

“In the Name”

Book One in Namesake Tales

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Preface

There is an ancient custom in the Kingdom of Aegis that began with King Wisdom's reign. It's said that to name a child with a virtue or occupation would so imprint the youth so that he or she would live up to the lofty name placed upon their heads. So it was true of King Wisdom, the wise who conquered the warring factions of Aegis and made the kingdom we know today.

His Son, Prince Prosperity brought wealth in trade from other kingdoms to our borders and thus the tradition of naming children with ideals to encourage them began.

My given namesake is Constant. An appropriate name since I seem to be constantly fighting or constantly thinking about a certain youth who owns my very soul and I am sworn to protect. I think back to my childhood when it all began and I cannot help but smile at the memory.

I was six years old the first time I saw him. It was during the harvest festival and being a child during those festivities is grand for servants as well as the nobility. The bright streamers and puppet shows. The minstrels and music and the stalls of fresh goods spread out in the courtyards of the Keep and spilling out into the city streets.

My mother, Kestrel was a huntswomen for the Queen and in charge of Queen Delicate's falcons. My father, Seeker was in charge of the King Stern's hounds so I grew up amidst dogs and birds in the King's stables and had a very good childhood being of the upper servants of the keep.

I had no concept of my station in life, my parents while teaching me their trades gave me a very good and loving upbringing and gave me plenty of time to myself to just be a child.

A luxury I took for granted at the time as I ran from stall to stall with my pennies buying all sorts of treats that were sure to give me nightmares and an upset stomach later that night. I didn't care and I was letting the old grey muzzled scent hound, Bloodnose, lick the berry juice from my sticky fingers. The bubbly pie long gone.

Bloodnose was old and no longer went to hunt with the King so my father let the dog trail after me most days. Partly because Bloodnose would take down a boar to protect me and keep strangers from getting too friendly with a carefree boy. Bloodnose kept me safe and I fed him tidbits of my treats and we were happy.

We met up with some other children near the kitchen fountains where a minstrel was singing songs of King Fierce's journey to the far north kingdom of Rustgaard where he slew the dragon and carried home the mountain princess to wife.

We laughed as he sang to us and that was when I first saw him. His dark skin was like Queen Delicate's. She had come from the southern Islands off the coast of Aegis. The tales I heard from there were exotic and that the golden skin people of the tropical islands wore little clothing and fewer morals.

I was too young to remember the scandal when the King newly widowed went to the isles and came back with a young tropical islander as his second wife. He named her Delicate to our customs, her real name I never knew.

She was the price of free trade and peace. She came back as Queen to an aging King and trade had opened between the Kingdom and the Southern Isles.

The boy peeking around the kitchen door had her dark skin, her piercing blue eyes and hair so blond it was almost white. He was just about my age it looked, maybe a year younger no more. He was dressed nobly, in sky blue silks and he looked terrified of Bloodnose and afraid to come any closer to the minstrel.

"It's alright. Bloodnose won't hurt you." I assured the boy who came out stiffly, regarding the dog warily.

Bloodnose thumped his tail on the ground as the boy approached and then walked over to snuff at him in greeting. The boy was won over and his stiffness melted when Bloodnose gave him a sloppy lick and then wandered off to nose at a discarded bone near the kitchen doors.

"He's a big dog." The boy said to me as he watched Bloodnose worry the bone in his jaws.

"Yeah, but he's old and he likes kids my Pa says." I replied not knowing who this boy was nor caring much at the time. He was just another child in a sea of merry makers.

He was pretty and finely boned and if it weren't for the clothes of a boy I would have assumed him a girl with the length of his natural ring curls and build. He seemed terminally shy and kept looking over his shoulder as if he feared being caught at something.

"I'm Constant, what's your name?" I asked innocently.

"Beloved." He answered shyly and then blushed when I laughed.

"That's not a boy's name." I replied callously and the youth looked ready to cry.

“It’s my name just the same.” He sighed; looking accustomed to defending his name and then resigned already to a lifetime of jeers from his peers for having a feminine name.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to tease.” I apologized and the boy just shrugged.

“Why should you be any different than my brothers?” Was all he said as Bloodnose came back to be petted by the new boy.

Beloved scratched his ears and chin and relaxed beside us as a tumbler joined the minstrel and we watched the show, Bloodnose between us snoozing in the warm autumn afternoon.

After a few songs Beloved stood and dusted off his pants. “Mama said I could have a pie and gave me money for one. Can you show me where I can find one?” He asked and I nodded and led him to the baker’s stall.

Beloved was in awe of the goods displayed, as if he’d never eaten a pie before. “Which one is good?” He asked me and I pointed out the bubbly berry pies. My particular favorites.

To my surprise Beloved bought four. One for himself, one for me, one for Bloodnose and one he said he was going to take back to his mother. Because she was sick in bed and he thought a sweet might cheer her up. He looked melancholy when he mentioned his mother.

I asked him what was wrong and he told me that ever since he’d been born his mother had been weak and that even small colds made her very tired and sickly. He was in the middle of his telling when a guardsman walked over and frowned.

“Your highness. Your mother is worried about you, I’ve orders to bring you back to her at once.” He said and the boy nodded.

“It was nice to meet you Constant. Thank you for showing me the way and I hope we can meet again sometime.” He said giving Bloodnose one more scratch behind the ears before he sighed and followed the guard back inside the keep.

“So that’s the young Prince Beloved. Don’t see much of him, his mama’s got him sequestered most oft than not.” I heard the baker say and his wife nodded.

“To keep him safe from his brother’s no doubt. Rough handed they are like their father. A Boy so much younger and of southern stock he’s prime for bullying. I heard rumors that sometimes Beloved isn’t seen for days on end and then when he is, he’s a motley of bruises and there is little the Queen can do about it confined to her sickbed. Just look at him, what boy of five should be so sad? He

should be playing with the other children his age, but he's locked in that room with his mother, watching her die slowly and then fearing a cuff if he leaves her protection. Not normal I say. It's cruel."

I listened intently. I'd heard my parents talking about a boy like that before too. They never mentioned his name, but they too gossiped at night about a boy they pitied in the Keep. My mother was a friend of the Queen as well as her servant. She'd often go to see the ailing queen and come back looking sad.

I went to find my mother and I asked her about what I'd heard and told her I met Beloved. She seemed shocked.

"I'm surprised they let Beloved out of her sight. Did he look well?" She asked and I nodded.

"He looked scared."

"He is scared Constant. He's a sad little boy. His Mama is dying and he's got no friends his age to play with. He sits all alone beside his Mama every day while she sleeps and watches over her. He's a good boy." My mother told me and then she sighed heavily.

"It's a shame his father and brother's cannot see that in him." She added with a far off look on her face. Then she turned and smiled at me.

"Constant, the next time I go visit the Queen, would you like to go with me for Beloved's sake? Would you be his friend?" She asked me and I nodded.

"Sure, I liked him he bought me a pie and just because I showed him where the booth was. He didn't have to and he gave one to Bloodnose too."

My mother looked pleased. "Beloved is a generous and gentle soul. He could use a true friend at his side." She said taking me off to meet my father where he was playing a game of horseshoes with some of the other stable hands.

That was where my life and Beloved's began sharing a path.

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Chapter One - The Chosen

The next time my mother paid a visit to the Queen she did indeed take me with her and I can categorically state that in my life I have never seen a more beautiful woman. Even weak and in poor health she was infinitely lovely and I could see why the King brought her home like an exotic treasure. She was propped up in her bed, lace coverlets in soft pastels. Her long golden tresses the palest of yellows fell in a riot of waves and curls over her shoulders and her dark golden brown skin in contrast was breathtaking.

She was much younger than I'd anticipated. King Stern was old; his eldest son was older than my own father. The young woman in the bed before me looked younger than my own mother. She had been what my mother termed a child bride, married to King Stern when barely into her womanhood at fourteen and mother to Beloved before her sixteenth year. I would learn later in life from experience in such matters that her fragile health was partly due to the fact that she'd been so very young when Stern bedded her and having Beloved so young, it had harmed her health.

Rather than taking the blame of that condition on his own shoulders, King Stern blamed Beloved. As if the child had a say over the lust of an old man who plundered a new young bride and robbed her of youth. Sadly, the children are often blamed for the vices of their parents. Beloved was no exception.

However, Queen Delicate knew the truth and from her hands Beloved knew only gentleness. He was sitting on a stool next to his mother and it was clear he'd grow up in her image. There was very little of Stern in Beloved's countenance. In all ways, he was his mother's son.

His skin was just a few shades lighter due to his father's influence, but that was as far as his father's blood dictated his looks. The southern blood ran strong in the small boy holding his mother's hand.

The Queen smiled at me and patted her bedside for me to come closer. "I see your father in you young Constant. However, it is your mother's eyes I see looking at me. Sharp as an eagle and clear as the smoky topaz that my homeland mountains grow." She said brushing my unruly dark hair away from my eyes. I did look like my father. Sable hair, fair skin and my mother's hazel brown eyes. I liked Queen Delicate immediately.

"I hear you befriended my Beloved the other day and your taste in pies was a most pleasing suggestion. I thank you for both the guidance to my son and for

the lovely berry pie he brought back for me.” She said and I smiled, lost in her so very blue eyes filled with kindness and warmth.

“You’re welcome your Majesty.” I said as the queen ran soft fingers through my hair.

“In my land, titles are not used. We are as we are and no one man is more important than the next. Our leaders are men and women who prove themselves by example and no decisions are made by any one single person, but by a counsel of elders. I came here with my husband as a representative of my people. Here they call me Queen Delicate. In my land I am simply Harah. Daughter of Zio elder and Mana Elder. Call me Harah please.” She said and I was astounded and I looked to my mother who just nodded at me.

I then looked to Beloved who was silent as a cat next to his mother. “Beloved dearest, would you bring Mama that box from the dresser please.” She asked and Beloved nodded and immediately fetched the box for his mother.

It was a small jewelry box, painted and carved in exotic beauty. Dragons in flight adorned the lid and blue silk lined the inside. From within she took a small golden earring, no larger than a small fingernail. Fashioned delicately into a dragon’s claw clutching a smoky topaz gem, the gem was indeed the same color as my eyes. It was identical to the earring my mother wore.

The Queen bade me closer and apologized for the sting I’d feel as she pierced my ear. “This is the symbol of my clan young Constant. I welcome you to my hearth as kin of spirit and as clan I ask you to treat my son as you would kin. As your mother is my kin in heart I hope you and my son will be as close.” She said and I nodded, my ear throbbing but I felt proud and turned to see Beloved smiling at me.

“Then be off with you two and share the day well. If there is trouble Constant, I bid you come to me immediately.” The queen said and I nodded and went and took Beloved’s hand. He gripped mine with a joy I’d never imagined.

“I promise, we won’t get into any trouble.” I said and I led Beloved behind me as we left my mother and the queen to talk privately.

It didn’t take me long to realize Beloved had never had a friend before, nor did he have the first inclination on how to play or where to go to play. Therefore, I lead the way. I showed him the hounds and Bloodnose was happy to see Beloved again and trailed us as I showed Beloved the new litter of puppies that were Bloodnose’s last stud litter. Beloved was lost in a pile of nipping and barking six week olds pups when I learned the truth of the rumors and became fiercely protective of my new friend.

We hadn't heard someone come into the stables and it wasn't until Prince Remarkable spoke we noticed his leering presence. He was Stern's third son with his first wife, Queen Regalia. She had borne the King four sons before she had died of the flux some seven years earlier. Prince Royal Justice, the heir to the throne was the eldest at thirty summers old and was currently with his soldiers traveling the kingdom dispensing the King's Justice. I'd never seen the man in my life and he had not been back to court longer than I'd been alive. Prince Persuasive was the second born at Twenty-five summers and was a born trader. He brokered most of King Stern's trade alliances and was as good as haggling as he was at spending the profits so my father said on more than one occasion.

Next was Prince Remarkable, and he was remarkable. Handsome and dandy and twenty and one summers old. He had a reputation of being a spend-thrift and womanizer and his cold glare gave me the shivers. His twin, Prince Reasonable was only so when it benefited his own interests. The twins were not identical, but often together and their entourage was never far behind. They were bullies and every servant knew to avoid the younger Princes and I watched Beloved cringe and cower before Remarkable.

"What have we here? Does the little savage like smelling like dogs?" Remarkable asked and Beloved didn't move, he was frozen in place in terror. Bloodnose emitted a low growl and moved between his puppies, Beloved and Remarkable. Protective of Beloved as much as for his pups.

"Answer me darkie!" Remarkable spat and Beloved shivered.

"I was just playing with the puppies. Mama said I could play."

"Your mama is a savage dark skinned whore. Bare-breasted she beast she was when they sold her to father for a bride trade price. Shameful that my father lays with a woman young enough to be his daughter! You shame us all you little piece of dark filth!" Remarkable spat on Beloved and I did a foolish thing, I stepped in-between them snarling.

"Stop picking on Beloved! He's not hurting you." I shouted and I made my very first dangerous enemy that day. Remarkable sneered at me and raised his hand and would have struck me if my father had not come into the stables.

"My Prince what's going on here?" He asked seeing the Prince ready to strike and me standing protectively arms wide in front of a cowering Beloved.

Remarkable lowered his hand and sneered. "Nothing." He grumbled as he stalked off and my father turned to me a look of pride on his face.

“Good boy Constant. Keep low. Don’t let him see you again too soon.” My father said squatting down beside Beloved and running a fatherly hand over his hair.

“My prince, I am sorry. Do you like the puppies?” My father asked changing the subject nicely. Beloved nodded still shivering.

“You can play with them whenever you wish my Prince. Puppies and young boys are made for one another.” He said turning to ruffle my hair as he stood again.

“Why don’t you take the puppies out back and play son. It’s safer back there.” He said and I lead the way out the back door of the stable into a small private courtyard where we ran with the puppies and played in the horse trough and just had fun the morning’s experience long forgotten in favor of laughter and my father bringing us bread and cheese and fresh apples for lunch.

Beloved was transformed when he smiled and laughed and was rewarded with a wet palm when he fed his apple core to one of the horses in the stable.

I had chores I had to do and I felt no qualms at enlisting Beloved to assist me. Rank and station are invisible when you’re children and Beloved seemed eager to help me. We swept out straw and laid down new in the pens. We filled feed buckets and fetched scraps for the dogs from the kitchen. All the while Beloved smiled.

As dinnertime approached we bid our farewells for the day and here I would learn of a mountain custom that to this day means very much to me. As Beloved turned to me to bid me farewell, he laid his bare wrist to my temple, a gentle brush where it rested and our eyes met.

“I am most honored to call you friend.” He said honestly before rushing back to his mother’s side. My mother nearby smiled approvingly.

“He just gave you a very deep honor son.” She said as we walked back to our rooms over the stables for our own dinner.

“To bare his wrist and lay it upon the pulse in your temple. Heart pulse to heart pulse he recognizes you as one most dear to him. It is the mountain way to show affection and kinship. Be honored my son.” She said and I was. I truly liked Beloved he was my first real and true friend too.

I awoke that night with an urgency within me I still cannot name. My heart beat wildly in my chest and an overwhelming sense of fear urged me out of my bed and down into the dog kennels.

There I found Beloved, shaking and sobbing and curled around Bloodnose for comfort. When I made a noise coming into the kennel, Beloved's face shot up in fear and I could see the remnants of a bloody nose and his eyes were swollen from more than tears.

I could feel the fear dripping off Beloved in waves and Bloodnose was protectively guarding the boy sitting in the straw dressed only in his nightshirt.

My mother, as all mother's seemed to have sixth sense had heard me get up and followed not far behind me. She made a little sobbing noise in the back of her throat when she found us in the kennel. I was holding Beloved in my arms while he cried into my shoulder. No words were exchanged at first, it seemed just my presence was enough comfort for beloved.

"Dearest mercy, take him up to your bed Constant and I'll go get something for his nose. Come on dears." My mother ushered us up the stairs and never letting go of my hand Beloved followed me up to my little room above the stables and crawled into my bed with me.

My mother brought in cool wet rags and washed Beloved's face, much as she did me when I was broken or bruised. Like the time I accidentally got kicked by the old mule. However, even I could tell Beloved's bruises were no accident.

"Beloved dearest, who did this to you?" My mother asked as she bathed the blood away from his nose. He sniffed and rubbed his eyes.

He didn't answer at first, his terror was palpable and almost as if, if he spoke the name it would bring his tormentor to him. I took his hand and just held it as he came to some internal decision.

"Remarkable, it's always the twins. Persuasive never even notices me and Justice sends me letter and toys. Remarkable is the meanest. He tells me Mama is a whore." Beloved sniffled and my mother frowned.

"She is no such thing and you know that Beloved. Does Remarkable hit you like this often?" She asked and Beloved nodded.

"He hits. Reasonable does... other things." Beloved shivered and the look on my mother's face was of pure shock and disgust. Then Beloved's words I did not understand. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned what those 'other things' were and I cannot think back on that night without misery in my heart. Beloved's childhood was something I'd not put my worst enemy through.

I would derive great pleasure to bestow upon Reasonable my sense of justice. He'd never be reasonably sound of body again if I had my way.

My mother never said anything; only her eyes betrayed the hatred she felt that someone could be so cruel to a child. My father stood in the doorway, his face a mask of controlled anger. "Let the boys get some sleep Kes. I'll keep watch, that is, if Bloodnose will let anything up those stair tonight. I think she should know the full extent of her worries."

My mother nodded, tucked us both in for the night and I held Beloved until he stopped shaking and fell asleep with his cheek against my chest.

My mother went to the Queen and I never did find out what was said, but it was dawn when my mother woke us. Not even the sun had broken the horizon yet.

"Come on boys, no time to waste." She said, getting us both up and dressed.

The Queen was sitting below in a cart, shrouded and hooded and Beloved raced to her embrace and she stroked his brow lovingly. She enfolded him in her arms and draped her cape around his small shoulders.

"My Beloved. No more will I let my little love suffer. You should have told me dearest."

"I didn't want you to worry mama. You're sick." Beloved sniffled and the Queen sighed.

"I am still your mama Beloved and it is my job to protect my son regardless of my health. We go where you will be safe." She said as my father finished loading the cart with what looked like travel rations, tents, blankets and chests of clothing.

Bloodnose and the bitch Sharpscent and her puppies were in the back of the wagon as well. My mother made me gather my things as fast as I could and those too went into the back of the wagon along with myself.

The queen folded me into her arms as well. "Stay warm little ones. Ah, I see why you feel safe with him as I do his mother. He has the sense." The queen commented vaguely and Beloved nodded. I didn't know what they meant and didn't have time to ask.

My father took up the reigns of the cart and my mother took up her mount beside us, her falcon Keeneye on her padded shoulder. Un-hooded his head swiveled as he watched over our hasty flight.

Two other huntsmen of the Queen's guard joined us on mount. Blade and Dagger. Blade was the largest woman I'd ever seen in my life. As burly and brawny as a soldier and her sword arm was legendary. She'd been a former mercenary in her youth and had many gruesome scars down her face and arms.

Her steel gray hair was shorn into spikes atop her head and she was silent as her grey stallion. Dagger was her son and even larger version of his mother.

Both seasoned warriors and both deadly. I noticed in every ear was an earring that matched mine. These were more than the Queen's guard, these people she counted as close to kin as she had in Aegis and no doubt they'd fight for her as they would family.

Blade took the lead with my Mother. We followed in the cart behind with Dagger taking up the rear guard as we silently left the Keep in the hours of pre-dawn.

We didn't use the main road, and took a round about way down paths and tracks that twisted through forested hills and rocky terrain. The cart bounced and jostled along rattling our teeth. The queen looked miserable but determined.

I still didn't know what was going on myself. Only that there seemed an urgency that we get as far away as possible in the shortest amount of time.

"We can make Rockport by sundown and I've got a cousin there that will hide us for the night and then book us passage on a vessel heading to the isles Harah." Blade said and she nodded.

