

## **“Namesake”**

*Book Four in the Namesake Tales*

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### **Chapter One - A Bond Acknowledged**

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My name is Kaoru, I was the first Torlander born in Aegis. My mother was a healer bonded to a Unicorn and my Father a warrior to a winged horse. They had come to live in Aegis as representatives of our homeland and I was the first child born to the delegation.

Not long after me came Charger, the first centaur. We were good friends. We weren't bonded, centaurs and any beast half-human didn't bond together like dragons or griffons did with humans. We chose to be together because we were both children and both friends and both very different from Aegian natives. Charger obviously so and for myself, my blue hair turns many heads and children can be cruel so as a child I felt ostracized at school. They never picked on me in front of the teachers but they made it clear often enough outside of class I wasn't invited into their social circles. So Charger and I spent most of our free time together.

There was only one person at school that really was my friend but he was two years older than me so we never shared any regular classes together and because he was a mage student and I was a healer our mentoring classes were also separate.

However, one day when I was twelve, Wise learned we shared a birthday and he brought me a present, little golden bells on a bracelet. I loved them. More for the gesture than the trinket, but they made such pretty chimes when I wore them and Wise said I walked as quiet as a cat and always startled him in the library so now he could hear me coming.

We had a good laugh about it and I always made sure I wore them when going to the student library for studies. Charger however, didn't like them so I took them off in his presence. I couldn't understand why he didn't like them or why he didn't like Wise. Wise was so very nice and kind and so smart. He helped me all the time in the library when I was struggling with my lessons. Charger however bristled whenever I mentioned his name. I cared for Wise greatly, but I also cared for Charger so my loyalties were torn. When I met Wise in the library I gave him all of me. The same for Charger when I was with him. The two most dear to me however never at the same time.

I wouldn't figure out Charger's animosity for Wise until much later even though he gave me all the signs of being jealous I was sadly clueless and in denial. I was almost seventeen and in my last year of apprentice studies and for the past two years Wise had been away scouring Aegis for talent and doing field work for the king as part of his junior journeyman rank.

The last year of his apprenticeship he shadowed Tigo on field work and then did a year on his own. For my field work since I was a healer, I shadowed my mentor Peaceful in his work in the Healer's building that worked as a Hospital for Crown City. Next year I'd assume full duties and take shifts as a junior journeyman healer alongside traditional doctors at the newly built hospital. Healers worked the most serious cases and I was just coming back from tending a seriously burned man with Peaceful when Wise came winging in on the back of Snowstorm his King Dragon.

It made me catch my breath, I never tired of seeing dragons in the air. The dust kicked up and Peaceful and I shielded ourselves and then Wise, dropped down and apologized. "Sorry, didn't see you until we were too close to ground to pull back. Kaoru, is that you?" He asked and I smiled.

"Aye. Good to see you back." I replied and felt my cheeks flush when Wise gave me a decidedly appraising look. My old crush on my senior came back with a vengeance. I'd almost forgotten how very handsome he was and how much I missed our old meetings in the library.

"I hardly recognized you and had it not been for your hair I wouldn't have. Where did that skinny kid in the library go?" He asked and I smiled.

"You've not been gone THAT long." I said and Peaceful grinned.

"Long enough apparently. I have to get back, I'll see you tomorrow Kaoru. Welcome back Wise." Peaceful said humming to himself as he hurried off.

Snowstorm made himself small and perched on Wise's shoulder and whirled his eyes at me and blinked. I smiled and just reached out a hand to stroke his chin. "Good to see you back too Snowstorm. I have an apple in my pocket if you'd like it." I said and Wise chuckled and informed me Snowstorm did. So I gave the dragon my left over lunch and then fell into step beside Wise as we walked back to campus.

"Did you have a good journey?" I asked, stumbling for small talk, my heart fluttering with joy that Wise was back again.

"Aye. Tested quite a few kids and found fifteen with the sense, it's getting harder to find them now, most those with the sense are here now. We really have to look in obscure places to find them. But living on the road is fun but hard." Wise said breaking up the apple into slices for Snowstorm.

"How about you Kaoru? You'll be getting your tattoos here in a few weeks. Nervous?"

“No. Not really. I’m ready to begin my work. I feel good when I help others who need me. I would love to travel like you do and help those who really need it out in the world. I wish my first year as a journeyman was spent like you.”

“Dangerous for a healer alone though. It can get a bit dodgy in places. Without a protector it would be far too risky. It’s a good thought though. Have you mentioned it to Peaceful? I bet you could tour with some of the Warriors out on their circuits.”

“I thought of that too. I just... well... Charger is adamantly against it. He won’t let me go.”

“Last I looked it’s your decision not his. Is he still bull headed possessive about you?” Wise asked and I was shocked, I wouldn’t have guessed Wise would have noticed.

“How did you know?”

“Oh he gave me a right earful a few years back, told me to stay away from you. He doesn’t like me much.” Wise said with a sigh and I nodded.

“I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. He can be... stubborn.”

“He can be a right asshole Kaoru. If he had his way you’d be in his grotto kept like a pretty treasure. If he didn’t threaten everyone that got within twenty-feet of you, you wouldn’t have been so alone at school. He tried it on me more than once. I don’t back down from bullies especially when I like you too.” Wise said turning to wink at me and I felt that flush in my cheeks again and felt warm in other places unmentionable too. I hoped he meant what I thought he meant. My empathy was picking up signs I was too scared to believe were real. I didn’t want to misinterpret his affection for more than I hoped.

“I like you too.” I heard myself say and my voice didn’t shake too badly. Wise stopped and offered me his arm.

“I hope as much as I like you. Allow me to escort you back Healer Kaoru?”

I took his arm and felt a million butterflies well up in the pit of my stomach. “Aye, Adept Wise.” I answered back formally and was lost in my imagination that Wise might be my bonded, his emotions were giving me all the right signals when Charger appeared looking angry.

“Kaoru! You’re late. Come with me now.” Charger ordered glaring daggers at Wise.

“The word ‘please’ tends to be polite Charger. Kaoru is not a slave to be ordered about. If you’re his friend you should try acting like it once in a while.” Wise said right back and Charger snorted.

“You know nothing human. All pretty smiles and trinkets to win a heart. Kaoru is safe with me. I protect him, not you.” Charger said taking my free hand. I felt suddenly in a tug-of war.

“Please, don’t fight. I’m coming Charger. Thank you Wise, it’s so nice to see you back again and welcome home.” I said defeated and let Charger grip my arm and lead me away.

There was such a difference in the way I was treated between the pair of them. Wise was always courteous and gentle while Charger demanded and held me tightly. I often had bruises on my upper arms from him, he didn’t know his own strength and I did bruise easily.

We didn’t get far before Wise was standing in front of us looking angry. “Unhand him Charger. Can’t you see you’re hurting him?” Wise asked and Charger stamped his hooves.

“Out of my way. Kaoru only needs me.” I whimpered as Charger gripped me harder.

“Stop this Charger! You’re hurting him and I won’t allow it. He is not a possession, he’s a person and I’ve had quite enough of you dictating his life as if he belonged to you.” Wise and Charger faced off, neither of them blinking.

“Please, oh please don’t fight.” Their anger was tangible and it was making me ill. Wise sighed and held out his hand to me.

“I won’t fight Kaoru. You have my vow not to fight him for your sake. However, please come with me, I’m afraid for you. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“No. His pretty words are human lies. Only I protect you Kaoru, only I can keep you safe.” Charger said and then picked me up and bolted away before I could say anything.

He set me in his grotto and cold and hungry I stared into the fire. “Why do you hate him so much?” I asked and Charger glared at me.

“He’s a man and all men want only one thing from pretty ones. He’d use you.”

“But I like him too. Someone willing is hardly used Charger.” I replied and Charger did something he had never done before. He purposefully slapped me.

“So you’d rut with him over me? Me who has always protected you? You don’t need a mate, you have me and that is final Kaoru. If you want physical pleasure, I will give it to you.” He said and now I was terrified.

“NO!” I got up and ran and didn’t get far before Charger had me again and was dragging me back to his grotto.

“I said you stay here! I will pleasure you. You are mine.” He said and I struggled. I heard my clothes ripping and his hands touching me in places no one had touched, I sobbed and fought and then bright light flashed from the fire.

I wrestled free in the moment and ran, right into the arms of Wise. “Foul beast. He said no!” Wise was glowing he was so livid and heaving for breath, he must have ran after us.

“He is mine!” Charger growled and Wise held me close as I cried.

“No. He belongs to no one but himself! I love him and I will not see him hurt by you. I am his protector now.” Wise said picking me up like I weighed nothing and Charger reared going in to charge when Snowstorm, full size leapt in between us.

“Leave it Centaur Charger. Humans mate Humans, Centaurs mate Centaurs, Dragons mate Dragons. The healer is not your mate and you defy the White Lady when you keep him from his true mate. Long Wise has known he was bonded to Kaoru and for years you kept their bond from forming by keeping Kaoru at a distance from him. No more, you let him go now before you sin against Tor and take a mate against his will.” Snowstorm said then turned to me with tender eyes.

“Little blue healer, long too you have known you love Wise and your fear for hurting Charger has made you hold your tongue and heart prisoner. Tell Wise truth in your heart, truth in your soul. Speaks words that should have been said long ago to each other.” Snowstorm said and through my tears, still held in Wise’s arms I wrapped my arms around his neck and whispered.

“I love you Wise.”

“I love you too Kaoru. I have since that first time you scared me in the library when we were kids.”

“Me too.” I replied and Snowstorm snorted.

“The Dragon King and the Healer, always a bond, always share the same day of birthing and always share a soul. This bond should have been made long ago,

now go and make it stronger.” Snowstorm ordered us and Wise carried me a good distance before I asked to be set down.

We walked hand in hand back to Campus and to the apartment that Wise had in the graduate hall. We talked very little, the mood still dark after what Charger had almost done to me. Once inside, I cried for a while, shaken emotionally and Wise just held me to comfort me.

“Have you eaten yet Kaoru?” Wise asked me softly and I shook my head. He got up and walked over to his hearth and put a kettle on to boil.

“If you make the tea, I’ll go pilfer us some dinner.” He added with a smile and I nodded and moved to monitor the kettle while Wise went out to get us dinner.

When just a few minutes passed and there was a knock on the door, I opened it expecting Wise and found my parents.

“What are you doing here? Why is Charger going ballistic and claiming you’ve been kidnapped by Wise?” My parents demanded and I sighed and let them in.

“Mama, Papa... Charger almost, he almost... he tried to...” I couldn’t say it and I think my mother understood first considering my obvious emotional duress.

“Tried to what? Spit it out boy!” My father demanded and my mother hissed.

“He can’t say it Tenju! Don’t be insensitive, look at your son he’s hurting and yelling at him isn’t solving anything.” My mother said and turned to me.

“Did he try and mate you?” I could only choke back a sob and nod.

“WHAT?!” My father was furious and again my Mother had to calm him down.

“Tenju! If you cannot control your temper I’ll send you out! Kaoru honey, what happened?”

I told them about Wise coming home and then Charger carrying me off and told them what Charger said. I told them about Wise coming after us and Snowstorm’s words. Just as Wise came back.

“It’s all true. I’ve known since I was fourteen Kaoru was the one. But Charger never let us spend any time together for me to confirm it. I only knew for sure when he carried him off and I was so furious I could have drawn lightning down on him. I’ve never felt so fiercely protective in my life. I knew then it was a bond making me so desperate to get to Kaoru. I got there just in time and Charger almost came after us had not Snowstorm intervened. I promised Kaoru I wouldn’t hurt Charger and I won’t. But he does need to atone for his actions tonight. What

he tried to do is despicable.” Wise said laying a hand to the top of my head and stroking my hair.

“I love Kaoru, I always have. I promise to keep him safe. He is my bonded and it’s now my duty to guard the healer. Would you turn that honor over to me now Master Tenju?” Wise asked and my father stood and offered Wise his hand.

“From my heart Adept Wise, aye. I will rest easy knowing he will be protected by one such as you. You do your parent’s proud lad.” My father said and Wise smiled.

“I try to sir. Thank you.” Wise said and my Mother stood and embraced me first and then Wise.

“I had long hoped when you bonded it would be such a fine match. We healers can be vulnerable and now I shall not worry about you. Take care of my only son Wise.”

“Always Healer Sanome.” Wise said embracing my mother. Just as his Parent’s turned up and we had to repeat the whole tale again.

Lord Fair was quite pleased with the match. “Oh the way he’d mooneye after you when he thought no one was looking. I just knew it. Oh I am so glad you finally got sorted out and we are intruding. We’ll go deal with the fallout, you two eat, both of your stomachs are rumbling.” Fair said escorting everyone out of the room and leaving us to share dinner.

“Did you really mooneye after me?” I asked and Wise chuckled.

“Obsessively. All healers are beautiful, but you to me make them all pale. All that blue hair, I love it.”

“It clashes horribly with my uniform.” I added making a face. Pale lime green and bright peacock blue was not a pleasant combination.

Wise laughed. “I honestly never noticed. I’m about as artistically bent as my father. Which is to say totally lacking any sense of color coordination. I wasn’t looking at your uniform, my eyes barely left your face. The way your eyes match your hair amazes me. I was dreadfully crushing on you and would deliberately wait in the library for you. Sometimes for hours. You’re the reason I had good grades, nothing to do but study until you showed up. I knew I had you all to myself at those times. Charger never came inside, it was the one place I could get you alone. I should have said more then, I’m sorry now I didn’t.”

“Don’t be sorry Wise. I should have said something too. I was too afraid of upsetting Charger. He gets angry easily.”

“So I noticed. No more Kaoru. I’ll never let him hurt you again.” Wise said and leaned over and gave me my first kiss.

They say some kisses are like a magic all of their own, it’s very true, I never wanted this one to ever end. I felt alive, I felt free and I felt infinitely loved.

Food was left forgotten as we kissed all the way to the bed across the room. I couldn’t remember how my clothes vanished nor Wise’s, it was a blur of bliss. Kisses, touches and caresses.

