

“Nicknames”

Book Five in the Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter One - Coming Home

I was ready to come home. Not that I didn't love Torland, far from it. It's green rolling hills and beautiful exotic people had filled my life for the past five years. I was just missing my family. My parents, both Torlanders themselves, my father Wise an Aegian, my brother Hisa, our servant Caring and Sweet. My little garden sprite I think I missed most of all.

I missed the way he'd skip beside me as we went off to school, his gentle shy laugh when I thought I was being exceptionally witty as a boy and his way of just filling our lives with his gentle and appropriately named sweet nature.

I missed the primroses he kept growing for me in my window planter box just because I mentioned one day I liked them. I missed his sleepy face at the breakfast table. Sweet was never a fast riser in the mornings and half the time Hisa and I were betting if he'd land face first in his oatmeal some mornings. I missed the private jungle of our apartment. Every table surface usually filled with potted plants and flowers making the rooms smell divine.

Oh they had flowers in Torland too, but none quite so vibrant as those Sweet touched with his magic. Every rose a deeper red, every lily pristine and blinding white, every apple rich and juicy under his fingers. I was bringing my sprite home seeds for plants he'd never seen; I knew he'd love them. One in particular just because it reminded me of him.

They even bore his name; they were called Chihanas, or Sweet Blooms in our language. They were simple little wildflowers in a blue the same shade as Sweet's eyes. Whole mountain meadows were covered in them as far as the eye could see, like a land locked sea of blue. They smelled just as sweet as the name implied. I knew they'd thrive under my Sprite's hands, to me those flowers were Sweet.

I thought of him every time I saw or smelled them. I thought of Sweet quite a lot if truth be told. I felt almost guilty at the proportions of my missing him in comparison to my parents and brother. I found myself most often wistfully smiling as a stray thought of Sweet crossed my mind. I wondered just how much he'd changed.

I left him a red eyed boy on the docks of Rockport, everyone coming to see me off on my journey. He was almost lost in the sea of sailors and he'd always been fey of build and seemed even smaller when he cried telling me goodbye.

I hated to see him cry, it tore my heart out. I wondered what had become of that boy, he was at least seventeen and would be eighteen before I got home again, and my ship had been delayed due to foul weather and put us almost three months behind schedule.

Any time lost now was more time away from home and as much as I loved Torland, Aegis was my home and it was time to come home to her and those I loved most. Admittedly, Sweet was high on that list. My time away from him had sharpened some feelings I had purposefully buried and misinterpreted growing up. Either that or absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder.

Whichever the case, I knew this feeling in my chest was more than friendly or even brotherly affection. I was fairly positive I was in love and moreover bonded to my little sprite without me ever realizing it was a bond.

I wouldn't know the truth of course until I saw him again, I could be fooling myself over fond memories. I was twenty-three, un-bonded and I had an itch to say the least. I had my fair share of trysts during my tenure in Torland, but none of them beyond mutual desire over a pretty face and emotionless liaisons. I was well past the age gifted folk usually bonded. My brother had been eleven when he bonded to Purity and thirteen when he figured out his penis was for more than pissing with. He lost his virginity before I had. However, I think I beat him to the bonding and if I was correct, I'd been bonded for almost eighteen years, since Sweet had been born and only our ages had stood in the way, I was five years older than he was, he had needed to catch up to me and bridge that distance.

I'd know the truth of my hunches when I got home, which could not be soon enough.

It had been six and a half years since I saw Aegis. I left just a few days before my Seventeenth birthday and now I was half-way to twenty-four when we reached port again. I kissed my mother and family who came to greet me in Rockport and was rocked to the core when I realized Sweet was not with them.

"He's living up in Greenborough Village now. After he graduated and did his field work there they had bumper crops that year and they begged him to stay on as a permanent assigned mage crop tender. You know Sweet cannot say 'no' when someone asks him a favor and he does write and say he does enjoy his work there. You know his paternal grandfather lives there, it gave him a chance to meet a part of his real family too and they seem to get on well enough. He's doing alright. Besides your fathers go pay him a visit every six months or so to check up on him, he's just fine." My mother assured me, but it still stuck in my throat that it would be even longer before I saw him again.