"Just get us away from that man and his wicked sons. My people will be outraged when they hear how we have been treated. I will not let my Beloved be tainted with evil. I will not." Harah spoke, adamant in her conviction.

"We all pray an early ascension for Justice. The only honest man of that bloodline left." Dagger said with a fierce nod. He spoke as if he knew Justice first hand. I would later learn he did and had been the sergeant at arms that had trained the young warrior as a youth.

I remember that first day and night like glimpsing patches of clear sky through the fog. I remember Harah holding Beloved and I in the cart and Beloved's hand in mine, gripping with anxiety and fear.

We all slept that night in a barn that belonged to Blade's blacksmith cousin. Wrapped in furs and huddled in the hayloft, once again Beloved sought comfort against me.

Once more we were up in the hours of pre-dawn and heading for a ship. The Queen and Beloved were given a small cabin on deck to share and Harah insisted I share the space with them. Beloved and I shared a tiny bunk together while the Queen slept in another. The harsh travel making her ghastly pale.

My parents, Blade and Dagger slept with the sailors in the bunk room and we were out to sea with the morning tide.

The sea voyage would take fifteen days from Port to Port and the further south we traveled the warmer the weather grew.

The queen seemed to rally her strength on the fresh sea air and Beloved seemed to bask in her glow and recovering health. We would eat with her every morning and then report to the captain for chores. No hands were idle and I learned quite a lot about sailing during that journey.

Mostly I learned that swabbing decks was back breaking labor and I learned to peel a potato by cutting away from myself and not toward. I had more than enough cuts on my hands before I learned the trick.

Beloved was quiet most of the time. His face focused on his tasks. The roles of Prince and Servant were gone and he did as much work as I did on that trip.

Harah nodded her pleasure when Beloved reported his chores at the end of the day. "Every mans hands are equal my son. Nobility comes from within the soul, not from a father's seed. Spirit is worth more than blood. Remember that." She would instruct and he would nod and crawl into bed beside me at night exhausted.

Harah would smile at me as she tucked us in at night, the look on her face approving. I never knew what she saw in me then, but I was happy that I could make her smile at me. Beloved was always a cool shape against my side those days.

His skin was always cool to the touch and I'd give him my warmth in the night without even thinking. We fit well together and that's all that mattered.

I remember the days on the ship as one remembers a fond dream. Even the strenuous chores in their way bring forth smiles. Even the most tedious of chores can be fun when you have a friend by your side to pass the time.

When we reached the islands, there was a delegation of fierce looking natives there to greet us. The warriors of several clans stood at attention, their spears, swords and bows sheathed but ready at attention. A concerned couple met Harah on board and the way they looked at her, filled with concern, was enough to tell me these were her parents.

Beloved was greeted warmly, his grandfather held him on his hip proudly as he carried him down the gang plank to the waiting caravan that would take us inland to their settlement.

Beloved's grandmother helped Harah into a comfortable carriage and then turned to me.

“Come, you ride with Beloved kin of heart.” She said and smiled at me. I could see that Harah took after her mother and even old this lady was just as beautiful.

Beloved and I shared a mount tethered to his grandfather’s and all the way down the road the old man pointed out landmarks of interest and told us ancient tales of how the islands were made from volcanic gods that argued with the mother sea and were tamed and cooled into the fertile land.

My parents, Blade and Dagger banded warmly with the warriors that made up our procession from port to village.

It was a long journey and we made camp at the side of a large Clearwater lake and Beloved and I played naked under the stars as we slashed about in the warm, clean water.

His grandmother scouring us with fragrant soap from head to toe while our mothers watched from the nearby campfire watching us play. None of us had endured a decent bath in well over a fortnight. We all took turns bathing in the lake and drying by the campfire and eating a good solid meal of roasted fowl on spits over the fire.

Beloved seemed transformed under the full moon of his heritage and homeland. His brown skin gleamed in the moonlight and his pale hair was luminous under the moon. All the natives had dark skin, pale hair and icy gemstones for eyes. They were a singularly beautiful race of people.

They were all soft spoken; no voices were raised beyond murmuring around campfires. Only the occasional hearty burst of laughter rang true in the evening breeze.

Harah retired to her tent early, she was weary of the travel and Beloved saw her to bed comfortably before he re-joined his maternal grandparents by the fire with me. We sat enraptured as we were told more stories of the isles.

Beloved and I shared a tent and we were ushered to bed earlier than we wished and I lay there half awake, Beloved’s bare back against my chest as I heard the tent flap pull back. My mother and Beloved’s grandmother stood there checking on us.

“He has the sense like you and your mate do. Has he bonded to an animal yet?” The old woman asked.

“Not yet. He isn’t quite old enough yet. Right now his senses are just awakening. He knew to find Beloved by scenting his fear and following it. Right now he’s attuned to Beloved.”

“That is more than obvious and Beloved is drawn to that net of safety. Beloved’s gifts are at the cusp of awakening and I can feel them just under the surface. It is a good thing he has been brought here. They would have been buried under his fears and would have gone unanswered.”

“It sickens me that his own brothers treat him so and his father turns blind eyes.”

“Let us hope the eye remains blind to a missing son.”

That was all the conversation I heard before the day caught up with me and I was blissfully asleep.

By mid-afternoon the following day we entered paradise.

Trees taller and wider than I’d ever seen grew like majestic spires of redwood conifers. The first boughs larger than the largest trees I’d ever seen. All along them artfully carved dwellings, natural staircases and bridges of timber and treated ropes spanned the trees.

Along the forest floor were the communal buildings. The meeting houses, the storage houses and the baths. Hot and cool springs abounded. Some houses were marked for drinking water wells; others were mineral baths and cooling springs. There was a healer’s hut and guest dwellings all along the ground and so artistically constructed as to be a part of the natural surroundings and not detract from the abundance of nature.

Goats and pigs were kept in neat enclosures. Several large cats lounged on rocks and branches and eyed Bloodnose, Sharpscent and their pups warily as we passed.

The natives were friendly and waving and running in joyous welcome. Clothing was sparse and indeed several woman wore only simple wraps around their waists but it was obvious even to a child these were no bare-breasted whores as Remarkable had so stated. These were a natural people, in-tune with the very breath of life around them.

Rather than to be masters of the land and beast, they chose to live in simplistic harmony.

Birds of all shapes and sizes nestled in the trees and on padded shoulders of many men and women. Others had large sleek cats at their sides others large grey coated wolves. This was human living side-by-side with beasts in harmony.

It was magical and my skin tingled at the magic in the air around me. Harah smiled at me.

“You feel the magic Constant because you’ve the gift. Just like your parents have the sense of beasts, so do you. The animals choose to live with us; they are not pets, but friends and partners. You have a wondrous gift, not everyone is so blessed to be one with nature. You see things in ways others do not. Cherish your gifts.” Harah said as she was helped down from her carriage and into a large dwelling on the ground. Her fragile condition would scarcely carry her up the winding staircases that led to the dwellings in the treetops.

I was dumbfounded with wonderment. The richness of color, the warmth of the air, the smell of loam and pine and fragrant flowers and perfumes. I stood still in fascination as I was helped down from my horse and my eyes turned to a boulder in a patch of sunlight to where the most dazzling creature I’d ever seen sat sunning herself.

Golden scales like molten metal caught the light and twinkled like stars. Her leathery wings shimmering in subtle rainbow hues under the gold skin. Her head on a long sinuous neck cocked and examined me closely. Her large, eyes like huge sapphires whirled and she spread her wings and flew to my shoulder.

Harah paused and gasped, my parents too seemed struck to the ground and everyone paused to watch as the small dragon came to inspect me.

She landed on my shoulder and her talons dug into my shirt but did not pierce my flesh. She was lighter than Keeneye and about the same size. Her tail wrapped around my neck as she sniffed my hair and preened it with her sharp beak like snout.

::Sharp mind, good soul. Friend to me you will be. I choose you as partner. I am Sunfire, you are my Constant.:: She said in my mind and I staggered at the weight of her words and she bereted me with a cuff of her wing to my head.

“Did she speak to you lad?” One woman asked, her eyes in awe of me. I slowly nodded.

My parents looked proud as one old man with a Green dragon on his shoulder stepped forward. “To be chosen by a dragon is a deep honor lad. They are wisest of the beasts and vain as peacocks. The little Queen has been with us many months now and has never chosen a partner before you. She must see great things in you to have chosen you so quickly upon your arrival.” He said smiling kindly.

::I’ve been waiting for him. Silly old fool.:: Sunfire said in my mind and apparently into the old man’s as well for he chuckled and nodded.

“So I have been scolded by the golden lady. Sunfire has chosen Constant.” He said and everyone cheered and my parents looked about ready to burst with pride. Beloved came over and took my hand, his eyes filled with wonder at the dragon on my shoulder. Sunfire turned and rubbed her head against Beloved’s cheek.

::Like boy friend. Special he is and will be. Gentle soul. Have him scratch my chin with his healing touch I have itch.:: Sunfire told me and I related to Beloved.

He smiled and his fingers gently scratched Sunfire’s chin and she trilled as he touched her scales.

“She’s so pretty. Mama told me dragons were real, I never knew they were so beautiful.” Beloved said enraptured as the dragon sang under his fingers.

::Like Beloved. Beautiful soul touch. Constant protect Beloved well, guard healer soul well my chosen.:: Sunfire bade me before she took flight and went back to her rock for sunbathing. The Green dragon joining her in the patch of sunlight.

Beloved and I were lead to a dwelling up a staircase beside where Harah was taken. Our shared dwelling just above hers. The old man with the green dragon carried up a perch on a platform and placed it by the window.

“For your lady to rest on. It is your duty now to feed her young Constant. She will be guide and protector and in return you will care for her needs. If you’ll follow me I will show you where to get her food and water and show you how to make the oils to rub into her scales to keep them healthy. I show your good parents around as well. Three new beast sense gifted join us, it is a good day for our clan. Dragon partners are most rare, you are a blessing to us lad. Welcome to our clan.” The old man said taking me and my parents off to show us where to get what we needed to take care of our bonded beast partners.

I was walking around in a daze, but listened well and my arms were full of pots of oil and bits of fresh meat and a skin of water when I returned to our dwelling.

Beloved was there, sitting with Sunfire on the single large bed in the center of the room. She was curled up on his lap and he was stroking her head and he smiled as I entered.

Sunfire left Beloved’s lap and landed on my shoulder as I entered. “Are you as confused as I am?” I asked Beloved who laughed.

“A little. Mama told me stories, but living one is different. She likes to be scratched.”

“Because she’s itchy and she’s demanding to be oiled now.”

“You can talk with her?” Beloved asked and I nodded.

“Beast Magic. Mama says that is a good gift and most of the warriors of the clan are gifted with the Beast Sense. I can only feel her emotions, I cannot talk with her. My senses are different. Mama says I have a healing sense.”

“So does Sunfire. She said you’re a healer and she likes your touch.” I replied and Beloved nodded and helped me oil my new partner. She hopped over to her perch in the sun to dry and Beloved helped me put my supplies away.

We each had our own tall wardrobe on either side of the bed. A shared table and two chairs. Two nightstands and two book shelves. We obviously were intended to share the bed together. It was certainly large enough for two large adults, for two children it was massive.

Two women came next and brought with them clothes for each of us and necessities like soaps and combs and even a few toys. They helped us change into the softer silks in bright colors and one of the woman cut my hair. Short on top and long in the back and she twisted the back into a short braid like I noticed the old man had worn.

“Dragon partners wear hair like this, a warrior’s tail.” She explained as the other woman pulled Beloved’s long ringlets into a crown on top of his head and twisted bright beads and feathers into it.

I was given a bright wrap loin cloth to wear and sandals that laced up my calves. Leaving my chest bare save for colorful beads they draped around my neck.

Beloved was given a soft belted robe that left his chest bare and on his feet almost dainty sandals that fastened just around his ankles. He looked like a fragile blown glass figure. Again I realized how pretty he was and how feminine he looked with his hair adorned in beads and feathers.

::He is healer gifted. He is not to be a warrior like you. He is gentle gifted, his hands hold only peace and no weapons. A Dragon Partner is always the protector of the healer. They are the most precious and rare of the gifted to be honored and protected and he is ours to care for Constant.:: Sunfire said lazily as she dozed on her platform in the sunlight.

Once we were dressed to satisfaction we were lead back down to where Harah lived now. She was sitting up in her bed, looking tired but at peace. She smiled with tears in her eyes as Beloved entered and she held her arms wide for her son.

She held him close to her as she sighed. "This is my Beloved as he should be. Ah my son, embrace the life you've been given and shine my joy, shine." She said holding an arm out to me, bidding me join the embrace.

"To each life there is a purpose. To each soul a match and compliment. Named him Beloved so he would be so to another and have one to call his own. Named Constant, and so you shall be in his life. Dragon Called and Dragon Loyal. For no Dragon ever chooses a man that is no less than his dragon equal. To every healer is his Dragon Protector. Constant, Beloved share well your lives together and may they be long and sure as you share your paths together. Let no one part you for to each other you are whole." She said and her words were powerful and I felt a weight of responsibility land on my young shoulders.

Instead of feeling weighted and heavy with the burden, I felt lifted and filled. I felt like a boy becoming a man and it filled me with pride. I vowed to my Queen I would ever protect her son and I vowed to Beloved to always be by his side.

My parents were standing together in the doorway. Their Dwelling connected to Harrah's. They were her protectors as I had become Beloved's. My mother nodded at my new understanding and I wondered just how they had come into the Queen's service and I asked what the Queen's gifts were.

"I am the seer of changes. I am the oracle of my people. I am sacrifice to the greater good. I dreamed of a life bereft of my own Beloved save for my son who would be born with precious gifts. I see turbulence that will lay in his path to peace. I see him lead our people to a path of understanding. I was sacrifice to the King whose son will lead stronger. I was the vessel to give a brother to a King of the people. Stern will be betrayed by sons of evil, one of violence one of debauchery and one brother will fall by the way. The great wheel of time is spinning and changing. It will be two brothers of different mothers who will purge Aegis of evil." She said turning to Beloved and kissing his brow.

"Justice to serve and Justice to trust. Time is now at the crux of change. You must learn well your gifts in the time we have now. I have come to the end of my seeing, my role in change done. I have borne the healer who heals change. Now we must dance to the music of fate. Stern will come and threaten war and I will buy us time. You will be given until your seventeenth year to learn, the time manhood is recognized in Aegis. Then you will return and follow no one but Justice into the time of change." Harrah said turning to me.

"Protector, your task is even greater, for his life will depend on you. His protection is your duty. Train well with the other Dragon Partners, learn your skills in the time given you. Know each other openly and fully and keep no secrets from each other. You walk enlightened when you know the other's heart fully." The queen said and I nodded gravely.

My parents sat at the table in Harah's room and my father served Harah in bed from the decanter of juice before my mother began to speak.

"I grew up here with Harah. My parents were traders and merchants and died when I was very little in a storm. I was orphaned in the port we came to when we arrived in the Isles and this clan adopted me, especially when it was discovered I had the beast sense and that every oracle eye's protector was a warrior whose eyes are sharpest to see immediate dangers. I grew up as a sister to Harah. Just as you will grow with Beloved." My mother began and my father continued from there.

"I grew up in King Stern's stables. I was an orphan with a knack for dogs. When your mother arrived with the new queen she sensed in me the gift I never knew I had. Harah had foreseen our joining and urged it immediately. I can say with surety I loved your mother at first sight and my secret gifts were no longer a secret I needed to keep. You came rather quickly after." My father winked at me and smiled.

"The protector always heralds the one he protects. Just as Kestrel is one year my senior to the day, so is Constant to Beloved. Both born when the spring moon shines brightest. We are the chosen who guard the people in peace." Harah said as we shared juice and fruit and stories in a tranquil setting.

Then, being only six, I didn't quite grasp the full portent of my duties and they didn't expect me too. All things come in time and learning is part of growing and understanding comes gradually.

Harah was correct, King Stern did arrive on our heels demanding his wife and son come home. Harah refused. Saying her health was poor and if he was not going to see to her health in his cold castle, she would stay in her homeland and she refused to relinquish her son to any one's care but her own.

She coldly showed Stern his son's healing bruises and bereted him on not teaching his barbarian sons manners. She went on to say that Remarkable had on more than one occasion insinuated starting an affair with her since they were of an age and Stern was furious. He conceded that perhaps he had been too ignorant of his sons and had not believed the rumors. So he agreed to Harah's terms. She would be allowed her rest in her homeland with their son but on Beloved's seventeenth year he would return to Aegis and learn the ways of his people there. Stern had to agree that he would be safer here with Harah than back in court. He promised Justice would come fetch the boy when the time came and he bid his wife and child a conditional farewell and departed.

Thus my training began.

“In the Name”

Book One in Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter Two - Souls Entwined

Every morning I would wake and Beloved and I would go to the baths together after we shared our morning meal. From there I learned to not only fight but how to sharpen my bond with my Dragon. Sunfire enjoyed our exercises, but she enjoyed my preening of her more.

I made sure her scales were clean and healthy with first a sand bath in a hot spring and then a fresh oiling. I cleaned her talons and painted them for her in red. She liked red best on her nails. She was such a vain little creature and I adored her outlandish vanity.

Beloved made her breast plates in fancy bead work and she wore her plates like grand ladies wore jewels on their bosoms. I think he pandered to her vanity more than I did.

While I was training with the warriors in the morning, Beloved had his own studies with the resident healer. He learned his own calling as I learned mine and he applied his rapidly flourishing talents on his mother. Sadly however, Harah never regained her strength in full and within two years, she was gone.

I held Beloved that night as he sobbed himself to sleep. Only in my arms could he find comfort for his loss.

Time however teaches one to accept loss and move on with life. We had both made promises to Harah that we intended to keep. We had regular schedules and duties to keep us active and our minds occupied.

Mornings we spent in training until we met together in our room to share a mid-day meal and then afternoons I went out with hunting parties beside my parents and Beloved would return to the healer for his afternoon studies.

We would meet in the baths again before dinner and then join everyone in the communal building for dinner and relaxation time.

Sometimes there was music and dancing, other times Beloved and I went off on our own down to the beach where we would skinny dip in the waves and collect shells in the sand.

We had quite a collection on the shelves in our room. Many of the smaller shells Beloved would string and make necklaces for me. My sword belt was awash in beautiful shells and beads.

He was quite talented and his nimble fingers found beauty in the simplest of things.

He learned to play the harp and often our evenings were spent in our room as he played for me as I honed the edge to my blade or whittled a piece of redwood.

I carved figures for Beloved that sat on his shelf. A cat, a bear, a wolf, a dragon... whatever idle time I had I spent making gifts for Beloved or my parents and mentors.

At night we would sleep together and Beloved's smooth cool back was always against my chest. I found as much comfort in our closeness as he did. Our lives revolved around each other seamlessly. Sunfire would lay on her platform and trill and remind me mentally that she too approved of Beloved.

At first it was two young boys as close as friends could be and as we got older it was evident that our bond was changing.

I watched Beloved grow from a waif of a boy into a lithe and willowy youth. By the time he was fifteen he reminded me of a bird. Delicate wrists and ankles and a long graceful neck. His hair, a pale milky white hinted with yellow when free, fell like a riot of curls down his back to his waist and his narrow hips. He was reed slender and graceful as an eagle in flight. His long legs were smooth and sinuous and I had known for quite sometime if I stared at him too long my desire would rage and it was a cool bath for me to control myself.

I would watch him through half lidded eyes in the morning going through his ritual. He'd sit and comb out his hair and don a loose fitting morning robe as he began our tea.

He'd then greet Sunfire with an affectionate kiss to her beak and feed her a tidbit of meat from the supply we kept on hand for her and she'd yawn and nuzzle her head under his chin and coax him for a scratch which he always gave her before he'd come and wake me.

We'd drink our tea and eat the breakfast that was always left for us outside our door and then we'd go bathe together.

He always washed my hair for me, he said he liked to take care of me as I took care of him and it was routine. He'd then braid my hair for me and work in the beads he made for me.

