

"Brotherly Bonds"
A Short Fable from The Chronicles of Xanadu
Author: D. Sanders
I - Escaping Reality

Rhys whistled a jaunty tune as he walked the road from the village square to his home over the local tavern. He was walking down memory lane as he smiled at the tavern barmaid and headed upstairs to his rooms on the top floor. He'd been gone from his childhood home for far too many years and was lost in memories of his Mother's fresh baked gingersnap cookies, his father's homemade stout and his brother's heavenly voice that rivaled morning songbirds as they sat around the fire after the evening meal before bed every night like routine. Their little rural community quiet at night unlike the noisy patrons downstairs he'd long since learned to tune out.

He'd been away from those memories five times longer than he'd ever spent in the home of his birth, but it was still his home and the fondest memories in his heart. He remembered burning his fingers while eating Mama's cookies right out of the oven as a boy and his elder brother making sure he didn't get caught as he indulged the youth and contributed to his delinquent behavior and taking the blame when mother inevitably scolded them.

Curbain had been ten years older than Rhys, and Rhys had been all of nine years old, sitting frantic over a very ill and dying Curbain. His eyes had been hollow and manic with pain, when the Mother Willow had appeared at the door of their small cottage with an elderly Fae man dressed in wizard robes. They had said he was a mage and that they both had come to take Curbain away to teach him so he would not die, he was sick because the powers in him were uncontrolled and hurting him.

Rhys hadn't seen him since, because not a decade later it was his turn to suffer. However, not as severely as his brother. Willow had come again and this time with a female Drow dressed in healer's green that clashed horribly with her dark purple skin and white hair. Tensha had been the healer's name and she had taken Rhys with her far away to the west to the shores of the great western sea and had become his teacher, his mentor and his friend. He'd spent the last hundred and thirty odd years living on the sandy shores in a large fishing community. Practicing his trade, learning, getting into mischief, into prettier people's beds, male or female, it didn't matter if they were willing to play and longing to return home and see his family again.

He'd get letters from Curbain delivered to him in various ways over the years. A small barn owl would land on the windowsill with rolled parchments and trinket gifts. Some would just appear on his table overnight to be found in the morning when he awoke, and still others delivered by more mundane means.

Every turning of the moon, without fail, Rhys would wake up the morning after a full moon to find a box sitting on his dining table, tied with string with a simple note that was always the same. "Don't eat them all in one sitting. Love Always, Bain."

The contents of the box was also always the same, Rhys' favorite gingersnap cookies and Rhys would always disobey the note and devour them all in one sitting dunking them in his morning tea while singing his brother's praises.

Had they known before how powerful Rhys was in mind speech, they could have easily kept in contact with each other over the years, but Tensha was not so gifted and had failed to teach Rhys or even make him aware he even possessed such gifts.

He'd found out quite by accident later that eventful night when he had awakened with an overwhelming sense of sadness. His chest felt heavy and his eyes were stinging as if he'd been sobbing for hours. It was just a feeling, but such a powerful one Rhys stretched out his senses to try and find the source that was making his empathy senses burn with the need to heal this suffering soul.

What he touched was something that sent his protective healer's senses into fierce activity and he reached out with his spirit, willing to give peace to such suffering.

::Who's there?: A voice shouted in Rhys' mind. The voice seemed terrified of the probing touch Rhys had sent out trying to locate the person suffering.

Rhys was almost knocked senseless by the power that crawled in his mind and he hoped if he thought words back to the voice in his head he might be heard. He knew of mind speech, he just never knew he'd had the talent within himself.

::Fear not. I am a healer and I felt your pain. Might I help? My name is Rhys and I mean you no harm.::

::Rhys? Rhys?!:: The voice suddenly seemed elated and joyful in a moment's breath.

::Aye. I feel you are much relieved. Do we know each other?: Rhys asked not recognizing the voice in his mind and he felt laughter well from his empathic connection to his mental midnight visitor.

::Aye, my brother. It's me, Bain.:: The mind voice was gentle and warm and so very happy where a moment earlier it had been so immensely sad.

::Curbain! How? Are you near?:

::Nay, I am home dearest Rhys. I was just missing you, it seemed you heard my wish to see you here. I cannot tell you how joyful it makes me to know you share mind gifts with me. Might I talk to you once in a while?::

::'Bain, you never need ask of me to talk dearest brother. I miss you too, and you were not missing me my brother, I felt your pain, it woke me from sleep. What is wrong my brother?::

::Healer's, always bloody nose. I am just weary Rhys, do not fret over me needlessly dearest. Your presence was enough to drive my mood into much cheer again.:: Curbain sent and Rhys smiled, he could almost feel Curbain in the room with him.

Rhys smiled and lay back in bed, his arms behind his head and shutting his eyes.
::I am glad to hear it dearest. What are you doing up so late? If you are home it is much later in the east than it is here and it is gone midnight.::

::What night is it dearest? Have I ever forgotten to send you a morning treat? I am baking you cookies for your breakfast. I was lost in thinking about you is all.::

::Dearest you spoil me. I thought Mama baked those, you've been doing it?::

::Aye. I try to stay out of Mama and Papa's way. I only use the kitchen when they are both sleeping. I trouble them so I try to ease them by not being a burden.::
Curbain said and the sadness was back for a moment before Rhys felt Curbain squash the emotion and bury it, trying to hide it from his brother. Rhys sat up and frowned.

::I felt that damn it. Dearest, what is wrong? Tell me, please.::

::It is nothing Rhys. Honestly. Many see me now differently than they used to is all. My powers worry them so I try and make it easier for them to bear. I will be alright. I just get lonely sometimes.::

::Dragon Dung. That was not loneliness Bain. That was sorrow. You hurt! What have they done?::

::Nothing. It's me. I'm a mage and normal folk are afraid of mages.::

::Not in my experience! Mages here work right along side everyone else. There's naught to fear from a Mage. It is Blood Mages you need fear and I know fecking well you would never follow a blood path.::

::Maker, bite your tongue Rhys! Aye, no, I would nary so much as speak a blood rite let alone spill it for power. However, Rhys dearest, this is not the glorious

west. We are isolated out here, I am the only mage for a thousand leagues around until you reach the cities further east. Mages make useless farmers unless there is drought or plagues of the rodent or insect variety. I make Papa nervous if I try to help plant, I make Mama nervous if I try to help with the livestock so I just stay apart and wait until someone needs me for something. Which isn't often. I'd be much more useful with your wondrous gifts. A true healer is a gift from the Mother. I have much pride knowing you are so blessed. Papa and Mama always boast of you to others. They too are so proud of you.:: Curbain said and Rhys could find no joy in Curbain's words.

::And no Pride in their firstborn I see. Masek un Feck! Your gifts are no less wondrous Bain! Don't belittle yourself!::

::I've made you angry. I am sorry dearest. Accept a peace offering?:: Curbain asked and Rhys' eyes went wide as light shimmered in the room and Curbain was standing there, dressed in nothing more than his long night shirt and a thick robe. His hair had grown from what Rhys remembered. It hung almost to his knees and was braided haphazardly and hung over his shoulder in sandy golden waves. His eyes were as blue as the morning sky as they looked to Rhys' fondly as he held a plate of steaming cookies.

"Fresh from the oven, I know how you liked them this hot once." Curbain said, his soft tenor music to Rhys' ears.

Rhys was out of his own bed and just took the plate and set it on the table before he crushed Curbain in a hug. "Bain, a sight for sore eyes you are dearest. You certainly look well enough." Rhys said standing back at arms length to drink in a vision of his brother whom he hadn't seen in nearly a hundred and forty years in the flesh.

"I feel alright. Suffered a bad cold not long ago, but otherwise I am in good health." Curbain smiled and Rhys almost felt his knees go weak. Curbain was more than beautiful when he smiled and he picked up a hot cookie from the plate and held it up to Rhys' lips.

"For once I'd like to see you eat my treats. I must see if you make the same face you did when you were little." Curbain said and Rhys smiled and closed his eyes and opened his mouth. He shivered internally as Curbain fed him the morsel and he felt Curbain swell with joy from within.

"Same face, even if that face is not quite so young as I remember. Who said you were allowed to grow bigger than your elder brother?" Curbain asked moving to sit on the edge of Rhys' bed. Folding his knees up under his chin, his arms crossed against his legs. A pose that once again struck a chord in Rhys. This was a pose of someone used to turning within themselves for comfort and finding

nothing to sustain them. It was a vulnerable posture and it was clearly the body language of someone hanging onto their emotions by the barest of margins.

Rhys walked over and sat beside Curbain and took his hand and kissed the back of it as he held it. "I know not who makes such rules dearest. You favor our Mama and I do Papa. Even if our faces are much alike." Rhys smiled and Curbain leaned against his shoulder and sighed.