He was so handsome. He looked like his father Colt, dashing handsome in that mysterious rouge way. The only difference he had his mother Fair’s eyes. Cornflower blue eyes, jet black hair and a body incredibly fit from hours of riding and tending a dragon.

He made love to me as if I were made of spun glass. Every gesture and movement gentle and fluid. He made my whole body seem to be burning from the inside out in the best of ways. I have never felt more pleasure in my life.

If we had doubted the bond before, we could not now. We connected in the most intimate of ways. I knew his thoughts, his desires and I felt his love penetrate my empathic senses and fill me. He in turn knew mine and we wept together with joy as we lay spent in ruined sheets. Relief and love mingled and we fell asleep long before either of us wished to that night. The first night with my bonded mate, I could not have been happier.

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We were both ravenous the following morning and we laughed as we ate the remains of our cold supper and laughed even harder as we tried collecting our clothes off the floor and found my tunic had somehow managed to wrangle it’s way under the bed.

“Let’s get your stuff together and then I’ll see my Mom about getting us a bonded apartment. We’ll be tripping over each other in here.” Wise said pulling on his breeches.

“Aye, these are not made for two to live in comfortably. Oh do see if you can beg Fair for one of the apartments that overlook the grounds if there are any. The fountain is so pretty.” I said and Wise smiled.

“Done and I agree. A courtyard view would be nice. Tender and Bold have an apartment in that wing and the view from their living room balcony is beautiful.”

“That’s why I mentioned it. Tender told me she often sits out there with Bold and they connect and she can see it through his eyes. Their bond is so special. I always prayed I’d have that. Now I do.” I said wrapping my arms around Wise’s middle to look up at him.

“You’ll make me cry again Kaoru if you persist on being so sweet in the mornings. By Tor I missed you. Two years was way too long. I thought I was going to go crazy those last few months. I also have a confession to make. The dust shower I gave you yesterday wasn’t an accident. I did see you and Snowstorm yelled at me a good one when I made him suddenly land awkwardly. I would know that hair of yours anywhere and seeing you walking back, I wasn’t about to wait to find you later.” Wise said and I smiled.

“I’m glad you didn’t. It was a wonderful surprise. What a joy it must be to fly. You both look so free when you fly together.”

“As soon as I can get a tandem saddle love, we’ll take you for a ride. It is freedom to fly and we’ll give you a nice long ride. Now time is wasting. Let’s get all our things together and moved. I’ll beg Peaceful to give you the day off and then we’ll see about that ride later.” Wise said taking my hand and he left me in my student dorm to pack while he went about getting us an apartment and begging time off for me today.

He need not have bothered, Peaceful arrived not five minutes after he left to help me pack. “Dear I am so happy for you. We all suspected since the day you were born you and Wise would bond. Healers and Warriors and that birthday coincidence is often telling. Had we known that you two had been meeting in the library for years we’d have moved you in together sooner. Both of you so quiet about your feelings. Understandable though considering. Love why didn’t you tell us Charger was making it so hard on you?” Peaceful asked as we folded my clothes into a chest.

“I don’t know. It didn’t used to be that way. It just sort of got worse as we got older and I guess I kept hoping Charger would change. He wasn’t nearly this brutal when Wise left. He just sort of exploded when he came back. I never knew he confronted Wise before. I never knew half the things he did to keep people away from me. I have to talk to him soon. We cannot leave it like this.”

“I don’t think that’s wise love. Charger is being violent right now, even to his own parent’s. He’s acting like a child who’s lost his favorite toy right now. Colt had to restrain him last night to his grotto so he’d calm down. Right now he’s under confinement until he gets control of his temper. What he tried to do to you love is a crime and he will be punished for it when the Torlander council and the school council decide.”

"I don't want him punished. I think it was the heat of the moment more than anything. I forgive him please tell the council that for me?" I asked and Peaceful nodded.

"Aye. I will love. You've such a tender soul. I can see why your parents are so proud of you. As your mentor I know I am. I want you to take the rest of the week and weekend off. That's a good four days to have fun with your mate. I saw him in the stables begging a tandem saddle as I came here. Take a trip to the sea, it's very romantic and use Urbane's townhouse to stay in, you'll enjoy it. I know I do when we go to get away for vacation." Peaceful said handing me the key to that townhouse and then helped me finish packing.

Wise returned looking pleased and swinging a key on his finger. "I can truthfully say, boy am I glad my mom is in charge of resident housing. I only had to beg ten minutes and promise him just our firstborn to get a courtyard facing suite. I think he enjoyed my groveling far too much. We're right next door to Tender and Bold. Ready to move dearest?" Wise asked and I grinned and Peaceful laughed.

"I'm sure Fair is enjoying this far too much too. You are his only child and I'm sure he's already seeing grandbabies in his head." Peaceful commented.

"I'm his only child because unlike a healer, Dad had to change him and he was sicker than a dog most of his pregnancy. Without healer gifts to make morning sickness easier, he was adamant I was the only one. I'm no fool and mom has never let me forget how the sight of sausage still to this day makes him gag."

Peaceful chuckled. "I remember. I just remember feeling like I'd been pregnant for ten years. A word to the wise Kaoru love. Make your man keep it in his pocket when you decide to have kids. I barely had time to squeeze one out before Urbane had me fat all over again. Dragon Warriors are potent beasts and you have an Adept to handle. He'll make Urbane look infertile. Be wary and use caution or you'll end up like me and have a house full before you can blink. Not that I don't love all my girls, but spacing them out would have been easier. Having them all in stages of nappies and training pants is just exhausting." Peaceful chuckled and stood.

At forty-six and with five grown daughters with children of their own Peaceful looked incredible. He didn't look a day over thirty-five and if he had gray hair it was lost in the natural cream color of his hair. He had no lines or wrinkles and was a man in his willowy prime. Urbane at fifty was likewise a robust and healthy man. He had gray at his temples and just a line or two around his eyes, but he was still the ox he always had been and when he wasn't still "daddy" to his daughters he was bouncing one of his ten grandchildren on his knee.

Healers tended to be rare in the Isles and in Torland and usually a healer would only breed a single child with his or her gifts. Not in Peaceful's case. All five of his

daughters were healers, and they were breeding true too. Aegis seemed to thrive and encourage healers. We had almost as many healer students as beast magic students. Enough so that the university had built the hospital just to house and train the sheer numbers of healers we had.

Some had just basic talents, senses to diagnose and treat simple ailments and were uncanny medicine men and women. They could cure just about any common illness just on their gifts and medicines. The rest of the true healers worked the higher magic and forced healing with the gifts like I had.

Most healers after graduating returned to their villages to tend their ill, but there were still some places isolated and I reevaluated my thinking and broached the subject with Peaceful about taking my first year solo on the road as a traveling healer.

He was all for the idea and had in fact been thinking about it himself. Paring up healers and warriors to make circuits together but worrying about non-bonded pairs in the field and how well they'd work together. "But we can test it with a bonded one at least. Wise you up to go back on the road again so soon?"

"I love the road. I like being a field mage for Justice. The king is old and he needs all our talents out there so Unity can take the throne in peace when the time comes and may it not be soon. I can settle problems before they become big ones and I can't tell you how many people need healers out there. I told Kaoru yesterday I thought his idea was brilliant."

"Then I'll square it with the student board and Kaoru can be a first test healer in riding circuit."

"Can I make a suggestion? Wise usually rides Snowstorm from village to village. But there are a lot of smaller homes and communities all along the road. Plus I'd want to carry supplies. Things that could weigh Snowstorm down. Two horses with pack mules or horse and cart would be better. Slower perhaps, but we could reach more this way."

"I agree. A covered cart can also double as shelter should we be caught between villages or in rain. I don't know how many times I slept under snowstorm's wing to get out of wet." Wise said and Peaceful nodded.

"Make a list of items you think you'd need and I'll do the same and we'll compare. Then we'll get the traveling medicine wagon put together. I'll see what ideas Urbane has for wagons. We'll go over this however when you two get back. Go enjoy Rockport for the rest of the week and we'll see you both first of next week and get ready." Peaceful said leaving us to move my belongings over to our new apartment.

It was a mirror copy to Tender and Bold's apartments. We walked into a beautiful living area with a large marble fireplace and floor to ceiling windows that lead out to a balcony that overlooked the courtyard. To the right lay a nice kitchen and dining room and off the kitchen a room with a private bath for a hired servant if we were to hire one to cook and clean for us.

Once I graduated and began receiving journeyman pay we could probably afford it, but for now I had no money of my own and Wise and I would be pinching pennies as it was to provide for two now just on his pay. He'd get a raise wage soon now that his first year was over and also get a bonus for being bonded but it would still be just enough to keep these apartments. Thankfully the rent was part of our wages if we stayed working for the King, but food and fuel and other things were up to us.

To the left of the living area were two doors on either side of the fireplace. The left door led into our bedroom suite and bath. It was stunning. The bath was all in marble with a sunken tub that could easily fit us both. Two sinks and mirrors and just about the grandest bathing room I'd ever seen. Our bed was large and while it had mattress and pillows, there were no linens. Those too would be up to us.

There was very little furniture, just the barest necessities. A table with four chairs in the dining room, a couch and two chairs and a low coffee table in the living room. The bed, two wardrobes, two chests of drawers and two nightstands in the bedroom.

Down the other door off the living room was a hallway. At the end was a smaller full bath for guests and three medium sized and adequate guestrooms, or rooms for future children. Tender and Bold had all three rooms filled with four children. The youngest two boys shared a room while the two older girls each had their own. The boys always complaining that their sisters hogged the bathroom.

As for now Wise and I had no such worries. Children were long in coming yet. We could at least plan for ours. I'd have to change my gender for it, no accidental pregnancies with us which was a very good thing.

The guest rooms each had a double bed, two night stands and a chest at the foot of each bed.

Again, no linens, no rugs. All the personal touches we'd have to add ourselves and there was no hurry to get those things for the guestrooms. Just the essentials for now. After we unpacked our few belongings and put them away we sat down at the table and made a list.

We'd need bed linens, dishes, cups, food for the pantry, towels for the bathroom and whatever else we saw and could afford to start making our house a home. It was also lunchtime so we decided to get lunch at the market.

On the way out Urbane was heading up the walk and hailed us with a grin. "Congratulations you two! I'm glad I caught you. Here's a note from me, go to my warehouse and get what you need for your new place. My bonding day gift to you and I won't take no for an answer. Helpful will take you around my warehouses and you are to pick anything and everything you'd like. Spare no expense and I mean it. I'm so happy when students bond, it's a thrill for me to spoil you on your happy day. Go and have fun. Oh and Peaceful said he gave you the key to the townhouse. I suggest when you go to stop by The Seagull Inn on the wharf for dinner. Wonderful food and very romantic." Urbane winked and carried on his way.

"That man has deep pockets and I think he can be overly generous at times." Wise breathed at the potentially extravagant gift we'd just been given.

"It pleases him. His aura is always pleasant and it does make him happy to share his wealth. We just must not abuse his good nature like so many people do. He is the best of men Dean Urbane." I said, I'd always loved our kindly Dean of Students and the Chairman of the University Board of Directors.

"I have every intention on being frugal. We'll stick to our list and maybe add a rug for the floor in the living room. Agreed?" Wise asked and I nodded.

"Aye. Just enough I think." I replied and we walked off arm in arm into the market.

First we stopped at a nice stall selling meat pies that smelled divine and Wise bought us each a chicken pocket pie and fresh apple cider brews to wash them down with. It was easy to get drunk on Cider brew because it didn't taste all that much different than regular apple cider and I learned that the hard way as a child. My father had left his mug in reach of the six year old version of myself and I was three sheets to the wind before my mother realized what I was drinking.

Oh she gave my father an earful over that one. To this day I think he did it on purpose to watch me get drunk. Sometimes my father's humor can be lacking, but no harm was done other than me having a hangover when I woke up.

Once our bellies were full, we walked to the far end of the market where Urbane's warehouses were and Helpful, Urbane's second in command of his non-school related business ventures, was outside to meet us. He too was aging well. Sixty-five and spry as a man half his age.

He was dressed resplendently and looked well fed and healthy and he greeted us with a huge smile. "Got word from his lordship that I am not allowed to let you be frugal and to make sure you leave with everything you need to outfit a four bedroom apartment. I've been in those lovely little apartments they have for

bonded pairs so no tricking me youngsters, I know what you'll need." Helpful winked and lead the tour down immaculately clean and organized shelves.

The first row of shelves were nothing but linens in a rainbow of colors all folded neatly and by size. This was more like one massive store than a warehouse. You could tell the nobility shopped here frequently direct. It was like a super-sized shop than storage.

Wise and I felt spoiled for choice. We opted to do the rooms in different colors since they were all so pretty. Light blue linens for our bed, Helpful added two changes of those linens with a wink. "I remember being young once." was all he said and I was flushed a bright red I was sure, but didn't argue with his logic. He was right, we'd need changes of linens.

We got yellow, light green, and pink for the other three rooms and then a nice shade of lavender for the servant's room and then we moved on to blankets and comforters. Helpful had a grand eye for coordination, obviously groomed by Urbane the consummate aesthetic when it came to eye pleasing quality. Helpful matched all our linens with complimentary blankets and bedspreads and had warehouse workers take the selections to crate them up to be delivered to our apartment.

From bedding we went to towels and we choose the fluffy white and blue terry cotton towels for our bath and white and green for the guest bath.

That was just the first two aisles worth! Every time we tried to beg off saying we had enough Helpful would just laugh and tell us he had his orders, we were to have the whole house seen to properly. Next came pots and pan of every shape and size and those Helpful picked out because other than a kettle and teapot neither Wise or I knew how to use much.

I picked out simple everyday stoneware for plates and cups. Just simple plain plates and cups. We didn't need fine china for two of us, we weren't going to be throwing parties. That didn't seem to matter to Helpful. He let me chose our everyday wear and then added a sixteen piece china service with a blue cornflower pattern along the edge. "Just in case" he said laughing with glee at Wise and I stuttering with protests of extravagance. We could see Helpful was exactly like Urbane and took great glee in our shock. Urbane had trained his right hand man too well.