Another six months passed before I could not bear it any longer and saddled my bonded horse, Prancer, a sleek and magnificent black charger stallion I'd raised from a foal. He was almost as anxious as I was to see Sweet again.

::I like the one who smells like roses. He always has carrots for me.:: Prancer said in my mind. Horses were not quite as intelligent as dragons and thought more emotionally than dragons did. They remembered kindnesses, sugar cubes and carrots and gentle hands. They remembered ill-treatment and bad masters with fear and greeted those they liked with near greed. Prancer was no exception, he was looking forward to Sweet's carrots. My horse always thought with his stomach.

I was looking forward to just seeing Sweet so we rode like the wind and made a seven day journey in four and reached Greenborough about a week before harvest fest. I was twenty-four which put Sweet at roughly nineteen and it had been seven years since I'd seen him, far, far too long.

As much as some things change, others stay the same. I'd have known him anywhere. I was watching a group of workers in the field, all of them shirtless in summer's last ditch effort of heat. One of them had a back tattooed in red roses and ivy. His scarlet red trousers rolled up to his knees as he waded in rice paddies. His blond hair was shoulder length and the bangs and sides were pulled back out of his face and haphazardly clipped with a clothespin. Sweet had never been conscious of appearances only functionality and he utilized whatever was handy to serve a purpose.

He was smudged with dirt and was smiling as he worked, that part of him had indeed not changed as the rest of him had. He was taller naturally and quite obviously as filled out as he was going to be as a man. Unlike my brawny self inherited from my biological father. I was tall and broad and lean like a horse. Torlanders often mentioned I was very equine in looks, little did most know my father had been a Centaur changed into a man.

Sweet however was slightly smaller than average but quite defined with what he did have to work with. He worked in fields and with his hands and it showed. He had hard lines of muscles across his chest, stomach and back. Though narrow of shoulder and hips his looks were probably very deceiving. He was thin, again from working hard no doubt. Manual labor left very little fat on a body and Sweet never had had any to spare to begin with.

From my vantage point I couldn't see the details of his face, but he'd always been a pretty child I had no doubts he was still easy on the eyes as an adult.

The workers noticed me and I held a hand up in greeting, and then Sweet turned to face me and I'm sure it was Prancer he recognized first because he was suddenly a blur across the field racing toward me at full speed.

I leapt down off Prancer just in time to be crushed in a joyous hug as a sobbing Sweet embraced me. "Shindoh! Oh I never thought I'd see you again! Welcome home!" Sweet sobbed into my chest and I smiled and held him back tightly.

"Like I wouldn't come to see you the moment I could? Think again Sprite. How are you?" I asked and Sweet sniffled and turned up his face to mine and I was lost in deep blue eyes and a face that defied my imagination. He was beautiful.

"Wonderful now that I am no longer afraid you've been swallowed by sea serpents. Oh you must tell me everything." Sweet said taking my hands in his and squeezing tightly.

"I shall, but first I must find a place to stay while I'm here. I plan on a nice long visit with you." I said and Sweet smiled.

"You will stay with me of course. Like I'd put you in an Inn? Hardly. Come on." Sweet said taking my hand and then turned to Prancer.

"I have carrots for you too handsome." He added running his other hand down Prancer's sleek neck. I chuckled; Prancer's mind was filled with carrots suddenly.

"He likes your carrots." I said and Sweet smiled a brilliant smile.

"I remember." Sweet said as he led us down the road and through the village.

He lived in a small cottage on the far side of the village by himself. I found out that while he and his grandfather liked one another well enough, Sweet's father lived with the old man now and Sweet and his father were still at odds. Especially since he was married with five other children with his wife, Sweet's half-siblings, and his new wife couldn't be in the same room with Sweet without crying.

She hated the fact her husband had sired a child on another woman before her and to keep discord at a minimum, Sweet lived by himself a goodly distance from his family.

I didn't like that at all but Sweet brushed it off. "What's done is done Shindoh and we cannot change the past. She sees my mother in me and a reminder that her husband dallied with other women before he married her. I look nothing like my father or my siblings, my father is a cold man and there is no love lost between us. My grandfather is kind and he comes to visit me here. So long as I don't intrude in her home, she's fine." Sweet said as he led me up the path to his cottage. I noticed both my father's handiwork all about.