Like all Dragon Chosen Warriors, the top and sides of my hair were cropped fairly short and over the ears and the back was left to grow long and long my hair had become. My own braid was as long as Beloved's unshorn locks. Beloved saw to keeping me groomed and cut my hair for me when it needed trimming and

braided it every morning to his liking. The beads he wove into my hair he made himself and he liked bright colors against my dark hair. Bright rainbows of colors threaded my hair daily.

“You are so handsome.” Beloved said to me one morning as he finished with my hair and his arms came to rest around my neck from behind. I tilted my head back and smiled at him.

“Thank you Beloved. As I think you are Beautiful.” I replied and that led to the first time I impulsively kissed him. I reached up behind his head and pulled his face down to mine. His eyes instinctively closed as I pressed my lips against his.

We both shivered in response and our smiles as we parted proved we were indeed synchronized to one another. We had moved beyond the bounds of friendship and into the stages of our adult relationship needs.

I found many fabricated reasons to find him throughout the day to steal a myriad of kisses that day and that night we became lovers.

The candles were out and the moon was bright in our windows as I kissed him breathless in our bed. There was not a patch of his dark skin left unexplored by my newly awakened passions for him.

We were young and inexperienced but thankfully not ignorant. Living in the clan it was not uncommon to see lovers trysting with one another. Male and female alike.

Sunfire was trilling on her perch, approving our union in song and her gentle mind nudge to me suggested I use her oil to aide our pleasure.

I thanked her with a whole fowl the next day in gratitude.

The oil made my joining with Beloved’s body a pleasure for us both and I’ll never forget the first time he welcomed me into his body as a lover and how he moaned breathlessly in my ear as we moved together in the night.

I will never forget the first time I spent my seed in his body and how he shivered with joy beneath me. I was sixteen, hardly more than a boy, but after a decade of living with him so intimately, this was a natural progression of our love for each other.

Harah was right, when there were no secrets between people, intimacy was soul deep and Beloved become more than my duty, he became my very soul.

The next day Zio, Clan Elder and Beloved’s grandfather draped us with flowers and bound our hands together. We were officially a bonded pair. We both

wondered how King Stern would react to the news when he found out. In Aegis Beloved was still a Prince and we were both positive that King Stern was not going to approve of our Island Union. Men did not marry each other in Aegis. It was frowned upon as a fruitless union.

We didn't care at the time. Our bond went much deeper than most. Our very souls were entwined and we were inseparable. We had been born to be so, every healer had a Dragon Partner mate. Just like Rehm, the Green Dragon Partner had been born a year to the day before Healer Ulan, so had I been born for Beloved.

Just as Rehm and Ulan had become more than Healer and Protector during their shared path, so had Beloved and I.

The clans saw this a goddess chosen and they had known since we were children we would grow to be full partners in life as well as in our duties. Which was why they never bothered to keep us from what fate had written on our souls and which the adults had read so plainly upon them so many years ago.

In their eyes, Beloved and I had been married from our first meeting, the marriage of souls is far more binding than the vows adults take. In their eyes, we had been a bonded pair since the moment we began sharing a path.

They had been right. I look back at all Beloved and I had shared and we had indeed shared our lives as a married couple would since that first day I donned the dragon clan earring and became kin of spirit to Harah and future mate of her son.

I wondered now if I made her proud, if I had grown to be what she had hoped for her son.

"You have. Because when you say my name, it is not just a name you speak, but a vowing of your heart. When you say my name, I know you mean it far deeper than any other who speaks my name." Beloved said wrapping his arms around my shoulders from behind, his words a gentle caress of sound behind my ear. He had always had the knack of discerning my thoughts without me ever having to voice them. I turned and gathered him in my arms.

"You are My Beloved." I said almost possessively and Beloved smiled.

"As you are mine. My mother named me in hopes that I would be so to another and have a beloved of my own. I would say she named me most joyously because her wishes and hopes are true. From the first day I saw you by the kitchen fountains with dear old Bloodnose I was drawn to you. My soul recognized my love long before my years allowed me to see clearly." Beloved said and I kissed him long and deep before I replied.

“All things take time, especially a child’s needs to grow into a man’s needs. I remember thinking you looked a girl to me then.”

“I look a girl now Constant.” Beloved chuckled reclining in my arms in our bed.

I pulled open his robe and his own half awake manhood lay bare to me. “Hardly a girl with that my fellow.” I teased giving him a gentle squeeze that made his breath hiss through his teeth.

“You know what I mean Constant.” He laughed and I nodded.

“I do. You have ever been the image of your mother Beloved. Delicate of build you are perhaps in comparison to others, but so are your gifts. Your hands were never meant to bandy weapons but to offer comfort and well-being to others. I say the goddess made you as gentle bodied as your gifts. You are perfect and beautiful as you are.”

Beloved shivered in my arms and pulled me closer. “Just as my protector makes me feel safe and warm in his strong arms. Love me Constant. My Dragon.”

“With pleasure.” I purred and I did. My body unlike Beloved’s was indeed now the body of a man. The tenderness of childhood long gone and replaced with the healthy physique of a young man in his prime.

I was tall and strong. Wide of shoulder, broad of chest and narrow of hip. My years of training my body to fight and hunt had honed me into a natural weapon. I had learned the practiced stealth of the natives and could match them stride for stride as they hunted both in the treetops and on the forest floor. My skin was baked brown in the sun, my fair complexion still several shades lighter than my Beloved, but a toughened hide it had become with exposure. I wore little more than a loin cloth since I’d come to the Dragon Clan and the skin behind that cloth still showed several shades lighter than the rest of me.

Beloved’s fingers dug into the fairer flesh of my posterior as I lay him spread before me on our bed. He yielded to me power and I possessed him and with every thrust while his fingers pulled me closer and deeper. He responded to my mating him predictably. He enjoyed it best when I took him roughly in our bed and so did I. I mated him as a Dragon Male took his female. It was a struggle of dominance over a mate. A forcing of will on a receptive partner. She would challenge and he would force her down.

Just as I would pin Beloved down in our bed and bend him to my will. Forcing his legs wide and pinning him with my body and arms while I thrust into him hard, until the slap of skin on skin was almost violent. He would moan and sob my

name as the sweat beaded on our bodies. He would be shaking in his pleasure before I ever took mine.

I marked my territory like a beast. My scent was on Beloved and my seed he carried in his body. Had he indeed been a female, I had no doubt I would have fathered children on him with my dominance of his body. We made love no other way and I don't think we even considered other options.

We had become lovers as we had been partners. I was the protector, the dominant male. My word he obeyed, my senses he trusted to keep him safe and in so doing he handed me the power in our partnership. My will he followed, to my body he submitted himself as mate. Just as I submitted my soul to the love and comfort he gave to me.

He was the nurturer in our relationship. He cared for my soul and my health. I ate what he told me to eat, I bowed to his will over my heart and health. While he entrusted his body to me and my will. I gave over my soul to him. Knowing he'd protect our love as I protected our bodies.

He was my perfect mate and I his. I can honestly say I have never been more fulfilled or more content than to be one with my Beloved. He completed me and together we were a whole.

For almost two years we lived this way and time began slipping away from us, our time in paradise was drawing to an end. Six weeks before Beloved's Seventeenth birthday and my eighteenth, Justice arrived.

Neither of us had ever met the man and here was Beloved's eldest brother at last in the flesh. At forty-two he was well old enough to be Beloved's father but as of yet, the heir to the throne had yet to marry and sire children of his own. He was a great hulking man, in prime health and a ready disarming smile. His eyes were kind, the type you only find in those who held a jolly spirit. He was a true warrior, a soldier to the crown and beloved of his men. He wore nobility on his spirit and he strode with a purpose to Beloved and shocked everyone when he threw decorum aside and firmly embraced his brother lifting him completely off his feet in a crush of a hug.

"Little Beloved, well met at last!" Justice bellowed and Beloved laughed and hugged his brother back.

"Well met indeed my brother." Beloved said as Justice set him back down at my side and gave me firm eye contact.

“You watch me like a predator lad. I have no intention of harming my brother, or testing your resolve to fight over him. I have no doubt your skills are as good or better than mine. Peace Brother Warrior.” He said extending his hand to me, which I accepted as Sunfire landed on my shoulder to inspect the future king.

“S’ttruth! I never in my life thought... Gracious Lady a dragon.” Justice was awestruck and Sunfire preened on my shoulder drinking in his reaction into her swelled vanity and ego.

“Sunfire.” I gave her name and then rolled my eyes at her excessive posturing. “She is as vain as she is skilled.” I said and Justice laughed.

“All grand ladies of singular beauty do tend to the excess.” Justice winked and bowed and Sunfire alighted once more to show off her aerial abilities before draping herself along a branch as a lady would drape herself and her skirts in a chaise.

“See. It’s my mother, all bejeweled bosoms and yards of silks. Told you.” Justice chuckled shaking his head amused.

We lead Justice to the dwelling beneath ours, where Harah had lived once and got him established and his small number of guards who had traveled with him were given likewise treatment and hospitality before we feasted his arrival.

Low tables and cushions were spread out from the communal house and into the clearings, bright lanterns hung and music filled the air as we ate and welcomed Justice to our clan houses.

Beloved sat to his right and I to Beloved’s. It didn’t take long for Justice to see the relationship between us as Beloved piled my plate for me and Sunfire helped herself from his.

“He is more than just your bodyguard.” Justice observed and I nodded and Beloved smiled.

“He is brother. I am Healer and he is my Dragon Chosen. He is my husband.” Beloved said and Justice’s eyes boggled.

“Husband?”

“Aye Prince Justice. Our gifts are our bond and our souls one. Beloved may be a Prince of Aegis, but the healer Beloved of the Dragon Clan is my spouse as well as my sworn duty. Where Beloved goes, I go.” I said and Justice nodded.

“I won’t attempt to understand it all immediately, which is why I am here early. To learn of my little brother and the clan’s customs before I take him back to shark

infested waters. Something my Father should have done years ago. Beloved, I do apologize I was not there to protect you better when you needed blood to stand beside you other than a frail young mother who was scorned." Justice said and Beloved just laid his hand on top of his brother's.

"You had duties too my brother and time will not wait as she deals the hands of fate. My mother believed in what she saw of you, I may be Stern's son, but I am your man my brother. I ask you let me stand with you to help you face the future." Beloved said and Justice cocked an eyebrow.

"What do you know?" He asked and Beloved sighed.

"My mother was a seer Justice. She knew what she gave up to wed our father. She saw her death from having bred too early. She gave her life freely to give me life. She bore the son to help the brother of a different mother. A brother for the man whom she loved." Beloved said and Justice's eyes went wide.

"You she believed in Justice, and if she could not aide you as wife, she would aide you as step-mother and give you a brother instead of a son to stand with you. She saw a hard path before you, One brother falling to treachery, a father to follow. Two Princes of evil out to take control. You are in danger Justice and I and Constant will stand by you to face what comes."

"You know more than I expected then. Your mother told me much, years ago. I just got word Persuasive has fallen during my voyage here. It looked like a trading deal gone bad, he was known for excess and shady pursuits."

"Which was why it is easy to contrive his murder. Mother could not see how they would die, only that they would. There is one man with you I trust not brother. His aura is filled with vileness. He plots while he smiles and enjoys the feasting. He hopes to blame your death on our clan. I will not let you be killed my brother. Constant?" Beloved turned to me.

"You've already pointed him out to me, and he is being watched. Look up." I said and Justice saw above the feast, two dragons and seven birds of prey sat in the branches, all eyes trained on the would be assassin. "We monitor him." Was all I said and Justice looked grim but nodded.

"How do you know this Beloved?" He asked and Beloved smiled softly.

"I am healer. I can sense truth. I can tell you are sincere brother and I can sense that you loved my mother dearly and carry a pain in your heart when your father took her from you to wife. I know you wished I was your son and I know you care deeply for the people you will one day rule. Honest men are rare my father/brother. Just as dishonest men can eat so merrily at a table of a man they seek to destroy."

"I see." Justice said turning sad eyes to Beloved. "I did love your mother. My father, tricked us both. We thought it was our wedding we planned and then my father took the vows in my stead. I have always wished you were my son Beloved and I loved your mother with my very soul. I wished I could have seen Harah one last time before she left us." Justice said, his emotions raw and the tears Justice refused to shed, rolled down Beloved's cheeks instead. He let his brother purge his sorrow through his own soul. Beloved was ever in tune with the needs of many.

Beloved took Justice's hand and held firm. "As she wished but knew could not be. It was why Stern kept you away, so you could not betray him as he betrayed you. That much she confided in me in those last few days of her life. She did love you in return, very much so."

"But we did betray him Beloved. We did. Just before I left, just one time we shared together. She wrote to me saying you... you are my son Beloved and she told me I could never be father to you in any way but in my heart. We must always pretend to be brothers when I am indeed your father." Justice whispered for our ears only and I saw his grip on Beloved's hand tightened.

"My son named for what we could not call each other openly." He added, a single tear escaping his eyes as Beloved's ran in a flood.

"Father, I will ever be your son where it matters most. In heart." Beloved said just as quietly and their hands slipped out of view under the table but remained firm.

The love and trust of father and son was forged and would never be broken again. Justice looked to me.

"Promise me you will always take care of him. I will not tear asunder what his mother and I longed for ourselves."

"Always sir." I said and he nodded once and we pulled back on our masks and enjoyed the feast together. A family united. That was when I noticed the earring in Justice's ear. The Dragon Clan claw and Topaz pierced his lobe and from the look of the ring, it had been in his ear a very long time.

We learned that evening over a private gathering in Justice's dwelling the exact details of Harah and his betrayal of Stern. Justice had been twenty-four when he met the fourteen year old Harah. He had been a guest of the Dragon clan to discuss negotiations for trade. He had fallen in love with the young seer of the tribe rather quickly and she with him. When King Stern made the journey to meet the young woman that his son desired to wife her beauty captivated him.

He let Justice and Harah presume his approval and then at the final hour of negotiations he laid down his terms. He would grant the free trade and the marriage to bind it, however he would not offer his son, but himself as the groom. If the parties did not agree with his terms, all negotiations would be null and void.

Justice argued until Harah took him aside and convinced him it was for the greater good that she marry his father and she and Justice made love the night before her wedding to Stern, to him she gave her virginity and her love and together they conceived Beloved.

Stern had no idea his bride and his son had lay together and thinking to be done with Justice and to avoid an affair he sent Justice on continual tours of duty and he married his child bride and consummated his marriage to her, never knowing she already carried Justice's son.

Justice told us how Harah has sent him letters via Kestrel. How he learned she was pregnant with Beloved and that the child was his. How she bade him that he would have to be content with the knowledge he had a son he could never claim publicly, but a son he would always have to bear in his heart.

She wrote to him of her visions and worries and how he'd reply and send what he could to his "brother" by way of trinkets and toys and letters of affection. He wrote as a brother and with the love of a father.

There was much weeping that night from Beloved and Justice alike as they shared memories of Harah. I noticed many things about Justice and Beloved as well. While Beloved looked like Harah, there were other things that spoke of his father's influence within him.

They had the same smile, the same way they gestured when they spoke, the way they both made eye-contact when speaking to another. The way they both ate systematically from their plates, meat first, then vegetables. Their laugh was identical. Small quirks they shared in abundance. Justice's son favored him in mannerisms if not looks and I said as much as I observed them together and they both smiled at my observations.

Justice learned about Beloved and his gifts and then questioned me as only a father would. He asked me of my training and skills, he queried me about my vows and duties. Typical interrogating of parent to a child's chosen. He had to have piece of mind that the mate of his son was worthy of him. I seemed to have passed the test when Justice clouted me firmly on the back and raised a toast to Beloved and I.

There was also an exchange of personal gifts that night. Beloved was quite adept at jewelry making and had fashioned a cloak pin for Justice of a dragon claw and

smoky topaz. The same as the earring he wore. He also presented Justice with a dagger. Blade had and Dagger had adapted to life with the clan and had taken up the business of weapons masters within the tribe and they could wield a blade as well as fashion some of the finest quality I'd ever seen. Beloved had drawn what he wished the weapon to look like when finished and from there the Mother and Son team had made a grand blade. The hilt a dragon claw clutching a large polished Topaz. Once again the clan symbol stylized and as functional as it was beautiful.

The sheath for the blade Beloved had made himself and he'd tooled and etched the treated leather to mimic dragon scales. A Few of Sunfire shed scales set into the leather with care as accents. It brought tears to Justice's eyes and he proudly wore the weapon his son had crafted for him.

For Beloved, came his coronet. A circlet of pure silver studded with the Aegis Crown sapphires. Each Prince of the Kingdom bore the same coronet, with the exception of Justice, the heir to the throne, who wore a smaller version of the King's Crown and all of them bore the sapphires that denoted the royal family.

We had been instructed many months earlier to send Beloved's measurements to the King and there were chests full of garments made to his size. Beloved chuckled at the finery and lace. "I won't know what to do with most of these I am afraid. I am used to my robes." He said and I had to smile. I was so used to seeing Beloved draped in loose silks and long flowing robes I was sure I'd hear him complain more than once of wearing trousers and shirts. He was used to being practically naked.

I pointed out he'd be grateful for trousers in winter. I certainly remembered how cold winters were in Aegis Crown City. He conceded I was probably correct and then asked what I intended to wear since I usually ran around with just my loins covered.

I told him I'd already seen to my own clothes and that the women were making me leathers and lined buckskins for winter and cotton weaved garments for summer to take with me. I'd be covered adequately for Aegis standards and warm enough. I'd not raise immodest eyebrows but I'd probably turn eyes, I new our craftswomen and how they worked. I'd be a moving piece of artwork and stand out as a southern Dragon Chosen Warrior.

I'd told them to do so, I wanted everyone to know when they saw me, I meant business and I'd brook no discourtesy to Beloved. I wanted to look a warrior as well as be one. Often looking fierce enough was deterrent enough for the majority of trouble seekers.

Justice nodded to my logic and laughed. "Boy, the hair and face alone are enough with you. Your eyes boy, they show knowledge and skill and are

predatory. Add to it your lovely lady on your shoulder and most will make a wide berth.”

“That is my intention.” I grinned and Beloved rolled his eyes.

“You’d make a fine actor Constant. You make look mean, but I know better. There is not a child in this clan who does not adore you, no granny who lets you pass without getting a compliment out of you and I certainly know you can sufficiently woo me with flowers and sweets until I’m blushing and melting into my shoes.” Beloved said and I smiled.

“I am with family and so I act with my heart Beloved. In Aegis I want to be first seen as your protector, I will choose who received my friendship there and who I want to fear me.” I winked and Justice smiled.

“Smart. Very Smart. Now, we have to discuss something that I don’t think either of you will like. Stern will not approve of your marriage. He will not recognize the clan ritual union. He has plans for Beloved and a betrothal probably already in the making.”

“I will not marry. I am already married and it would be an affront to the Gods to make light of my vows to Constant. Nor will I be separated from my spouse. I have not slept apart from him in twelve years, I doubt I could sleep without him now.” Beloved said and Justice sighed.

“Do you know how many people will be aghast at that? Not only are you both men, soldiers do not sleep with nobles. It’s going to be hard enough to get Constant accepted as your bodyguard. Stern is not going to allow more than an adjacent room to yours and servants talk. They’ll know if he is sleeping with you at night.”

“I will not hide him or our bond. My purpose is to bring acceptance of the Isles and all our customs. This is one Stern will have to accommodate. I will wear his clothes and respect the customs of Aegis, but I will insist they respect my customs too. It is a balance we seek and healing comes from acceptance and tolerance and leading by example.” Beloved said and I knew with a sick dread in my gut we were going to face trouble over our bond.

“That could make you many enemies son.”

“I already have them father. Remarkable used to beat me and Reasonable... I will not face him without Constant in my bed. What he used to do to me I still have nightmares over occasionally. He is depraved.”

Justice looked sick and then violent. “He did NOT!”