We had silver flatware added, serving bowls and utensils and everything the kitchen might need once in a million years was added to the rapidly filling crates.

Next we came to the aisles of Torlander goods Urbane brought in for trade. A piece of a homeland I had never seen being embassy born here in Aegis. Here we got a rug like my parents had in their apartments in the embassy. A woven

painting of grand rolling green hills with a Unicorn and Wing Horses grassing in the tall grasses. The bright blue sea and white sandy beaches edging the masterpiece. It was breathtaking. I almost cried seeing it and longing to see the land of my people one day came upon me.

“I’ll take you there someday Kaoru. I’d like to see it too. It brought me you after all.” Wise said and I did cry then and nodded wiping my eyes. I wasn’t about to ask for something that grand and expensive but before I could move on, Helpful was ordering the rug rolled up.

“It could go to no better home than to someone who appreciates it’s beauty and who so obviously it should belong to for sentimental reasons.” Helpful said smiling and we continued on along the items. There were oil paintings here and we chose two. One large one for above the mantel, again an idyllic scene of a rose garden with a trailing vine covered arbor where a Unicorn rested wreathed in red roses. The one for our bedroom of a white dragon in flight.

A single ceramic vase for the mantel that had satyrs dancing around the base was elegant in its simplicity and that rounded out our shopping. We had already gone well over what we had planned and we begged Helpful to allow us to stop.

He nodded. “Both good lads, the pair of you. Urbane wanted you to have the best of the best. But I can see you’re afraid of overindulging, I won’t press. He’ll probably come here himself later once I tell him how little you took.” Helpful said and my eyes boggled. If he considered a good five crates worth of goods “little” I’d probably faint with what Urbane considered “a little”.

I was right, we rode back with the cart carrying our goods and Urbane showed up with Peaceful to see what we chose. “That’s all you brought back with you? Where’s all the fun stuff? You’re all as bad as Peaceful when I married him. Frugal to the core. Let’s see your tastes then.” Urbane grinned looking at our goods critically as we unpacked and he helped us put things away.

“Right, I’ve got a good idea now. Peaceful if you’d care to join me shopping dearest?” Urbane grinned evilly and Peaceful just smiled.

“Never tell my mate ‘no’ when he’s in a spoiling mood. It just makes him all the more ornery and adamant.” Peaceful winked as he sashayed out of the room behind Urbane.

They came back a few hours later loaded with more items of a more frivolous nature. More bowls and vases for surfaces. Tablecloths and lace doilies and throw pillows. More paintings and tapestries for the walls and all of them what I or Wise would have chosen. Urbane had spotted our preferences most accurately and it was a mixture of Aegian, Southern and Torlander touches in our home.

“That is so much better. Now this place looks less like a tomb and more like a home. You want to come home to comfort and little touches of beauty. A man’s home is his castle.” Urbane said as he helped Wise hang the painting over the mantle as Peaceful helped me put away the kitchen goods.

“Furthermore, Wise. I put in for your pay raise this afternoon. You’re officially ranked now as full journeyman and as bonded. Your pay goes into effect today. Kaoru, since you’re only two weeks away from your seventeenth I’ve started the process for your own junior journeyman ranking and pay. You’ll get your marks when you get back from your trip and then we’ll work out your first year circuit. Between you, you’ll have enough to hire a servant. I suggest you do so. Keeping house and cooking is a pain when you’re going to have such busy schedules. You won’t want to come home to a dusty apartment either. Ten silver marks a week plus room and board will hire you a good young servant. Especially when her job this first year will be babysitting your home and keeping it dust free and aired. Give her a five mark raise when you get home again and you’ll be grateful for the help. I’ll interview applicants for you if you’d like.” Urbane said and I think Wise and I were just overwhelmed and nodded dumbly.

“It gets easier being grown-ups, honestly.” Peaceful chuckled as he admired our new china service.

“If you think it’s best.” Wise said and Urbane nodded.

“I do. You’re our only circuit mage Wise. All the others are not mages and I do appreciate you taking on the tasks Tigo used to do. He’s getting too old and Cadence can’t ride anymore without joint ache in his hips. They are much better retired and teaching here. Your father has his own students to mentor and the seven mages we have had come through this school are doing their own work for Justice in various courts as representatives. We’ve one is Rustgaard, one in Torland, one in the southern isles and four within our own landed lords households. You’re the only one out there with the people direct until the ten lads we have come of age. None of them adepts, only Tigo and yourself are Adepts. Your father naturally far beyond that and much needed here as a teacher. We need you and your pay will reflect that lad.” Urbane said sitting down with us at the table for the tea Peaceful and I made.

“I had no idea. I mean I did, but I never thought of it in those terms.” Wise said and Urbane nodded.

“The facts are son, we need you and we need what you do to not only find talent and bring it back here to be educated, but more importantly, your level head and good judgment. You’re mobile law enforcement and mediator on top of everything else. Those of you who ride circuit carry the king’s law with you and settle minor disputes before they become major ones. You work in concert with the local law enforcement and the barons and lords. You do more for Justice and

the people than you realize. Aegis is at peace because of you and the warriors who ride circuit. You most especially, because you are an Adept, the lords respect you more. I don't know how many letters I received praising you boy. You made us all proud this past year. Your parents named you very well." Urbane said and I smiled. Wise was indeed named well.

"I don't know what to say. 'Thank You' seems so inadequate. I just try my best and I do enjoy working with the people a lot. It's the farmers and the workers that make Aegis work. They are the bread and butter on our tables and I get so mad when they're being treated unfairly. I just do what I can to make their lives easier since that is what they do for us." Wise said and Urbane smiled so brightly it was blinding.

"That's exactly what I mean son. Your heart and head are always in the right place. So are yours Kaoru. I'm so pleased to hear you want to take circuit. So many healers once they pass through the school just go home again and there are just too many people too far away for help when it could save a life. It's always been status quo that Healer's learn and then stay with their home villages without ever venturing past the safety of the village. For good reasons for the most part, you all are rather fey little things where a strong wind could knock you all over. But if you went out as pairs with a warrior that problem wouldn't necessarily be a problem. You'd have protection and be able to help where it's needed most. If this works, we'll adopt this for future students. Pair them up, if they aren't already bonded as is usually the case with healers, and send them out the first year as juniors. I haven't seen a healer yet graduate without already having a bonded warrior stuck to them like glue. Hell, my girls barely hit puberty before I was having heart failure at boys sniffing at my door for them." Urbane laughed and Peaceful grinned.

"Boys and Girls. Affy and Ami bonded to their mates by thirteen, Charity was fourteen, Merry was still in diapers playing with her future mate, and Gay met hers first day of school. It's a good thing healers can change gender or else Gay and her lovely warrior would never have been able to give you grandbabies. One of the rare occasions where it worked in reverse and it was the warrior being mama and the healer being papa." Peace grinned and Urbane smiled.

"They can keep giving me grandbabies too for that matter. Such bedlam and such fun." He winked and then stood.

"Now we have intruded enough. Have a good night and do go to Rockport and get away from school and enjoy yourselves. Take a proper honeymoon like most people and just be young for a few days." Urbane said tossing a purse on the table.

"Advance on your wages. Enjoy Rockport in style. I'll have your servant chosen by the time you get back." He added with a wink before leaving.

We were left in a euphoric stupor and we laughed and giggled a little manically as we finished decorating our home and put everything away. In all our crazy day we had forgotten to buy food, so Wise went to beg food from the student halls for us while I hung a lovely small painting of griffon in the servant's room. Making it a cheery little room, complete with a little flower vase on the nightstand table and some throw pillows for our servant's bed. Whomever she was, I wanted her comfortable and hoped she felt welcome.

I left her a note saying if she didn't like the painting I'd change it and that if she needed anything to let Urbane know while we were gone and we'd see to her comfort. I told her to bring whatever she desired into her own room and if she had any pets they were fine to bring with her. I warned her about Snowstorm and that he tended to scare cats however if he was here.

I didn't want her to feel lonely while we were gone.

I had just finished when Wise returned with our supper and we ate by candlelight and then retired to our new bed. It was heaven on earth to share my life with this man. He treated me like a treasure and I felt like a pampered King in silk sheets.

My Wise was a wonderful lover on top of being a balm for my soul. I was boneless before he kissed me goodnight and we went to sleep in our big and soft new bed.

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## **“Namesake”**

*Book Four in the Namesake Tales*

*Author: D. Sanders*

### **Chapter Two - Stranger in the Shadows**

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Riding on the back of Snowstorm to Rockport was perhaps the single most exhilarating experience of my life. I had never been out of Crown City and never on the back of a Dragon. The tandem saddle had two large saddle bags we filled with pleasure outing clothes rather than our school uniforms and a few necessities like our hair brushes and we were packed and ready to go right after an early breakfast we again begged from the student dorm kitchen.

We ate excitedly and Snowstorm met us at the stable and greeted me with his large beak of a snout shoved in my chest. “I like chin scratches big too little blue.” He said and I laughed, he always called me “little blue” and I obliged my mate’s handsome king as Wise grinned and rolled his eyes at Snowstorm and affixed the tandem saddle in place.

Once saddled Wise helped me climb up in place in the front half of the saddle and then he climbed up behind me and handed me a pair of goggles, a scarf for my face and a leather hat that tied under the chin. “You’ll want these love. The wind can be rough and no one likes bugs in their eyes and teeth.” Wise said with a wink and helped me tuck my braid in the back of my shirt and get the loose ends tucked up under the hat.

The goggles covered half my face and Wise grinned at me. “You’re adorable with those on.” He said pressing my nose with his finger. His affection for me a constant assault on my empathy reception. He made my insides melt with the simplest of gestures and made me blush easily.

“You blush so easy love. I’ll have you know that is one of your endearing quirks that gets me... how do I put this? ...Excited.” He whispered the last word and I flushed even hotter.

“Wise!” I was so embarrassed and he just kissed my cheek.

“I’m my father’s son. He once said it was the little unconscious things my mother did that he found the most endearing. I find I’m that way over you too. I’ll tell you more about that when we have a little more privacy.” Wise purred into my ear and gave me chill bumps.

He chuckled and then wrapped a safety belt around us that hooked to the saddle and me tightly up against Wise. There was a large bar for me to hold onto in front and two side bars for Wise to hold. His arms around me on either side, his leather gauntlets gripping tight. My leather gloved hands sought purchase on the bar in front of me.

“Ready?” Wise asked softly and I nodded.

“Aye.”

“Then hold on tight. We’re ready Snowstorm!” Wise said and I felt the muscles bunch underneath us and great massive wings unfurl and beat heavily. The squeal of half fright half joy escaped my lips as Snowstorm leapt into the air and wind hit us hard as his deep swooping wing beats lifted us airborne.

Oh it was thrilling as the ground slipped away from us and we climbed high over the city. The city was so big from this view and so beautiful. Snowstorm circled the campus once as he lifted higher and higher until the city became a patchwork like a quilt.

Once we were high enough Wise reached around and loosened my death grip on the bar and holding my hands in his he held my arms wide. “Fly love.” He said and I was lost in sensation. I felt like I was indeed flying. The wind, the clean air, the cloud and the ground nothing but a quilt of green. I cried for joy and Wise’s arms wrapped around me, crossing our arms across my chest and he held me close as we sailed on the back of Snowstorm’s back.

*::I love the way you drink in every moment as if it were your last. I love the way you get all shy when someone compliments you. I love the way when you read, you constantly hook your hair over your ears, only to have it fall back again the minute you do it because your ears are so small. I love the way you sigh with a dreamy look on your face when you’re listening to Cadence and the Dragons sing. I love the way you used to absently play with the bells I gave you when we sat together. I love the way you sit with your chin on your knees and your hands crossed around your ankles or curl up like a cat in a chair. So many little things you do, that you don’t realize you’re doing made me fall in love with you. Please don’t ever stop being my gentle little bluebird.::* Wise mindspoke to me over the wind and I shivered in his arms. Oh how I loved this romantic man.

*::Oh Wise, you make me feel so wonderful. I love you.::*

*::I love you too beloved. More than I’ll probably ever express fully.::* Wise’s arms held me tighter and I soared higher. Flying high as emotionally as I was in reality, I was living the best of dreams and I never wanted to wake.

Traveling by dragon is infinitely faster than by traditional means. A journey that would take a fast single rider at least two full days without resting more than a few hours took us five hours. We were landing on the beaches of Rockport by lunch time. There was a dragon station built on the beach and the local dragon warrior posted greeted us warmly. The warrior named Worth and his red dragon, Flame, had been the first dragon warrior student before the school had even

been built. Flame was from the first clutch of eggs Sunfire and Wintermoon had laid. He was a man in his early forties and quite handsome with broad shoulders and a swaggering gait to his walk. He had fought the Virago as a young man and had been a runner between Rockport and Windy Port during that time.

He'd bonded to one of the southern warriors during that war. A lovely woman named Gerna who rode a blue named Azure. They manned the dragon station and relayed messages for Lord Sure and Lady Ardent, the local landed nobility of Rockport to King Justice.

I'd heard a rumor once that our Lord Urbane and Lady Ardent had once been betrothed and then I heard how that betrothal had almost sent my beloved mentor to his death. Beloved told me of that horrible time and how Urbane's mother had lied about the betrothal to Peaceful. Urbane had never accepted the marriage agreement to Lady Ardent and she eventually married Lord Sure not long after Urbane and Peaceful had the twins. Things were settled again and the man Ardent did marry was a good man and a staunch supporter of King Justice and our school. They made donations regularly and funded the upkeep of the Dragon station that protected the port and was a place traveling warriors could check into when they arrived.

"Oh Ho! What's this lad? We weren't expecting you and last time you stopped your saddle wasn't carrying two." Worth said as Wise helped me down from the saddle onto legs that didn't want to walk properly after so long in the saddle.