"Had I known earlier you could make such a mental link, I would have come and visited you much sooner. I can feel your powers so near now. You are more than a mere healer my brother. There is much power in you, you could transport too eventually with practice. You are a healer mage my brother, not just a mere healer."

"I suspected as much. Would you teach me to use those gifts?" Rhys asked and Curbain sighed.

"Aye, I could. However, I am still learning things myself, and I have no healing gifts as strong as yours. I think you should seek a better mentor than I. I will ask Mother Willow for advice tomorrow." Curbain said still leaning against Rhys and drinking in the comforting presence like wine. Rhys could feel the need for closeness almost overwhelm him and he draped an arm over Curbain's shoulder and held him tight.

"Love, I won't press for you to tell me what troubles you so much. However, please, I am always here for you, I love you very much and it hurts me to see you suffer. Promise me if you grow weary, come to me and I will ever be at least a shoulder to lean against." Rhys said kissing Curbain's temple and he just nodded and wrapped his arms around Rhys' middle in their sideways embrace.

"Aye. I can promise that much dearest. This alone comforts me much. I have missed you very much."

"As I have you. Come visit me again soon? Now that I know you can do this I would very much like to see you often. Perhaps I can cook for you in return? I'm not such a bad hand myself and you have fed me cookies for decades. I would be a poor brother if I didn't return the favor dearest. What food do you crave, I have never known your weakness as you have always known mine."

Curbain chuckled and sat up smiling. "Make me something with Golden Apples and you will find me quite happy indeed." Curbain said kissing Rhys' cheek and standing. "I need to return home dearest. I need to clean the kitchen and vacate before mother gets up. I will call upon you later after I speak with Willow. Sleep well Rhys." Curbain said again, laying a gentle hand to Rhys' face before he shimmered away again into the night.

Rhys groaned and flopped back into his bed. Curbain was perhaps the most beautiful man he'd ever laid eyes on, the most troubled and secretive soul he'd ever touched and suddenly one of his most profound desires. Rhys could not deny the reaction sitting mocking him in his lap.

Curbain was troubled enough without the added burden of knowing his brother was lusting after him suddenly too on top of everything else. Rhys sighed, there was nothing for it but to take care of his desire. Rhys lay in bed and stroked himself, imagining soft blue eyes, sinfully long hair covering him like a blanket of spun gold and that musical light tenor moaning Rhys' name in ecstasy. That image alone brought Rhys to a shuddering release,

"Feck. Bain, what do you do to me suddenly?" Rhys asked cleaning his mess more frustrated after his release than before as he covered his cookies and went back to bed more than troubled himself now over his rather strong feelings for his own brother. "I love you Bain. Maker help me, I do."

Curbain could barely breathe as he quickly cleaned the kitchen and raced back to the room attached to the barn he'd made his own since his presence in the house proper was no longer welcome when others were awake. He'd been ostracized and lived a solitary confinement in a small room off the barn up in the old hayloft. Curbain was breathing heavily as he locked his door behind him and tore at his robe and clutched his night shirt at his heart. His heart pounding so wildly in his chest the blood roared in his ears.

He collapsed in his bed, his hand reaching down beneath his nightshirt to grip his swollen erection. Curbain cried as he masturbated, visions of a broad chest, large concerned green eyes looking at him with affection, a deep baritone of a voice that was like rich vermilion on his senses and filling his mind with sinful images. One hand was on his erection and the other was probing and moving in wicked mimicking of an act of carnal desire.

Oh how he wished those fingers were something else entirely. He felt vile and alive all at the same time as thought of making love with Rhys, feeling Rhys fill him, surround him with the kindness that was in his face and eyes, the love he felt for Rhys in his heart suffocated him as he came and wept and curled up in a fetal ball of misery. Denying his love for his brother as much as he wished to embrace it, he'd never reacted this way to anyone before and all it took was one smile from Rhys to turn his world upside with joy.

"I love you Rhys. Maker help me, I do." Curbain cried into his well worn pillow stuffed with straw. He cried himself to sleep, dreaming of Rhys' strong arms wrapped around him in comfort.

The next afternoon, saw Rhys upon another Journey. Curbain arrived with Mother Willow and the same mage that had come to train Curbain. "Aye Curbain, you are correct. Strong mage potential too on top of the healing gifts. Rhys, I'd like to train your other gifts at your brother's request. Curbain was my brightest and most apt pupil I've ever had. If the younger brother is anything like the elder this world will be seeing changing times indeed. Come and taste the wonders of the Crown City lad?" The elder mage asked and Rhys smiled.

"Aye, and perhaps you can regale me of some of my dearest brother's secrets he likes to keep Master Jervas?" Rhys asked as he packed his belongings and paid his rent by leaving coins on the table in his room.

"Aye. Of course." Master Jervas winked at Curbain who blushed and looked away shyly.

"Always so self conscious." Willow said patting Curbain's hand affectionately.

Rhys turned to Curbain. "You'll promise to visit still aye?"

Curbain looked up again and smiled. "Oh Aye. You could not keep me away now dearest, but mind you Master Jervas is a task master, you'll be too tired for long visits." Curbain winked and walked forward and embraced his brother. "Good luck dearest."

"Take care Bain." Rhys replied as he vanished with Willow and Jervas and Curbain returned home.

"You'll taint him too with your witchery!" His mother hissed as he walked across the yard to the barn.

"Mother, he is a healer with great talent. I am just seeing that all his gifts receive the most training possible. He is and will always be a healer and one even greater than he is now. You need never fear him being like I. We have different talents entirely. Hate me all you wish Mama. Please never hate Rhys, he is the purest of souls, no healer has even taken a walk in darkness, they cannot, the Mother herself grants those gifts to him."

"Unlike you! I cannot believe I gave birth to such things! Unnatural gifts even for a mage you have! Why won't you just leave?" His mother shouted at him and Curbain hung his head in shame.

"Because Mama, Willow told me to come back here since there is no one here like me. Would you have me disobey Mother Willow?"

"I'd have you live elsewhere! I want you to stay in that Barn until you are called is that understood?"

“Aye Mama.” Curbain said clamping down and swallowing his pain as he shut himself away in the barn with his three lonely little books.

Looking forward to the moments he’d be able to sneak away to see Rhys. That was his only joy at the moment. At least Rhys still cared about him and loved him and that was all Curbain needed.

“AH! Bain you bastard! You won again!” Rhys groaned laying his cards down and watched Curbain rake the pile of cookies and candies they’d used as money into his steadily growing pile of winnings.

“I told you dearest. Beat me not in this game you won’t. Nevertheless, fear not, you know I despise all these sweets, they will still be finding their way into your stomach later.” Curbain grinned and winked and Rhys rested his chin in his hand on the table.

“You spoil me with treats.”

“You crave sugar and ginger. You’re burning these treats up in your daily lessons. I’m just keeping you healthy.” Curbain smiled and Rhys chuckled.

“Who’s the healer again?”

“Who’s already been a student of Jervas? I know how evil that man can be.” Curbain smiled dealing another hand of cards.

“You stack the deck, I’m sure of it.”

“Blame not your poor skills on my slight of hand dearest.” Curbain said with a wicked smile on his face that Rhys adored and would never tire at looking at or dreaming about.

Rhys was financially bankrupt of sugar by the time Curbain kissed him on the cheek goodnight and returned home again.

Fifteen years of hard training saw Jervas satisfied and Rhys transported himself home and was walking up the yard as his Mother and Father came out of the house to greet him with fond smiles and embraces. He looked for Curbain and frowned when he saw him race from the barn with joy and then stop short when his father turned and held up an arm.

"I could stop you not from going to him with your witchery. I know damn well you kept sneaking off to see him even after I forbade you to! I will stop your influence on him in my own home! You are to cease contact with Rhys now immediately! Go back to your room!"

"Aye Papa." Curbain said and the devastation in his mood killed Rhys for an instant before Curbain hid his emotions like he had always done.

"Stop right there Curbain! I am not hearing this! Curbain why didn't you tell me this was happening?" Rhys asked and Curbain just gave him a pathetic smile.

"They love you as I do. Because they love me not I had no wish to taint your relationship with our parents. Please Rhys, accept."

"I bloody will not!" Rhys was furious and turned to look at his parents like strangers.

"How can you do this to your own firstborn? How? Curbain is beautiful and kind how can you fail to see all his wondrous gifts when I remember quite well how much you loved him once." Rhys demanded and his father snorted.

"He's a MAGE! Unnatural for a man not to use his own two hands to make a living! Always weak and sickly as a boy and look at him, how womanishly long his hair is! He is no son of mine!"

"I'm so sorry." Curbain sobbed, cracking under the strain and fleeing in tears.

"Fecking useless." His father spat and Rhys saw red.