“He did father. He never went as far as to physically take me, but I knew well his foul touch and his forcing me to touch him. I was spared a coupling but was not spared the knowing. He is disgusting and I will not face returning to Aegis without Constant close. I need him father, he is my strength to face what I must.” Beloved said and Justice nodded.

“I’ll talk to my father and tell him what you fear and why Constant is in your room and at your side constantly. Appropriate naming of you I’d say.”

I nodded, yes I was named well indeed. I was Beloved’s Constant as he was my Beloved.

We were both named well.

“In the Name”

Book One in Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter Three - The Return to Aegis

On the third night of Justice’s arrival, the assassin struck, or rather, tried to.

It was dark and everyone had long been retired for the night when Sunfire alerted me to the movement in the shadows below our dwelling. I disengaged myself from my sleeping companion and tracked the movements of our culprit through the eyes of my dragon while I tied on a wrap around my nakedness and grabbed my dagger.

I could see in the night as if it were mid-day if I used the wondrous eyes of my bonded beast companion. Her eyes never lost track of the heat that came from my target’s body. She saw the world in patterns of warmth. Every living thing had certain degrees of heat. She could track a single ant in dense undergrowth. Seeing a full grown man was easy.

Sunfire hopped onto my shoulder and laid her head to my temple so her eyes were even with mine. This way we could track him and have shared depth perception. I quietly descended our stairs and slipped down the hidden door trap in the roof of Justice’s room. The culprit was making his way around the back to try and get in through the window.

I leaned over Justice and awoke him gently with my hand over his mouth, we had discussed this plan of action earlier, we had planned that if the assassin tried a night visit we would be ready to ambush him and he knew if I awoke him this way, to remain quiet and pretend to still sleep.

“He’s coming in the back window.” I said barely a whisper in his ear as I eased his dagger under his covers and into his hand. I backed away into the shadows of the room, waiting to spring on our assassin from behind. We would wait until he was in the room and I would watch. If he made no attempt on physical harm on Justice we would let him do what he came to do and catch him in the act.

If it looked like direct murder, I would take down the man before he could strike. He was quite good at being quiet, I watched him slip in the window without disturbing a speck of dust. I watched him check Justice from afar, making sure the Prince still slept. He could not see me where I stood, I was in total darkness.

He moved from the window to the table and I watched him take from his pocket a small corked vial and he emptied its contents into the water on the table. Poison. He’d opted to kill our prince silently with his morning water.

I stepped up behind our man and in one movement I had his arm behind his back and my dagger at his throat. "Move and you die." I said and Justice struck the lamp and stalked over.

"It was poison in your water. The empty vial is in his front pocket." I said as Justice reached into the pocket and pulled out the vial and then sniffed the contents and rolled his eyes.

"If you think I'd have not smelled death draught in my water in the morning, you're a fool. Speak on who sent you or I will instruct warrior Constant to slit your throat." Justice said and the fool whimpered.

"Highness please, I only..."

"Truth and no excuses." Justice interrupted and I gripped his sweating wrist harder.

"Just get to the point. Was it Remarkable or Reasonable?" Beloved asked as he came into the room through the front door. His hair unbound and a riot of messy curls that cascaded over his shoulders and his long silk robe hung loosely on his frame. I watched the assassin blanche.

"Her ghost!"

"That's Beloved you fool and answer him!" I said, noticing that Beloved did indeed look like Harah when he walked about with his hair down. He never wore it completely down in public, usually only I saw him in his natural state. Justice's eyes too looked as if they'd seen a ghost as Beloved drifted into the room.

"Remarkable sir. He's got my daughter and said if I failed he'd kill her!" The man sobbed and Beloved sighed.

"He's telling the truth. Have him sit." Beloved said and I pushed the man into a chair as Beloved walked over to face him.

"What did he order you to do?" Beloved asked, fixing the man with his eyes. Beloved's gifts surging to the forefront, his eyes glowed with the power and transfixed the man's gaze. No one could resist Beloved's strong gifts. He would lull the man into comfort and urge the truth from his lips. It was hypnotism at it's most potent. Beloved was a master in his talents.

Justice watched fascinated as Beloved wrung forth the plot as far as this man knew. All he knew was his task. He was to poison Justice with a poison that came from the isles. The death was to be blamed on Beloved specifically, so that Stern would sign a death warrant against his own son for the murder of the Prince Royal. Ships would be sent with the warrant and Beloved would be

brought back to the gallows in irons. Remarkable's plot was to dispose of two brother's simultaneously and be made Heir apparent. It was simple and crude plotting. I remarked that Remarkable wasn't quite so Remarkable in the brain and Justice laughed.

"Aye, he's not very bright." Justice said as Beloved eased the man into sleep.

"What will you do with him? His daughter is still in danger." Beloved said and Justice sighed.

"Send a bird to my Captain of arms, Commander Rumble. We have a code between us. I can write what we discovered here and it will look on the surface a friendly letter saying all is well. He'll find the girl if he can. As for him, he is guilty of attempted murder by coercion. Keep him under arrest until we leave and once we are back home again and his daughter is safe he's dismissed and on his own or he makes a blood pact to serve me."

"I can imprint loyalty on his subconscious. He won't try his hand on you again after tonight. I can make a subliminal suggestion that he will obey without question. I can make him your most loyal man. It is never wise to discard a weapon that may be used against you again. I can render him a useless weapon." Beloved said and Justice nodded.

"That is wise, so be it Beloved." Justice said and Beloved whispered in the man's ear. It was done.

"You are more than a healer my son." Justice said and Beloved shook his head.

"No, I am just a healer. These skills of the mind are used to help those after trauma. The side benefit is what you have seen here. It's hypnosis used for devious purposes and I take no joy in it, but in times like these, it will protect us." Beloved said and I didn't think Justice could look prouder of Beloved. I was wrong.

"You are your mother's son. You humble me Beloved." Justice said and Beloved just smiled.

"As I live to serve my father." Beloved said as the man stirred to semi-wakefulness.

I lead him discreetly to a separate dwelling high in the forest canopy and we set guards on it quietly. No one would know about the attempt on Justice's life except those who needed to know.

One week before Beloved's seventeenth year, he was given his tattoo from the clan. I had received mine the year before, and my back was a mural of living artwork. Sunfire was depicted in flight and she had observed my painful endurance while making mental commentary on the progress in my mind. She mentioned how much prettier she was in flight than as a marking on my back. Nevertheless, she did find it flattering to have her likeness etched into her chosen's skin.

I just found it painful, but it was tradition. When a child reached adulthood, it was the clan way to tattoo the body in the calling of the bearer. I was a dragon warrior so my tattoos denoted my gifts. My Bonded Dragon graced my back and my upper arms, shoulders and part of my chest were covered in small symbolic scales.

Beloved seemed to find my tattoos irresistible, his fingers always traced the lines idly. He said on my fairer skin the artwork showed up so much clearer and he thought it was beautiful and I wasn't complaining. Especially since my Beloved was a healer, I healed quickly under his care.

Now it was his turn, and there was a special white ink only healers wore. The white markings looked like lace on his dark skin. He wore the image of the White Lady on his back, the Goddess of Life. She was depicted as the flowers that bore her name. The white fragrant blooms that grew all along the isles. The petals themselves when powdered and drank not only aided fevers and illness but were said to promote fertility. The creeping vines that carried her blooms now crept up Beloved's back and encircled his collarbone around his neck like a delicate floral necklace.

I didn't think Beloved could be more beautiful. Again I was proven wrong. He sat perfectly still as the needles and the craftswomen did their work. I could tell from the glow in his eyes he expended a lot of power in dampening his pain and healing himself as they worked.

Justice sat transfixed in fascination and when one of the women offered to give him his own, I never saw a man strip off his shirt as quickly.

Most of the men of his guard followed suit. Most only sporting small marks on their arms, runes of strength and power, the markings of warriors. Justice was sprawled on his stomach as the women worked his broad back with needles and ink. I watched as the Lion, the Royal family's Crest Beast took shape on his back. In his mighty paws it held the symbol of the Dragon Clan. It was symbolic artistry at it's finest.

"The lone Lion rises tall in Pride. The Dragon Clan ever at his call." The woman said as she finished and smiled with warmth at Justice. She was a warrior herself, a graceful sleek spotted leopard was her bond beast and she sat

watching her Chosen Warrior tattoo a future king. She was in her early to mid thirties, and like Blade, she was a formidable woman. Tall and strong and powerful, but with the trained and natural grace of her bonded beast partner. Her hair was shorn like mine on the top and her long white braid was as colorfully beaded. Most of her arms were tattooed with leopard spots to mimic her partner. She was a handsome woman. Proud and strong. She was the female version of Justice. They'd either get along well with each other or despise each other.

She was part of our clan party that would travel back with Beloved as his honor guard and representatives of the Dragon Clan. Beloved's Entourage as befitted a Prince of Aegis. I picked the members myself as was my right as Beloved's mate.

Riaah was going as was her brother Mio. His bond beast was a huge grey wolf. Keppet and Kirpet, identical twin brothers both bonded to owls would be our night eyes, they kept hours with their bonded beasts. Shirah had two ferrets bonded to her and she was as sneaky as her partners. She was our ears, no secrets were safe from Shirah. Last of our six honor guard was Tigo, his bond beast was like mine a magical beast and clever and he was a secret asset. While my Sunfire had special talents where magic was concerned, Tigo's Wintermoon, a pure white albino dragon was the King of power. Tigo was our mage and even Sunfire, a queen dragon deferred to her King. Sunfire was Wintermoon's chosen mate and it was Wintermoon who told me he was going where his queen went. Tigo and I conceded his choice and thus our group was made.

There was a grand feast to celebrate Beloved's coming of age and as a side my own eighteenth year, the age of majority. I was counted a full leader of the clan and I was in charge of our traveling party as the healer's mate. I had been groomed for this role since I was six years old, I knew my duties as second nature anymore. My parents, looked exceptionally proud of me and it lifted my heart. I had two younger siblings now, a ten year old little brother and a seven year old little sister.

My brother, Truth, was like my father and was constantly followed around by a wolf cub, bonded companions and learning to train together. My sister, Larksong, took after my mother and the bright white cockatoo that had chosen her was always on her shoulder. She had exceptional talents and was being groomed as a minstrel already. My sister, even at seven, could sing as beautiful as her namesake.

I was going to miss my family, but with two young siblings, my parents would not be going. I would not take them away from my much younger brother and sister. This was their home, their clan and they deserved the peace and safety the clan provided. They had raised me well and I knew my siblings still needed my father's sure guidance and my mother's wisdom and caring.

Blade was too old to return and had found a grand retirement with the clan. She was eighty-three summers and still healthy as an ox. She swung her hammer and anvil still and found great joy as a weaponsmaster training the children and fashioning the clan's steel.

Dagger, in his sixtieth year was also now retired along side his mother and had started a family late in his life. He had settled into our clan, then forty-eight years old and a widow of the clan, Zara, in her fortieth year and a weapons craftswoman in her own right had captured his eye and heart.

They had thought she was going through the change all women go through when they had a surprise miracle. Their now ten year old son was learning the trade of his parents and grandmother and would be a formidable warrior one day in his own right. Sharp was his name and sharp were his talents already.

The original party who had come to Dragon Clan was remaining, their lives had been forged into the tribe and I would not part them from the happiness they had found. Only Beloved and I would be returning to Aegis, beside us the friends we had grown up with, the people we trusted as we trusted brothers and sisters.

Our clan party was young. Riaah was the eldest at Thirty-four and the youngest was Beloved at Seventeen. We were all close in age and had all grown up together in the clan. We loved each other and would fight with each other with a fierceness that only came with familial love and respect.

Tigo had been like a big brother to me. Only ten years my senior, but to a six year old, a teenager is an adult in many ways. He became my mentor and teacher as a child along with Rehm. They were the only other Dragon Warriors in our clan.

Rehm taught me how to give strength and power to a healer to aide them with additional magic. Since he was also a bonded to a healer and knew my future duties intimately. Tigo had taught me how to let Sunfire work her magic through me because a green dragon, like Rehm's Emeraldstar, did not have the same amount of magic as a queen did and Rehm could only teach me the healing aspects of my bond to Beloved.

Tigo had taught me to be a lesser mage. I had limited power of my own which was bolstered with my bond to Sunfire. I was considered a master level mage and I could work small amounts of magic of my own without Sunfire. I could start a fire, I could bend light to make myself seem invisible to untrained eyes. I wore light like a cloak and reflected things around me like a mirror. With Sunfire's aide I could work higher magic. I could control fire, wind and water. The elements of the earth answered my summons, or rather Sunfire's summons through me.

I was considered a master level mage. Because a Queen Dragon was a master mage naturally. Tigo was adept, I still did not know all the man could do, but knew with surety my talents were inconsequential to an adept and he had been born with that power naturally.

A White Dragon King would only choose a bondmate that was his natural equal in power. Together, they were two adept powers working in mutual harmony. I felt safe knowing these two stood as our allies and friends.

Sunfire would preen like a grand lady for Wintermoon and like all good Kings he humored her vanity and was enraptured by her. Womanly wiles crossed species boundaries and my Lovely lady had Wintermoon exactly where she wanted him.

They had yet to take a mating flight together, my Sunfire was young and female Dragons only went into season once every ten years. Wintermoon would wait for Sunfire, his chosen queen, and dragons mated for life and only Kings and Queens mated to bear and Sunfire would only lay another queen egg at the end of her years. A daughter to replace her at the end of her days. A King Dragon was almost as rare as a queen. Most dragons were green or blue infertile females or the brown, red, copper and silver of infertile males. Only the Golden Queens and White Kings mated and laid clutches of eggs. Therefore, when a King found a golden unmated female, he latched onto her with a possessive fever.

It would be their offspring that our dragon clan members bonded to in the future. We were a blessed tribe and clan to have a King and a Queen choose us as their human bond mates. The Dragon Clan got it's very name because the magical beasts had chosen us repeatedly as their humans. We were rich in what they termed, special aptitude, they liked our blood and knew we would serve them and their offspring as equals and would give our blood to protect them.

Likewise, they would shed blood for us. We were true partners.

We made a rather colorful brigade as we headed toward the ship that would bear us to Aegis. Beloved, opting to wear one of his longer robes instead of the princely garments Stern had sent rode beside Justice on a snow white mare. His silken robe in dazzling iridescent hues was split for riding. He wore loose harem pants underneath with soft ankle boots. All in shades of purple, green and blue like peacock feathers.

His hair, which was still as pale yellow, near white as fresh cream, was braided simply down his back. He wore his coronet and his hair had been threaded through it to hold it on his head elegantly. Down his back the thick braid fell to his saddle and spilled over and was threaded with ribbons and beads.

He was regally and exotically beautiful. I know I rode my chestnut bay with a smirk firmly in place. I felt such a smug bastard knowing all that beauty was mine alone.

I rode behind Justice and Beloved, Sunfire perched proudly on my shoulder. I wore my more ornate shoulder pad, she liked this one best, she claimed it showed her off much nicer than our plain little hunting pad.

I think she just liked that Beloved had made us this one and had tooled into the leather Sunfire's likeness in a repeated motif. Beloved knew how to flatter my girl to excess and she thrived on it.

She wore one of the red beaded collars Beloved had made for her and she was freshly oiled and gleaming this morning. Her newly painted talons in crimson red gripped the pad as she lazed on my shoulder, posturing for all who gazed upon her dazzling beauty.

As for me, Beloved had taken care of my looks that morning. He called me a handsome rouge before he was finished and while I am not as vain as my Sunfire, I knew I was indeed a handsome and fine looking man that morning.

My garments were shades of forest green and bark brown. My brown buckskin leggings and boots had a green leafy trim up the sides. My tooled leather vest was of matching buckskin, but dyed into a deep verdant green. My silk shirt was of a lighter green and complimented the golden lady on my shoulder and my own natural sable coloring.

Beloved liked me best in natural shades of green and brown with the occasional rich burgundy and blood red. He called me an "earthy" handsome and thus dressed me according to his tastes.

He had taken extra pains with my hair that early morning. A golden silk ribbon threaded my braid to match Sunfire's scales and the emerald beads flashed like gemstones at random intervals and the headband I wore sparkled like a coronet of polished leather with green and golden beads. This was my favorite gift Beloved had ever made for me. The beaded effigy of Sunfire across my brow, surrounded by greens, was a masterwork and I wore my headband as I would a crown.

Beloved was a master craftsman with beadwork and I was always bedecked in beaded grandeur.

However, as grand as I was Beloved was the grandest as he rode before us.

Tigo, equally as stunning. His buckskins were all white from head to toe. As was his hair. It gleamed a pristine white and his braid was beaded in dark royal blue. They matched Wintermoon's eyes. The fringe on his buckskins was also beaded in blue and the thick leather shoulder pad was studded in the same beads.

Wintermoon had been given a collar from Beloved too, in the same blues that beaded Tigo's attire. Beloved's handiwork was everywhere.

Riaah's red and gold beaded bracelets matched the collar on her leopard, Cur, as she padded beside her partner. The horse giving nervous glances at the predator beside him.

Mio's gauntlets were studded with Blue Topaz as was the Chest harness plate on Shade, the great wolf. The chest plate looked like warrior armor as did the gauntlets on his partners arms.

Keppet and Kirpet wore matching beaked eye masks with dangling smoky topaz beads at their temples and all covered with owl feathers. They served to shade their eyes from unaccustomed sunlight as well as giving them mysterious wise airs. The Owls were given hoods with smoky topaz beads and their jesses were equally lovely where they slept on their bonded shoulders.

The hoods were for blocking out sunlight so they could sleep and not as the hoods were normally used for hunting birds. They were calm and at rest on the twin's shoulders.

Shirah bringing up the rear of our group had beaded belt pouches that carried her ferrets at her hips.

Beloved had spent months making them all special gifts and each of our party wore them with pride.

We made a dazzling display for the sailors who welcomed us aboard warily. To Aegians, we were mysterious and unknown. I alone among the group was Aegian born, but that made me even more dangerous in appearance, I was the known presented as the unknown.

I escorted Beloved to his cabin and the Captain was about to show me where the guard was to bunk when I shook my head. "I stay with Beloved. Tigo is the head of our warriors after me. He is in charge of our guard. I am in charge of Beloved." I said and shut the door behind me and got Beloved and I comfortably installed in the small but adequate cabin.

The journey to Aegis was uneventful for the most part. The sailors warmed to us rather quickly and the Captain was taken in with Beloved's natural charm. Beloved had a knack for setting everyone at ease in his gentle presence and he made each and every sailor on the ship a simple good luck charm bracelet with his gratitude for a safe voyage.

Every wrist bore a simple leather thong with various stones and beads marked with symbols for luck, health and prosperity.

If the sailors were curious about my relationship with their youngest Prince, no one was crass enough to mention it or they assumed I took my body guard duties to the extreme.

Tigo was viewed with awe as were the dragons. Sunfire and Wintermoon would sun themselves on the masts while the rest of our beast companions moved about the deck at will.

Cur was often found curled up in a stack of ropes grooming herself in the sun while Shade liked to nap on the prow, the wind ruffling his fur. Silent and Sure, the owls were usually sleeping in the shade of the crows nest during the day and scouting the waves ahead of us at night. The ferrets, Quirk and Thrift were into everything. They had a neat little horde of stolen paraphernalia by the end of our journey to which Shirah had to return to their proper owners. The ferrets were worse than magpies and anything shiny or eye catching was quickly snatched away by the curious little thieves.

We made port in Rockport, the closest southern port and then traveled by horse for two days inland to Crown City, the Capital of Aegis.

Crowds lined the streets to catch glimpses of our party as we headed toward the keep. As much a palace as a military fortification. The cobbled streets rang under the horse's hooves and Sunfire I thought would preen and posture herself into a knot. Twice she almost slipped off my shoulder as she twisted a serpentine dance to make the light dance off her scales.

::You're beautiful dearest, and your tail is choking me. I'm sure they think you are dazzling as you are, mind tying yourself in knots show off.:: I sent to her and she bit my ear in scolding.