"This is my lovely spouse Kaoru. We're here for a honeymoon on Urbane's orders." Wise grinned as Worth helped him unhook the saddle from Snowstorm and stow it away in the tack shed. Flame and Azure winging in to greet their fellow. Snowstorm, now small again winged away to dive into waves with the others.

"You'll be up at the Townhouse then I'll wager. I'll have my boy bring up your saddle bags in the pony cart. No sense lugging those up those steep streets. Come on inside and wash the travel grime off first before you head off. Gerna just made crab cakes for lunch join us and share the good news. She'll be thrilled." Worth said leading us both inside where Gerna was setting out crab cakes and salad for lunch and a pitcher of fresh lemonade on the table.

She was almost as broad shouldered as her husband and dark skinned like all southerners I knew. Her short cropped hair and long braid indicative of dragon warriors and in a buttery yellow. Her eyes a kindly blue and she smiled warmly at us as she got us towels for the showers. "Go get dust free dears, showers are through that door and there are robes in there to wrap up in after." She said shoing us off to clean up. The shower room was built to be serviceable, with five showerheads in a tiled room. Made for a group to quickly wash away travel grime before heading to their destination in Rockport, it was unseemly to turn up at the

lord's door covered in dead bugs. Southern and Torlander culture was centered around bathing. Cleanliness was tantamount to respect, one did not insult a host by bringing odor and dirt into his or her home. That culture was also taught at the school. Every student bathed before breakfast and before bed. Twice daily no exceptions unless you were too sick to get out of bed and then a healer came in to help you bathe in your room.

At times I wished Aegian culture would adopt ours. So many people got ill just over the fact they were unclean and lived in unclean conditions. Aegians tended to have an unnatural aversion to bathing and even some of the nobility just tried to cover up body stink with perfume. It could be gag inducing sometimes in the hospital and I lost count of the number of grown men who whined at me when I insisted they bathe for their own health.

The shower felt wonderful and the robes were soft and airy as we rejoined our temporary hosts for lunch. My hair was down and drying and Gerna grinned at me. "Torlanders, always as brightly plumed as exotic birds. Be careful, Azure will try to steal a lock of your hair. Whenever a ship from Torland comes to port she's hanging around the pier hoping for a prize. Damn loopy dragon has a hair fetish." Gerna laughed and I begged a pair of scissors and cut Azure a little lock.

"For our host. Hurts less if it's willingly given." I said and tied it with a bit of ribbon and handed it to Gerna. I had plenty of hair to spare, healers traditionally never cut their hair and mine was almost to my knees to begin with. A little lock went unnoticed.

"You've just made her day." Gerna said setting the hair on Azure's perch while we tucked into a delicious meal. I had never had crab and found I decidedly liked shellfish and vowed to try it again before we left Rockport.

After lunch we pulled out a change of clothes from the saddle bags and sent the rest up with Worth and Gerna's hired boy. A nice lad of about twelve, Eager, and he was that in spades.

It was a rare occasion I got to dress in anything other than my school uniforms so it was a treat when I pulled on traditionally Torlander attire. A long sleeveless shift cut high on either side with gauzy loose pants that tied with drawstrings at waist and ankle. Perfect for warm summer afternoons and white to reflect heat with just a simple blue trim around the neck of my shift rounded out my simple attire. I braided my hair in two plaits that hung down behind each ear, my preferred lazy way of keeping my hair out of my face and I rejoined my spouse in the kitchen.

The look he gave me made me blush yet again. "You look... fantastic." He said and I was taken aback, it was just a simple casual choice, not intended to spark his interest.

"I do?"

"Oh yeah, and don't take offense love, but you look decidedly like a girl dressed like that with your hair all... Damn you're pretty." Wise stumbled and I chuckled.

"I'm not offended. I know I look like a girl, most healers do regardless of gender. See?" I said and shifted gender and I saw Wise blanche.

I'd shifted my gender enough in bathroom mirrors to know my face didn't change when I did, but everything else did. I had a nice figure as a woman. Truth be told, I shifted genders quite often, I enjoyed being a girl and I actually preferred it, all my clothes fit better when I chose to be female rather than male.

"If you don't want to be pregnant before we leave Rockport you have two choices beloved. Stop tempting me with such beautiful curves out of the blue like that or we go and buy some of those lambskin sheaths for me before we go anywhere else. Holy Tor, White Lady and Counter save my soul. You're gorgeous!"

I had to laugh, Wise swearing on the trinity was almost comical and I was suddenly feeling a little ornery. "So you like me like this do you?"

"That's a drastic understatement bluebird."

"I like it too, so let's find those sheaths you mentioned?" I purred and Wise grinned rather evilly and seized my hand.

"Don't have to ask me twice." He said and we left the dragon station and headed into Rockport and straight to the apothecary who supplied Wise with what he asked for while I doubled the precaution and asked for Urari petal tea. If we were going to play about I was taking no chances of getting pregnant.

"What a shame, such a lovely couple you'd make lovely babies." The old man said behind the counter and I smiled.

"We're just not ready yet. We've only been bonded two days and we have work to do. No babies yet, but eventually yes." I said getting my tea and Wise and I practically ran to the townhouse.

We were greeted by the house staff and shown to a lovely guestroom suite.

"Will you be dining in tonight or out?" The old butler asked.

"Out tonight and probably every night, we're only here for three days, no need to fuss over us." Wise said as our bags arrived and we brought them up.

I begged a kettle and tea pot and made sure I took a good dose of Urari before I permitted my King Dragon within sneezing distance of me. I had heard Peaceful's tales more than once and was not taking any chances.

Urari would totally stop any moon cycles a woman had and place her body in almost a state of limbo. It should only be taken no more than a few months at a stretch before she should stop and have a cycle before resuming the use. I prescribed this often enough for women who had enough to worry about and fearing another mouth to feed when a husband refused to use a sheath.

Having my husband offer was peace of mind, we would not have accidents we didn't want right now.

We had a marvelous afternoon, we both found making love as husband and wife was equally enjoyable as husband to husband. Each had it's own pleasure and I discovered my husband was very much enraptured with my breasts. I felt deliriously manhandled and wonderful.

I personally preferred being a woman with Wise for more reasons than just lovemaking. It always seemed odd to me when men were called "mama", Peaceful, Beloved and Fair all returned to being men as soon as their children had been weaned.

For me, I had grown up with a female as a mother and nothing was quite as nice as cuddling up to her soft breast as a child when I was sad and hearing her gentle voice sing me to sleep. I wanted to be that to my children. I wanted to wear feminine clothes and shoes and dance with a boy and not have society eyes on me. It was fine in the school or in the embassy for both Torland and the South, but Aegis society was still quite backwards where same gender marriages were concerned.

Even though Justice had made it legal to officially wed each other it still would be a long time for some attitudes to change where marriages that, for the most part, created no offspring were concerned.

Most people were not like healers who could change gender and Fair was the only exception to that rule simply because his husband was a creator mage. Everyone else did not have that luxury and it was frowned upon still by society by in large.

I wanted my children never to face the peculiarity of calling a male "mama" and I just simply preferred being a girl. I always had. I had been changing into a girl since I was ten and playing dress up in my mother's closets. I'd even gone to see Wise in the library a few times as a girl, not that he noticed. Even girls at twelve years old don't have very noticeable breasts.

"I never knew you did that, but then again, school uniforms aren't very form fitting for me to tell. Bluebird if you want to be a girl or a boy it makes no difference to me. I fell in love with you, not your package. However both packages are mighty pretty you won't hear me complaining either way." Wise said as we cuddled in messy sheets and shared a cup of juice together.

"I do prefer being a girl. Call me silly, but I always wanted to go to the midwinter ball King Justice throws wearing one of those long skirts that twirl so nice when ladies dance. With my hair all done up in pretty pins too. I used to watch all the ladies show up to dance with such envy. Silly huh?"

"I don't think so. If you like it Birdie, stay this way. You'd actually look beautiful in one of those frocks. I know I'd strut around like a rooster with you on my arm like that."

"I love that."

"What?"

"You're already calling me by nicknames."

"Where do you think Snowstorm got 'Little Blue' from? I've been calling you Little Bluebird or My Birdie in my head for years. It stuck." Wise grinned at me and I laughed.

"I'm glad it did, I like it."

"Then I shall carry on My Birdie." Wise winked as we just talked together and relaxed and enjoyed a lazy afternoon loving each other.

For dinner we dressed up. Wise looked so handsome in his white leather pants and long vest with a bright blue shirt that matched my hair. He was always on duty so always wore either black or white with just a colorful shirt. His black hair he kept short. Most Dragon Warriors had taken to changing their traditional hairstyles in favor of short hair which was much easier to handle after flying. The long braids were rarely worn any more and just a simple short cut was worn. Longer on the top and brushed back to short sides and neatly trimmed neck. When Wise swept his wavy dark hair back he looked dashing.

Snowstorm was appraising us from his perch on the edge of our bed. He had turned up after a good frolic in the sea and was half dozing and telling his chosen he cleaned up nice.

I was going out for the first time as a woman and was debating with my own appearance. Thankfully, most Torlander garments were unisex and I chose a close fitting robe in white with a high collar and short sleeves. It hung to my

knees and slit up the sides to almost my waist. I usually wore it as a boy, so my extra curves were really accentuated. It was in white with black trim. The buttons shaped like butterflies.

I wore black leggings underneath and white sandals. I braided my hair and wrapped it around my head like a crown, leaving most of it free to fall down my back and Wise came in and smiled at me in the mirror and tucked white forget-me-nots into my braid.

“You look stunning. Ready Birdie?”

“Aye.” I smiled at him in the mirror and took his offered arm and went out to enjoy the night with my husband.

Shops were just closing for the night and when Wise suddenly stopped and went into a jeweler's I was confused.

The old man at the counter smiled. “I was just closing up lad. What can I help you with?”

“A whim. This lovely lady is my bonded healer wife and I'd like a traditional wedding ring on her finger.” Wise said and the old man's eyes lit up.

“A healer? Oh Missus, you can have any ring in my shop if you'll take a look at my wife.” The old man pleaded.

I forgot all else. “Where is she?” I asked rushing behind the counter and following the old man up the stairs to his home above the store.

His wife was in bed, a nasty wheeze in her chest. I knew immediately her woes the moment I took her hand and went to work purging her lungs of illness. “Wet Lung. Easy enough to cure normally but the elderly always susceptible and it takes hold quickly. Take a good long hot bath tonight, change the bedding, and have your husband get you some bark root tea. That will keep the infection from coming back. Take a bath at least once a day, every other day at the barest minimum and drink some bark root at least once a week hereafter and you should be able to avoid future outbreaks. That goes for both of you, and make sure your bedding is also clean, at least weekly. Wet lung is a nasty thing that likes to linger in human sweat and dirt. I'm so glad I was here, another few days and I would not have been able to clear your lungs.” I said and the old man looked relieved.

“We'll do as you say Missus. Now I believe we had a deal.” He said bringing out a tray of Rings for Wise to look at, matching gold band sets.

“Oh these are perfect. Birdie look.” Wise said and the set he showed me screamed our names. The thicker band had a dragon etched into the metal and the thinner band was roped like a unicorn’s horn and their lion’s tail twisted together.

“These good man, we don’t need to look further and I won’t take them for nothing either. We’re paid by Justice to do our duty, by Tor we won’t let you pay more.” Wise said and the old man grinned.

“Then at least let me offer a discount for two such good young folks who do an old man’s heart good to see honor isn’t dead. Two for one, fifty silvers.” The old man said and Wise nodded.

“Fair enough. Thank you.” Wise said reaching for the purse Urbane had given us and he bought our rings and Wise placed mine on my finger.

“We don’t need the ceremony when our bond is as true as ours, but the symbol is nice just the same. I love you Kaoru, my little Bluebird. May this ring remind you how much you mean to me.” Wise said slipping the ring on my finger. I picked up his.

“An Aegian custom that is most endearing. I am honored to wear your ring and I pray you can feel my love that rests in this band upon your hand. I love you Wise, my Dragon King.” I said and slipped the ring on his hand.

The old woman clapped from her bed. “Oh to be young again! May the White Lady bless you both with happiness and fertility!” She exclaimed and I smiled.

We thanked the jeweler and his wife and we headed back out to dinner again arm in arm. Wise looked like a strutting peacock with an ornery grin on his face. I noticed the looks we got from passers by and so did he and he was walking like a man full of overblown pride.

He was amusing to watch. I was happy he thought me beautiful and I was amused at the way he was posturing like a dragon to show off what was on his arm.

We walked to the wharf to the Seagull Inn and got a lovely table overlooking the sea. It was a high class establishment and upper nobility and merchants were dining with family and spouses like us. The serving girl came over with menus and being used to landlocked fare I asked Wise to tell me what he thought would be good.

“Well you liked crab Birdie and I had shrimp once that was really good. They have a selection here that has three types of shellfish. It says cracked crab,

shrimp and lobster tail in drawn butter with clam chowder. That sounds good to me.”

“Make that two then.” I said and we placed our order and were brought over a light and fruity white wine and as we waited for the meal a tall young man came over to the table.

“You’re the Adept who came in this afternoon?” He asked and Wise stood to shake his hand.

“Aye. Adept Wise and this is my Wife Healer Kaoru.” Wise said and the youth around our age took my hand and kissed the back of it.

“Healer Kaoru, a pleasure. Torlander correct?” He asked and I nodded.

“Aye. Embassy born though. I have never been to my homeland. Lord?”

“Oh forgive me. Lord Winsome, youngest of Lord Sure and Lady Ardent.” He said bowing introduction.

Wise gestured him to sit with us and he did. “What brings you to Rockport?” He asked and Wise smiled.

“Nothing but an old fashioned Honeymoon. Kaoru and I have only just bonded.” He said and Winsome smiled back at us.

“Then I am intruding on romance. Forgive me. I just happened to see you wing in earlier and was curious if there was trouble. Not often a Dragon King flies in, such a majestic beast.”