"How dare you! I don't know you anymore." Rhys' voice was cold as he chased after Curbain and found him sobbing as he packed his few pitiful belongings into a sack as Rhys slammed the door behind him, ripping the bag out of Curbain's hands and pulling him into a hard embrace.

"Cry Love. Let it out please. Hide this not from me anymore. I love you and I will always love you." Rhys said softly and was brought to his knees as Curbain collapsed with grief and wept gut wrenching sobs into Rhys' chest.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Stop it! Do NOT say you are sorry Curbain! This is not your fault and you will stop blaming yourself for other's actions right this moment. It is not healthy and I will heal you of this pain if it kills me." Rhys said rocking back and forth holding Curbain tightly to his body as Curbain shook with agonizing sorrow.

"I'll go away somewhere else. You're here now, they'll be happy again." Curbain mumbled and Rhys gripped Curbain's chin and forced their eyes to meet.

"If you think to leave without me you have another thing coming dearest. Leaving is the best for you, aye, I agree and leave with you I will. You should have come to me a very long time ago dearest. I will always be by your side, I vow."

"Rhys. Don't make yourself suffer with me."

"Curbain, my suffering is yours. I could not be happy here with them and without you. I cannot love people who can drive away their son in misguided prejudice and hate. I love you and I go where you go dearest." Rhys said kissing Curbain's brow and Curbain clung to him weeping.

"I love you too, Rhys. I'd go mad without you." Curbain sniffed and Rhys handed him a cloth to wipe his swollen eyes and nose.

"Then let's get packed dearest and not look back." Rhys said as they finished packing Curbain's belongings into the sack and they walked out of the barn and Rhys took Curbain's hand.

"Where are you going?!" Rhys' mother looked stricken and Rhys turned cold eyes toward her.

"Away from you. I'll not let you harm him any longer. I will heal the damage you inflicted on him Madam." Rhys said, not even calling her mother he was so furious.

"Stop right there! You will do no such thing!" Their father bellowed and Rhys draped a protective arm over Curbain and faced their father,

"Be glad he is not what you treat him as. If you'd have treated me like you've treated him, I would have killed you long ago sir. We are not dogs to be kicked, we were your sons and I say 'were' because I will call no man father who would abuse his own child while boasting of the other. The abused child who could have quite easily used his powers against you to protect himself and he did not. Could have hated me for your preference and yet he did not. Be grateful he is the most beautiful soul I have ever touched and he loved you and I enough to accept your torment. I, however, refuse to let you continue. I am taking Bain and you'll not have to worry about us darkening your doorstep ever again." Rhys said with a cold rage burning within as he turned and led Curbain away never to look back.

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II - Denial

They traveled the valley for several weeks, sleeping in barns and hay stacks and keeping warm by holding each other under a single blanket, penniless but happy together. Until one afternoon they came to a small village near the edge of the great forest whose orchard crops of apples of every shape and size spread far as the eye could see had Rhys pausing and reaching up to a tree overhanging the road and plucking Curbain a bright golden apple. “Love, I believe this is your favorite?”

“Aye.” Curbain said taking the apple and eating hungrily. They were not only penniless but starved and looking for a place they could settle together. Curbain made a face of sheer ecstasy and Rhys knew, right then and there, this was where he would make their home, just so Curbain could have all the apples his heart desired.

They headed into the village and Curbain eyed the lovely farmer’s market spread across the town square as Rhys went into the local tavern. “Is there a healer in the Village?” He asked the man at the bar who laughed.

“Son, if there were, he’d be a blessing from the Maker. Nay.”

“Then you’re in luck. I am a healer and looking for a place to settle and call home. Tell me, is there an empty house I can settle in with my... my dearest where I may work for the rent? We are both cold, tired and hungry and all I can offer are my services at the moment.”

“Are you serious lad?”

“Aye.”

“Hang on a moment.” The barkeep said bringing over an elderly man who Rhys could tell immediately was suffering from severe joint ache.

“Sit, sir please. Take the strain off your knees. May I?” Rhys said leading the man to a chair and laying his glowing hands on the old man’s knees.

“Maker bless you lad. Oh that is much better.” The old man said with a sigh. “My nephew here tells me you and your lovely companion need a house and jobs?”

“Aye sir. I am a healer and Curbain is... is talented in many areas. Do you know of a place?”

“Aye. I have an empty little cottage at the end of the path here. Rent it out I do to travelers, but will gladly offer it to you rent free for healing services and I’m sure many will trade you goods for services once you’re settled. Just follow the path until it ends at the house. It’s all yours Master?”

“Rhys. Thank you.” Rhys said as the Barkeep handed him a basket.

“Dinner for you and your companion, I’ll spread the word and I daresay by morning neither of you will be hungry.” The barkeep winked and Rhys smiled.

“I am hoping so. Thank you very much for your kindness to strangers. I hope my services make up for it in some measure.” Rhys bowed returning outside to collect Curbain and lead him down the path to a cozy little cottage at the end of the trail, a golden apple tree in the front yard behind a little stone fence right up against the forest itself.

“I’d say this is fate, this cottage was made for you.” Rhys said indicating the tree and Curbain smiled and nodded as they went inside.

It was a large single room dwelling, with a small double bed in the corner next to the large hearth that doubled as their kitchen and living area. A table with two chairs, a small couch and a single curtained room that held a privy and small bathing tub and basin. It was like a newlywed’s cottage and Curbain went to the cupboards along the back wall and opened them to see they at least had three full place settings of stoneware and cooking pots. They’d not starve or be without the bare essentials anymore. It was a relief.

“Come eat love, snoop later.” Rhys said setting the basket on the table filled with a container of stew, some bread and a bottle of apple cider wine just as a knock came to the door and the first of Rhys’ patients arrived bringing a bushel full of fresh vegetables with them and children with sniffles. Rhys moved the couch over to the far wall and made a makeshift section of the cottage his work room and he did indeed set to work immediately as Curbain smiled and sat at the table, spelling Rhys’ dinner to remain warm until he could eat it.

They had agreed much earlier on in their wanderings that Curbain did not want anyone to know he was a mage ever again. Rhys thought it a silly fear but would abide by Curbain’s desire to hide his gifts and live like a normal powerless man.

He seemed much happier with himself, even poor and hungry.

Curbain was putting away their meager possessions out of their sacks and folding their few changes of clean clothing and putting them in the trunk at the end of the bed and placing his few books on top of the mantle. Turning the cottage into their home as Rhys tended patients who brought all manner of

goods. Meats and dairy products for the cold larder, which Curbain put a charm on to keep their food just above freezing in temperature so it would keep longer. Soon their little larder was full and merry looking as Rhys bid goodnight to his last patient and turned to eat.

Curbain was at his shoulders as he sat and he could feel Curbain connect and feed him power to restore what he'd used as he rubbed shoulders while Rhys ate.

Rhys could feel how happy Curbain was and he paused in his meal to take Curbain's hand from his shoulder and he kissed his palm. "I told you I'd take care of you did I not dearest?" Rhys asked and Curbain smiled and leaned over to hug Rhys' shoulders.

"Aye, you did. As I will take care of you. Eat your dinner and give me your shirt, I'm going to wash our clothes and fix you a bath so you can relax." Curbain said taking their dirty laundry over to a wash tub and dropped them in and had them agitating merrily with a spell as he walked over to the bathroom and drew Rhys a bath while he finished his dinner.

Curbain took Rhys discarded pants as he climbed into the tub and added them to the washtub along with his own. He washed from the basin and Rhys couldn't tear his eyes away. He'd never seen Curbain naked and his thoughts took a decidedly hungry turn as he devoured Curbain with his eyes. It was getting harder and harder to deny the fact that he had more than brotherly affection stirring within his heart. He wanted Curbain desperately, to taste those lips, to lose his fingers in his hair and make love to him until they were both breathless.

Rhys was thankful he was sitting in the tub and his erection was hidden as Curbain flashed him a smile over his shoulder. "I'm going to hang up our clothes to dry and then go to bed I'm so tired and I know you must be too with seeing so many tonight. We have ginger and sugar now, I will bake you cookies tomorrow." Curbain said leaning over the tub to kiss the top of Rhys' head. "Goodnight dearest."

Rhys shivered with want. "Goodnight love. I'll try not to wake you when I come to bed."

"I doubt I'll stir at all, I'm so tired." Curbain said leaving the bathroom and Rhys immediately took care of a rather large problem. The last thing he needed was an awake erection when crawling into a shared bed.

"Maker, give me strength." Rhys sighed as he came and let the water out of the tub before crawling out and drying off and avoided the hanging clothes in the middle of the room by the fire as he crawled into bed next to Curbain who was blissfully asleep and still very much in the nude.