::I'll decide how I look. You carry me boy.:: She said and I chuckled and adjusted her tail around my throat to spare my breath and rode on behind my Beloved.

We were once more back in our finest and he did indeed look like a Prince of unequalled beauty. His foreign blood mixed with Aegian pride. He wore his dual heritage like a mantle of elegance and mystery. He refused to wear the clothes

Stern had sent. He'd tried them all on and found them all dissatisfactory. All frills with no substance he declared.

The lace trimmings itched, the silk cut too binding against his loins and the buttons annoyed him. "No wonder Nobles have dressing servants. You could not put these things on without assistance." He grumbled and put everything back into his travel trunks and wore his loose robes and harem pants. He was used to freedom of movement and I had to say he did look better in the clan garb than what Stern had sent. Beloved needed colorful liquid fabric around him. He was light and airy and was far too lovely to hide behind overly trimmed and bejeweled garments.

The simple cut of his healer robes in colorful fabrics was enough for his body. His hair itself was a crown and the simple beads and feathers accented his already exquisite natural beauty. He had always been feminine in beauty and feminine softness to his garments suited him far more than the garments he had been sent.

Tigo rode beside me and often could read my thoughts and I would learn something new about my mate that not even he knew that day. "She wears the illusion Harah placed on her well."

The use of the feminine pronoun made me turn my head to him in query,

"I have taught you enough magic where you can sense it on Beloved Constant. Look beyond her natural gifts to the magic that binds her body. Beloved was conceived a female and her body changed by Harah in the womb to protect her in the times to come. A son born because the times demanded a son. However, when the times of testing are done, her body must be restored to a natural state. One is not meant to live a lifetime in illusion. It is only a cloak of protection and must be shed eventually. She will want children with you one day as I am sure you would wish to raise a family with her."

My mouth went dry, Beloved and I had never discussed children, we thought it beyond us being both male. Suddenly I felt like a light had been cast upon me and I looked deeper into my Beloved and saw the illusion spell upon his body. Her body. I saw clearly the male façade that clung to the female beneath. The sealed womb waiting to be unsealed. I saw a bright woman underneath the gentle man. Beloved was a perfect balance of gender, one masking another and in harmony. Harah had been a more powerful mage than she had told anyone.

I wondered if Beloved knew and once again Tigo read my thoughts.

"Unless he looks as deeply at himself, probably not Constant. Harah's magic is natural, a mother's magic to protect a child is strong. He is in harmony with himself and has not needed to look deeper. He is already in touch with his

femininity and accepts it naturally. Were he to look and discover a she soul within, I'm sure nothing would change. Beloved is Beloved and is perfection regardless of what gender is worn for all to see." Tigo said and left me to ponder my new found knowledge.

::I already know Constant. I'm surprised it took you this long to see it yourself.::
Came Beloved's voice in my mind. A light teasing touch that made me shiver.

::Why does this not surprise me. Forgive my delayed enlightenment Beloved.:: I replied and felt his amusement ripple down my spine.

::You are forgiven delayed understanding. Your body has known for years what your mind did not. You've always loved me as a woman and recognized your mate on an instinctive level if not a conscious one. I will admit, I only came to realize this not long ago myself. I felt the truth during my marking ceremony. When I went deep to block the pain and heal myself, I discovered my mother's illusions on me. I will shed them when our time here is finished and when you and I have peace again. To know I will be able bear your children one day makes me very happy.:: Beloved sent and I swelled with internal joy.

::Aye. A family with you will be most joyous indeed.:: I replied and we ended our interlude of mental conversation as we passed under the balustrade and into the courtyard of the Keep.

There King Stern and a host of court nobles awaited our arrival.

I dismounted first and offered my hand to Beloved to help him from his mount. He descended like butterflies landing on a flower. His feet landed lightly on the ground.

Justice came to stand beside us and we flanked Beloved as he presented himself to the King.

"Your Majesty, as promised, I have returned upon my seventeenth year." Beloved said bowing regally to his King and the Princes Remarkable and Reasonable who flanked their father. Their eyes barely containing their fury at seeing Justice and Beloved alive and whole before them.

::KILL BOTH! FOUL EVIL SOULS!:: Sunfire hissed in my mind, recoiling from the princes with a vehemence I have never felt from her.

Wintermoon was equally agitated on Tigo's shoulder. The King, Princes and Nobles turned their eyes to our dragons in both awe and fear and I reached up to stroke Sunfire's breast to calm her and I sent her mental instruction to calm herself, that I would see to rights eventually what plagued her, but could not draw my weapon just yet to satisfy her desires.

“Forgive them your majesty. Our dragons are far from their homeland and such pageantry is unsettling and distresses them.” I said and Tigo nodded, going along with my story.

“Aye, there is much to dazzle them at the moment, I am sure they will settle in due course.” He added and that appeased the humans. Tigo and I had earfuls of scolding mentally. We were reprimanded for treating them as ignorant animals and we placated them by assuring them it was safest for them that ignorant humans thought they were equally ignorant.

Wintermoon saw the logic of our game first and imparted to his Queen the necessity of acting the parts they were given. Sunfire didn’t like it, but would not argue with her King.

“Beloved, welcome home my son. So like your mother you look.” King Stern said welcoming his son home.

“Aye, your Majesty.” Beloved acknowledged and King Stern gestured to the main doors.

“So formal a coming home. Come, you must be tired from your journey, your rooms have been restored for your use again. Let us get you settled first and then this night we celebrate your homecoming.” The King said leading the way inside.

Inside Servants lined the halls and then separated into groups of three. Each member of our honor guard was treated as an emissary, given rank as Nobles of Prince Beloved’s entourage.

“The servants assigned to you will escort your court to their rooms. As per Justice’s request, they we be given honor as your kin and not common soldiers.” The King said and when a group came to me and bade me follow I shook my head.

“I go with Beloved.” I said and I could see the worry in the servants faces. I turned to the King.

“Sire, I am sure you have provided for me well, however, I must insist on staying with Beloved. It is my duty to be with him as his protector. I have spent my life in service to him and will continue to do so my King.”

“Surely you don’t feel it necessary to stand guard over him in his own family home.” The King said and I stood taller.

"I feel it necessary to ensure his comfort at all times no matter where he resides. My life belongs to my healer, at all times and in all ways. I mean not to insult the security of your home, which is not my intention. I mean to stress the importance of Beloved to me."

"So familiar you speak of your Prince." The King said eyeing me and Beloved took my arm.

"My Father, Constant and I have been together twelve turnings of the years. We have eaten, slept, played, fought and trained together until our souls are as familiar as two halves of a coin. Our gifts, mine of healing and his of beast magic are always tuned to each other. No healer can live without their protector. He aids me in more ways than I can describe to those who have not the senses of the Clan. He is my working partner as much as he is my life partner. I too insist Constant stay with me. Father, he is more than my protection, he is my husband." Beloved said and I watched King Stern's eyes widen with rage.

"Impossible! This I will not allow! My son is no catamite!" Stern bellowed and Beloved stood his ground.

"No I am no Catamite. I am a healer soul bound to my Dragon Warrior. It is not up to you to allow my bonding, it is the White Lady who makes this match for a healer who works her magic." Beloved began and his icy blue eyes glowed with his power and I saw Stern take an involuntary step back. Beloved hummed with musical power.

"As you can see Father, I am not the boy I was when I left. I am not the boy Remarkable used to torment and Reasonable used to molest. I am not the child you ignored, the bruises on my person you failed to see the truth in. My mother gave her life so I might live and grow in safety. I am no longer that child, I am a man and as such will make my own decisions. I return to you to keep an alliance with the southern Isles. I return as a Prince to honor Aegis, I return as a Healer of my Dragon Clan. I am loyal to both and serve both with my gifts. My personal life, is mine and only mine. I have vowed to Justice my allegiance to the throne of Aegis. I have vowed my aide to the people of my Clan. I am their emissary as I am Prince of Aegis. My husband too, Aegian born and Clan sworn also embodies both people. We remain as we are Father. Accept." Beloved said and Stern was red faced and would have shouted if Justice had not stepped forward.

"You agreed to this father. Remember your words to his mother. Remember the written promise you signed. You gave her the power to raise Beloved as she saw fit, you gave him the right of Clan and of Aegis. He is correct, he is royal ambassador to the Southern Isles, and he is Prince of Aegis. He is unique unto himself and you bestowed that right upon him by your own hand. You cannot take it back now. He is right, accept that your youngest son is a grown man with the weight of the monarchy and his clan responsibilities on his young shoulders. I

have seen him with his tribe and I have seen him with the people on the way here. He honors us all, his nobility is unquestionable father and I stand with him firmly. I accept my Kin as he is and am honored to call him my Brother.” Justice said and Stern nodded, it galled him, it was evident. However, he had made that agreement with Queen Delicate, he would honor it.

I turned my gaze to Remarkable and Reasonable and glowered. “I have not forgotten his bruises or his nightmares of abuse afterward. I suggest you honor my spouse accordingly or Titles be damned I’ll hold a man accountable for his actions.” I said, making firm that I would run them both through with my sword if they dared even consider harm to Beloved.

“Enough threats Brother Constant. We know well your vows to Beloved you hold most important. Let us adjourn for now. Father I would speak to you urgently.” Justice said, taking Stern aside and I had no doubt he would enlighten his father on the death of his son Persuasive and the attempt of an assassination on Himself and Beloved.

The Southern Delegation was thankfully housed all in the same wing, and any intruder down that corridor would have to face all our contingent before they reached the double doors at the end of the hall that opened into Beloved’s suite.

Beloved let out huge sigh as I closed the doors behind us. The six servants allotted to us combined standing at attention in the room, waiting for orders.

“Please be at ease friends. In Clan there are no servants only fellows and I will treat you as thus.” Beloved said turning his kind smile to the baffled servants.

They just didn’t know how to react to a Prince who did not act as one. He asked them each their names and then requested their aide. “I do know we will require assistance here and your aide will be most appreciated. Such as for food and necessities. However, for dressing and bathing and the like Constant and I are more than capable of doing for ourselves. In the clan, only the invalid or injured would let others wash and dress them.” Beloved said just as our trunks were delivered to the room.

Here we proved our point as Beloved descended on our trunks and threw open the lids himself. I took Sunfire’s perch platform and set it up by the large window and opening it wide. “Please leave the window open. Sunfire comes and goes as she chooses and it will save me a scolding later if it is left open. She gets quite cross with me if I do not pander to her whims.” I said and the servants chuckled and agreed to leave the window open.

I introduced Sunfire to our servants and like the queen she was soaked up their fascination like fine wine before moving to her padded and comfortable platform and made herself at home. I asked our servants to include with our meals, raw

meat in bite size pieces and fresh uncooked vegetables, preferably tuberous roots which were Sunfire's favorites. Grapes and Apples were also her favorites and asked if there were any, if they would also be included in addition to our meals.

The servants seemed elated to having such simple tasks to tend to us. The women of our staff were relegated to our meals and they all gladly noted to make sure Sunfire was fed well and that they'd bring up a good sized tub and keep it filled with fresh water for her to bathe in at her leisure.

Our man servants moved to help Beloved put away our clothes in the large ornate wardrobes and closets. They seemed perplexed as to why with all his princely finery he opted for such simple robes and then as they inspected the fine silks of our clan, decided they knew why he chose them to wear. Comfort.

Once we had sufficiently unpacked, our servants grilled us as to our own food preferences, and seemed pleased that we liked simple fare. Truth be told, we had simple palettes, used to Clan fare and we had our own spices in which to sprinkle on our foods if we so chose. That was the clan way. Food was cooked simply and it was up to the person eating to add their own spices to taste.

I liked my food spicy, Beloved called me Dragon Tongue in jest most of the time. I loved the ground red-pepper spice and I had brought a good deal of it with me, with a request to my mother to ship me more on a regular basis. Beloved liked his foods with a touch of sweetness to them and he had a kettle over a brazier that he could concoct his own sweet sauces in. Cream, honey, cinnamon, sugar, anise and various other spices he had or else they were easily obtained.

The same with our tea. Beloved ground our own blend of leaves and preferred to make our tea himself. Therefore, a kettle was brought up for him to keep water ready at any time he desired.

We were rather self-sufficient and had been for years. The servants appreciated our independency and knew being assigned as the clan's personal servants, their jobs would be simply to provide the basics so we could provide for ourselves.

As we finished unpacking, lunch was served and with the lunch service came Justice and Stern.

"Constant. I hear I also owe you for my son Justice's life. I have been given grievous news that weighs heavy on my heart. First Delicate tells me of their natures and I wish not to believe it. Then my Second born dies in most usual circumstances and then I hear of an assassin in my heir's guard. Once I can ignore with a father's desire for it to be unjust accusations. Thrice I cannot ignore, but cannot prove beyond the word of the man you captured. Trust I will be

vigilant and I accept the importance you place on protecting my youngest.” Stern said and I nodded.

“For a father’s heart, know I love him and would place my life in exchange for his without a moment’s hesitation.” I replied and Stern nodded.

“So I begin to at last see clearly as my days number fewer. I did many things in my life I now regret. I regret too late I fear. First I spoil them beyond what is reasonable and then I rob my own firstborn son of a woman he loved and look back in much shame over my actions. I turned one too many blind eyes and I live to rue my actions. I lost my chance to be a better father to you and now see I have in you something most precious. A son with a sound heart and understanding of what is right. I will endeavor to honor you both as you honor me. My firstborn and my last born. Let us all be wary, I am filled with fear.” Stern said and Beloved stood and took his King’s hand.

“That is why we come Father. Mother saw this path for us, we must follow it to its end. The evil that is here must not be allowed to continue. If we fail, all of Aegis will suffer our failure. Watch them closely father, they will not rest until they have what they desire.” Beloved said and the King nodded.

We ate together with a heavy air, each of us wondering when the next card would be dealt in the game we all played now.

“In the Name”

Book One in Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter Four - The Fall of Stern

After Justice and Stern left us for the afternoon, Beloved and I drew a bath and washed the travel grime from our bodies, trying to relax in vain. The tension was in the very air itself.

Beloved, was braiding my hair and I was sitting at his feet where he perched on our bed when the door opened without a knock and my sword was in my hand at the same instant Sunfire hissed and spat from her perch. The twins stood in our room, uninvited evil masquerading as a brotherly visit.

“Come now man, put down your sword. Cannot brothers come to welcome Beloved home?” Reasonable purred and I stood firm between him and Beloved.

“Would a wolf bare its throat to an enemy? Nay, my sword stays where it is and you will leave our room. I know well that brotherly affection is absent here.” I growled and Beloved stood at my elbow.

“As do I. State your real intentions.” Beloved said and Reasonable smirked.

“So delicious. We know full well that you are not our brother and are instead our nephew. We saw Justice and that Island Whore in the tower that night. He had just come home from the border for the wedding and they slipped away that night together. We know they betrayed father with their lust. Father knew to keep him away during that year of their engagement. He knew they would betray him if Justice was allowed to stay near her. We know you are his get and not our father’s. We know you too Constant. The stable boy brat, son of the dog man and the bird woman that came with the Whore. A commoner and a bastard catamite.” Reasonable said, his eyes wantonly raping Beloved.

“So pretty, a whore like his mother I’d wager. Does he still cry when he sucks a man off? I’m sure you know the pleasure of that pretty mouth.” Reasonable said and Beloved had to stop me from running the bastard through.

“Constant no! He’s baiting you on purpose!” Beloved cried, gripping my arm to stay my swing.

“Get out, how dare you speak such disgusting words here! You child raping bastard!” I saw red with fury and Sunfire was glowing with my rage and shrieking. Like a dart she shot from her perch and flew hissing and spitting at the twins, raking her talons down the side of Reasonable’s handsome face.

He cried out with pain and that brought the rest of our party running. Wintermoon, came flying in first, his own rage set off by Sunfire's. Snarling, barking and agitated bond beasts agitated by my fury surrounded the Princes.

"I suggest you two depart the way you came. Unless you wish to be further injured by beasts who ignore human niceties and titles and seek a quick end to that which disturbs them." Tigo said and both brothers fed, Reasonable whimpering in pain.

"What happened?" Riaah asked rushing in and seeing me boiling with rage.

"Filth that should never have been spawned!" I growled, slamming my weapon home in its sheath and shaking with fury.

"I gathered that Constant! What did they say?" She asked and Beloved stepped forward to hold me.

"Just a long old truth that is vile. He was poking at an old wound to anger Constant and he succeeded. Constant it is over my love. The past can only harm us if we let it." Beloved comforted and I clutched him to me as sobs of frustration and anger manifested.

"I will kill that son of a whore for what he did to you. On my grave he won't have the opportunity to do it again." I said just as Justice came in.

"I saw the bloody tracks down his face and heard him swearing a mile away. What the hell happened?" Justice said and Beloved sighed.

"Reasonable decided to remind me of our past encounters in Constant's presence. His anger set off Sunfire. They know you are my father, they said as much." Beloved said and he shut the doors and we all sat down in private counsel immediately.

Beloved told everyone what he had endured as a child and I thought Riaah was going to shred the pillow in her hands with fury. "Any man who willfully does that to a child in the clan has his genitals removed... painfully."

"Trust me Riaah, that is a pleasure I will take out on his hide when the time comes." I growled and Justice snapped at us both.

"While I concur with the anger I share with you that my son had to go through such torment, it is I that will mete out Justice here, when it is time is that clear?" Justice asked and both Riaah and I nodded reluctantly.

"Just see that you do swiftly. Cur is in a right state over the evil in these walls. It festers like a bad boil." Riaah said and Shirah emphatically agreed.

“Thrift and Quirk have already found hidden passages behind the walls. Treachery lurks here. They have found several men in the walls spying on us and who knows how many more men spying on us openly.” She said and at that Justice’s eyes went wide and our conversation became quite hushed.

“I have put up a barrier around us, speak freely, none can now hear us.” Tigo said as Wintermoon came in through the open window.

“Wintermoon says that the princes are in their rooms and a warrior was called into them. There is at least one soldier of rank in their confidence. Where there is one of such rank, there are many underlings.” Tigo added and Justice nodded.

“Silent and Sure volunteer to roost outside the window and eavesdrop for us.” Keppet said and Justice accepted the offer and both owls went winging silently away to spy for us.

“Justice, let Mio, Shirah, Keppet, Kirpet and I clear out the rats in the walls. It is safer for us all to control those passageways and stop throats being cut in the night. The ferrets and Cur have excellent night vision and are silent and none can escape Shade’s nose. We can secure them swiftly and quietly.” Riaah said and Justice nodded.

“Try not to kill them if you can avoid it. Capture as many as you can for questioning. I want to know my brother’s plans before they act on them.” Justice gave his approval and Riaah smiled.

“A good smart man you are Justice. My thoughts exactly. We think alike you and I. I knew I liked you for a reason.” Riaah said and immediately headed out with the others to seek prey in the walls. Justice smiled after her.

“A remarkable woman.” Was his only comment. Beloved smiled.

“Enough talk right now, it will seem too suspicious. I’ll seek what I can and try to find out information as well. Until tonight, we must be simple guests.” Tigo said leaving with Wintermoon and Justice left, no doubt taking our information to Stern.

Beloved and I resumed our stressful wait for the feast that night. Both of us agitated and jumping at shadows and both of us fervently missing our privacy and clan simplicity, our lives were no longer peaceful and time had indeed run out.

I noticed as the steward announced us to the gathered assembly of nobles as we entered the hall Stern had made his first attempt at accepting his son and I and our bond officially. The steward hailed us as Prince Beloved Lionspride of Aegis, Healer of the Southern Isles Dragon Clan and Prince Consort Constant, Dragon Warrior of the Southern Dragon Clan. Long winded titles but indicating our union officially. Beloved smiled on my arm as we descended the stairs and headed toward our places at the main table beside the King. To his right sat Justice and the two spaces beside Justice were for us. Remarkable and Reasonable were seated to the King's left.