The cottage was small but cheerful and flower beds abounded in the front yard and in merry little window boxes. I noticed the chicken coop and goat shed which

we stopped in first to make Prancer at home. There was a large stall for visiting horses and Sweet said that was my father's doing since they came to visit occasionally.

The stall was large enough to house two horses comfortably and that Sweet said was because both my Father's came on occasion together and needed a place to stable their animals. Sweet had no horse and didn't need one of his own. This was simply for visitor's use.

They had also helped Sweet refurbish the little cottage and build the greenhouse out back.

It was attached to the house and was almost as big as the house itself. My father Wise had spelled it to keep it at a constant temperature of seventy-three degrees. I could see his heat charms hanging from hooks all along the walls.

It was all glass, walls and ceilings and inside there were rows and rows of plants. On tables, in pots and even in the floor itself. It was the garden of gardens. Every vegetable or herb was growing in carefully tended beds.

"Father Charger and Father Wise made sure I'd never starve." Sweet said as he gestured to the greenhouse.

"I grow everything to eat in there. Outside is just the things I find pretty and not so functional for survival." He said as I finished getting Prancer groomed and Sweet fed him carrots while I worked.

He told me how Charger had helped rebuild the cottage and build the greenhouse from scratch and how Wise had charmed everything for protection, heat and health. My father's made sure their adopted son was safe and secure and that set my mind at ease somewhat.

He'd been here about three years and my father's came every six months to check on him personally. They'd silently passed that duty on to me it seemed and I was grateful for it, I wanted alone time with Sweet.

Unbeknownst to Sweet his animals were talkative. The goats praised him for the sweet grasses he fed them and his gentle hands when he milked them. The chickens touted his grain and corn and made sure to tell me he never forgot to feed them or keep the foxes out. The little party colored calico cat lounging in the sun on the fence post yawned and told me quite frankly she hoped I was here for a while because her boy was lonely and I seemed good enough in her opinion.

I coughed at her shocking insulations, but all cats were quite blunt. She eyed me up and down and groomed herself as she talked quite boldly about his lack of a mate and how people gossiped about him behind his back. Girls pined because

he didn't seem interested, some boys were hopeful and others leery he might be fey. However, most of all she told me of Sweet's father.

::He does not like my boy. He calls Sweet a freak and he is not. Just lonely and alone. He seems to love you so for now you are welcome. Hurt my boy and I'll scratch your eyes out. I know you can hear me all-beast warrior. I hope you are all he has told me you are Shindoh, Warrior of his heart.:: She said before hopping down to wind around Sweet's legs.

"There you are Patchwork. I left you milk this morning I hope you found it." Sweet said picking her up and scratching her ears and she purred.

"She did and gave me a right earful just now. I'm under pain of eyes being scratched out if I upset you. Never fear cat, on my honor my lady I shant hurt him." I said and Sweet chuckled.

"She bites my father when he comes. She's my little protector." Sweet said setting the cat down as he led me to the cottage.

It was lovely inside, here was my mother's and his mother's handiwork. I could tell Caring had made the colorful blue curtains and the matching table cloth. The vase had my mother's tastes stamped all over it and the flowers in said vase had obviously come from Sweet's garden.

The cottage was small but more than enough space for a single person or small family. The kitchen, living room and dining areas were really just one large room. The furniture was a mixture of things either my fathers built or my mother bought. It had a single bathing room and that was obviously a new addition. Aegians still rarely had bathing rooms in their homes while those of us brought up in school society took bathing as almost a ritualistic cleansing.

We grew up bathing at least twice a day, Sweet even more since he routinely came home from school filthy with dirt. He usually bathed in the morning, after school before he touched anything in the house and then before bed with the rest of us kids in a joint bath before bed.

Remembering those times suddenly made me wish for another joint bath, sans my brother naturally, and was dismayed at the size of the tub, it would be awfully cramped to share a bath but not impossible.