Just as Rhys was as Rhys curled up behind him and wrapped around Curbain's cool skin. Soon enough both were warm and Rhys drifted to sleep holding Curbain in his arms, feeling very much a newlywed even if they weren't bonded.

It was very difficult to see Curbain as his brother anymore, somewhere over the recent years their relationship had changed and the past few weeks had driven them even closer together. Curbain was Rhys' entire world and there was nothing he wouldn't do for him to protect him from the powers that Curbain didn't want and only served to make him miserable.

Rhys awoke to the smell of baking gingersnaps and tea and Curbain standing over him in a robe. "Wake up dearest, I have your cookies." Curbain grinned and turned looking a rumpled morning mess, his hair still askew and unbound from bed falling in waves down his back to his knees.

"You are decidedly beautiful first thing in the morning I'll have you know." Rhys said crawling out of bed yawning as he pulled on a robe and headed straight for hot cookies.

"You have wonderful bed head, you slept in it wet silly. You look like a porcupine." Curbain chuckled running fingers through Rhys snarled hair with a wink as a knock came to the door and Curbain went to answer it.

"Good morning, are we too early?" A woman asked, her young son on her hip with a severely runny nose.

"Nay, come in. Would you like a cookie lad?" Curbain asked and naturally the child, cold or not, accepted. Curbain offered his mother tea and cookies as well as Rhys sat the child on his lap and they ate cookies while Rhys simultaneously tended his minor cold.

"I could get used to this routine quite easily." Curbain said as Rhys worked on and off all morning and Curbain cut vegetables for stew while reading a book propped up on the table.

"How many times have you read that book?" Rhys asked as he washed his hands in the basin.

"I only have the three, many times." Curbain said smiling, he'd always been a brilliant mind and devoured learning like a starving man.

"I'll have to get you more then. I'm sure Jervas will send us more now that we've settled."

“Aye, I asked him too already.” Curbain grinned scraping the vegetables into the pot simmering over the fire.

“You’re quite handy in the kitchen dearest. I will never go hungry I see.” Rhys said leaning over to smell the stew.

“You’re working, I’m freeloading. It’s the least I can do until I can start working. I was thinking maybe teaching the children reading and writing. Anything where I don’t have to use my gifts other than for our creature comforts in private.”

“I still think it’s unnecessary to hide them love, but I won’t argue when you’re happy this way.” Rhys said and fingering the small pouch of coins he’d managed to earn. “And I am off to get us some ale for our larder. I’ll be back.” Rhys said heading out the door.

“Lush.” Curbain chuckled turning back to his book.

Rhys was standing at the bar, waiting for the barkeep to bring him a quarter keg to take home when he heard some young men talking hushed behind him.

“I passed the cottage on the way in, the healer’s lover was outside collecting apples. S’t truth never saw a finer looking thing, I’d pay to bed him I would.”

“Not if they are shacah you won’t and don’t let the healer hear you for goodness sake! We don’t know if they are shacah or not, he’d kill you for even thinking such things about his mate!” The other man warned and Rhys saw red. He was indeed angry and suddenly highly possessive as he turned around and glared at the Faes sitting at the table.

“Keep thine hands and eyes to thine selves. Bain is mine.” Rhys said just as the barkeep returned with his keg and Rhys paid him and stormed off.

“See, I told you. They must be shacah, you stupid fool. Don’t drive a healer away lusting over his mate you idiot!”

“Aye! He’s a godsend you fool. Leave the shy and quiet pretty one alone; even a fool could see he belongs to Healer Rhys, their body language alone should have told you that Dirkin! The Rhys calls Bain is most definitely ewe to Rhys’ ram so leave ‘em be and no makin’ them want ta leave!” The Barkeep said wiping off his counter and glaring at the youth.

“Maker, I only said he was pretty and beddable!”

“And beddable only to Rhys obviously. Stupid Faes, can’t ever understand Shacah bonds.” The female Enf’ Tuvalu barmaid said rolling her eyes as she peeled boiled eggs at the counter.

Curbain watched Rhys storm in with the keg and quirked an eyebrow where he sat peeling apples and placing them into a dish. “What’s wrong?”

“You already have attracted admirers.” Rhys said from the larder and Curbain looked white as sheet when Rhys came out from the larder.

“Maker, forbid. I’m not interested.” Curbain said with a shiver turning back to his apple and sectioning it into bite size pieces.

“You might be one day when you meet your shacah. I’m already feeling lonely thinking about the day you leave me.” Rhys said sitting down at the table with a pathetic smile. Curbain reached over and took his hand.

“Shacah or not, if you think I’d leave you behind you think poorly of me dearest.” Curbain said tenderly and Rhys took his hand and kissed his palm, an affectionate habit he had adopted recently that made Curbain’s entire being glow with happiness.

“Poorly of you I will never think. I am ever your devoted brother.” Rhys said smiling and reached over to steal a slice of apple Curbain had cut.

“As I am yours.” Curbain smiled shoving the plate of apple segments at Rhys for him to have while he set to work on another for himself.

They settled in quite nicely within the next week and Rhys, being naturally friendly and outgoing soon found more than a few good friends among his patients and fellow villagers while the children seemed to gravitate to Curbain who always had cookies and fascinating stories to share with them when they came to call.

Jervas paid them both a visit ten days after they arrived and brought with him an entire bookshelf worth of books, including the shelves themselves and Curbain was like a child on his birthing day with presents as he lovingly stacked away his new treasures on the shelf. “Master Jervas, thank you so very much.” Curbain sighed floating somewhere in a scholarly heaven.

“You can thank me lad, by not letting my teaching go to waste! More power in one little finger than I’d ever dream of having and you use it to wash laundry!” Jervas snorted and Curbain sighed and hung his head.

“Master, please.” Curbain said hanging his head and Rhys walked over and just laid a hand to Curbain’s hair where he sat on the floor sorting books and he turned to look at Jervas.

“Please master, it upsets him. If he’s happier not using his gifts is there harm in it?” Rhys asked and Jervas shrugged where he sat at their table puffing a pipe in his teeth.

“I won’t deny I think it was disgustingly abominable how your sire and dam treated ye lad and I’m damn annoyed you never told any of us your woes so we could help you. When we said to go ‘home’, we did not mean for you to live as you were, just live in the general area since it was lacking mage protection. You should have left that house long ago. You take things so literally! Not all folks think like your village lad.” Jervas began and Curbain just stood and shook his head.

“I’m not going through that again, nor would I worry you both needlessly. Please, I never asked for these gifts and I want them not! Please stop!” Curbain said rushing from the cottage and down the path. Rhys raced to the door hot on Curbain’s swift feet.

“BAIN! BAIN!” Rhys hollered, feeling the turmoil of despair and self loathing churning in Curbain’s heart. His walls were down and his smiles had been but masks to hide the deep pain that still lingered. Rhys chased him down the path and tackled him half way back to the main village.

“Let me go Rhys!” Curbain sobbed, struggling to get away.

“I fecking will not! Running away is not an answer to what troubles you and never was.” Rhys said picking up a kicking Curbain and slinging him over his shoulder.

“PUT ME DOWN!” Curbain growled and Rhys held firm.

“No.” Rhys said walking back to their cottage past a curious few orchard workers who watched the healer and his pretty companion argue and fight, with the healer obviously winning by overpowering his smaller mate.

“I SAID PUT ME DOWN RIGHT NOW RHYS!” Curbain spat viciously twisting and trying to break free from Rhys’ death grip on him as Rhys walked back up the path.

“No. Unless you want to have our row right out in public? Go right ahead.” Rhys said angrily storming back into their cottage and upending Curbain onto the bed. Jervas still puffing his pipe and waiting for these two to sort out much deeper troubles brewing. It took a blind fool not to notice there was much more going on than Curbain’s refusal to use powers and emotional duress. The emotional

troubles were more than compounded by other things as well that were festering between them both.

“I’ve had enough of this Curbain! I can’t bloody well help you if you block everything and run away. You have to accept the fact you’re a mage and others will have need of your gifts! I don’t mind you being damn conservative and not wanting to flaunt your talents. That’s admirable, but damn it, there are people here who can benefit! Jervas is right, most people are not like our parents and village. You know that DAMN IT! You lived in the Crown City for eighty years for feck’s sake! Can you honestly tell me anyone in all that time treated you like Mama and Papa did? Of course not! You’re being paranoid!”

“I’m being SENSIBLE! This is not the Crown City, THIS is the middle of fucking nowhere where people are all like Papa and Mama! You’re a healer! They look to you with pride and love because you benefit them on a level they can understand. Me? All they see is power, and to them power means loss and fear. They know they can never stand against me, even if I’d never do a thing to harm them ever. They don’t know that so they hate what they cannot understand and can only fear. I am not ever facing fear in a child’s eyes again! I am not going to look a mother in the eyes who sees only a man who would hurt her or her children on a whim. I am not facing a man who hates me on principle and thinks magery is a cheater’s way out of a decent days work. I am not going to do it, I never asked for this curse, I wish every day I’d never been born!” Curbain yelled and turned to the door and Rhys blocked it.