Beloved wore a shimmering sapphire robe with matching harem pants and slippers. His hair was back up in a healers traditional knot atop his head. Again he had threaded his hair around his coronet so it sat securely on his brow and matching sapphire colored blue beaded clips dotted his healer's knot. His natural tight ringlet curls never truly would contain and there were always stray wisps that would escape his knot and frame his face.

This was where the woman of his true self showed most evident. He was fairer in his natural grace and beauty than any of the grand ladies we passed in the hall. Just the simple cut of his robe in fine fabric without adornments, his simple hair knot with a few accented beads and his one concession to his royal birth, his coronet was the only jewelry he wore and he looked more elegant and more stately regal than any man or woman in the room. He didn't need jewels, he was a jewel.

::If you get any more prideful, your head will explode my love. I am pleased you find me so beautiful dearest. I do try to please you, I am happy I succeed.:: Beloved said in my mind and I glowed.

::Beloved, you are ever beautiful to me.:: I replied smiling as I saw him seated first then took up my place beside him.

::As you are ever most handsome to my eyes. I am quite jealous suddenly. All these womanly eyes on you and some openly flirtatious and inviting. I am most grateful you don't seem to notice. I see you anew through their eyes and count myself most blessed that such a fine man is my husband.:: Beloved said catching me off guard slightly.

He never failed to tell me he thought me handsome, but to have him say so and point out I was being ogled made me self-conscious. I didn't like to think of myself drawing unwanted attention. Not that sort at least. I looked at myself through Beloved's eyes. I was tall, young and fit. I had large shoulders and a broad chest, muscles honed to carry the weight of a dragon effortlessly. A body trimmed to an active life, a clean shaven face, narrow waist and hips and dressed in exotic fabrics. I wore what Beloved had chosen for me to wear. He always had me dress to compliment him.

Tonight I had on black leather pants and boots and my shirt was the same sapphire blue fabric as his robe. My beaded sword belt and beaded vest matched and Beloved had threaded my braid with a blue ribbon with owl feathers. I swallowed hard, I never noticed myself as a desirable man. I was so accustomed to only being Beloved's mate I never realized that others besides Beloved might find me attractive.

Beloved smiled. "You are most attractive and if you are allowed to gloat and be smug, so am I." Beloved teased and I just smiled and shook my head.

"Aye. I supposed you have a point Beloved." I conceded and took up my chair resigned to my life beside my witty and charming and ever astute mate.

::And you call me Vain?:: Came Sunfire's playful jest as she crawled from my shoulder to the back of my tall chair and adjusted her sapphire collar and settled to oversee the crowd over my head.

Beloved chuckled, when she chose to Sunfire could broadcast her words to his mental hearing too and apparently she'd just shared her rebuke with my Beloved as well.

The rest of our party arrived behind us, all dressed in their finest as we were. I wondered if they had flushed our quarry from hiding and with a single nod and smirk from Riaah, they apparently had discovered something. I was positive we'd find trussed up men hidden somewhere later that evening, Riaah was thorough and efficient.

The beast partners made themselves at home under our delegation's table or opted to rest on the backs of chairs. Quirk and Thrift chattering happily on the tabletop itself and helping themselves to fruit and I distinctly saw Thrift making away with a silver spoon until Shirah took it from him and set it back on the table again.

I chuckled, the little thief couldn't resist. I wondered how many ladies would lose jewels that night with his nimble little paws and covetous eye for sparkling finery.

Stern welcomed his guests and proudly welcomed home Beloved and bade everyone to make merry in celebrating his return and his seventeenth year. I watched Remarkable and Reasonable through Sunfire's eyes. The marks on Reasonable's cheeks were not deep, but three long scratches from her talons were clearly on his face. Sunfire stared at him, twitching her tail and he averted his gaze from her. She was making him nervous and I was more than pleased. Let him wonder when she'd attack again, it would keep him unbalanced.

I didn't need to keep him unbalanced because in the blink of an eye, everything changed.

Not even the animals had anticipated what happened beyond the threat in the air we'd all perceived upon arrival. King Stern was standing, giving a toast to Justice, thanking him for guiding Beloved safely home and then without warning, an arrow was standing and imbedded in his chest. A clean heart shot kill.

I reacted on instinct; I dove for Beloved just as another arrow pierced the pad on my shoulder. It was a heavy gauge arrow and managed to pierce my skin through the heavy leather of my shoulder guard.

"TO ME!" I called and I saw Cur first, an arrow gash in her withers.

It was chaos, a hail of arrows falling from above, I held Beloved tight against me for protection as we took cover behind the now over turned head table.

I saw Reasonable, an arrow in his throat, his eyes open in shock at his death. So his brother thought to be rid of him too I thought bitterly as my men reached me under a dome of protection from Tigo.

Justice was behind me, three arrow wounds bleeding and being supported by Riaah. "Justice, a route sire!" I implored and Justice grunted and rallying his strength and leaning on Riaah he led the way.

It was a massacre, in the chaos and confusion of lords and ladies screaming, soldiers rushing in for defense and the ensuing disruption, Tigo held us under a barrier as we all limped out. A second arrow landed in my thigh and I hissed in pain as I limped forward, never letting Beloved go as we hurried out.

"SIRE! THIS WAY!" Rumble, Commander of Justice's Guard came forward, equally as wounded as the rest of us.

"I've got men getting horses, Hurry Sire, we have to get you out alive!" Rumble helped shoulder Riaah's burden and we ran as quickly as we could toward the stables.

Beloved was in a state of shock, his healer senses overwhelmed with the sudden trauma and death around him, his nature was to heal and there was just too many dying around him. I picked him up and carried him.

"Commander! Remarkable's got mercenaries at the gate! They've killed the guard and are heading this way!" One of the soldiers shouted and I grinned. I knew the stables and they hadn't changed.

“Behind the stable is a courtyard, there is a way out I used it all the time as a child. Follow me!” I said pushing through the stable and finding our horses, I grabbed Beloved’s mare and swung up on my Bay, cradling an almost incoherent Beloved before me.

A bad storm when I was little had felled a great oak and part of the outer wall had crumbled. I was glad to see it still had not been repaired. I had Rumble help me rip down one of the barn doors and used it as a ramp. The wall was too high for a horse to clear without assistance and too narrow. Barely the width of a horse and rider. “Sunfire! Check for trouble!” I said and my lady went out first surveying the immediate area. She gave me the all clear and I used every ounce of my beast magic to urge the horses together, acting as the herd stallion I bade them all follow and laying my heals to my Bay we surged forward at speed up the makeshift ramp and made the jump over the low remaining wall.

We had just twelve riders in all, a sad few as we raced across the open grazing field to rally in the relative safety of the leading edge of the forest. Cur and Shade flanking us and guarding us and our horses as we fled.

Of the twelve, all of us had wounds; some major some minor and Beloved was sick and slumped against me. “Sire! Your orders?” Rumble asked and Justice, though wounded rode his great gray war stallion and for the first time I saw Beast Magic. Justice was bonded to his horse and the horse would die to protect his partner.

“We ride North. Remarkable will have every road south to the coast under his control. He’ll presume we’ll flee to the isles. Make for Riversford. Lord Bright lost two sons tonight and is a true loyal to the crown. He has a solid military Keep and soldiers; we need to rally quickly before Remarkable knows I yet live. Let us put as much distance as we can now, speed is our friend and well tend our wounds when we can safely.”

“Tigo, can you relay a message back to the clan?” I asked and Tigo nodded.

“When we reach a safe place, find me a mirror and the mage council will hear and send aide. Aye. Just get us to a shelter and I will secure it, we have some with us very wounded. A long journey is unwise.” Tigo said and Justice nodded.

“There’s a cave I used to use as a hideaway as a teenager. A few leagues through the forest. It’s large, has fresh water and to my knowledge no one knows about it. Follow me.” Justice said and we hurried through the night and through dense forest. We kept well away from the road.

Beloved began to regain awareness the further we got from the Keep, and then silent shuddering sobs broke forth.

“So much death.” He whispered and I held him closer.

“And you still live my Beloved. Hold yourself together my love.” I replied, as we reached the cave in the dark of night.

We lead the horses inside and to the glassy small fresh water spring toward the back. Some deep fissure had created a natural well and from the spring a brook gurgled merrily down the center of the cave and out to meander it’s way through the forest.

Tigo walked the perimeter of our shelter and drew runes in the dirt with a stick as he walked, I knew what he was doing, bending the light and dampening sound, making us invisible to untrained eyes.

Beloved, through a haze of misery, went from each person, cleaning and dabbing at arrow wounds and expending his strength on healing us. The pain in his eyes clear to all. He had never been faced with such merciless loss of innocent life. I have never seen him cry as he cried that night, when he got to the wound on my shoulder, he shook with agony and I took his hand and kissed it first.

“Beloved, we live dearest. It is a minor wound I have. I have plenty of strength in me to help you yet. Help your father first, he needs you more than I do right now.” I said taking Beloved over to where Justice was resting against Riaah. She had already seen to his wounds and had them cleaned and ready for Beloved to help speed the healing.

“Father...” Beloved began, but his words choked in his throat and his arms encircled Justice’s neck and he wept on his father’s chest. Justice brought his arms around Beloved and held him close. The comfort of a parent is oft times more magical than any healing or skill.

“Son, Constant is right, we live and it is a blessing we do.” Justice said and Beloved shook his head.

“No more lies, no more deception, no more pain.” Beloved croaked.

“Son?” Justice asked and Beloved sat up and shook his head.

“Not son. Daughter.” Beloved said and shed his mother’s illusion like a snake shedding skin.

There, sitting with her arms still around her father, in her torn and bloodied robe, hair falling apart, with her coronet still miraculously in place if crooked from our flight and utterly beautiful sat Harah’s daughter, the vision of her mother. “There is no one left to lie to father. Mother’s protection has served its purpose and I will no longer hide the truth from you. I cannot, you’re the only parent I have left and I

will not deceive you any more. Nor will I deceive the family around us, the truth will bear witness here." Beloved wept and Justice gathered Beloved in his arms and wept with him...her.

"I knew Beloved. I knew." He whispered stroking his daughter's hair and holding her as if she'd float away like dust on a sunbeam if he let her go.

"Bless my soul, Like mother like daughter in every way." Rumble said quietly, the others who had seen Queen Delicate before she'd fled to her homeland quietly agreed.

Beloved shimmered in her father's embrace, I could see her healing magic set free from its illusionary shackles. In the body she was meant to wear, the magic was unhampered and flowed freely. Once Justice was healed she sat up and held her arms out to me.

"My husband, my love, come to me." She said and I obeyed and fell into her arms and felt her light penetrate me and heal me body and soul. My wife was as pure a soul as the white lady herself.

I was restored completely and I escorted Beloved around our troops and she embraced each one with her light and all were left in awe of her gracious touch.

She was tired as she finished tending our wounds and soul weary. My duties had just begun, it was my duty to restore the magic she had used to aide us. This was a private communion and I excused ourselves and lead Beloved far back into the Cave.

"What's happening? Where are they going?" I heard Justice ask and Tigo thankfully and tactfully informed the King what I intended.

"Sire, the healer has used her own personal magic to heal us, the warrior will give her back some of what she used. It is her husband's duty and no other can give her what she requires now. When a dragon mates, he creates power for his female to drink from. That is why only a Dragon Warrior can Mate a Healer. Only he is stronger than she is." Tigo said and I vaguely heard Justice cough and then Riaah's voice echoed after us.

"Come now man, your son turned daughter is a married woman for some years. You didn't think she was still a virgin did you?" Tactless Riaah, blunt as a cudgel. She was perfect to tame our King.

Beloved was in a daze and needing me desperately as I removed her robe and used it to lay her upon. She had expended a great deal of power and barely let me shed my own clothes before she was drawing me close.

“Need you now Constant.” She said almost in pain.

I complied and fed her my strength with our joining. I felt myself being drained of power as I fed her depleted stores. In the back of my conscious mind, I realized too little too late, that my mate as a female was still indeed virginal and I unsealed her womb far too hastily than I would have had we both been more cognizant of our actions. This was a power coupling and not one of our more intimate couplings of the heart. She needed power and this was how I joined mine to hers, creating a well from her to drink from between us.

As I reached my zenith and my power exploded from me in waves, they in turn crashed into her reserves and filled them again. We fell into a deep sleep, totally drained and still joined together. Letting our powers settle again and to let real rest complete what we had started.

“They’ll sleep like the dead now for several hours. Set up a guard and take shifts, we all need rest.” I half heard Tigo say as I felt a cover draped over us.

I awoke properly several hours later into mid-morning. I was positively ravenous and Beloved was still sleeping beside me. I had my first good look at my wife as she lay sleeping beside me. She was still my Beloved in so many ways. The face had not changed, nor the glorious amounts of hair. However, Beloved’s narrow hips now were far shapelier than they had been, and where a smooth flat chest had been, two perfectly shaped and small breasts rose and fell with a deep even breath of sleep. A stunning hourglass lay bare beneath me, and I winced when I saw the small amount of blood that lay between her legs. My wife had given me her virginity twice. I felt a brutish dog suddenly and I rose carefully and wet a section of my shirt and cleaned her properly.

Men can make such a mess at times and I had made a mess of her. I hated power coupling, I was a beast and she suffered bodily for it the next day. She’d be stiff and sore, but sound.

I finished washing her and then made my own hasty absolutions before I found my pants and joined the others closer to the mouth of the cave.

Riaah was with Justice talking quietly as I walked into sight.

“Go easy on him Papa. He is her husband.” Riaah said and Justice glared at me and I glared right back.

“Nothing has changed you realize. Beloved is still Beloved. Changing the wrapping does not change the gift it conceals.” I said and Justice sighed.

“I know. Nevertheless, yesterday Beloved was a man, today he is a woman. Every father fears more for women. That is why Harah changed her in the first

place. Men don't have to fear the burden of a pregnancy or worse being raped in the middle of war!" Justice grumbled and I sat beside him.

"First, trust me to protect my wife. Second, trust Beloved, she is not without the skills to create the illusion again. She can wear it like a cloak if she chose to. She is not defenseless herself." I said just as Beloved came into the room, wrapped in her robe. Her hair loose and messy and lovely.

"He's right father. I am not defenseless. Mother put the illusions on me in my youth because then I was helpless. I had to learn my gifts first; I had to be partnered completely with Constant. We are whole and the illusion is no longer necessary. It was merely a camouflage, like a salamander can change its color to hide from predators. So too, I can change my skin to hide or not to hide. It is that simple." Beloved said curling up at my feet to lean against me. She was still tired, but stable.

"Tigo has already sent word back to the elders. They will send aide as swift as they can. Cur and Shade brought us down a deer and the ferrets found us berries and tubers. We have a stew going, I know you're both hungry." Riaah said getting up and getting us bowls.

When I asked where the cooking pot and bowls came from Justice laughed. "I said I used to hide out here as a boy. I'd spend days here; all this stuff was my youthful stash. A good clean and they were ready to use again." He said just as Keppet and Kirpet came inside.

"We've not been tracked. You were right Justice; all activity seems to be pointing south. The city is a mess, Mercs are all over the city and nothing is coming in or out right now." Keppet said feeding a bit of venison to Silent.

Sunfire was nuzzling my cheek and sharing my meat as we listened.

"Sure got in close and was listening. Everyone's dead. Stern, Reasonable, all the court nobles and Remarkable is furious. He was rolling over bodies in that hall looking for the two of you. He's not happy that none of our bodies hit that floor. What I saw of that room by daylight is carnage. Bodies everywhere and they're building a bonfire to dispose of the bodies right in the courtyard. His vultures he calls men are picking the bodies clean of wealth. Worse than carrion scavengers." Kirpet said shivering and sharing meat with Sure who had earned her meal that day.

"What I want to know is what Remarkable is thinking? Surely he cannot explain this away, this fratricide and massacre! The people will know he butchered them all." I said and Justice frowned.

"The arrows, how were they fletched?" Justice asked and Kirpet closed his eyes.

“Gold and Russet.”

“Damn it, my colors. He’ll try and blame it on me.”

“No one with half a brain would believe it.” Riaah snorted.

“Some might. My disappearance will add credence to his accusations. We best hurry to Riversford with haste before the messenger birds are sent out.” Justice said and Keppet and Kirpet and I shared glances.

“Sunfire, care for some pigeon my love?” I asked and her eyes whirled and her head perked up.

Sunfire leapt from my arm along with Wintermoon, Silent and Sure on their heels. They’d gone hunting messenger birds. “No messages will make it out of the city, they’ll circle back come nightfall and catch up to us. They can move far swifter than we can. Let’s eat and get moving, by your leave Sire.” I said and Justice smiled.

“Natural born leader you are. I won’t argue a sound plan.” Justice winked and once we finished eating, we cleared all evidence of our tenure of the cave and headed out ever north using game trails and paths and avoid all heavily trafficked roadways.

It took us five days weary travel and sleeping huddled together for warmth with little shelter. We were a bedraggled mess when we came insight of Riversford. Sunfire flew ahead of us with a message from Justice and by the time we reached the fortified gates of the large trading city, Lord Bright was there to meet us, Sunfire on his shoulder.

She hopped to mine when we paused.

“That amazing creature bodily dragged me out of bed and thrust that message at me and then barely let me change out of my night shirt to come get you Sire. Hurry, we’ll get you undercover immediately and rested and fed first before I get the full details. Bad news can wait until you are all safe.” Lord Bright said reaching out a hand to the King.

“Thank you old friend, I am afraid I bring more than bad news in my wake. Come ride with me and talk, some of it will not wait until I sleep again.” Justice said and as he rode ahead with Lord Bright, I saw the man slump. Justice told him of his sons and what happened as far as we knew.

Beloved was melancholy beside me on her white mare. Her sad spirits and flimsy tattered robe made her look even more bedraggled. However, she still urged her mare forward to reach out a hand of comfort to Lord Bright.

“My Daughter, Beloved.” Justice said and Lord Bright took in the sight.

“Named for your brother?” He asked and Justice shook his head.

“I have no brother named so. Beloved is my child not my father’s.” Justice said and Bright nodded and took Beloved’s hand.

“So you had your lady love at least once before you were robbed. Princess, thank you for your comfort, it warms my heart.” Bright said and Beloved smiled sadly.

“We take what warmth we can in these times Lord Bright.” Beloved replied, feeding Bright a tendril of comforting magic before taking back her hand and riding sedately alongside King and Liegeman.

It was thankfully just after dawn, and few people were about yet and with Tigo’s quiet manipulations, no one noticed us pass. We entered the Keep quietly and handed our exhausted mounts to stable hands and then followed Lord Bright inside.

Lady Patience met us inside and had us fed and wept in Beloved’s embrace when she learned two of her children were gone. She was a tender woman and even in her grief insisted on seeing to our comforts herself.

We were all asleep on our feet and once we were led to our rooms I think we were all asleep before our heads reached the pillows.

We awoke much later that day to fresh clothes ready, food on our tables and items for washing laid out by silent servants.

Beloved looked at the dress laid out for her in distaste. “I am not wearing a dress. My breasts are not going to rest on a display shelf while my lungs are crushed in a bodice. Dearest, I’m begging you, find me anything other than a dress please.” Beloved asked and I smiled and nodded.

Truth be told, I hated Aegian fashion for women too. I did not relish the idea of my wife’s breast being on display like that either. I’d rather have her bare breasted in a clan wrap than have them unnaturally shoved up into her throat. Therefore, I found a passing servant and begged a pair of leggings and a loose shirt for Beloved. I knew she’d prefer her healers robes, but this would have to do for now.

Beloved was barefooted in short leggings and an airy shirt when we gathered for more talk in Bright's private chambers.

Beloved raised Lady Patience's eyebrows at her attire and Beloved sighed. "Forgive me, the dress you sent was lovely, but I have lived wearing my healer's robes and as a boy for many years. I am sorry if I offend."

"Nay dear, truth be told I'm sure most girls would like to wear simple boys clothes just for comfort. Offend me you do not. I'll have my sewing women come see you and we'll get you new robes to your desires while you are with us." Patience said and Beloved thanked her honestly as we discussed our next course of action.