From the bathroom I set my travel bags in the spare guestroom. The bed was huge, again my parent's handiwork. Since they'd be the guests the bed was large enough to accommodate three adults comfortably. Even when my fathers traveled without my mother, they still slept together and my biological father alone filled out a normal bed like I did. I tended to take up a goodly portion of a bed myself. Like father like son and I was sincerely hoping I'd not be sleeping

alone for long. My suspicions had only multiplied after seeing Sweet again. I couldn't have denied my desire under pain of death, broaching the subject now was the only obstacle left and timing was everything.

Even bonded didn't just rush into sex, it had to be handled delicately and there was really no rush. I set my bags down and Sweet turned to a wardrobe in the room. "Your father's keep clothes here for when they visit. You'll find a robe that will fit and some lounging clothes in there and your mother sent wonderful towels I keep in the linen closet in the bathroom. I'm sure you're dying for a hot bath after being on the road. Soap is on the edge of the tub and your fathers built me a water heater so there is hot running water in there. My home is yours too make yourself welcome Shindoh for as long as you want to stay with me." Sweet said and I smiled.

"You might regret that offer Sprite. I've been dying to see you for a very long time now and you're right I do want a nice long bath. You could use one too, you always get a smudge right here." I said reaching out to swipe at the streak of dirt on the end of Sweet's nose he laughed.

"I'm always dirty it comes with the job." He said with a wink and then turned to the door. "However, I'm going to get dirty more first and dig us up some potatoes and carrots for a stew so go get started and I'll use it when you're done. I'll get supper on and then I charge you to tell me stories until bedtime." He said and I winked.

"Absolutely, a promise but before that..." I started going into my saddlebags and pulling out his presents. "... Like I'd go halfway around the world and not bring my little garden sprite flower seeds? Think again." I said and Sweet squealed like it was his birthday and he was getting cake after dinner. I told him about his flowers and how Chihanas had reminded me of him when I'd first seen them.

My bath was delayed as I followed Sweet through the back door into the greenhouse and he excitedly rummaged for a pot. He filled it with fresh dirt and sprinkled a few seeds into it, watered it and using his magic to speed it's growth so he could see the flower I watched it bloom before my eyes. I had been correct too, I'd never seen that little wildflower look more vibrant and beautiful than I had right at that moment as it bloomed under Sweet's touch.

"Oh Shindoh, it's beautiful. What delicate little blooms." He said touching the petals almost reverently as he closed his eyes to smell the sweet fragrance.

"First time I saw them, they covered a whole field for miles. I thought of you right away. They reminded me of the color of your eyes and were so small yet could encompass everything. To me they are you, I'm glad you like them too." I said and the look Sweet gave me went straight to my heart and squeezed.

“I love them and you’re going to make me cry when you talk like that. You should have been named Sweet.” He said taking my hand and squeezing.

“It suits you more.” I replied squeezing back and would have leaned in and kissed him right then and there had not our moment been rudely interrupted.

“Sweet! What’s going on why did you race away from the fields?” Came a booming voice from the living room, whomever it was hadn’t even bothered to knock. I was about to meet Sweet’s father.

Sweet sighed and stiffened and our magic interlude was broken as the man waltzed into the greenhouse as you please. Totally disrespecting Sweet’s privacy like he owned the place and he stood there demanding an answer and eyeing me with distaste.

“Father this is Shindoh, I told you of him before. He’s come to visit me. Shindoh, this is my father, Handy.” Sweet introduced us and the man snorted.

“No excuse for leaving a job half-finished magic or no magic. Do I have to remind you how these people depend on you and you left them in the lurch with such a devil may care attitude. I suggest you go back to work now.” The man said and I was appalled.

“I beg your pardon sir, but does Sweet offer a service to the people without pay or is he a slave? Last I looked he worked for the crown and is posted here to offer assistance and King Unity sends his wages. Part of his posting here includes seeing to any other crown officials, like himself, that come to call. That would be me. I just also happen to be a larger part of his life than I suspect you are which would account for his rather rapid departure. Blame me, not him. I came as a surprise.” I said and the man just snorted.

“Please, don’t fight, not in my home I beg you. Father, tell them I’ll be back to finish shortly. Shindoh, please make yourself comfortable, I’ll start dinner cooking before I go and your tales will have to wait until later.” Sweet sighed and followed his father out who had a victorious look on his face. I was angry and started a bath without joy as the cat came in to talk to me.