“Nay, Bain. Don’t run, let these emotions out, don’t swallow them anymore they are eating you alive dearest.” Rhys said and Curbain scowled.

“I wouldn’t have to face them at all if you’d both leave me ALONE!” Curbain said vanishing where he stood, transporting himself away to goodness knew where and slamming up a block so tight Rhys couldn’t sense him at all and he sank to the bed defeated.

“He so damn stubborn! He won’t let me help him, he avoids purging his grief and bottles up everything.” Rhys sighed and Jervas nodded.

“Curbain always bottled up emotion. The only time I ever saw that boy truly happy was when he had a letter from you. Rhys, tread carefully his psyche is fragile and depends on you most for stability. If not for you, I think he’d have done himself harm many times over.”

“You and me both Jervas. Hell, I’d have slit my own damn wrists living there in those conditions for so long and you know me, I don’t let things like that get to me. Believe me I know. Every time we take a step forward with him we fall three back. His healing will be long in coming.”

“Perhaps if you were more honest with your own feelings you’d help him better.” Jervas said giving Rhys a knowing gaze over his pipe.

“One mess at a time Jervas. One bridge at a time.” Rhys said and Jervas shrugged.

“You’re the healer.” Jervas said shimmering in his chair out of sight, leaving Rhys alone in the cottage staring at the flames and waiting for Curbain to come home.

Curbain ran until he was out of breath and collapsed under an apple tree at the farthest edge of the orchard up against the forest proper. He curled up upon himself sobbing in frustrated tears. His face buried in his knees. A twig snapped and Curbain’s face shot up to see a young fae standing in front of him looking concerned.

“You alright?” He asked reaching into his pocket and handing Curbain a handkerchief. Curbain accepted the cloth with a strained smile and wiped his eyes.

“Aye. Old arguments, pay me no mind.” Curbain said handing the handkerchief back and the fae just held up his hand.

“Keep it. Would a telling a stranger help?” He asked squatting down eye level and Curbain shook his head.

“Nay. Wish it would, but it won’t. Old troubles that Rhys and I disagree on, nothing more.”

“I saw the argument. I’m sorry you and your shacah are fighting.” The youth said and Curbain’s eyes widened. Did the villagers all assume that He and Rhys were bonded? Curbain wondered suddenly and realizing it probably looked very much that way from outside. Curbain suddenly had no desire to clear up the misconception; it gave him an excuse to avoid others who wanted intimacy.

Not that anyone had ever made him yearn for love and affection the way Rhys did anyway. He’d never mated anyone, male or female, he’d never had the desire or drive to before that night he reunited with Rhys fifteen years earlier. Curbain was positive he was probably the eldest living virgin in the region. One-hundred and sixty-nine and still untouched, yet one more thing to be ashamed of himself over. It wasn’t he hadn’t had opportunities, he just could never find interest or see what others could be interested about in him either. All his sexual experiences had been solitary affairs.

“We fight not often, Rhys is very kind but we are men, we disagree over trivial things at times.” Curbain said just as the sky opened up in a sudden downpour.

“Feck!” the youth said shoving his jacket toward Curbain as the freezing cold water of the mid-autumn season rain shower fell. They shared the jacket as a makeshift cover as they ran back to the road. Curbain refused to keep the jacket with a soft and strained smile as he parted ways from the youth and ran back home to get out of the rain before he caught a cold. He’d always been highly susceptible to chest colds. He was just at the fence gate when Rhys threw open the door, looking to be heading out to find him.

“Maker! You’re drenched!” Rhys said racing out to pull Curbain inside, and they were barely in the door before Rhys was stripping Curbain to his skin. “Get out of these now. I know you and colds!” Rhys said, a worried tone in his voice.

Curbain was in a shocked state, half expecting Rhys to yell at him for being foolish and he was standing naked suddenly in front of the fire as Rhys almost forcibly stripped him before throwing the blanket off their bed around his shoulders shoving him into a chair. “Sit and I’ll fix you a preventative tea.” Rhys began and Curbain crumbled and started sobbing all over again.

Rhys just gathered him in his arms, blanket and all, and carried him over to the bed, laying him down and crawling in with him as he silently held Curbain to his chest as Curbain wept.

“I’m sorry.” Curbain sobbed and Rhys just kissed his brow.

“Nay, I’m sorry. I should not have yelled at you dearest. I do not understand your pain and cannot heal you and that makes me upset. I should not have pushed so. I just wish you would open up to me dearest, I am the last person in this world who would ever wish you ill.”

“Aye.” Curbain choked and said nothing more as he shivered and lost himself in Rhys’ warmth before falling asleep, emotionally exhausted.

Curbain awoke much later that night, Rhys was spooned up behind him, fast asleep, his arms wrapped around Curbain’s waist and snoring softly. His bare chest pressed against Curbain’s back, bare thigh to bare thigh.

How had they ended up like this? Curbain wondered, suddenly realizing they slept like this automatically now, naked flesh to naked flesh, like lovers and not brothers. The thought alone suddenly gripping Curbain and a surge of desire welled up from within. He could feel Rhys groin was pressed against his posterior and Curbain shut his eyes and tried to imagine what it would feel like if Rhys was hard and not flaccid. What it would feel like to have Rhys take him like a lover and touch him intimately. Curbain groaned as his desires awakened and he quietly crawled out of bed and crossed the darkened room to the privy, stopping in the larder to find an aide to help alleviate his specific desires and once behind the curtain he quietly began to take care of his desires to get them under control.

He was on his knees, resting his head against the tub, stroking himself with one hand as he used a sturdy slender carrot to mimic what he desired most. He slid the vegetable slowly in and out of his own posterior, biting back a moan as he masturbated.

Rhys opened his eyes, the bed was still warm so Curbain could not have been far. Rhys rolled over and froze and just stared in awe and wonder. The light of the full moon was bathing the room in moonlight, the curtain was askew in the privy and Rhys was enthralled as he watched Curbain on the floor of the privy masturbating.

His own erection swelled to life as he wished fervently to be that lucky vegetable. Rhys stroked himself as he watched, timing his strokes to the same tempo as Curbain's. Every time Curbain pushed the carrot inside, Rhys stroked, imagining tight confines and Curbain panting for him. Rhys watched further mesmerized as Curbain spelled the carrot to move on it's own as he raised his posterior high in the air, his chest on the floor, his arms splayed behind him. Rhys had never seen anything so entirely erotic in his entire life. So his brother liked to take it like a woman it seemed and he liked it hard and fast too.

The carrot was a blur of motion, Curbain's posterior perfectly aligned with Rhys' line of vision. He watched the artificial replacement for a penis literally drive itself into welcoming flesh, he saw Curbain's testicles hanging low and swaying with the force of the thrusts, he saw Curbain's hand frantically stroking his erection.

Rhys' own hand a blur on his own sex and when Curbain came and spilled his seed on the floor, Rhys bit back a cry as he too came into his own hands. Making a mess in their linens and not caring as he watched Curbain slowly regain his breath, before standing on shaky legs and washing himself first before cleaning the floor and then transporting the carrot and evidence of his nocturnal activities to only the Maker knew where.

Rhys quickly wiped his hand on his discarded shirt on the floor, he'd wash it in the morning and he feigned sleep as Curbain crawled back into bed again.

Rhys thought that Jervas was right, he was not going to hold out much longer against his desires. Sooner or later, preferably sooner, Curbain would no longer need an artificial aide. He'd be more than happy to oblige Curbain's desires since they seemed to mirror and compliment Rhys' own tastes in lovemaking. A lover who liked rough play was always on Rhys' preferential treatment list.

Rhys loved not having to hold back when the moment swept them away and a lover who would let him drive his thrusts wantonly and forcibly was his ideal match. Especially womanly beautiful, young virile males, with such tight spaces to make love to and as flexible as Curbain seemed to be. Rhys squashed those

thoughts or Curbain's virtue was at stake and he'd just fallen back asleep and had a slight rasp in his throat.

The idiot was coming down with a cold after all it seemed, first getting caught in a cold rain and then laying on a cold floor and exerting himself to the point of exhaustion.

"Brotherly Bonds"
A Short Fable from The Chronicles of Xanadu
Author: D. Sanders
III - Eternity in Thy Arms

Rhys awoke and usually Curbain was already up and having tea, but not his morning. He was shivering beside Rhys and was warm to the touch and the rasp in his chest a definite wheeze.