Riaah and Shirah came in, much as Beloved. Wearing thrown together leggings and shirts and Patience smiled. "I think Clan women have the right idea." Was all she said and I could see a Lady considering making a new fashion statement eventually.

Messengers and Birds were sent out immediately, detailing the truth and all sealed by King Justice. Denouncing Remarkable, and describing the massacre of King Stern in detail. In addition to the assassination attempt against himself and Beloved prior to our homecoming and also laying the blame for Persuasive's death on Remarkable's shoulders. Justice said any Noble who willfully followed Remarkable, the usurper of the crown, would be considered a Traitor against Aegis. He bid soldiers to rally and march toward Riversford Keep and after forces were Marshaled, they'd march to Crown City and Unseat Remarkable for public execution. No word was mentioned of Prince Beloved, only that Princess Beloved was also safe and unharmed and proclaimed King Justice's adopted ward and under his protection since she was still one year away from her legal age of majority.

Beloved was as legally Justice's daughter as she could be without raising serious scandal. It was enough, she could openly call Justice Father and he could call her daughter. It was enough for them both.

The first week in Riversford was hectic, meetings and errands and never enough hours in the day it seemed to get what was needed done. The seamstresses of Riversford however, found great joy in making new garments for their Princess to wear. Beloved had her robes again, even if she had to keep reminding the women making her clothes that ornaments and fancy trim were not necessary and encumbering.

Beloved hated frills, she was a simple woman with simple tastes. Eventually the women caught on after seeing Beloved removed lace from her garments herself if need be.

The only concession to her royal status was her coronet, which had somehow survived our journey in tact and rode on her brow in public. Behind closed doors, she was still just my healer wife in simple, unadorned beauty.

She would lay cool by my side at night, nestled as always in my arms. Her skin was always cool to the touch and her breath the music that I found comfort in at night.

Our peace would not last, it was just the eye of the storm.

“In the Name”

Book One in Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter Five - Death's Blessed Darkness

We had been almost two moons in Riversford, several garrisons of troops had already arrived and were bivouacked in whatever building could be commandeered to house them. Supplies were rolling in from upriver and down and how Riaah and Justice found time to strike up a tenuous relationship in-between duties was anyone's guess. It just seemed to happen like everything else around us as pieces fell into place.

Beloved heartily approved, she felt her father had a lifetime worth of loneliness and after eighteen years without someone to love she was happy he had managed to find it within him again.

As for Beloved, she had seemed to contract a sickness. For a week straight she'd been up well before me and I'd awake to hear her purging in our bath and then just the thought of breakfast would have her rushing back to the privy again.

She looked miserable and I was loath to leave her in the morning to see to my own duties for the King.

I had come back to our room to share dinner with my wife when I found her looking pensive and waiting for me by the window.

“Beloved? What's wrong dearest? Are you still unwell?”

“I'm not unwell Constant and I cannot leave you ignorant any longer. Please sit, I have something to tell you.” She said and I could tell by the sound of her voice she was troubled. I took her hand as I sat, waiting for her to continue.

“Constant, I am not sick so you can stop sending ladies up here with remedies for me. What is happening to me is common for women to experience when they are expecting.”

I thought my stomach dropped clear to my boots as her words sank in and I'm positive my eyes were as wide as saucers. I knew my throat was parched and my hands shook as an elation I have never felt before washed over me.

“A baby? We're having a baby?” I asked the most obvious inane question and Beloved smiled at me.

“Yes, your Dragon Soul is King, when we power coupled, just like a dragon you unconsciously forced fertility. I should have known. Your daughter was conceived that night. I've not had a moon and the morning sickness made me look deeper

at myself to see what was wrong with me. Nothing, just your daughter making her presence known." Beloved said and I think the whole Keep and half of Riversford heard me shout my joy.

Beloved was laughing and clinging to my neck as I spun her around the room. "Joy." I managed to croak out,

"What?" Beloved asked as I set her on her feet again.

"Her name, please. Joy, my Joy." I said and Beloved smiled.

"A good name and appropriate looking at her father. I should have known you'd be this happy. Joy she will be then since you are obviously filled with it." Beloved said and I cavorted like a fool about the room, Sunfire was trilling like a minstrel in love by the window and I threw open the windows and shouted like a supreme idiot.

"I'm going to be a father!" I cried out. Announcing to all and sundry my prowess in the bedroom. I am certainly glad my Beloved tolerates blithering idiots, because I suddenly became one.

She laughed and my ruckus brought Riaah and Justice and everyone else in hearing or with Beasts to our rooms to congratulate us.

I spent the entire night talking to my wife's stomach. Telling my daughter how much I already loved her and making grand promises to her. I look back at myself and see clearly what a dolt I was. I always swore I was not going to be one of those men who turned into fools when around babies.

I was worse, I'd turned fool with my baby still in my wife's womb. Beloved humored me, my joy was such it just could not be contained. We had timed it exceedingly poorly, an accidental conception when neither of us were of our right minds, but we were happy nonetheless. We were going to be parents. It was a blessing from the White Lady.

I slept poorly, jumping at every sigh Beloved made wanting to be ready for anything she might need.

After a few mild reprimands that she was quite capable of seeing to herself and she'd let me know if she needed anything I finally found my sleep, focusing my senses on the tiny spark of life growing within my Beloved, my Joy.

It was three days later, hell opened its gates and war found us before we were ready.

We had known they were coming, we'd seen the troops on the road with overhead surveillance for several days and the gates of the city were closed and troops stationed. However, undermanned as we were, it was an effort just to keep the walls standing and the gates closed.

Tigo worked from the keep, using his power to help fortify our walls and to keep them from being breached with repelling and strength incantations. I was out along the wall, using my powers at closer range. Trying to keep men shielded from hails of arrows and putting out fires that rained down upon us from catapults they erected all along the wall.

I can honestly say I cannot remember what happened clearly, it all happened so fast. We were all running on little to no rest, twenty days of constant battering at our walls waiting for more troops to arrive from farther north. I had bid Sunfire to stay with Beloved and guard her within the keep, we were only connected mentally and she shared my eyes and senses of the siege we were under.

I heard the angry shouts of men around me, just as a large burning mass came flying over the wall. I heard Sunfire's mental shout of warning in the same instant as I remembered throwing a shield around myself as the mass slammed into the wall at my very feet.

I remember being blinded by heat and flames, I remember sending a mental command to Sunfire to leave me and stay with Beloved at all costs and then darkness.

When I finally came to my senses again, I felt the pain all along my body, my arms and feet were scalded with first and second degree burns and untreated. My left shoulder was dislocated and I was in total darkness. Sunfire was scratching at my awareness with a tenacity and plea that I wake up and tell her where I was, I was so far away.

I couldn't answer her, I didn't know. I was in small confines, a metal box of sorts like a coffin and it rocked and swayed and every jolt sent new moments of pain down me. Through my pain riddled awareness I surmised the container I was in was on a cart and moving.

Sunfire confirmed I was moving, because I was getting further away from her quickly and she was not happy that I told her not to follow me and stay with Beloved. The city was still under attack and my Wife and unborn child were depending on Sunfire and I to protect them.

That small conversation taxed me and what was left of my strength and I fell back into a stupor, unable to move and thankfully unconscious enough not to care how hurt I was.

I came to again with a gasp, the lid of my prison was open and I was awakened by a bucket of freezing cold water being dumped on me to rouse me.

The water on my burns made them protest anew and the wrenching of my dislocated shoulder had me tumbling back into the water at the bottom of my coffin moaning in pain.

“That’s him. Remarkable wants this one alive for questioning.” I heard someone say as the lid to my tomb closed again and I heard the latch lock.

I was so thirsty and even the filthy water they’d thrown on me was good enough when survival instinct kicked in and I lapped at the water beside my face and shivered cold and wet and throbbing in every pore until wonderful sweet oblivion claimed me again. My thoughts running in urgency to Sunfire.

Stay with Beloved. Protect my Wife. Protect my daughter. Leave me.

Sunfire obeyed and wept in my mind for me.

The third time I awoke, I looked into the eyes of a smiling demon. Remarkable was above me and looking down on my body with satisfaction.

“So little dogboy, welcome back to Crown City. Not so much fanfare for you and your pretty little savages this time. You’ve caused me quite a lot of trouble. My assassin caught, Justice and Beloved alive and your beasts sending messages and killing mine. Oh yes, quite a lot of trouble.” Remarkable said sneering at me.

“Good.” I growled right back and it was a mistake. Pain flared as Remarkable dug his fingers into the burn on my forearm and I involuntarily screamed as the flesh gave way.

“You’ll sing prettier than that before I’m finished with you. How many men does Justice have? What Lords send troops?” Remarkable asked and I grinned.

“Kill me, I won’t talk.”

“Oh, yes you will. Eventually. Every man has a pain threshold that will break them. I will find yours. Oh no my dogboy, you will not die yet, but you will certainly crave death before I am finished with you. I will send you back to Beloved, a piece at a time if need be.” With that, I felt my braid yanked from my hair painfully. Not cut, but pulled from my scalp until my throat was raw with screaming and I could feel the blood trickle down my neck where I lost not only hair, but part of my scalp at the nape of my neck.

Remarkable left me then, I whimpered like a baby in my cell and it disgusted me to hear myself cry like that. Guards came in later with a cup of water and bread and left it across the room. I had to reset my own shoulder by slamming it into the wall, before I crawled over to my rations, and by the time I got there, I was too weak and in pain to eat.

I passed out again, letting sleep fog my mind of pain once more.

It was several days later when I felt Beloved's anguish wash over me in waves that made me nauseous. She must have received the bloody stump of my braid.

::CONSTANT! CONSTANT!:: Came her frantic, fear driven plea to my mind. Her terror bolstering her manic search for me.

::Beloved. Stay safe. I love you.:: I replied and felt her cling to me using Sunfire to connect us.

::Chosen! Your pain! Let me come to you!:: Sunfire pleaded and again I refused.

::Protect Beloved. Remarkable has me, I am lost. Fight for Justice and Guard Beloved.:: That was all I managed before I could no longer sustain the link, my head was awash with fire and pain.

I lost all track of time, days, weeks, months I could not count. Food came at irregular intervals intermixed with whipping, beating, needles, knives and the systematic removal of every single finger and toenail. My nose was broken, my wounds festering and bleeding and making me feverish and incoherent most of my time awake. I couldn't even sustain a link to Sunfire, she was fading from my perceptions. I just had no strength to do much more than try to breathe and remain alive and defy Remarkable. He would not beat me, I would not give him the satisfaction of gaining control of me.

I heard the guards talking outside my cell quite often, I knew things were bleak and failing for Remarkable, despite his words to the contrary.

The men were scared, the King's army marched toward Crown City. Riversford had held out and fresh troops had arrived to liberate the city. I heard that ships from the south had come and secured the ports and held them firm against Remarkable.

He was cornered, a rat in a trap and his time was running out. I would hold, I would rally what strength I had left in me, and the next time he came for me, I'd throw every scrap of power I had left at him, I'd kill him myself. He would not have my wife and he would not have my daughter. I would protect them at the cost of my life, which I had sworn to do when I bonded myself to Beloved all those years ago.

This was my duty and it was more than my life, it was my soul I protected.

I didn't have to wait long, my guards were in a state, talking about cutting losses and getting out while they still could. King Justice led the March, his barbarian Queen at his side, her devil cat with them.

I wondered how long I'd been gone, I knew from their words they meant Riaah, I hadn't known they'd married. I doubted anything official beyond a Clan oath ceremony had been taken privately, but it made me happy to hear nonetheless. They were good for each other.

I heard them mention Beloved and I held my breath straining for news. They mentioned how acres of men seemed to rise from the dead under the hand of the White Lady. I feared Beloved was taxing herself, I feared for our daughter in her womb. The strain of using so much power could harm both Beloved and Joy and I wasn't there to give them power, I failed them.

That knowledge sat like a lead weight in my heart. How could I look at them again? How could I face them knowing when they'd needed me most, I was captured like a novice child and held prisoner. Too weak to even summon up enough magic to slip my locks. Too weak to even stand anymore on my own power. I was useless, weak and unmanned. I hoped Tigo would look after my Beloved. He was a better man for her, stronger and much more powerful than I.

::Stop those thoughts brother, they serve no one. You are far stronger than you give yourself credit for. You still live my brother, we'd almost lost hope.:: Tigo's voice mixed with Wintermoon's was in my head. A warm presence in my mind giving me a comforting touch to lean against.

::Take care of them, please.:: I begged and felt Tigo wrap my mind securely with his own.

::You will care for them yourself brother. They know you live, Sunfire still clings to your bond tightly, we'll not let you slip away from us. We're closer now, we're coming and we need you Brother. Sunfire tells me Remarkable comes to you, keep me in your mind, I will use my power through you. I cannot guarantee you will survive, but only you can act as a conduit for me inside the Keep. I will strike Remarkable through you, together we will take him down and end his evil. Live for us Constant, you're our one chance to set things right and capture the city and end this bloodshed.::

::Use me as you will brother, but promise me if I die, take care of them.::

::Aye brother, you have my vow on that. However, I will do my best to keep you alive. I have no heart to lose you either. Rest now, even I can feel how badly you suffer now. Just keep your mind open and I'll be here.:: Tigo said and I felt him urge me to sleep and sleep I did. Still wondering how long I'd been in this senseless room.

No windows, no light, no warmth. Just damp darkness and the smell of my own rotting body. The passage of time unknown, my nights and days a blur of misery and isolation.

I had even ceased dreaming, just an endless void of pain and weariness. I would hold until Tigo struck and then embrace the promise of death that always lingered close these days. Remarkable had been right, I would crave death as a release. He was also wrong. I had not yielded, I had not betrayed anyone. My will was stronger than his, even if I died. I won.

I hadn't eaten in so long I couldn't remember my last ration. The guards seemed to have vanished, I hadn't heard them in just as long. However, what awoke me was the jangle of keys in a furious rage and I was dragged to my feet by Remarkable. I felt Tigo's awareness building inside me, he was very close.

"On your feet! MOVE!" Remarkable shoved me, tripping and stumbling before him and I fell innumerable times up a winding stair case. Slowly I felt my endurance building, my brain clearing. Tigo was inside me, lending me the use of his power, making me capable of fighting back, blocking my pain for what needed to be done.

It was an illusion, I was still injured, and still weak this was Tigo's strength in my body. Dampening the edges of my pain so it would not hinder me, it was a deception of my own mind, it would cost me dearly and if I used up what was left of my own body's capabilities the moment Tigo left my mind, my lifeless body would fall where it stood, bereft of life.

He and I had one chance to make this work, he was giving me what I needed to take down Remarkable. We were buying lives with the cost of my own, and we both new it. We could not fail.

I pretended to struggle, giving Tigo time to finish working his magic on me, Remarkable needed to drop his guard completely. He already knew how weak I was, that still was not a lie, the reserves I was now gaining came from Tigo.

Remarkable prodded me along, his sword gripped loosely, used as a cattle prod to herd me ahead of him. As we reached the first landing, heading up into the

Keep proper from the dungeon I feigned another stumble and turned to face my tormentor.

I felt the rush of power in my bunching thigh muscles and I used my warrior training to it's fullest. I got underneath his sword, he was unprepared for my strike and I kicked him in the chest.

My attack sending him backwards down the stairs, his sword clattering from his hands as he rolled back down the flight of stairs in a heap of stunned limbs. I grabbed the fallen weapon and followed.

Before he could regain his senses I struck. I pierced his black heart and met his eyes squarely as he realized his doom was at my hands. "Die and go back to the hell that spawned you!" I growled ramming the blade through him to its hilt then yanking it free.

It was a sharp blade and with a single whacking stroke I severed his head cleanly. I had not the strength to carry his body, but I did have the strength left to carry his cowardly severed head.

I grabbed a fist full of hair and gripped the dripping head and continued my gory climb. I could hear the sounds of battle in the court yard as I climbed ever higher. Out onto the parapets from the main tower, there I stood, holding Remarkable's bloody head aloft until eyes began to turn and swords ceased clanging as soldiers realized what I held. Snow covered the landscape, it had been spring when last I had seen the world of men. I had been imprisoned a very long time.

I saw Justice and Riaah in the center of the Courtyard bloody but whole. "My King! The usurper is dead! Long Live King Justice!" I yelled, throwing Remarkable's severed head at my King's feet.

I was draining, Tigo's power was leaving me, I saw Wintermoon and Sunfire come careening into the courtyard as my eyes began to blur. Tigo was on Beloved's white mare, racing to my side, behind him...

"Beloved..." I saw her, my beautiful wife was alive and well. I'd seen her one last time, it was enough. If I fell I don't remember, the darkness of death was welcome release. We had won, and Remarkable was dead by my hands.

In the darkness of my deathly sleep I heard voices. The gentle song of my Beloved, telling me she loved me. The trill of my dearest Sunfire, singing me to rest. I felt warm again, it had been so long since the sensation of warmth had caressed me, it was welcomed with open arms.

It was several days later before I realized I had not died. I had been closer than anyone had liked and it was only with the efforts of Tigo and my Beloved I lived to tell my tale. However, my awakening from my deathly sleep was like walking into a room full of sunbeams.

What woke me was an incessant tapping on my arm. It was irregular and soft, but something was hitting me. It brought me out of my sleep and I blinked open my eyes to unaccustomed light.

I was in a soft bed, the gauzy lace bed curtains pulled to diffuse the light coming in from the tall windows. The fire in the hearth was crackling merrily across the room and I distinctly smelled peppermint candles burning. I felt the tap against my arm again followed by a cheerful little coo. I turned my head and my heart stopped.

Beside me on the bed was a small infant, her kicking and jerky hand movements playing with the covers to entertain herself was what had been striking me. My breath stopped, my heart leapt into my throat and tears filled my vision as I raised a weak and shaky hand to her. She was so tiny, newborn, healthy innocence and so very beautiful. She gripped my finger and made newborn gurgles, hiccups and coos. Her skin dark and smooth, her hair a buttery blonde hued downy crown and her eyes, her large hazel eyes, just like mine, looked into my soul.

“Joy...” I croaked, succumbing to joyful sobs as I struggled to roll onto my side and curl myself around her. My daughter, I never thought to ever see her, and here she was, perfect and safe and so utterly beautiful to me.

Then the most beautiful creature in the world appeared. Pulling back the curtains and sobbing her own joy for me. “Constant! Oh Constant you’re awake!” She cried and my Beloved held me and I lost myself to grateful happiness in her arms.

I was emotionally overwhelmed and just cried my joy into my wife’s breast, too weak to move much and Beloved just settled my head into her lap as she combed my shaggy shortened hair with her fingers my eyes fixated on my daughter laying beside us on the bed, chewing and sucking on my fingers.

Sunfire joined us and curled up under my chin, purring like a cat and letting the baby play with her tail.

“We nearly lost you Constant. It broke my heart to see how much you suffered for us. It took me three days to heal you enough so you wouldn’t slip away and three more to bring you back from the brink again. Tigo held onto your soul so it would not leave us and Sunfire and Wintermoon worked until exhaustion. Then your daughter decided to make her arrival wanting to see her Papa. For the last nine

days we've been waiting for you to wake up. Joy cries if she's not in this bed with you. She already loves her Papa." Beloved said stroking my hair and wiping my tears with her soft white cotton robe. She had been in the bath when I awoke. She'd only left me a few minutes and in those few minutes the world was given to me.

"How long? How long was I gone?" I had to know, I hated to ask, but time was upside down for me, Beloved had not even begun showing her pregnancy when I left, I missed it all.

"Almost seven months." Beloved sighed. "When you fell in the fire, you fell off the wall and into their hands. Sunfire said you were unconscious and couldn't rouse you. It took four days for you to regain consciousness and then only sporadically. You kept getting farther away from us." Beloved's voice cracked and I laced my fingers in hers to comfort her as she spoke.

