" Grandfa said, waving a dismissive hand at him. "You're already too young to know what to do with what I done told you... anything else'll keep til I'm on my damn deathbed, 'cept one thing."

"What's that?" Nandurath asked warily.

"Whatever you do or don't do, know this. What I want most of you is the same's as I wanted for all my children. To make your choices, them's as you got, and pick a path that's not about what you think I want or the clan needs- but what's got the best chance to make you happy."

Nandurath nodded shortly, pausing at the door as though there was something more he wanted to say before shaking his head and letting himself out of the room.

Till rose later than was her habit the next morning, feeling somewhat fuzzy headed. Whether it was from the stronger drink that she wasn't used to or long overdue truth telling, she wanted to stay under the soft quilt until the feeling passed. She heard Auntie huffing a bit and surreptitiously pulled the covers over her head as Auntie chivvied Adia out of bed and onto the day. Till released a sigh of relief that she was no longer considered a child to require the pokes, prods, and pinches she remembered Auntie delivering with great verve.

From the pointed way Auntie closed the door extra firmly, Till knew she was lounging on borrowed time. Yes, she was considered of age since the last winter solstice, but Auntie was undoubtedly dying to know what had sent Nandurath to bed in such a quiet mood and would surely find other ways to *accidentally* rouse Till for answers.

Out of all the cousins, he and Adia were the ones she was closest to, both in age as well as general outlook. The older cousins, being able to recall their own parents and the times before, had carried a

measure of bitterness over what they saw as stinginess. Grandfa had had the right of it, Till thought, though he had rarely given vent to such feelings in her presence, it made her sad.

She rolled over onto her back, tucking her hands behind her head as she stared at the smooth sculpted stone of the ceiling above her bed. Long ago, when she'd first been given a bed all her own, Till had found it hard to sleep by herself, and she remembered the nights when she'd lain awake staring at the dark stone with its subtle whorls, wondering what it would feel like under her hand. She wondered if it would be as polished smooth as her workbench. Was it Grandfa's Maddie that had carved out this room, or some other long ago Durane?

Sighing, Till sat up, hugging her knees and shivering. Auntie had let the fire go out, ostensibly so as to observe the double virtue of not disturbing her and economizing on wood.

Money was the one thing Till refused to worry about any more. She knew she had done all she reasonably could to help support the clan, to the point that Grandfa had threatened to lock the forge against her. After the solstice had been the worst, when she began to feel the Queen's emissary could turn up at any time. Certainly, no one expected to see any such soul before the mountain passes were clear of snow, but with magic folk, who knew if they bothered themselves with the pedestrian problems of travel?

Now, Till worried more about how quiet the great room would be at night, especially if Nandurath ended up marrying and leaving for his wife's clan. While it would make the hoard go further with fewer to support, Till found it too easy to imagine the long table only being set for Grandfa, Auntie and Adia as all those empty chairs stood, silently accusing.

Till hoped Nandurath would find some peace with himself, and with her before she left. His quick boyish grin and readiness to laugh and make light of troubles had cheered them all so many times that it seemed unfair that there was no comfort Till could share in return. Last night it had seemed he wanted to be angry with her, but was too honest in knowing there were really only their circumstances to be blamed.

And she was lingering in bed still, unwilling to put her bare feet on the chill stone of the floor when the unmistakable pounding of Grandfa's walking stick connected with the stout oaken door.

"Be up with you, lass, there's none but me to plague you, and I'm off myself."

She laughed in spite of her dark thoughts before calling back, "I'm up, I'm up, and yes, I'm heading to the forge." Till heard Grandfa's approving grunt before his stick tapped away from the door. A part of her wondered if he'd had to put on his grumpiest mien to keep Auntie from questioning him, and decided it was likely that he had.

"However much time may be left, it ought not to be wasted," Till murmured to herself, starting her day with a good heart.

## Author's note

So that's it, a preview of the new book that I've been working on... well, for awhile now. Thanks for taking the time to give it a look! If you enjoyed it, I hope you'll be kind enough to drop a line at [thetaleofthesmith@gmail.com](mailto:thetaleofthesmith@gmail.com) and let me know.

Til we meet again- happy reading!