Rhys rolled Curbain onto his back; he was very pale this was no ordinary cold to have taken such swift hold of its victim. Rhys crawled out of bed and threw on his robe and stoked the fire as he set about making tea and porridge with his herbal remedies before bringing a cup and bowl to Curbain still in bed, oblivious. "Bain? Dearest?" Rhys nudged Curbain awake.

"Hum? Rhys?" Curbain blinked open sleepy eyes.

"Aye. Come love, sit up a moment you need to eat this. You're ill dearest." Rhys said propping their pillows up behind him and setting the bowl on a tray in Curbain's lap.

"I'm really not hungry." Curbain said, punctuating his statement with a cough.

"Aye, I know. Eat it anyway." Rhys said laying his palm against Curbain's chest. "Drop this fecking block Bain, let me in to heal you."

"It's just damp lungs Rhys. It's fall, I always catch a dozen or more colds before Spring again. I'll live, waste not your gifts on me dearest."

"I'll decide what is and what is not a waste. You come first Bain. I don't care if you have a splinter or a cold. You are my first priority, so I say again, oh ye most stubborn of fools, drop your blocks please."

Curbain complied by the barest of margins and Rhys frowned but it was enough to see the mucous forming in Curbain's lungs which Rhys sent a tendril of power to alleviate the symptoms. Curbain was breathing easier in moments. "There, you stubborn mule. Better for now, let me know when the mucous forms again and I'll repeat the treatment. I'll not have you suffer damn it, now eat like a good boy and stay in bed today." Rhys said moving over to the table as a frantic knock came to the door.

"Master Rhys! Come quick, we've got a plague! Just overnight, everyone's sick!" The woman at the door said, rasping herself and shivering. Rhys dressed quickly.

“Bain! Stay in bed I’ll be back when I can!” Rhys said and rushed out the door.

The woman was right, everyone who was ill were showing the same symptoms that Curbain was, the common factor with them all being they’d all been caught out in the previous day’s rain shower.

Rhys immediately took a sample of water from a puddle and looked at it with his mage sight, tiny angry red aura filled it, a virus and no mere cold either. This was blood magic, created for amusement. He’d spent all day and all afternoon going from patient to patient and was currently taking a quick break in the tavern over a bowl of stew as he thought of how to battle the plague.

“Spread the word, I don’t want anyone drinking this water, avoid puddles for at least the next forty-eight hours until these viruses dissipate. I’ve put counter curses on them, but it will take time to take effect. Anyone with new symptoms I want given this.” Rhys said pulling a bottle of spirits from the barkeep’s wall and muttering counter charms over the bottle. “One shot glass for adults, one spoon for children. That should help counteract the infections. Like any cold, you’ll have to expel the sickness with coughing and sneezing but the charms should help and the spirits will keep it from becoming worse or mutating.” Rhys said pulling on his coat.

“Now forgive me, I have to return home. Bain was suffering too this morning and this was before I knew it was more than a simple cold. I have to check on him immediately.” Rhys said worried and the barkeep nodded.

“Aye go! I’ll make sure this gets around, go see to your shacah.” The barkeep said and Rhys’ insides did a somersault as he rushed home. Shacah? Did they all assume He and Curbain were bonded? Rhys had to admit it probably looked like it and he was surely not forthcoming in correcting people or informing them what his relationship to Curbain was in reality.

Rhys shoved those thoughts aside as he raced inside. The fire had gone out and Curbain was in bed, his breakfast bowl had fallen to the floor and he was passed out in an alarming state. He could barely breathe, his skin was pallid and clammy and his fever alarmingly high. Curbain was always prone to suffer even with a mild cold, this one was killing him.

“BAIN!” Rhys sobbed. Ripping off his clothes so he could get as much skin contact as possible as he climbed into bed with Curbain and spooned up with him from behind, a deep power mesh was needed at this stage and skin contact was vital. Curbain was fiery hot to touch and his lungs rasped violently with every labored breath.

“Hold on dearest.” Rhys said diving into a trance to crawl into Curbain’s weakened body. Rhys forced down all of Curbain’s blocks, tearing apart the

matrix of blood magic that was feeding on Curbain's power. Unlike the others, this little cold liked mages and Curbain had been soaked to the skin yesterday with the infected storm cloud.

Curbain was not helping matters as he embraced the illness, hoping this was the one that finally killed him at last. Rhys was horrified with the emotional turmoil boiling under Curbain's skin.

Self-hatred, Self-loathing, fear, despair, loneliness, and severe depression swirled like a black cancer inside, festering and devouring Curbain from within. Rhys shattered more blocks in desperation, trying to heal all the multitude of troubles on top of the sickness which compounded matters.

He learned many things about his beloved as he battled illness. Curbain was hiding his desires too, he felt for Rhys the same way Rhys felt for him. On this mage plan of sight, it was suddenly painfully obvious that for the past fifteen years both of them had been purposefully blocking the natural progression of Undatta. They had fallen into it that first night Curbain came to see Rhys in the west. Both of them denying the truth and thinking it no more than simple male lust over a pleasing figure. It was so much more.

It explained how they reacted to each other so painfully clearly Rhys wanted to weep. He could have had this glorious man as his shacah fifteen years ago and he'd used his gifts to squash the truth, just as Curbain had done. It also explained why it kept becoming harder and harder to resist the pull, it was an involuntary need to connect with a soul mate in the most intimate of partnerships. The ties that bound Enf' Tuvalu together in seamless accord with their mates.

Mates that Curbain had never taken to his bed. Rhys saw the loneliness, the emptiness of soul within Curbain. He had never been held, never been kissed, never been made love to by another. The only person he had ever desired had been Rhys which added to his shame. Thinking he was a wretched fool for only ever desiring his own blood brother and none other.

Rhys was soul lost in desperation as he clung to Curbain and battled on. Their brotherly bond had been negated the moment they had fallen into Undatta fifteen years earlier. The soul bond that would form from becoming Shacah could not be denied and overruled commonality. It was not unnatural to have siblings experience a soul bond, just highly uncommon.

Their father's prejudices once more causing damage to Curbain's psyche. He saw how for years the man had cursed Curbain, had tried to keep him away from Rhys, how he called him an unnatural beast for displaying such strong attachment to a younger brother.

Rhys wept into Curbain's hair even in a trance, his whole soul on fire and aching to heal the most important person in his life, his brother, his Undatta, his would be Shacah.

Rhys sent everything he had into their connection, willing Curbain to feel his love, his devotion, his desire to heal and protect what was most precious to him, Curbain.

Finally after what seemed hours, he felt Curbain crack and the walls crumble completely. Rhys shoved his being into Curbain's body, forcing him to accept the bond of Shacah. Rhys felt the elation when he established the bond and the sheer joy as a being was thrust back and filled Rhys with a love that knew no boundaries.

The moment they bonded, Curbain submitted total control and Rhys was everywhere, healing all he could touch. When at last the cold was purged and burned away and Rhys pulled out of his trance and immediately crushed Curbain's mouth in a fierce kiss.

Curbain gasped into the kiss, coming to wakefulness, his whole body quivering on the edge of a knife. Rhys was all over him, kissing, pawing, grasping, and his need suffocating them both with its sudden intensity after having been denied for far too many years.

Curbain responded in near feral blindness, he spread his legs automatically and Rhys was upon him, thrusting, driving, and tearing him apart in his frenzy to mate with his shacah.

"Bain! Bain!" Rhys sobbed with every thrust and Curbain's arms clung to strong shoulders, his legs wrapping around Rhys' hips as he arched into him, throwing his head back into pillows. He felt electrified in every pore as Rhys made frantic love to him. All those years of denial for naught, they were Shacah, they'd been in Undatta all along.

Curbain moaned, all those years dreaming about this moment paled in reality as he was filled and he submitted his body willingly to his brother turned mate and husband. Nothing could compare to the feeling, no artificial replacement could hope to rival what Curbain felt as Rhys' sex invaded him mercilessly.

Rhys felt Curbain's joy fill him and he thrust harder. "Like this do you?"

"Aye!" Curbain moaned.

"I saw you last night, you like taking it like a woman."

"Aye. Rhys! Oh!"

"I should have done what I wanted and gotten up and taken you! Years I've wanted you!" Rhys growled hooking Curbain's legs under his arms and trussing him up higher for better access.

Curbain moaned in sheer ecstasy as Rhys drove even deeper in this position. "Harder! Oh Maker Rhys take me harder!"

"Aye dearest." Rhys complied, breaking out into a sweat as he mated with extreme force which Curbain responded to by thrashing wildly in heat beneath him. Sexually alive at last and needing more, craving more, their dual states of need pushing them over the edge and turning them into beasts.

Rhys grabbed Curbain and forcibly flipped him over. Pressing Curbain's face into the pillows with his hand at the back of his neck, forcing him into ultimate submission and Curbain readily complied on his knees, his posterior high in the air, in the same position he had been in the night before when Rhys could only watch.