“Snowstorm would be pleased to hear you praise him, he has quite an ego. I will pass on your good comments.” Wise said and Winsome stood.

“Thank you, and I shall leave you then with my congratulations on your bonding and will rest easier knowing nothing urgent needs attention from the King. Have a good evening Adept Wise and Healer Kaoru.” Winsome said bowing again and leaving us to rejoin his party. A group of young nobles, obviously his friends out for an evening.

From the looks I was getting from that table I could tell a few seemed disappointed in hearing I was married. Wise chuckled.

“Can I gloat now or later?” He asked under his breath and I had to hide my laugh under my hand.

“Later you horrible man.” I answered as our food arrived and I became absorbed in my new favorite food.

Shellfish had definitely become my favorite dish. Steamed in butter as we had it was even better than the crab cakes we had for lunch.

“Can we get shellfish in Crown City?” I asked and Wise shrugged.

“I never asked, I just always ate whatever the student halls fixed. Ask Urbane, I bet he can get it. You like it that much?”

“I love it!” I said and Wise grinned.

“Then remind me to talk to Urbane and see if we can get that for our kitchen occasionally. I like it too and it is a nice change from school stew.”

“Aye.”

We cleaned our plates and then had a lovely and light cheesecake in raspberry sauce for dessert before paying our rather expensive tab and then heading out to walk the beach under the stars while our food settled.

We walked barefoot in sand and listened to the waves on the shores and kissed under the full moon several times during our walk. It was a grand night and other couples like us were enjoying it too. There were flower vendors walking the beach and Wise bought me roses. My man was the consummate romantic. I was almost giddy and not paying much attention to anything other than Wise.

He wrote our names in the sand with a stick as we walked and then when we turned around to start walking back we both stopped short. Wise’s name had been struck out deliberately. That sacred me.

“Just someone being a pratt Birdie. Pay it no mind dearest.” He said as we walked passed. I turned my head to look back and my heart stopped. I saw a man standing in the shadows. Tall and broad shouldered and with Charger’s face. I blinked and he was gone.

When I told Wise what I had seen he turned to look and saw nothing. “It’s your imagination Birdie. Probably just a coincidence. Charger could no more make himself a man as I could turn myself into a dragon. Only my father can work that kind of magic and he wouldn’t do that. Charger is still back at home. Don’t let it scare you love or ruin our night.” Wise said and we walked home and talked of other lighter things and loved each other well into the night before falling into dreamy sleep.

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The following morning I slept late, without the school bell to wake me I was horrible about getting up myself. It was midmorning before I opened my eyes and Wise was not in bed. I sat up and saw a tray with muffins and fruit and cheese and a covered pot of tea on the table with a note. It read: "Be Back Soon Birdie."

So my mate was out, leaving me to be lazy this morning. I drew a bath first and pampered myself with the fragrant soaps before wrapping up in a long robe and enjoying my breakfast. I made another batch of Urari tea and checked myself before I drank it and sure enough our double precautions were working and I was still in no danger of unwanted pregnancies.

I was halfway through my tea when Wise returned with wrapped bundles looking smug. "Where were you?" I asked and he just grinned.

"Come open these and find out Birdie." He said setting the packages on the bed and curious and suspicious of my very sly looking husband I padded over and opened them.

I had two new frocks and shoes. One was a soft and sleeveless summer shift in white with pale yellow daises along the neckline. The skirt stopping mid-calve and made for pleasure outings in the heat of summer and the other dress a full skirted lacy dancing frock. Short sleeved still for summer and light material, but made for dancing. It was also a virgin white with pale pink dusty rose trimmings.

"Oh Wise! These are beautiful." I breathed and he grinned at me.

"Beautiful dresses for my beautiful wife. You said you'd always wanted something like this, no better time than the present. Because..." And here Wise grinned and opened a third bundle that had white dress leggings, an officer's cut waistcoat and jacket for himself. "...We've been invited by Lord Winsome to join them at their mansion this evening for dinner and dancing including Snowstorm so I thought you might enjoy dancing so I had to get you a frock like you said you liked."

"You are so romantic. Come here you." I said pouncing on my husband with joy and proceeding to show him how very much I loved his thoughtfulness. He was rather appreciative and looking far too smug as we finally dressed for the day and headed out into town for lunch and just a tour of the market and town.

My new summer frock was cool and free and my twin braids hung loose as we ate white fish battered and fried at a local stall and sipped frosty cold cider beer. I was sitting at our little outdoor table finishing my beer when Wise got up to go get himself more. My husband had a hollow leg when it came to white fish, that was his favorite and while he waited in line at the vendor to purchase more I scanned the milling crowd of shoppers.

Once again I caught sight of the Charger look alike, glowering at me from the side of a building. When he caught me looking at him he turned and left. I was agitated when Wise returned and he frowned. "Once is a coincidence, Twice something is wrong." Wise said turning to converse with Snowstorm mentally.

"He said no word has come to the station and if he were by some chance Charger, someone would have immediately sent us word. I think in this instance, we just have an uncanny look alike making his actions seem more suspicious than they are. You are pretty love, all sorts of men have been staring at you today. I think it's just poor luck he's interested too. You're safe here, but if you see him again point him out and I'll track him down for answers." Wise said and he did make sense, it was just his face that was unnerving and I had been getting stares all day.

We carried on, pushing the Charger stranger out of our minds and we returned home to get ready for the evening at the mansion of Lord Sure and Lady Ardent.

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## **“Namesake”**

*Book Four in the Namesake Tales*

*Author: D. Sanders*

### **Chapter Three - Captive Bluebird**

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The evening at the Mansion was thrilling. We were served a fine dinner where I sat next to Lady Ardent and she almost grilled me with questions. She was fascinated to learn I was actually born male and she commented that healers always confounded her. She talked well of my mentor Peaceful and how glad she was that Urbane and Peaceful were so well matched. She was quite frank on how horrible she had been as a young girl and how all that had changed when she'd heard what had almost happened to Peaceful.

“I took a good look at how I was acting and trying to force a match is just painful for all. When I began just being myself and stopped trying to be “a Lady” I met Sure and what a good match that was. You just be what makes you happiest and everyone else shares that inner peace with you.” She said patting my hand and smiling and she was such a genuine lady inside no act was necessary. I liked her very much.

After dinner, everyone adjourned to the grand ballroom and between my Husband, Lord Sure and Lord Winsome my feet were danced off. I begged a rest and sat in the garden looking at the fountain. Other dancers coming in and out to cool off in the cool evening breeze. Wise and Winsome were laughing, standing at the double doors not far away and sharing good conversation and wine. I stood to get a better look at the fountain. It was a beautiful marble statue of a Mermaid and the pot in her hands poured the water into the cistern below.

I trailed my hand in the cool water and sipped from my wine glass. I was having a wonderful evening and I was beginning to get sleepy. The day was catching up to me. I turned to look at Wise and Winsome. Both of them seemed to be getting sleepy too. They were hiding yawns behind hands themselves.

I saw Snowstorm curled up on a bench already sleeping. Something seemed odd, everyone was suddenly yawning and dropping like flies. I staggered a few steps, my feet felt like they were encased in iron and I had to sit before I fell.

That was the last thing I remembered. I woke up in terror. I was bound and woke up next to a campfire and certainly not in Rockport. The sun was just rising, I'd been asleep for hours. I didn't know where I was or how I had gotten there and my head hurt like I had been drugged. At that realization I looked at myself internally and realized I had been drugged, probably everyone at the party had been. I could tell the trace amounts of alcohol meant it had been in the wine.

A snap of a twig nearby made me turn my head and there was the man who looked like Charger. “Awake now Kaoru? See how poorly he protects you. Only I

can protect you and see what I've done for you? I am a man now, I will be your mate."

It was Charger! "No, oh white lady, Charger what have you done?"

"I asked Colt to change me and he said no. But the white man said yes. He came after the damn mage left me in my grotto chained like a dog with magic. The white man was like a ghost and walked right through that creator's barrier. He said he'd give me what I wanted he said it was foul what humans were doing to me. He set me free and gave me the ability to change into a man for you. I am here now and this foolishness with Wise is over. You are mine, you have ever been mine, only I know what is best for you Kaoru." Charger said reaching out to stroke my cheek.

I flinched back as if bitten. "No! Charger you can't! You're a centaur. You're not human. You were my dearest friend and I love you, but not like that. Oh please you must understand. I care for you, I do and I don't want to hurt you but this cannot be. I am mate to Wise. I love him, he is my husband, please try and understand. I cannot and will not be your mate." I said and Charger's eyes were furious.

"He's turned you against me. You will learn to love me again. Look how he has you dressed like an Aegian woman! You are Torlander, you are above him and all those Aegian fools. I will protect you from him and the ways that taint you and turn you against your homeland. Torlander women don't hide their beauty under yards of frippery! Wear your skin with pride!" Charger said ripping open the front of my dress and I crossed my arms across my chest to cover my breasts.

"See! Makes you shy to bear skin this Aegian culture. It is a sickness on you I will purge Kaoru. I will make you pure again. I will be your mate and protector. Only I love you." Charger said and I cried. He was mad, I could feel it wash over me. He truly believed he was doing what was best for me and he was blinded by his own desires and lust for me. I feared, truly feared. So I did what I thought best, I shifted back into a male. I knew it was inevitable and that eventually he would overpower me and mate me. He would not have me as a woman, I would not risk bearing an abomination as a child.

"You like being woman, change back Kaoru!" Charger said and I shook my head.

"No. I will never be a woman in front of you again. What you intend is against all that the White Lady holds sacred. You cast aside the gift of creation Tor gave you to walk unnaturally as a man. No Charger. You are not my friend anymore. My Friend was Charger the Centaur. I don't know you as a man." I said and regretted it. Charger slapped me.

“You’ll learn!” He said and then changed back into a centaur and looped my bound hands around his shoulders forcing me to ride on his back. He ran on swift ground devouring hooves. A centaur made even the swiftest racing horses seem like sway-backed nags. I had no sense of direction, I only knew that wherever I was, Wise was going to have a hard time tracking me down again.

I prayed he found me or I managed to escape on my own soon. Otherwise, Charger was going to force himself on me and succeed.

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By that evening I was so sore I was sobbing with every step, I was starving and thirsty. “Charger please I’m black and blue all over, please stop.” I cried and Charger grunted.

“Not much farther.” Was all he said and indeed it was true. We came to a run down little hut, just as we cleared the forest. There was probably a town nearby of sorts but this was where we stopped. You could tell the place had not been inhabited for years. The garden was overgrown with weeds, the roof needed mending and the inside was covered in dust and mice had long since eaten the straw in the bed box.

Charger dumped me inside. “Don’t move.”

“Like I could go anywhere? I’m bound, my legs are on fire and I’m exhausted. I wouldn’t get far.” I grumbled and Charger shifted into his human form.

“You’re that hurt?” He almost sounded concerned.

“Are you now dumb as well as insane? Riding bareback on your spine all day? What do you think?” I was not in a good mood and Charger was no longer in my good graces. Being pleasant was the farthest thought from my mind. I just wanted to be back with Wise in a nice soft bed and eating anything at this point.

“I am sorry beloved. I’ll get you something to eat.” He said and his kindness in his voice was sincere, I wasn’t having any of it. My Friend was gone.

“Do not call me that. I am not your ‘beloved’ nor do I intend to be.” I huffed and Charger patted my head like I was the one sick in the head.

“You’re in pain, you’ll soon recover. You’re home now. The white man said this place would be ours. I’ll go check the garden for anything still growing. Rest easy.” Charger said acting like my husband and believing it in his mind. I was wondering who this White Man was and was decidedly not his friend either.

I watched Charger out of the window dig in the garden and he was talking to someone I couldn't see. He was truly mad and I was beginning to think this White Man was either a figment of his imagination or some ghastly lost soul using Charger as a conduit.

That thought made my blood run cold. Charger was a natural mage, all Centaurs were. If some entity had possessed him in a moment of weakness and that spirit was an adept, he could very well be the one allowing Charger the power needed to change his shape. A bargain, the soul would live in Charger's body and allow charger his desires at a cost. Charger's soul would eventually be devoured and that spirit would take it over entirely.

The only mages who worked like that were Viragos and they were all dead. But the pieces fit. What if one of the Viragos didn't cross over at death? What if he had been wandering from person to person feeding on their souls until he found a receptive host?

I was now beyond terrified. If that was the case my Charger was indeed already dead and he didn't even know it yet. I had to get out of here and soon. I had to find a way out of this nightmare, I could not wait to be rescued or I'd be prey to the worst evil known to the world.

I prayed to Tor, the White Lady and Counter to watch over me while I sat to think. Charger came back with several large jicama and turnip tubers and peeled and sliced them.

I ate them raw I was so hungry. "There's more. Most of the root vegetables are still growing. If I weed the garden tomorrow, what is left of the ground vegetables I can force growing on. I'll go hunting and see if I can find meat for you tomorrow then go into the local town to see if I can buy us some chickens for a roost."

"You're crazy. You're not seriously thinking of playing house with me here?"

"I'm not playing anything. I am taking care of you. Only I care for you Kaoru." Charger said going out again and coming back with rushes for the bed box.

He untied my wrists and rubbed the circulation back in my hands. I just wanted to vomit at the sickening irony. In one breath he was yelling and hitting me the next acting like the devoted husband. "Get some sleep, and please don't try to run, you know it's pointless and I want to stop fighting you Kaoru. You will see I am the better man for you."

He had the audacity to kiss me and I flinched away. "Do not ever touch me. Do not Kiss me, I don't even want you where I can see you!" I growled and turned my back on him and curled up in pain to sleep.

I heard him sigh and settle against the door for the night.

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The next day Charger set up a mage barrier around the run down cottage. I couldn't step two feet from the door without encountering resistance. No matter what I tried, a veritable invisible wall stopped me. I was caged like a bird.