::See what I mean? The father is mean and my boy takes it without fighting back. Will you fight for him?:: She asked me and I nodded.

“Absolutely. First that man will learn to knock, this is not his home and he’s never been a father to Sweet and it’s a poor time to throw that weight around now.” I replied and the cat purred.

::That much my boy as told me. He cannot hear me but knows I can understand him. He told me of his life before. You were a large part of what he told me. He

missed you very much his heart very much aches for you. More than he will ever confess openly even to me, but I know human bonds and I know those that are magically tied to one another. You've left him too long to pine for you, now he fears all he feels was never real. I suggest next time kiss him anyway, he needs to know you love him too. Furthermore, why are your things in the father's room? Only they sleep there, you belong elsewhere.:: She said to me and I had to laugh.

"Cat, trust me okay? I do love him too and I'll woo him in my time not yours understood?" She thought me daft and left me to steam away my anger and then go tend the stew Sweet had started before he'd left.

It was well passed dark before Sweet managed to come home and he was exhausted. I could tell overwork when I saw it when he shuffled in and fell onto a chair at the table. "I'm sorry for earlier." Was all he said and I just shook my head and filled a bowl with stew and shoved it under his nose. He needed to eat, not apologize.

"Just tuck into that first and I am drawing you a bath. You're wasted of energy you're crackling around the edges. Talk later, eat now." I said leaving him to eat while I got him a bath ready.

He was so tired and had used more magic than was healthy that day and he was nodding off between bites. I almost had to carry him to the bathroom and my anger flared again as I helped him strip down and climb into the tub. "They work you too hard damn it! You're not a slave Sweet!" I said as I took a sponge to his back for him from my perch on the side of the tub.

"I know, oh please don't be cross with me. I can bear anyone mad at me but not you." He said in tears and I reached down and lifted his chin so he'd meet my eyes.

"I'm not mad at you Sweet. I'm mad that people take advantage of you. No more Sweet. First other students used to take advantage of your giving nature and now villagers. You give too much of yourself and if you cannot tell them 'no' when they need to be told so, then by Tor I'll bloody tell them 'no'. I'm not going to let them use you. I wouldn't stand for it then and by The Creator I won't stand for it now either. I care for you far too much to let people walk all over you without a care." I said and that just seemed to make his tears worse. Therefore, I stripped myself and crawled into the bath with him and held him while he cried.

"Don't cry Sprite. I can't bear to see you cry." I said and Sweet shivered in my arms.

"I love that." He said softly and I leaned back in query.

"What?" I asked softly and Sweet just curled up in my arms.

"That nickname, Sprite, only you have ever called me that. Like your father calls your mother Birdie. It makes me feel special when you call me Sprite." He said and I smiled and held him tighter.

"You are my Sprite. I think you have invisible faerie wings sometimes. I always have. I love you and I'll be damned if I let this carry on. I should have never left." I said and Sweet's arms encircled my shoulders and he buried his face in my neck and sighed.

"I missed you so much. I love you too and I was so afraid I'd never see you again." Sweet confessed and I couldn't bear it anymore, I lifted his chin with my hand and looked him square in the eyes. How could I have mistaken this love for anything else?

"I'm not going anywhere anymore. I'm home where I belong, with you." I said and I kissed him. Nothing in the world could ever describe the release and joy I felt as our bond was finally acknowledged for what it had always been. Sweet was not just an adopted brother, he was my very soul and I had come home at last. It wasn't Aegis, it wasn't my room in my parent's apartment, it was with Sweet. He gave me that soft place to fall in the world, right here in his arms.

The water was cold before we were done kissing each other and I literally carried him to bed. He was still so tired and emotionally drained as I put out the lights and held him against me under the covers. We had the morning to continue what we'd started, he needed sleep now and by Tor he was going to have it if I had to restrain the whole village to keep him sequestered until he rested properly.