Not this time. Rhys buried himself in Curbain and Curbain literally screamed into the pillows. Rhys felt his core ignite with Curbain's sudden powerful surge of desire. Rhys was hitting the perfect spot within Curbain at this angle and Curbain was seeing stars as he met Rhys' thrusts by pushing back against him as Rhys surged forward.

"Maker so tight!" Rhys moaned, feeling Curbain's muscles contract as he came in violent shuddering spasms. Dragging Rhys over the edge as he emptied himself into Curbain's bowels.

They were weeping and clinging to each other and devouring kisses like wine. Rhys covered every inch of Curbain's body with his lips. "Mine, mine at last!" Rhys sighed, running his tongue over Curbain's sex and licking residual semen off his foreskin like dew from a flower. Curbain shivered and twitched in response.

"Rhys, beloved don't torture me so." Curbain cried as Rhys brought him back into a state of arousal.

"Beloved, I have waited fifteen years to bed you. I am making up for lost time. I will show you everything you ever denied yourself, I am taking full advantage of the fact I am and will ever be your only lover. Your body has known no other and I will deflower you properly. You will not be able to stand tomorrow without leaking my seed. I intend to fill you until I can no longer move myself. Oon Mei Shacah." Rhys purred and Curbain moaned, he felt Rhys' smugness fill him, he was thrilled that Curbain's body was virgin territory and he was the one staking eternal claim to it with a vengeance.

Curbain whimpered and felt Rhys take him again and again until he felt boneless and as if he'd never be able to sit down again as his sphincter was stretched and abused and adapted to fit Rhys' rather large manhood until Rhys was sliding in and out with ease.

"So fucking beautiful! You were built for this my lovely. I will never tire of loving you." Rhys purred, gnawing on Curbain's earlobe as he loved in languid strokes as he came again.

"No more, please. Oh Rhys I cannot move." Curbain whimpered and then felt Rhys' hands on him, kneading abused muscles with healer's hands.

"Like I would leave you abused? Think again my dearest. Relax and rest and sleep beloved. Dream of me loving you for the rest of your days." Rhys said dripping kisses down Curbain's spine.

"Which we be short if you keep that up!" Curbain chuckled and Rhys slapped the perfect round globes of Curbain's behind.

"Sex is the best exercise I'll have you realize. You'll live longer, because I plan on keeping you quite physically fit."

"Maker preserve me from you, you wicked man."

"Deny you enjoyed this as much as I. You cannot lie to me Oon Mei Shacah, I felt you in our bond. You are just as deviant in your perversions and desires. You loved it."

"Aye. Much." Curbain smiled and turned his head to look at Rhys. "Come kiss me beloved. I may enjoy being your ewe, but I also enjoy just being near you beloved. I love you very much."

Rhys smiled and lay down to wrap Curbain in his arms and kissed him deeply. "As I have ever loved you dearest. Now get some rest. I may have purged your cold, but I have weakened you too and I refuse to let you catch another."

"Aye." Curbain sighed and snuggled up under Rhys' chin, content never to move again.

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"Just the one keg Bain?" Mika, the Barmaid asked as she took his order.

"Oh Aye. Rhys is the only one who drinks it and if I bought more, he'd drink more." Curbain laughed digging coins out of his deep coat pockets as he stood at

the bar. Rhys was back in the cottage tending his patients and Curbain had noticed Rhys' quarter keg was empty. Therefore, he brought back the empty one to exchange for a full one.

"Mean drunk?" Mika asked with a wink and Curbain chuckled.

"Amorous." He winked right back and Mika chuckled.

"Better pokin' ya than hittin' ya." She said rudely and full of humor as she set the full keg on the counter.

"That's debatable sometimes." Curbain grinned and Mika laughed.

"So, he's a big'un?"

"Mika my dear, a horse would feel inferior."

"I am jealous now you fecker! Go take your ale and get out you shit." Mika laughed and Curbain smiled and took Rhys' keg home.

The past few weeks had been heavenly. Curbain had never been more content or happy. As the first snows fell, more mundane colds kept Rhys quite busy, and Curbain was more than happy to be the devoted assistant and house spouse, tending Rhys' needs so he could tend to everyone else's. He kept Rhys fed, fetched his herbs, ran the errands, delivered medicines to homebound ill, cleaned their cottage and happily submitted to Rhys' whims after his patient's had left for the day.

That in itself was a full time job, mundane, boring and glorious. He'd never think woman's work was easy ever again, he never worked so hard in his life and never enjoyed anything more.

On the way back home, Curbain passed the local mercantile which carried the staples like bolts of fabric, yarn, pots and pans and assorted other merchandise that could not be grown from the earth. In the window was something new and Curbain smiled and dashed inside.

"Hullo Bain! How's that new coat?" The shopkeeper and elderly Drow asked as Curbain stamped the snow off his boots by the door on the mat.

"Lovely and warm. Thank you for convincing Rhys it was the perfect birthing day gift. He would have bought something far less practical for the mantel. I love this coat."

"Well you're thin as can be lad! Even all that hair can't keep a body warm in this climate. What can I get you?"

“The harp is new. May I see it Tana please?” Curbain asked setting down his keg and taking the harp from Tana. He plucked a few strings and it was already in perfect tune.

“This is a Hundis Harp! Where did you get one?” Curbain asked, knowing the maker well from his time spent in the Crown City. Hundis was his favorite craftsman and favorite harp, they never fell out of tune, even if you dropped them down a well.

“We had a traveler in, said he won it in a hand of cards and traded it in for a pot, three blankets and a barrel of rice.”

“You got a bargain Tana. These are worth twenty times that. This is absolutely beautiful not a mark on it.”

“Perhaps, but it’ll sit in the window doing me nary good. Not a soul I know here knows how to play it.” Tana said and Curbain grinned and began to play a soft melody, the other shoppers in the store pausing to listen. When he opened his mouth to sing, jaws dropped. No one had known they had such a talented bard living under the healer’s roof. Curbain finished and reluctantly handed the harp back.

“I could never afford it, but thank you for letting me play it.” Curbain said and Tana refused to take it back.

“Are you daft lad? If you think you’re not going home with that you’re out of your mind! You can pay us all back with songs, that belongs with you son. Take it.”

“Are you serious? I couldn’t!”

“You can and will. Not everything needs be practical Bain dear. Be impractical once in a while and enjoy life. Go play for your mate, I’m sure you will make him happy. He was asking a few weeks ago for something like that when he bought you your coat instead. Surprise him.”

“Oh Aye. Thank you, Thank you so much!” Curbain hugged the harp tightly against his chest almost ready to weep for joy. He strung it under his arm beneath his coat as he hurried home with Rhys’ ale and a surprise.

Rhys was thankfully occupied with a three year old who didn’t want to take Rhys’ medicine. Curbain quickly hid the harp under a pillow and put away the ale and came out of the larder with a cookie.

“If you take your medicine sweetie, You can have a cookie. I know it tastes bad honey, but it’ll make you feel better. The cookie will make sure the bad taste

goes away, I promise.” Curbain said kneeling down and taking the spoon from Rhys and the child took his medicine and then bolted his cookie. Mother grinned at Curbain.

“Bribes always work. Even with little ones, at least one of you learned a mother’s secret.” The mother winked and Curbain chuckled.

“I used to have to bribe Rhys the same way when he was little and did not want to take medicine either.”

“Mercy, how long have ye two known each other?” she asked and Curbain smiled.

“All his life. We’re not only shacah, I’m his elder brother.” Curbain winked ruffling Rhys’ hair.

“Well that would explain the resemblance facially. We all thought it was just our eyes playin’ tricks on us. Everything else though much different.”

“Aye. Bain takes after our mother, I sadly take after the bull called father. Our faces are rather a blend of the two.” Rhys chuckled helping the toddler down off the sofa and handing him another cookie with a wink.

“Well, thank ya Rhys! Thank ya Bain. You coming to the mid-winter party over at the pub tomorrow?”

“Oh aye! I promised Mika I’d bring my apple and butternut squash soup.” Curbain said sitting at the table.

“Oh mercy, make a lot Bain! I think everyone here loves your recipe! I never thought of makin’ apples into dinner soup.”

“It’s the squash, it balances out the sweet in the apple. I cannot take credit for the recipe, only refining it. I had this once in the Crown City and thought I’d died and gone to heaven. I begged the cook for her recipe and just tweaked the portions to my tastes over the years.”

“Well you made fans out of us, I doubt your soup will last past the first hour. Goodnight loves!” The young mother said picking up her tot and heading home.

Rhys was washing his hands for dinner as Curbain set the table. “I have a surprise for you later.” Curbain said as Rhys sat down at the table after filling his mug from the new keg in the larder.