"When Remarkable sent me your braid and no other message I... I almost lost hope but Sunfire told me you still lived and to never give up hope in you. You were her chosen, you were a King Dragon among men and that it would take more than torture to break your will. I had to believe in you." Beloved was crying now and I kissed her palm.

"Forgive me for not being there to protect you. When you needed me most I was gone." I sobbed and that stopped Beloved's tears.

"You have no idea what you've done do you?" Beloved asked and then lifted my chin to meet her eyes.

"You were there Constant. In every battle, in every victory you stood there with us all. Your spirit moved with the near the flesh of a man. Tigo believes you soul walked, you were so dedicated to protecting me, you sent your very soul out of your body to stand over us. When we were safe, you were gone, but when the fighting was worst, you fought beside Justice and the others. Pure light you were. We could see right through you and we could not communicate with you, but you were there. Many nights I awoke to see you standing over me, watching me. Then as I reached for you, you disappeared like smoke. You were there, you were a Constant force for us all. You never left your duty for others, when your parents named you, they named you well." Beloved said, her love for me in every word.

"I thought, I thought I dreamed that." I said, vaguely remembering snatches of dreamscapes where I fought in battles, stood looking over my pregnant wife while she slept, wishing I could hold her. They had been dreams to me, fragments of imagination lost upon waking.

“Perhaps you did, but because your will is so strong, your dreams were made real. No Constant, you never left us.” Beloved said just as Tigo coughed in the doorway.

“Aye brother, you never left us and I followed you into your dreams to find you. I’ve never known a soul walker as powerful as you. Usually it’s a glimpse of a soul light and then gone. You took almost solid form and swing a mighty sword my brother. You saved my life more than once, as you saved us all.” Tigo said coming to sit beside us on the edge of the bed.

“You look much better than you did my brother. I had but a taste of your pain when I touched your conscious mind. What I saw with my eyes made me realize the depth to which you suffered. Had I known your body had been through such torment, I would have never done what I did. I almost killed you by blocking pain instinct in you. How you managed to move at all leaves me in awe of your strength.” Tigo said, his eyes pained for me.

A young man I didn’t know stood in the door. He was Aegian and full of fiery red hair and huge green eyes. He was built well, all long lines and agile grace. On his back was strapped a lute and in his hands he carried a tray. Tigo looked up and smiled, a warming affectionate smile and once again I felt left in the dark and Tigo noticed my look and winked.

“Come in Cadence.” Tigo said and the youth smiled and brought in the tray and set it down on the nightstand beside me.

“It is a joy to see you in the flesh, rather than walking like a ghost across a battlefield. Too close to being a real ghost you were.” Cadence smiled, his airy tenor was a musical sounding as his name.

“Thank you.” I replied, accepting I’d be confused for many days yet as Tigo and Beloved helped me into a seated position in bed.

Tigo stirred the broth in the bowl as Beloved settled beside me with Joy in her arms. I was torn between eating myself and watching my daughter nurse. Tigo chuckled.

“Let her eat while you eat. I’m tired of forcing this down your throat with you comatose brother.” Tigo said and I resigned myself to being fed like an invalid. I was an invalid.

I swallowed the first bite and it sparked my hunger. I eventually begged Tigo to forgo the spoon and I drank down the broth direct from the bowl eagerly.

“Now that is what I like to see.” Beloved said smiling, the heavy weight of fear lifting from the room. They were glad to see me coming back to them however slowly.

“Can you enlighten me on what else happened while I seemed to have been a living ghost? Starting perhaps with this?” I asked, nodding my head at the pretty youth looking at me like a hero or a good song and Tigo chuckled.

“What war doesn’t draw minstrels like flies to honey?” Cadence chuckled curling up in his chair with a whimsical air.

“You had a death wish.” Tigo grumbled and Cadence grinned.

“It is your duty to fling pretty bits of magic, it is mine to record it for history in song so no one forgets. Your handsome face alone is worth a few good ballads.” Cadence added and Tigo shook his head.

“I am no love sonnet.” Tigo rolled his eyes and Cadence smiled suggestively from his chair.

“I beg to differ and since it is my opinion that matters, you lose.” Cadence said and I chuckled. I couldn’t help it, my stoic, private, straight-laced mentor had met his match. It was about time.

“Laugh it up brother. You haven’t heard his songs about YOU. Spirit of the Battlefield.” Tigo teased and I shrugged.

“It could be worse. Dungeon prisoners make poor hearth fire songs.” I said and Beloved shivered.

“That is very true.” She said getting up to place a now sleeping joy in a lacy little bassinet beside our bed before returning to my side and snuggling up under me arm.

“So how did you two run across each other?” I asked and Cadence grinned.

“I stalked him like a she-cat in heat. I cornered him taking a bath in the river and invited myself to share it. I am not the most subtle of men and I just had to see if that white hair went all the way down.” Cadence waggled his eyebrows and Tigo coughed.

I laughed, Tigo was prey and Cadence was like a cat toying with a mouse before pouncing. I already liked him.

“It was charming to see Tigo at last at a loss for a change. Who knew he liked redheads?” Beloved grinned and Tigo smiled.

"I'm certainly glad he likes red. He gets mine all the way down too, including freckles." Cadence winked and Tigo took his hand.

"I love your spots and I love more that even when I feel most lost, you can bring humor to my life. I needed it and I appreciate it."

"Love, life is too short not to laugh when you can." Cadence said and our light conversation halted when more visitors arrived.

Justice and Riaah swooped into the room and took up more chairs to cluster around my bedside.

I had been right about the oath vows, they would have a proper wedding once I was standing again. Justice would not wed without me standing by his side as best man.

I learned a great deal of what had gone on in my absence. The siege at Riversford ended when troops from Lord Steadfast's holdings from the West had arrived fifty thousand strong and Lord Golden had marshaled the North and brought not only an additional thirty thousand men, but had sent word to King Tidus of Rustgaard who moved his own army to our aide. With more men and much needed supplies and aid.

They had made Riversford by Winter and then all made the final push to Crown City. Using the Dragons and beasts as messengers and Tigo's mirrors to coordinate movements with the Southern Isles Warriors and Mages who held the port cities under their protection everyone pushed as one inland to Crown City.

What I had seen was just the tail end of the battle. The city had been breeched easily, Remarkable only had a small army loyal and the mercenaries had long left a losing battle. I had known that much from the talk of my guards. Remarkable hadn't orchestrated his movements, he had been so eager to get rid of Justice and Beloved, he hadn't thought beyond that night when Stern fell.

He had hoped to blame Justice for the massacre, he hadn't counted on the Loyalty and friends Justice had among the landed nobility. Remarkable knew courtly lords, those simpering dandies with more wealth than sense. The young who gambled and talked pretty but when it came to real fighting and real war, were in far over their heads.

They abandoned Remarkable the moment he saw how ruthless he was, how he had killed not only his father, but those same court nobles he had claimed as allies. Those that had survived the night of terror had fled like us, back to their fathers and relatives of the landed nobility.

Spreading word as they flew home of Remarkable's actions and swiftly shouting loyalty and allegiance to King Justice, it took a fool not to see which side to stand on in this war.

When Remarkable realized his error, that no one believed Justice had murdered his own father and brother, he'd recalled his troops from Riversford to fortify the city. The southern ports had already been left once Remarkable realized we had fled north, which made it easy for the Southern Aide to make port without bloodshed and hold the ground until we called for aide.

Remarkable's inexperience and hasty decisions without thought of consequence had doomed him. Hostile Lords seeking vengeance against their slain kin surrounded him, he had a brother, the rightful King promising justice to his people, and he had a niece who wielded the touch of the White Lady. For every injury he inflicted on us, she healed in her wake.

He had known he was staring death in the eyes, but like a wolf in a trap would chew off a leg to free itself, so he tried to save himself by locking the city gates. However, he'd lost the loyalty of his men and his hired mercenaries held no allegiance to anyone save the golden coin in their hands.

They saw no profit in staying with a doomed King and packed up their losses and left. It had been fairly easy for Justice to subdue the city and take the Keep. Everyone wondered, including myself what Remarkable was thinking when he came for me in my cell that day.

What had he hoped to gain?

"Perhaps he just wanted to take me with him. If he was going to lose, he'd take at least one of us with him. I can only guess, he didn't enlighten me as to why before I killed him." I said, it would be a mystery, but one that none of us would lose any sleep over.

Remarkable was gone, the Castle Keep of Crown City restored to the custodianship of its proper King. Peace had come again, and now it was down to simply repairing the damage Remarkable had wrought.

We had time at last, and we'd mend one bridge at a time.

“In the Name”

Book One in Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter Six - Dawn of a New Age

It took me several weeks before I was moving around again with confidence. It would take many more weeks of exercise to regain the muscle tone I had lost along with the weight I'd lost. I was skin and bones but whole.

My daughter was my salvation. She was getting bigger by the day and with each day more of her personality began to develop. Oh she had a twinkle in her eye that I just knew would one day give me more than one gray hair. Her laughter filled me with peace and her smile was brighter than the sun to me.

She was a chubby bundle of life and I cherished the time I spent playing with her in our rooms while I recovered. Soon I was walking the gardens with her and Beloved and watching the world through her eyes. Everything was new and exciting. We were bundled from the cold in warm coats and Joy's reaction to snow under her fingers was a delight. I never knew I could like the cold again. It was different when you were warmed from the inside out.

Watching Justice with her was even more heartwarming. He took to being a grandfather like a fish to water. I never knew a King could make such idiotic faces to get a two month old baby in his lap to giggle.

Riaah would smile and let him make a fool of himself in private. “I think it's highly ironic that he waited to sire a second child until after his grand-daughter was born. The niece will be older than her uncle.” Riaah said, still not showing her own pregnancy yet.

“Only we know the truth I am really his daughter. I could never be heir and I don't want to be. That was never my path in life. My little brother will be King after me as it should be. The children you have together are the only ones my father can truly claim officially. Not that it matters in our hearts. The truth is here with us. Let other's see the adoption of me as they will. I am just happy I can call my father my father at last.” Beloved smiled as we ate dinner as a family and watched the snow fall peacefully outside.

“I'll drink to that.” Justice said lifting a toast to family while Joy, heedless of rank peed on her grandfather's breeches.

Babies were such messy little creatures and I thanked her for choosing her grandfather and not myself this time while Beloved laughed and apologized and whisked our offspring away to change her.

Winter turned to Spring and then Summer again. I was more or less back to my old self again. Mornings I spent training with the guard to regain my lost muscle and getting healthy and fit again. Order had returned to Aegis, trade was flowing again, the dead had been mourned and laid to rest and Cadence was still singing lofty songs about us nightly in the great hall.

If I didn't like my Mentor's lover so much I might have had to kill him. One too many songs about my soul walking battles had been written and not just by Cadence. People treated me like a great legendary hero and it made me uncomfortable. I missed just being Constant, plain simple Constant. Beloved's protector and husband.

I missed our clan and the simplicity of our life there, so did Beloved. Neither of us were suited to courtly life. All the protocol and pageantry was suffocating. Riaah was adapting well, or rather she was forcing people to adapt to her.

The wedding had taken place the beginning of summer and she wore clan warrior garb. No silks and veils for Riaah.

Mio had led his sister up to the altar, Shade and Cur flanking them. All bedecked in beads and feathers, leather and silk. Her sword strapped to her waist and her hair braided as a warrior and her burgeoning belly bare and painted with symbols for a healthy son and pride. Most clan women loved to paint their pregnant bellies and Riaah was no exception. She looked wonderful.

Justice grinned like a fool the entire ceremony. His queen made one concession to Aegian honor. While we all still called her Riaah in private. She was now known as Queen Dauntless, for she had been during the war, ever fighting side-by-side with Justice, a warrior through and through.

She'd start a trend with the women I had no doubt. You would never see Riaah in frills and dresses and I'm sure like minded women would latch onto Riaah's preferred style of dress.

Robes and harem pants like Beloved liked for lounging and good solid leathers for working or hunting.

I couldn't wait until Riaah got too warm. The first time she marched out wearing nothing but a loin cloth I'd pay good coin to watch the fainting and scandalized faces on prudish Aegian society. That thought made me miss my own freedom where clothing was concerned.

I missed my own loin cloths and lounging in the cool springs on a hot summer day. Walking naked from the springs back to my dwelling dripping wet with no

one batting at eye at my nakedness considering most of them were as naked to the heat as I was.

I missed Beloved sprawled on our bed in just his skin. That thought stopped me, I was missing Beloved as he had been. As much as I loved my wife and her beautiful body, I also missed the man she had been too. Beloved must have read my thoughts as I came into our room.

She smiled and set her book down and sighed. "I want to go home." She said and I nodded.

"As do I." I admitted and that was all it took to decide it for us.

We stayed until Harvest Fest, to remember and honor our first meeting and then we were on a ship heading home. All but Riaah and Mio came with us. He stayed with his sister and Justice. The rest of us were more than ready to return home.

Cadence was with us, where Tigo went, so did Cadence. Their love was real and I was sure Cadence would fit right in to our clan. He was a minstrel, they fit in no matter where they were, it was a knack they all had.

I was sitting up on the prow, watching the waves when arms slipped around my shoulders, and a very flat chest was pressed against my back. I turned to see Beloved, smirking and very male again behind me.

"What's this?" I asked and Beloved crawled into my lap.

"Joy is sleeping and weaned, I'm not suckling a baby cutting teeth and well, I missed this. While I enjoy being a woman, I also enjoy being a man. I also like not having moon cycles." Beloved said honestly and I laughed.

"I see. I forgot how much I missed this until I see you like this again." I said and Beloved smiled.

"I know. I missed it too Constant. You're more like Tigo than you'd ever admit to me openly. I know you like this body better."

"I didn't dislike the other Beloved. I really don't care what wrapping my Beloved is in, you don't change where it matters most." I said wrapping my arms around my husband as we watched the waves against the prow.

"And neither do you My love. Constant is as Constant does. I'd rather love you like we were before. I prefer this myself. I'll be a man for us and a woman for our children. Unless one is enough." Beloved said and I chuckled.

“She’s enough for ten men to handle. Maybe when she’s a little older we’ll consider trying for a son?”

“That is a promise I can gladly make. A son would be nice too. Come kiss me Papa.” Beloved purred and I complied. My Beloved, the one I had fallen in love with all those years ago, was back, it had come full circle.

We were mid-kiss when a teasing whistle was heard and we broke our kiss to turn and smile at Cadence.

“Now I see what Tigo was saying. Beloved, you cross lines beautifully. Woman or Man you wear it well.” Cadence said and Beloved smiled.

“Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.” Beloved replied and Cadence laughed.

“I’ll keep what I have. Tigo likes my boy bits.”

“Why do you think I’m male again? Constant likes them too.” Beloved joked and we all laughed as Tigo joined us and we shared a quiet moment and wine together on our way home.

Home, it was so good to be home again. Beloved and I moved out of our old dwelling and into the one Harrah and Justice had used. It was easier to live on the ground when you had an infant to care for and it was a larger dwelling, with a separate room that we made Joy’s nursery.

Everyone was thrilled to see us again and I think Joy got passed around to every single person of the tribe before the night was over. Cadence was welcomed with much delight as he sang songs and entertained everyone during the welcome home feast.

Wintermoon and Sunfire lounged on their favorite rock again, curled together sleeping soundly. Silent and Sure had flown up to their roosts hooting happily and Kirpet and Keppet were grateful to be home so they could resume night hours again. Quirk and Thrift were bounding around the feast with energy to spare and I saw several beaded necklaces in Thrifts paws as he scampered away, Zara chasing after him threatening him with disembowelment.

Yes, it was good to be home.

Winter in the Isle is balmy and peaceful. The temperature never too hot and never too cold. The cool breezes from the ocean were fresh and clean and the thunder storms were bad outside the protection of our village. However, Tigo and

the other mages had ways of keeping us all dry under domes that let only enough rain through to keep our plants healthy. The fury was kept out.

However, even that was refreshing, I'd go out hunting in the morning, storm or not, with the other warriors and come home mid afternoon drenched but feeling good.

Joy was beginning to stand on her own and would use everything within her grasp to pull herself up. I had a child clinging to my wet pants if I didn't shed them quick enough.

By spring she was walking and beginning to talk. The first time she called me 'Papa' I thought I'd explode from pride and joy. She was just too damn adorable. My chubby cheeked little dragon. All butter colored curls and cheer sporting four little teeth in her wide smile.

She looked like both Beloved and I in many ways. She had my eyes and her skin was just slightly fairer than Beloved's, a cream coffee hue to her skin and a slightly more yellow hue to her hair than Beloved's. My dark featured influence there no doubt. She had my crooked smile and Beloved's nose. She was our little 'tea blend' as Beloved called her affectionately as we watched her develop and grow before our eyes. It hardly seemed that two years ago we had left on a voyage that almost destroyed us.

Two very long years, but worth it to see her grow up in the peace we'd forged for her and both of us still very young ourselves. I was only twenty summer old, I had a lifetime yet ahead of me.

Cadence and Joy shared a birthday and on her second winter, Cadence turned twenty-six. He was older than he looked, he had that type of face that would always belie his years. Tigo was just thirty, they too, had a lifetime ahead of them.

Beloved and I waited until Joy was three before we sought to give her a sibling and our son, Peaceful, was born twelve days after her fourth birthday and on his first birthday, Wintermoon and Sunfire took their first mating flight.

That was a glorious sight to behold as they cavorted over the waves and then Sunfire laid her clutch of eggs in a warmed box of sand we kept heated and secure inside our dwelling.

Six months later, seven new dragons, the size of my hand, graced the dragon clan. Two blue females, one green female, and a silver male that Wintermoon said would probably choose Joy since he seemed to love to hide and play in her curls. Two red males and a beautiful copper male rounded out the clutch.

Sunfire and Wintermoon were good parents as far as reptilian parents go and I was going crazy with little dragons everywhere in my dwelling for those first weeks until Sunfire too got fed up with them and their insatiable curiosity too and snapped at them all until they flew outside to wreak youthful havoc on the clan.

Every night however, Silversong was sleeping on my daughters pillow and one of the little blue females, Lazuli, the same color as the stone Sunfire named her for, would be in Peaceful's crib at night. Both my children had a touch of my gifts and only time would tell if Beloved's gifts graced them.

For now, we were busy with two young children of our own and eight dragons, including Sunfire to provide for until they were old enough to provide for themselves or bond to a clan member.

We were surprised when Lapis, the other blue little female opted to bond to one who did not have gifts, but rather a talent she liked. Cadence would up with a little blue darling who trilled on his shoulder as he played.

She claimed music was a gift and Cadence calmed the soul and she liked him. That was good enough for them both and Cadence adored his biggest fan and she him. It was a good if unconventional bond. Blues were the least magical, but the best 'singers' if you could call the chirps dragons made voices. She could chirp beautifully and add a counterpoint harmony to whatever Cadence played.

Wintermoon indulged his daughter and would listen with his eyes half lidded as she crooned with Cadence in the evening. I know how he felt, to take pride in offspring. I did it enough with my own growing little ones.

It was five years before we saw Justice and Riaah again. Their son, Prince Royal Unity was as beautifully blended as Beloved and our Children. They played together happily and during their stay, one of the red males took a shine to Unity and the first Dragon Bonded Prince of Aegis came to be. If there was ever a more unifying symbol of Aegis and the Southern Isles it was represented now in the five year old future King. He would stay with us longer than intended. He needed to be taught how to care for his bonded Dragon, so Riaah would stay behind with Unity for an additional six months so he could learn the clan and his dragon before he went home again.

The path that Harrah had seen for us had been walked and I knew she was watching us from the heavens smiling. I certainly was. I had my Beloved, my children and I saw a future King of Aegis that would lead with an understanding that would benefit not only his own people, but the clans of the future.

This shared path would lead to acceptance and prosperity for us all. What better future could we have hoped for? This was the beginning of grand new times and

we were at the threshold of wondrous change and enlightenment. It was the Dawn of a New Age. No man could ask for more.

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