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Chapter Two - The Simple Life

As much as some things change, others stay the same. I'd said it before and it still held true. Sweet had never been and probably would never be a morning person. He always managed to wake on time, but the waking process itself was a long affair. The rooster in the yard heralded the dawn and I woke as I always did, bright and rested and ready for the day. I was lucky, when I slept I slept deep and whether I got just a few hours sleep or a long night I always woke fresh and alert.

I rolled over to watch Sweet make a valiant effort, which to him was a moan and a groan and denial it was morning already. I usually only ever saw him by the time he managed to actually get up and make it to the breakfast table. I was entirely amused watching him wake up from the vantage point of being in the same bed. “Good morning Sunshine.” I said and Sweet jumped, apparently he'd forgotten I was with him. He rolled to face me and a sleepy smile curled his lips.

“I thought it was all just a very nice dream.” He said through a yawn and I gathered him close and kissed him good day.

“It is if you count it as one come true Sprite.” I replied and I felt Sweet shiver.

“Where did you learn to be so romantic?” He asked drifting in and out of wakefulness.

“When I realized I was in love of course.” I said nuzzling his ear and nipping at his neck. I was more than ready to continue what we had begun the night before and Sweet was responding oh so nicely to my urging him to a state of morning arousal.

He almost purred and arched into my caresses. “So... Nice...” He drawled in a state of pleasure and sleepy bliss. He was clay in my hands and he molded nicely to my whims. He was mewling like a spoiled kitten as I kissed and nipped and learned Sweet could wake up rather quickly when given proper incentive.

He was gorgeous in the morning all tousled from sleep and erect with pleasure. I was having my sinfully wicked way with him and was succeeding in drawing out delicious moans when our foreplay yet again was rudely interrupted by an unwelcome visitor, who waltzed into the front door without so much as a knock. Then he stood in our bedroom door making Sweet yelp with surprise, since our bedroom door had not been shut.

“I knew you was Fey as the day is long. Unnatural it is, men with other men!” Handy growled and I was livid.

I got up, naked as the day I was born and got right in his face. “Listen here you, I’ve had it up to here with pigheaded, prejudiced old fools. You wouldn’t have to see what bothers you if you respected other men’s homes and bloody well knocked before you came inside. What Sweet or I do in the privacy of our own bedroom is our business not yours. Just as any one has the right to love whom they choose. I don’t go barging into YOUR bedroom at the ass crack of dawn and you will never do this again! You will knock and wait for permission to enter this house by Tor or I’ll have you brought up on charges of trespassing!” I said and Handy took a step back and sneered at me.

“He is my son and I will damn well make sure his lazy hide gets to work on time!” He barked back and I grabbed his shirt front and deposited him outside.

“He is my bonded husband and I will make sure people like you will respect his privacy and property! You overworked him yesterday and by Tor you won’t do it again. You gave a rat’s ass about him as a child it’s a little late for you to be making fatherly demands and assumptions now sir. You should address him as Journeyman Sweet, King’s Naturalist Mage and he should be given the respect his talents and skills demand. I am Lord Shindoh, Master All-Beast Warrior of the King’s Order and I sir am the law when I am in a village. You are breaking several of them. Do not make me pull rank and have you arrested. Good Day!” I said slamming the door in his face and turning to Sweet who looked relieved.

“Thank you, I hate that he just walks in here whenever he pleases. He’d just laugh when I tried to pull rank so I gave up.” Sweet said and I returned to our room and carded a hand through his hair.

“You always did love. I hate to say it, but you’ve always been too accommodating to assholes. No more, I refuse to allow it if I have to pull rank on everyone down to livestock.” I said and Sweet chuckled.

“It’s only father really. Well father and Hardy. He’s not going to be happy you’re here.” Sweet said and I cocked an eyebrow.

“Who’s Hardy?”

“Just the most persistent pest I’ve ever had the displeasure to have to work with. He’s the mayor’s son and likes to throw his weight around too. Specifically in trying to get me alone with him since I arrived, I may be Fey but not desperate enough to let that brute paw me! The man wears enough perfume to gag poor Prancer to death. He wouldn’t need so much if he knew which end of a bar of soap to use. He’s disgusting and all hands. I’ve told him more than once I wasn’t interested in his affections, he refused to believe me when I said I was bonded to you. I’ve known for years I love you and would not give false hope to others. It would have been unfair since I’ve ever compared other men to my memories of

you. Not to mention Hardy just plain disgusts me and he'd have to drug a poor fool to get them in his bed. The stench alone is enough to run people off. I cannot tell you how grateful I am you're here. Perhaps now he'll believe me when I say I am already bonded."