That left me unbound but that was about the only good. What Charger did to me that morning infuriated me. He cut off almost all my hair. He left it in ragged lengths about my shoulders. My hair had not been this short since I was two. On top of that, he dyed it black. If anyone was looking for a blue haired Torlander who wore it to his knees like all healers, they weren't going to recognize me now.

I cried, I'm not ashamed to say I wept over that. My hair had always been a source of pride for me, for most healers our hair was part of our rank. I felt unmanned as if he'd cut off a limb or my penis. I was less attached to that than my hair. I held the shorn lengths and sobbed.

Charger left me to collect my pride off the floor and where he went he didn't say. He hadn't said anything all day. Just grabbed me and lopped off my braid with his knife and then magically dyed my hair.

I tied off the loose end of my lost hair, over three feet of my hair was now gone. It would never grow back like this again, it would take a lifetime as it had the first time to grow. I coiled my hair and found an old empty sack to hide it in and placed it under the bed.

I sat alone all day, fretting and angry and starving. I had finished what little sustenance left from the night before hours ago.

It was nearing sunset before Charger returned. He tossed three hares on the table. "Meat. Eat." He grunted and I crossed my arms across my chest.

"And how pray tell do you expect me to? I have no knife, I have never skinned a rabbit in my life, there is no wood for a fire and I wouldn't trust that hearth not to smoke the house down to even light one. This is madness Charger. End this stupid charade!" I was livid and my tongue had a mind of it's own anymore where Charger was concerned. I had no options. It's amazing how brave or stupid one can be when there is only anger fueling you. I was hungry, tired, sore, mad, cranky and not even remotely in the mood to play house with a lunatic.

Charger frowned and took the hares outside to clean them. I noticed outside there were items that had not been here the night before. He'd been to a town, he had a pot and bowls. A few blankets and pillows, a dirty old homespun frock he tossed at me to replace the torn finery I'd been wearing all day. Four chickens

scratching around in the old chicken roost of the hut and an ancient looking nanny goat. He really did intend to live here like we were newlyweds and in abject poverty no less.

I was going to make his life hell, if he wanted to be my protector and take care of me, I wasn't going to lift a finger to help him. That would probably earn me lots of bruises, but I'd be getting those anyway, I might as well earn them with pride. I thought to myself as I glowered at Charger through the door.

I would not go down without a fight. I may not have magic or strength to fight as most men, but even the most saintly of men would lose patience with a bitchy troll to contend with. Considering my current disposition toward Charger, he'd be lucky to only have a bitchy troll on his hands. I would make him despise me eventually.

For three days this carried on. Him eking out an existence and me being cold, aloof, demeaning and anything else I could think of alone the way to make him miserable. He cleaned and repaired the hut and I sat stony in the chair.

He fixed the bed and I refused to let him sleep in it with me. He cooked, he hunted, he cleaned, we did the chores and I never budged. I sat silent unless he demanded me to talk and then I was vicious. I already had one black eye and a sore jaw and earned them both. I knew my luck wouldn't hold forever, but every minute I could buy gave Wise one more minute to find me.

On the fifth day, my luck ran out. I got into bed and Charger came with me and held me down. "You will sleep with me! I am your husband now!" Charger said and I knew struggling was pointless, I'd just end up hurt even more.

"You will never be my husband. Wise is my husband, you are my jailor." I said icily laying motionless with his weight atop me.

"Never say his name! I'll make you forget him! He's tainted you." Charger said pulling off my only garment and again I was dead weight. I just went limp and made him fight to undress me just by my laxity.

He fondled me and tried to kiss me and I just turned my head away and thought of nothing. This was just Charger asserting his dominance on me. I'd treated rape victims before. I knew none of this was my fault and it was safer for me in the long run to let Charger have his way with my body than to fight him and risk injury. Just the foulness of the cross species breeding was enough to make me internally ill inside. Which frustrated Charger when he could not even make me erect.

I prayed silently to the White Lady and Tor for protection and forgiveness. I knew this went against all that was sacred and right and I begged mercy upon my soul.

The pain of his mating me was horrific. He finally gave up trying to please me and roughly turned me over, forced me onto my knees and mounted me without preparation or preamble. I couldn't stop the screaming, he tore me apart when he entered me.

"Charger stop! It's hurts!" I begged pathetically.

"You take it from HIM! You'll take it from me now! I am your mate!" Charger grunted and thrust and only because it was causing him pain too did he pause and find an aide.

Once he used the lanolin oil that had been in the hut prior to our arrival did the physical pain ease to an extent. I was still bleeding and the oil stung but it was better than before. I still cried into the pillows as Charger took me and nothing in my life had made me feel as dirty as Charger did when he came inside me.

Centaur seed did not belong in a human body and after he had rolled over and gone to sleep, I washed until I was raw. Flushing out of me as much as I could. I begged the White Lady and Tor to lend speed to my husband and hoped he found me before I really was tainted completely.

I tried to be rational and keep my wits and senses about me, I had counseled victims before. Being the victim however was another matter entirely. My mind told me I wasn't really dirty, it was just sex. However my heart was crushed, my soul battered and I felt filthy and like I'd never be able to wash Charger off me again. I'd have to tell Wise what he had done to me and my husband would look at me and know another man had done to me what, by rights, should only belong to Wise.

I couldn't bear to sleep in the same bed. I curled up in the corner on the floor and cried myself to sleep.

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My hopes dwindled as days, then weeks passed without a sign of another human being let alone rescue. My life was confined to the walls within the cottage, now in full repair. Charger had systematically fixed the hovel, weeded the garden, repaired the roost and coop, and set up a hay shack for the goat and milk cow now residing with us.

He had turned this abandoned ruin into a self-sustaining little farm in eight weeks much to my dismay. He had every intention of living here forever, his captive little mate right alongside him. I was as much a possession as the chickens to Charger.

For my part, I did nothing. I did not cook, I did not clean, I did not speak unless spoken to and never did anything without being forced. Most of the time I was sporting a black eye or busted lip when Charger was particular cross with me for being stubborn.

After that first night of sleeping on the floor, Charger had not let me do it again. Everyday had become a routine.

He would feed me breakfast and then go out all day leaving me stuck behind my invisible wall, sitting in a chair by the open door and I watched the road for any sign of life so I could yell for help, and so far my luck had been nil.

Charger was home by evening and fixing dinner. After dinner he'd mate me before bed. He'd moved the bed against the wall and trapped me against the wall so I could not leave the bed without waking him.

He was in his own world and I was an unwilling captive within the maddening confines. I had no way to get out, I'd tried every method to escape, even the chimney, but that was too small and I just ended up filthy for my efforts and beaten for trying to escape later.

A sad resignation settled around my shoulders as my hope died and expired. I wasn't going anywhere, no one was coming for me. I was sure by now even Wise had lost hope in his search. Harvestfest had come and gone and winter was on the horizon. Charger left no trace of himself and even I didn't know where we were in the middle of the vastness of Aegis.

This was my life, a kept pet of a mate to a madman. He beat me less if I cooperated and even my stubborn nature began to fade when weariness of abuse wore down my resistance.

Eventually I just began to exist day to day. I'd sit idle all day with nothing to do but dust a single table. I had no belongings. Just a burlap sack that held my severed braid and the torn frock Wise had given me. I kept that hidden from Charger, it was all that was left of Healer Kaoru, Spouse of Adept Wise.

I was now simply Kao. Charger's object and what he called me unless he was angry and then it was just a barking of my full name. My seventeenth had come and gone and my markings never received and I healed no one now. I was helping nothing and my gifts going unfulfilled.

Even I didn't look at my precious belongings anymore, I kept them hidden from even myself. To look only reminded me of all I had lost and I'd lose all day sobbing in misery and that was more torture than to just sit and occupy myself with watching the world pass me by outside the window.

Charger however seemed to enjoy my lackluster companionship. He commented that I was properly docile as a healer should be now and that he knew he had done the right thing taking me away.

I could only sigh, I was too tired of fighting back anymore. He was confusing Docile with Defeated. Sometimes those two things went hand in hand. I ate when he told me to, I slept when he told me to, I got on my knees when he told me to, only one thing I would never give him. He would have to kill me first. I would never give him children, he would never have my body as a female and the evil spirit now content in it's victory over Charger would never sire offspring on me.

I would live here and die here and never be a mother but it was a price I had to pay. There is only one man in the world I would bear children for and he was denied me, so in turn I denied Charger.

Autumn turned to Winter and I had to spend almost all my time with Charger during the cold months. I detested winter and Charger's favorite pastime had me on my knees far too often.

If I hadn't felt beaten before, I did so utterly by midwinter. I had no escape and only sheer luck would get me out of my living hell.

Sheer luck happened, Charger was up fixing the roof and fell and broke both his legs. I had to quell my first instinct to rush out and heal him. This was my only chance.

"Let me go to town, send word I am here and then I'll save you." I heard myself say, even if all my healer's senses were urging me to ease Charger's pain.

"NO!"

"Then you will die here in pain. I will not heal you." I said turning away from him. "When you die, the barrier here will break and I'll be free anyway so it's your choice Charger. Let me go now and live or I'll just wait until you freeze to death out there in the cold."

"You evil little thing! I am your husband, I give you everything and this is how you thank me?"

I could not believe Charger. "I am not your husband, I am your prisoner. Wise is my husband and you will let me send him word or you will sit there and die." I felt the walls around me give.

"Go then." Charger said and I grabbed my little sack with proof of who I was and ran. It took me an hour to reach the little village and I was frozen to the bone shoeless and in just a homespun dress, my hair all shorn and black but I was

freer than I had been in almost half a year. I ran right into a tavern and straight into a dragon warrior sitting at the pub. His little green perched happily on the barstool beside him eating a picked egg.

“Help me!” I begged throwing myself at the poor shocked man.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, my sudden euphoric shaking making me stutter.

“My name is Healer Kaoru, I’m being kept prisoner. Please get word to my husband!” I began, probably sounding crazy but the man just leapt to his feet and grabbed my shoulders.

“Wise’s wife? S’t truth we’ve been looking for you months! Sit! Sit!” He said taking me to a chair and getting me something hot to drink.

I showed him my belongings as proof and told him my tale and I could tell Warrior Able and his lovely lady Jade were good folk. Jade had already flown off to take my message to Crown City.

Had I known how close we were to the city all this time, I would have wept harder. It wasn’t an hour before the tavern doors banged open and my husband was running across the room to seize me in a death grip.

“BIRDIE! BIRDIE!” Wise was sobbing as he clutched me to him, Snowstorm twittering all about me in a frenzy. I was dreaming and sobbing and clinging to Wise with the first joy I’d felt in so very long.

When I managed to tell Wise what had happened he stopped and murderous rage took him. “That bastard! He’s been at his grotto every day! He’s tricked us and had you under our noses all this time! I’ll kill him!” Wise growled and then finally noticed my hair.

“Oh Birdie, what has he done?” Wise said fingering my locks and then seeing my shorn braid on the table. He picked it up and then turned to me.

He held the braid at the nape of my neck and his hands felt warm around my ears. “Restore and reverse the falsehood.” Wise whispered and I heard most of the room gasp. When Wise let go of my braid, the severed ends were once again attached where they should have been and my hair was once again it’s natural color.

“That’s my Bluebird.” Wise smiled and kissed me and it was bittersweet. I didn’t need to tell my husband all the details, he knew them as well as I did. I shed them as best as I could as I shifted from male to female.

“Let the old Kaoru die here. Too many scars for them to ever mend entirely. Let us walk forward one day at a time from here.” I said softly and Wise nodded and wrapped me in his cloak and had someone bring me socks and boots for my feet.

“He is dying, I made a promise to return to heal him.” I finally said and Wise looked furious.

“Let him DIE! For what he’s done to you he deserves it!” Wise yelled and I shook my head.

“I’d be no better than he then. Would you have me stoop so low?” I asked softly and Wise shook his head.

“No beloved, I would not. You are right and it is up to King Unity to dispense justice.” Wise said and I staggered.

“King Unity? Oh no, don’t tell me King Justice died?” I asked, the world had changed around me and this news was most unpleasant.

“Aye. Two months ago, just after Harvestfest. He was ninety-three Birdie, it was peaceful in his sleep. Ever since Queen Dauntless died a few years ago he just dwindled. Unity said it best, his parents are out being wild barbarians enjoying a good hunt in the heavens now. They both had full, long and lusty lives in life he’s sure in the afterlife they will be no different.” Wise said and I nodded.

The Tavern owner brought me over socks and boots and warmer clothes and I changed and gathering my dignity and my pride went to go keep my promise to Charger. Wise and Able and the dragons at my side to protect me.

## **“Namesake”**

*Book Four in the Namesake Tales*

*Author: D. Sanders*

### **Chapter Four - The Compass Forms**

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Just before we left the Tavern, Colt and Frostbite arrived to join us and when we reached him, Charger was furious with pain when we returned less than three hours after I left him.

It was the first time anyone but I had seen Charger in his man form and all three dragon warriors were as disgusted as I to see a Centaur in manflesh. “I told you this was an abomination! Who gave you this ability?” Colt demanded as I healed the bones in Charger’s legs.

When he refused to answer, I did. “He’s not Charger anymore. He said the White Man set him free. He’s been possessed, I’ve seen it take him over. Look to his soul father Colt and see.”

At the mention of the White Man Colt’s eyes widened and he grabbed Charger’s face in his hands and met his eyes squarely. I was repelled from Chargers body and Colt threw up a barrier.

“Heal not this until it is PURGED!” Colt said straddling Charger and he began to thrash wildly as Colt chanted.

“Be gone Lamia, Be gone Lamia, Be gone Lamia.” Colt said over and over until Charger stopped thrashing and went into a deep sleep.

Colt then turned to me. “Come here!” He said and he held me in his arms and cried into my hair.