“Oh? Really? Does it happen to involve you naked at some point?” Rhys asked grinning and Curbain chuckled.

“It could if you are a good boy. Eat your dinner first and no more questions.’
Curbain winked as he set their roast that had been slow cooking all day making
the cottage smell divine on the table.

“I’ve been wanting at this all day. It’s smelled great in here and made me fecking
hungry.” Rhys said heaping a portion onto his plate.

Curbain just smiled and buttered a roll and ate quietly as he let Rhys prattle on
about the days patients and village gossip. Rhys never had to leave the cottage
to know all the juiciest gossip. They’d probably be gossip fodder tomorrow now
that their bonding and relationship was out in the open and confirmed.

After dinner Curbain made Rhys sit in his new chair by the fire and close his
eyes. Curbain smiled wickedly as he undressed to his skin and grabbed the fur
blanket off their bed to lay on the floor in front of the hearth, he then carefully
picked up the harp and settled at Rhys’ feet.

“Can I open them yet?”

“No. Just be patient.” Curbain said as he got comfortable and set the harp in his
lap and just started to play.

Rhys’ eyes shot open and he looked about to cry with joy that filled Curbain’ core
through their bond as he played and sang for his mate. Rhys could not stay in his
chair, he was on the floor with Curbain almost immediately, wrapping around
Curbain from behind and resting his chin on Curbain’s shoulder as he listened to
heaven on earth.

Curbain got a pleasant surprise himself when Rhys began to sing with him, his
rich baritone adding a lower harmony to Curbain’s tenor with a brotherly blend of
voice that sent shivers down both their spines. There was always something
about blood related family voices that blended so much more intimately than a
choir of strangers. Siblings being the most profound mix of wonderment.

Joy filled the little cottage as they sang together until voices were tired and
Curbain’s out of practice fingers began to ache.

The harp was lovingly set in the chair as Rhys loved Curbain right on the floor in
front of the fire before they crawled tired and elated to bed much later.

It was well past midnight when the door of their cottage was shattered open and Curbain threw up a protective barrier in shrieking fright as a large pack of black wolves burst inside and ransacked their little cottage, the screams from the village could be heard piercing the night.

Rhys and Curbain clung together in terror as the Wolves tried to get passed Curbain's barrier. "NO! GET OUT! GET OUT!" Curbain shouted sending a blast of power at the beasts that shrieked at the light and fled.

"Oh God! What was that!?" Curbain was shaking with fright in Rhys' arms, equally shaking.

"Maker, I know not. Hurry, HURRY They're attacking the others too!" Rhys said and both men bolted out of bed and pulled on clothes in haste and shoved feet into boots as they ran up the path, Curbain lighting up the night with light, the wolves were everywhere. Men laying dead and the women! The poor women!

"GET OFF HER! GET OFF HER!" Curbain shouted seeing Mika being held down and her clothes being ripped to shreds by a demon right in the snow, she was screaming and fighting and Curbain blasted the beast with his magic before he could finish the despicable act of trying to rape her.

Rhys was also sending off power mage globes of lightening across the square as he and Curbain fought off the beasts.

Mika sat in the snow stunned as she watched Rhys and Curbain use magic none of them knew they possessed.

"EVERYONE GET IN THE TAVERN NOW! I've put a barrier on it! HURRY! HURRY!" Curbain cried, blasting a beast that leapt at him. Rhys was ushering groups of terrified men, women and children into the safety of Curbain's barrier.

"Listen to Bain! He'll keep you all safe, do not leave this barrier!" Rhys said running off to find more survivors.

Come dawn the remaining beasts fled and Curbain collapsed in the snow sobbing with grief over the body of Tana and so many others.

Rhys collected him in his arms and carried him in the tavern. "Hurry, bring him food! He needs to restore what he used!" Rhys shouted setting Curbain in a chair and holding shaking shoulders as Mika raced over and hugged him crying.

"Maker Bless you Bain! You saved us!" Mika wept as Dirkin brought over stew.

"Feck me! A mage! You're a mage?" He asked as Rhys forced Curbain to eat while he chewed through a loaf of bread himself.

“Aye. We both are. I’m a healer mage, Curbain is... Exceedingly more powerful than I.” Rhys said seeing Curbain’s fear manifest as he continued to sob.

“Bain?” Mika asked seeing Curbain was not himself and shaking terribly.

“He never wanted anyone to know. Let’s just say our parents were rather cruel to him when they found out about his gifts. Bain, dearest please.” Rhys said smoothing Curbain’s disheveled hair out of his face.

“I couldn’t save them all! What good am I if I can’t!? I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!” Curbain wailed and Rhys rocked him tightly just as Mother Willow walked into the tavern.

Everyone fell to their knees as the sheer presence of the Spirit Mother in Willow’s form filled the room.

*Darkness comes from across the Sea
Taking victims with vicious Glee*

*Send you I do My Mage most Wise and His Brother Healer Good Mirth
Soul bonded Mates from Birth.*

*West shall you fly to fight the Night
Only my Six can make all wrongs right.*

*Met you will be on your journey hence
First the Dark Seer Lost near the Forest Fence*

*Over Stone, Over Glen, West ever West to Rivers Bend
Master of Fire and Master of Earth Fight and Defend*

*Master of Sense joins them on the Morrow
Meet them you will all filled with much sorrow.*

*My Six you shall be and shall Fight for me
Until Darkness and Terror of Tanaocktu Flee.*

*They Cannot be killed by mundane methods
Tanaocktu must be burned to ashes!*

*Go now, Make haste The sunlight must never waste.
Protect and serve my children’s fates.
Darkness will not wait.*

From there Willow vanished and Curbain stood tall, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "Someone get me paper now. Anything! All your jewelry, anything you wear. Hurry!" Curbain said and people raced away to bring him what he needed.

He sat down and hurried scribbled charms on paper and held his hands over the baubles.

"Hang the paper in your windows. Over your doors, protect every home with them, accept anyone who comes to you in fear. Wear your jewelry at all times! I've placed protective charms on them that will burn these beasts if they set foot within fifty paces of you!" Curbain said storming outside and setting fire to the bodies of the Tanaocktu that lay scattered in the courtyard.

His whole demeanor had changed. Gone was the quiet and shy Curbain they all adored, an eerily calm, collected and emotionless and shell-shocked husk of a man had suddenly replaced him.

Rhys stood and took Curbain's hand and for a moment, Curbain sagged and turned into Rhys' embrace.

"I'm sorry, we have to go. Please, Please stay safe so we have a place to come home to again." Rhys said and Mika raced forward and hugged them both.

"Make sure you both stay safe so you CAN come home. My prayers go with you both. We all love you, please come home again!" Mika begged and Curbain held her close.

"I vow to at least try." Curbain said softly, once more the gentle youth everyone loved.

"Aye lads, come home safe! I'll make you travel rations, hurry and take all you need from the store. I'm sure poor Tana would have wanted you to." The barkeep said turning to prepare food and rations as other's scattered to make their homes safe and grieve the dead later.

It was with heavy hearts Rhys and Curbain packed essentials in miniature. Including a little cherry wood harp that had somehow managed to survive the damage to their home, it was the only personal possession Curbain took with him as he and Rhys headed the Mother's Orders and set out on a path that would leave a legacy that would far outlast memories and history.

A legacy told in other tales and bedtime fables and not however, in this one...

Calum stood looking at a small stone beneath a golden apple tree. “Rocky, take a look here!” He called and Rocky walked over.

“I’ll be damned. It’s our Tree! The one from our past memories.” Rocky said kneeling to look at the simple engraved stone, well worn and hardly readable. However, the names unmistakable. It was Rhys’ and Curbain’s gravestone marker. Anda had buried them beneath the tree that Curbain loved.

The cottage was long gone, and even the orchards no longer existed and the forest had reclaimed much of the area. They had come across the tree quite by accident on their way back north to return the hilt to the shrine.

Calum reached up and plucked an apple and took a bite. They were delicious and just sweet enough to take the edge off being too tart. “I can see why I liked these once.”

“Aye beloved.” Rocky said as they both stood looking back and remembering a little girl plucking the vary same apples. “We had happy times here. Reyna loved your tree as much as you did.”

“Aye. We should get moving again, we could stand here and be nostalgic all day. And the sooner we put the hilt back, the sooner we can go back to OUR home and start our own family.” Abaisha said coming up to stand between his mates who smiled at him.

“Aye. Nag, we heard you the last hundred times you were hinting at having children.” Calum chuckled and Rocky winked.

“Aye, and Cay’s stopped taking the tea so we’ll see what happens okay?”

“Fair enough.” Abaisha laughed as the triad made their way back to their camp for the night, safe in the knowledge that there was nothing left to go bump in the night.

END BROTHERLY BONDS