“Lamia was not a man, but the most evil woman ever to walk this earth. She tortured my Fair as she Tortured you. I saw her intent, she sent her soul out of her body as my father killed her all those years ago and she has been lurking around us all for many years. First she was in the body of a seagull, then into a horse, then into Charger while he was still an infant. She has laid in him a silent voice all his life. Urging his basest instincts, eating away his soul and taking him over slowly over many years and making him the beast he is today. Charger never hated Wise, she did because he is my Son and grandson of her murder. When you bonded to him, she saw her chance for revenge on us. She wanted to use your body as a vessel to breed a new race of Virago. She is now gone, I have rendered her soul apart. Charger is free of her influence. Thank Tor we discovered this in time. Oh dearest, forgive me for never seeing this until too late.” Colt said rocking me back and forth like I was an infant and purging his grief over what happened to me into my hair.

“We cannot change what has passed, we can only move ahead. I am whole and alive and restored to those I love most. I can be grateful for that much. Others have not what I have. Your love and support will see me through my own healing. Let me heal him now.” I said moving to finish healing Charger’s human legs and then Colt removed the Virago spell and changed Charger back into a Centaur while he slept.

He awoke a few minutes later howling with anguish and soul agony. “Kaoru forgive me! Forgive me! I tried to stop her I did! Oh Tor kill me for what I have done to you!” Charger wept and I took his hand.

“That wasn’t me Kaoru! Please believe me! She controlled me, spoke for me and had me trapped in my own mind.” Charger rambled and shook with remorse. This was my childhood friend again. He couldn’t even look me in the eyes without turning away and sobbing. Repulsed by what his body out of his control had done to me.

“Leave me here. I cannot go back, I cannot face any of you in my shame. I broke Tor’s law, Kaoru I’m so sorry.”

“I think we should all just consider this the last act of the Viragos. We have all been victims to a malevolence that defies even the boundaries of death. If we cannot find it in ourselves to forgive and accept a cruelty we had endure then we forever have an open wound and the pain lingers eternally. Let the last of the Virago’s pain end here, let not their power continue. We win this battle if we stand and face it together.” Wise said holding out his hand to Charger.

“For the Love of Kaoru we both have in our hearts, may we always stand to protect him from evil.” Wise said and through his tears Charger took Wise’s hand.

“For the love we have for Kaoru I fight beside you to protect him. He could not have a better husband than you. I always believed so. He was always my dearest friend and his happiness is what is most important. As his friend I am yours too. I beg you forgive me and allow me to atone.” Charger said and they both turned to me and I crawled between them and let them hold me together.

“We have already begun healing. Forgiveness is not needed now. It is over and done. It was not you my Charger, I cannot blame you for the acts of another who used you more ill than I was. My soul was not threatened, yours was my dearest friend. I cannot blame you for this, nor should you blame yourself. It is as Wise said. The Evil of the Virago can only survive if we allow it to taint our souls. Let our hearts be purged and let us walk together and grow stronger.” I said and both Wise and Charger wrapped around me. I sat in Wise’s crossed legs and Charger reclined beside us his arms around both of us.

“Birdie, you have the most beautiful of souls.” Wise said kissing my right cheek.

“And the strongest of hearts.” Charger added kissing my left cheek.

Colt smiled. “We’ll leave the three of you to sort this out among you.”

Colt and Able left us alone in the little cottage, which I learned was just an hour walk away from Crown City. They had all searched for me much farther away and during this time Lamia had Charger in his grotto all day as if nothing was wrong or amiss. She would come back at night with supplies stolen right from the Castle with no one the wiser save for Charger who was as much a prisoner as I had been. More so, he had been a prisoner his entire life, fighting against a very real inner demon who took possession of him at her will his whole life long.

The biggest victim had been Charger in all of this. Yes, Lamia had raped me for months using his body, but it was a physical torture. Charger had to watch me plead and beg for mercy and he had been powerless to help me as I had been powerless to escape.

We stayed in the cottage together that night. Both Wise and I giving affection and comfort to each other as much to Charger. We talked together, Snowstorm sitting on our table asleep as we all reclined on the floor in front of the fire. We used Charger’s strong horse’s back as a cushion. We were sitting by the fire, eating stew when a light shimmered in the fire and a very real White Lady stepped from the flames. Otherworldly and divine. This was no Virago, this was Hespia herself. She shimmered and smiled at us and every hair on our bodies stood on end with her light flooding the room.

“So the cycle at last ends. The compass to the future now points down a golden path. The last of the Soul Devoured Ones are purged. Much pain did she bring to you all and now much joy you will all share together. Dragon Snowstorm, the guardian at the southern point of the compass. You stand as their foundation of strength. Adept Wise, the Northern point of the compass, the position as to which all others point. You are truth and Wisdom and lead with the mind as well as the heart. You lead the others.

“Gentle Kaoru, soul daughter and flesh son of my lineage. You are the soul of the compass. The dawn and the rising sun of the east that gives light and comfort to the rest of the compass points. You are the scale that balances all. North, South and West stand as your protectors.

“Charger, the sun sets in the west and you stand strong against the darkness. You never let the evil consume you and fought against it to keep yourself whole. You are the warrior in the compass that protects all others. You suffered the most and your pain deepest. Let the others heal you. As Kaoru sheds the past skin and wears a new one into the future. So too shall you.” The White Lady began

and laid a hand to Charger's head. He was lost in her light and when the light faded, he was a man again.

"Shed the old skin for the new one Charger. You are now human in every way. Feel the bonding of the compass as fate and the Creator wills it to be." She said and both Wise and I were flooded as all four of us bonded. Snowfire to Charger and I and Charger to all of us. We were all soul bonded in the most intimate of ways.

"Live and Love together. Friends, lovers, companions and protectors of the people. Take your journey's far, take healing and justice to the people who need you. Let the children that come be rich in the gifts you share together." The White Lady said and then was gone.

We were left in awe and much warmth of soul. It wasn't unheard of in the south or in Torland for three people to bond as mates but it was very rare. Here we now were, Wise our leader and Primary husband. Charger, the second husband and I was their wife. I no longer had to maintain my gender transformation. As much as Charger had been irrevocably changed, so had I. I was a woman, completely. To change into a male would now be the illusion, my primary gender had been changed.

Snowstorm took it all in stride, yawned from the table and whirled his eyes at us. *::At least try not to wake me my triad and we'll have to adapt my saddle for three now. I suggest none of you gain weight to spare my back when we ride together. Except you Kaoru, with those two I suspect to be playing with little ones soon::* He said and Wise laughed, breaking the suspense.

"This is going to break everyone's brains in the morning. It's certainly broken mine." Wise said and Charger nervously chuckled.

"My parents will cry but adapt I am sure. As I must. I am fully man now, I will never be a centaur again."

"With two human mates Charger, it's natural she change you for us. It's not everyday people bond like we have, we're very lucky."

"I'm the luckiest I think. I have two husbands I both love very much, you have to share me." I said and both Charger and Wise laughed and once again I was sandwiched in-between them.

"Birdie, I think we'll manage." Wise said nibbling behind my right ear giving me gooseflesh while Charger whispered in my left ear.

"Kaoru, you'll just have to get used to being loved."

Both my mates made love to me that night, my fair skinned and raven haired Adept and my chestnut haired and tawny skinned Warrior. Both my husbands so very handsome and prime young men. Wise, the tallest, broad of shoulder and narrow of waist in his lean and long elegance. Charger, nearly as tall in his new form but wider of chest. He was brawny strength in a powerful body. His large barrel chest still dusted in his dark hair and his sharp equine features still evident in his rugged male precision. Wise with his dashing regal beauty and Charger with his earthly male prowess covered both ends of the spectrum that defined men at their finest. I was surrounded and cocooned by loving handsome men and together they made me feel worshipped.

Wise taking me while Charger caressed and kissed my breasts and then Charger took me while Wise held me. My back against his chest as he nibbled my neck from behind. He held my legs apart in invitation to Charger.

As Charger mated me, he and Wise kissed above me and then they both kissed me and we meshed together seamlessly. My husbands took turns on me all night long and at one point were both taking me together. I felt filled and lost in sexual stimulation. My emphatic reception snapping and tingling under the joint assault of their affection.

They had me spread bare in ultimate submission, yet I didn't feel suffocated or in danger, only sublime comfort knowing how they both loved me. Wise had entered be from behind where he had my back against his chest, and he directed our lovemaking. "Let me see you take her Charger. That it's, does it feel nice to have us both in you Birdie?" Wise panted in my ear, I knew they were enjoying this, I could feel their pleasure wash over me. I could only whimper and nod.

"You're so beautiful Kaoru." Charger groaned as he buried himself roughly in me, I could see him from my position enter me, my legs held wide by Wise who rose and fell beneath me to bury himself in my posterior. Doubly penetrated I could only pant as they electrified my body.

"I feel your pleasure Birdie. Take her harder Charger, she likes it, that's it fill her. Show her how much we love her." Wise grunted and they both had me moaning and screaming in pleasure. I was filled with their seed, I was theirs and they took possession of me fully.

When I was recovering my breath, and after a few minutes for them to regain their own as well, they also mated each other to cement their bond together too. It was erotic to watch my husbands together and as pleasing as when they were mating me together. "Watch Birdie, we are all one." Wise said and took Charger first and then offered himself to Charger. We were all equals in this relationship. We were all well spent and slept together all entwined with each other, me in the middle, right on the floor in front of the fire.

I was pregnant by morning and we'd know the father once our son arrived. Not that any of us cared whose seed did the deed on me. We were three and any child we had, would be ours together, regardless which one of my husbands was responsible. We'd love them all equally. We were family, nothing would tear us apart again.

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Coming home again was almost like a celebration. It seemed we were not the only ones the White Lady had paid a visit to, apparently she'd appeared before Colt and the others as well. He'd called a meeting to let everyone know what had happened and right in the middle of the meeting, she'd appeared and told them of our new circumstances and that she expected we continue on with what he had planned before my kidnapping.

Wise, Charger and I were to go out among the people to heal and protect come the first of spring. That left us just under three months to prepare for our journey, but that first week was spent rejoicing with our loved ones.

Charger moved into our home and I met our servant for the first time. A lovely young girl named Caring who was my age and I adored her almost immediately. She had a little ginger cat who didn't even flinch when Snowstorm swooped into the room. She just opened her eyes from her nap, assessed his presence and then went right back to sleep again on the hearthstones.

Our unconventional marriage didn't seem to phase Caring at all. She just accepted and stated she knew quite well some folks just are best together rather than apart. We agreed that she had the right of it, we were better together than apart. I could not imagine my life without either of my husbands. Charger had been my steady support since I had been in diapers and Wise was my first love as I grew into my adulthood. My relationship with Charger had grown from friendship to lovers and with Wise from pubescent infatuation to deep love.

I had everything in the world one could ask for, more than most ever knew. I had two men to hold me close and love me, I had a beautiful home, family and friends. I had healing talents that fulfilled my purpose in life and I had a child coming to bless me further. I thanked the Creator and the White Lady for giving me such wonders in my life and I hoped I lived up to their expectations of me.

I finally got my marks a few days after we returned and I had two overly anxious husbands being solicitous of me during the tattooing. Yes it hurt, but both of them were acting like I was being drawn and quartered. I had to remind them both I was a healer and I was healing myself as the work was being done on my back.

That night, I slept on my stomach and I had two men on either side of me insisting on rubbing aloe and lotion into my skin. I felt exceedingly pampered that

evening. I had to chuckle as Wise proceeded to talk to my lower back as if he were talking to the baby. "Wise, he cannot hear you, you realize? He's not even cognizant yet, just a little blob of light taking form right now. Wait until he's kicking my ribcage black and blue, then he's getting to a stage where your talking to him will reach him subconsciously." I said and Wise just grinned.

"I'm just so excited Birdie. I can't help it. I'm curious. I can't help wondering if he's going to inherit my gifts or Chargers or yours." Wise said and Charger nodded.

"Not that I'd love him any less than I already do, but I too am curious if our son will look a mix of you and I or you and Wise. It's that nagging little question. Which one of us is actually responsible." Charger said and Wise emphatically agreed.

"Precisely. By Tor I love him so much I'm already going into debt in my mind buying him toys. I don't care which one of us is actually the biological father since Charger and I will both be father's equally. It's just the wondering that's driving me crazy. Speaking of which, we should decide what he's going to call us. Mama is easy. But which one of us is Papa and which one is Daddy? We'd better decide for ourselves so we don't confuse our little boy." Wise said and Charger laughed.

"I'd prefer Papa, I called mine that." Charger said and Wise smiled.

"Good, because I prefer Daddy since I called mine that. That was easy enough to settle." Wise chuckled as we curled up together for the night.

"Mama says you're both loveable fools. Goodnight." I said as Wise put out the lights for the night and we all curled up in our nice big bed for the night. Wise to my right and Charger to my left.

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We began getting ready for spring immediately. Urbane built us a large wagon like gypsies used. It would be our home as well as being a traveling healer's cottage. There was a big bed in the back of the wagon that held us all comfortably, a small wood burning stove for heating and cooking, a fold down table for eating and several securely latched cabinets to hold all our personal belongings on the inside. On the outside was a series of cabinets as well that could hold medicines and gauzes and practically everything a healer might need to tend a host of ailments.

There was more storage on the roof of the wagon as well as a covered and comfortable bench seat for me to sit in to ride just within reach and above and behind the driver's bench. I could even curl up and sleep comfortably there if I needed to since I was pregnant. Charger and Wise would ride in the driver's

bench, also covered to protect them from sun and elements as they drove the pair of sturdy shire horses that would pull our bizarre looking wagon. It was functional and efficient and while an unorthodox and bastardized version of a gypsy wagon, we named it "Care-Cart One" Seeing as this was probably the first of many if what we were pioneering worked.

Three months seemed to fly by and I was going over my supply check list for about the fiftieth time and making sure all my supplies were in their designated cubby holes and cushioned for travel when Charger led over our horses. He still had the ability to talk freely with horses, that part of his Centaur heritage still well in tact and he smiled and laughed at something one of them said.

"I still apparently smell like a horse to them and they're confused." Charger said as he hooked our beasts into the riggings.

"This big chestnut stallion is Sturdy and the dapple gray mare is Surefoot. They are good beasts and are most eager to help us." Charger said commiserating with the horses and knowing precisely how to care for them on our journey. That was his role, driving the cart and caring for the beasts and tending our wagon. Chopping our firewood, doing the cooking and taking care of the basic manual labor as we need it.

Wise as an Adept would resume his normal travel duties of looking for talent, mediating any disputes in towns we crossed and in addition assisting me with power if I needed it. My role was obviously the healer.

Wise was inside the wagon, making sure all our personal belongings were stowed and filling our larder with provisions. A suspicious keg of Ale making it's home on top with the larger supplies. Both he and Charger shared conspiratorial smirks when I noticed the addition. My men were typical young men. Charger was seventeen, like myself, I was born only four hours before he was and Wise was nineteen and as all men their age, they liked their beer and that too seemed to be coming along.

We should have known we'd all end up together, that cosmic birthday rule between healers and warriors was far too accurate. I didn't know a single healer who didn't share a birthday with their mate. In my case, two mates. It was like healers liked convenience and making one birthday cake was easier than making two.

Everyone turned out to give us a grand send off and Unity, still wearing a mourning black armband in honor of his father came down with Flame and his grandson Prince Loyalty. He was ten and a student in the University himself. A future dragon warrior like his grandfather. A little red dragon sat on his shoulder too. Ruby had adjusted himself even smaller than most dragons as to not be a burden on his chosen's still small shoulder.

Loyalty was Heir, Unity's only son, Prince Regal had died with his mother and Unity's wife Princess Grace along with Queen Dauntless when Loyalty was still but a few weeks old. Unity had lost his mother, his wife and his son within weeks of each other. About a decade earlier, a bad flux had taken many people, even healers. It had been a harrowing and sorrowful year. Even I suffered it that winter and barely survived, I had been just a small child.

Justice and Unity had always been close as father and son and grew closer when tragedy had ransacked their family. Beloved had almost died that year too but managed to save himself just barely. Justice and Unity never left his bedside during those months, hoping they didn't lose yet another loved one.

Regal's widow, Princess Chastity was a good woman who took up Queen Dauntless' work in stride when she'd passed and now her only child was heir to the throne. Loyalty was a sweet boy and named well. He was staunchly devoted to his Grandfather and to Aegis and at ten you could already see the makings of a fine King to follow in Justice's and Unity's footsteps.

At Unity's smile of encouragement the young Prince walked over to us and held out to us each a broach. It was the royal crest. "You represent the crown in your journey and may The Creator give you blessings of peace in your journey and may The White Lady give you health and comfort as you give comfort to our people. Lord Adept Wise, Lord Warrior Charger and Lady Healer Kaoru. Henceforth as pioneers in the betterment of Aegis, you are granted these titles to bear to show royal favor over your house and your service to the people." Loyalty said to perfection, he'd probably rehearsed it all morning.

I felt shocked and honored at the same time I was amused. The child looked so proud of himself as he pinned on our broaches and gave us our new titles in name only. We weren't landed nobles, but we were given the same honor with the titles.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I pray we serve Aegis well and earn the titles you've so graciously bestowed upon us." Wise said bowing to the little Prince, I felt he was as amused as I was. Charger just felt slightly overwhelmed and wanted to be on the road. He never did like attention drawn to him.

Unity, like his father, often broke with protocol and today was no exception. After he let his grandson take care of the formalities he hugged us all warmly and stopped to rub my still fairly flat stomach. "Take Care Kaoru. Do send word when the little one comes if you're not back in time. You know my nephew Peaceful almost better than I do and you know how worried he is that you're traveling while pregnant. Spare him undue duress and send letters." Unity winked and I laughed.

“I will. Thank you.” I said as Wise and Charger lifted me up to my seat and then they took theirs. Snowstorm perched beside me on a specially built in perch that had him sitting just above Wise’s left shoulder.

With a silent request from Charger, we were off on our journey.

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## **“Namesake”**

*Book Four in the Namesake Tales*

*Author: D. Sanders*

### **Chapter Five - The Next Generation**

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Time seemed to fly by even though traveling between villages and settlements was slow moving. It felt wonderful to be in among the everyday people giving hands on help where and when it was needed most. We paused at every small farm in-between villages, stayed several days in the actual villages to make sure everyone was tended and all disputes managed and overall made spectacular progress in bringing Aegis into a prosperous and healthy kingdom.

From simple scrapes on children’s knees to aiding a family with a sadly senile old grandfather to helping midwife the deliveries of several babies I was true to my calling and thrived.

Our little wagon was cramped sometimes, but cozy enough. Especially that winter when it was freezing outside and my men made sure to keep me amply warm between them in our bed. Even if my now rather distended stomach made laying down an adventure in discomfort. Our son was growing quickly and his healthy glow assured me he was strong.

Several nights over our dinner Charger had prepared we sat discussing names and we all finally decided to give our son a Torlander name while at the same time honor Aegis tradition to name a child with a virtue, skill or desire.

Shindoh was the Torlander word for protector. I could already tell our son had mage potential. With two fathers with the skill, Wise being an adept and Charger being a natural master of all beasts from his Centaur blood any children we had were bound to have some sort of magic. Shindoh’s light had all the markings of a future mage and we felt it appropriate to name him a protector of the people and hopefully one day follow in our footsteps and the path we were making.

Just as autumn was giving way to an early winter, Shindoh was born and his full head of chestnut brown hair and deep brown eyes like a young colt stallion left none of us in doubt which of my husband’s had sired our firstborn. Shindoh was Charger from head to toe and every stray cat, dog, and farm animal was baying and shuffling about. He had his father’s gifts too, an all-beast warrior.

Just as Charger could talk to any animal at will, Shindoh would too in time. They all seemed overjoyed with his birth and Charger was grinning like a fool as he silently conversed with our horses who snuffed the baby’s blanket in greeting.

Snowstorm barely left the baby’s side and used his smaller forearms to tuck the blanket closer where he curled up in the crate turned bassinet in our wagon.

Wise hovered with him, proud as any new father. He gave no emotional reaction to Shindoh other than unconditional love and affection. It didn't matter to Wise that his seed was not responsible, he saw Shindoh as his son regardless and he was already in heavy debate with Charger over the boy's future schooling.

My son would not lack male influence, which was for certain. The testosterone in our wagon was flowing mightily as Charger and Wise drank toasts over our son and discussed his future.

"He's not even a day old yet you too. Mind letting him be a baby first before you have him out working for the crown?" I asked with a smile in my voice where I rested in our bed watching my husbands fuss over our baby.

"Of course love, but this little brute will be big before you know it. I'd never let my son face the world unprepared." Wise said and Charger raised his glass.

"Here, here. A big baby and big man one day!" Charger toasted and I just shook my head, if he took after his biological father I had no doubt that statement would be true.

He was a nine pound brute of a baby, full of pudgy fat and Charger was powerful strength like a plow horse. Considering how much Shindoh looked like Charger now, it was easy to surmise my son would be just as handsome and strong as an adult.

I hoped so, Charger as a man was exceedingly handsome and I wondered how many hearts my son would break before he found his own mate one day.

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Our year of field service ended almost as soon as it started and before long we were back home again. I was put in charge of creating the healer's program, where all healers in the first year of journeyman status would take a cart out among the people. I had worked out the kinks after all and I enjoyed my new work almost as much as I enjoyed field work.

Shindoh was three before he was given a baby brother to dote over. This one as much a copy of Wise as Shindoh was a copy of Charger. Hisa, which meant Duty in the Torlander tongue was bright and gay and according to Fair exactly like Wise had been as a baby. Hisa was into everything and left me harried daily whereas Shindoh had been rather quiet and apt to entertain himself with our servant Caring's cat.

Shindoh was ever attached to some sort of animal from Caring's cat to stray dogs to the birds nesting in the eaves of our apartment balcony.

I'd had a difficult second pregnancy and we decided mutually that two children were plenty to keep all three of us occupied. Hisa was enough strain for ten adult to keep up with and thoughts of having another like him made us all shiver. We were exhausted keeping up with his insatiable curiosity and even Shindoh often escaped Hisa's mad frenetic energy by hiding under tables or in his bedroom.

I began taking contraceptives daily and my husbands had a ready supply of lambskins on hand. Two children was more than enough. However, three children ended up being ours. Caring had become infatuated with a young stable hand and not long after Shindoh's fifth birthday, Sweet was born.

He was a darling little baby, big blue eyes and sandy dark blond hair and as fair as any baby one could hope for and his namesake quite appropriate. He had as sweet disposition as his name implied. Never a fuss, never a cry just a darling little bundle of smiles and coos. Shindoh was fascinated with him and Hisa seemed to calm down in his very presence and made sure he was being good and not naughty near the infant.

Caring and the boy's father sadly parted ways, he wanted nothing to do with Sweet and Caring was distraught at the thought of raising a child by herself. In truth sweet had been a terrible accident and my husbands and I solved Caring's woes. We unofficially adopted him, we gave him the spare third room, allowed Caring to remain in our employ and raise him with us and we became a even more unorthodox family.

It was wonderful, Sweet even turned out to be gifted himself. We noticed it quite by accident when he was about two and the old potted plant I had on the balcony all but withered because I kept forgetting to water it suddenly sprang to vibrant life again unexpectedly. One day it had been a rather brown twig in a pot, the next a trumpet vine was wound around the railings of our balcony bearing bright red flowers.

It could not have grown that much in a single season let alone over night. Wise hadn't done it, neither of my sons had, which left Sweet. When we asked him had he done it, he just smiled and nodded and sad flowers were sad and wanted to grow so he helped them.

Wise immediately tested Sweet and sure enough, he had a strong plant elemental magic bubbling merrily within so he began lessons with the botanists seeing as he was already using magic he should not have been able to harness yet. He was only two so we thought it wise he begin to learn immediately.

Life in our home was always busy, Charger and Shindoh spent most of their time out in the stables learning beast magic, Wise and Hisa spent most of their time during the day together too, also learning. Sweet was escorted to his classes every morning by Charger and Shindoh and picked up in the evenings to come

home for dinner. I ran my schedule from my office in the hospital. Tending patients in-between reading reports from my healer's in the field. We all converged on the apartment for dinner which Caring always took great pains to present like a masterpiece. She really stopped being a servant years earlier, we were family and Caring was like our house spouse while everyone else worked outside of the home. She kept our home clean and running and took care of us while we supported her, it was a wonderful arrangement and worked for us like a well oiled machine.

We all sat together like one extended family over the evening meal while the children reported to us their daily lessons. Shindoh was sixteen and getting ready to leave on a tour of duty with his warrior mentor and excited. Unlike most boys his age, he wasn't going to tour Aegis, he was hand chosen to go to Torland a place even I had never managed to see myself. Neither had Charger, so we were just as excited for him to see a homeland that neither of his parents had seen before him, it was his heritage too after all.

The draw back was, this was going to be a much longer journey. Six months by ship just to get there, then a five year posting at the Aegis embassy and then six months back. He'd be fully a man by the time he came back. He'd be almost twenty-three years old when he got home again, it was bittersweet but we'd never stop him, this was a once in a lifetime chance and he was young enough to have a grand adventure he'd remember his whole life.

Hisa made Shindoh promise to bring back presents, he was thirteen and gangly arms and legs and totally bonded to one of my healer students, a girl his age to almost the minute and they were already well cemented. Purity was her name and we all knew she wasn't anymore. As tradition with healer and adept bonds, once it was established the healer and warrior began living as partners and Purity had been living with us for three years.

We all knew the night my son decided he'd hit puberty with a vengeance and the next day we had them both on contraception to avoid any unwanted children. They were still children themselves. You could never stop a warrior and healer mating when they found it the right time, but you could take precautions and we did. Purity was more than relieved.

This left the youngest and always the most quiet at our table. Sweet was eleven, small for his age and almost introverted he was so shy. He looked melancholy as Shindoh prattled on and on about his upcoming trip. He had always been closest to Shindoh and it didn't take us much to deduce why he was so sad, he was going to miss Shindoh probably more than we would.

For his part, Shindoh was always there for Sweet right from Sweet's birth. He was always Sweet's protector and confidant and we knew Shindoh knew more of Sweet's secrets than anyone. Shindoh's absence would affect Sweet the most.

We were discussing that privately as we all got ready for bed that night. "Sweet is sad." I said as I brushed out my hair and Charger was stoking our fire as Wise came in from his bath.

"Of course he is, I'd bet my last copper there's a bond between Shindoh and Sweet but our daft son can't see it." Wise said and Charger nodded.

"He feels it though, I think it's just their ages right now. I'm with Shindoh most of the day and he's got an uncanny sixth sense when it comes to Sweet. He always knows where that lad is and what he's doing and will drop everything he's doing to help Sweet when he needs it. They've always been that way. I think it's just age. Shindoh is almost seventeen and Sweet is just eleven. I agree with Wise, just wait until Shindoh comes back. It would be a fool's bet to take. This relationship will change when Shindoh returns. Sweet will be seventeen, almost eighteen then, the boy will be gone." Charger said and I nodded.

"In more ways than one, you know his grandfather has sent word recently. They only just found out he was even alive and are begging to be given a chance to meet him, they live in a farming village out west. They seem genuinely upset their son dismissed Sweet and never told them he was born. Leave it to grandparents to want to mend fences. I know I'd want to see my grandchild given the same circumstances. Sweet talked to me about it earlier, I think he plans to take his field work out there and live with his grandparents and tend the crops. He won't be here when Shindoh comes home." I said and Wise nodded.

"Like that will stop our son? He's as bullheaded as you Charger." Wise chuckled and so did Charger.

"Aye, I know. Centaurs are half mule I suppose." Charger winked and I laughed.

"Oh yes, you can be an ass." I replied and now Wise was laughing.

"Can't we all?" Charger grinned and pounced on me and tossed me in bed.

All conversation died in favor of more amusing antics. Our children were growing up too fast and whatever we did or didn't do at this point was left to the hands of fate.

Only time would tell if our children lived up to their namesakes and we lived according to ours.

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