"He'd better or he'll have my foot up his ass. Did you really always know?" I asked intrigued and Sweet just smiled.

"Not always. Not until I was saying good-bye to you in Rockport that day. Remember how we shared a bed in the inn the night before you left? I woke up realizing I'd just hit puberty and, oh goodness this is embarrassing to say to you now. I almost didn't make it to the privy before I messed myself. I had such wonderful dreams of you and you were leaving us. I was miserable and too ashamed and afraid to tell you and beg you to stay. I thought it was wrong of me to want you to stay and I was being selfish when you had such a chance to earn your masters in Torland. Those tears I shed where agony I felt vile and selfish and wished I was older." Sweet said and I crushed him in a hug.

"Sprite, oh by Tor you should have told me beloved. I spent most of these past seven years kicking myself in the ass. I didn't realize until I was away how much you were a part of my life and desperately wished you were there with me. We were both fools dearest. I couldn't see past your age until it was too late for me to do anything about it and you lived with such regret."

"We cannot change our mistakes, but we can move forward now. Our ages thankfully are no longer an obstacle and we can see clearly. I waited for you this long, I think we can wait a little longer. I do have to be to work soon, harvest is upon us will you come help me today?" Sweet asked and I smiled and nodded.

"Absolutely. I should however report to the mayor first that I'm taking up residence here with you. The local magistrate will want to log any complaints with me too. However, that will probably only take the morning. After lunch I'm all yours dearest. I may be piss pour with plants but point me to the beasts of burden." I said and Sweet grinned.

"Sounds good to me and we'd better make a quick breakfast or we will be late." Sweet said and we dressed and ate a quick scramble of eggs and toast before I walked my new spouse to the fields and met the local farmers.

It was a simple life and simple folk and I could see why Sweet liked them and stayed regardless of his father and his ordeals in avoiding Hardy. I left Sweet with the workers and made my way into the village proper.

I met and talked with several villagers as I made my way to the courthouse. The fat baker and his wife were full of smiles and town gossip and stuffed me full of cinnamon pastries that were better than I'd ever eaten.

I met the butcher and local healer. One of Prince Beloved's first pupils, an elderly woman who was widowed and just beamed at me and told me how much I reminded her of her bonded who had passed about ten years earlier. She was thrilled that I was with Sweet.

"That dearie is just as darling as apple pie in cream. He told me all about you over tea one afternoon. Oh it does my old heart glad to see you've come home to him. Bonds are so special, cherish your youth it's so short." She winked and sent me on my way.

I met Hardy while waiting for his father to deign to see me. He was indeed not happy to see me and even less enthused when I made sure to speak boldly in his hearing.

"Just come back from Torland. I just couldn't bear to be away from my Sweet anymore. I was a daft bugger for leaving him in the first place. Took me being half a world away to realize I'd been bonded to him since the day he was born." I spoke to an obliging servant and regaled her on my childhood with Sweet and my Adventures in Torland and just watched as Hardy hung on my every word from across the room.

"Sweet is a dear. Crops have never been as good since he came to live here. Word is he has Fae blood in him to be so good with the earth as he is." The girl gushed and I chuckled.

"I told him once I thought he had invisible faerie wings. You should have seen him as a child. My parents had him at school not long after he could walk he was so gifted. At two he was healing near death plants and by four our whole apartment was a living jungle of life. He's remarkable." Oh it was fun extolling my mate's virtues, I was casting the bait and waiting for Hardy to bite. He did and he walked over to join our conversation.

"So you are the elusive Shindoh then... So it's true, he's your bonded?" Hardy asked and I nodded.

"Aye, I am the luckiest man alive and just about the daftest. Here I had the world right under my nose all the time. In my defense, poor as it may be, being so much older than Sweet I misinterpreted my feelings for him for a very long time. It took stepping away and looking at my heart from a distance to see the truth. I plan on making up for my extended absence however. My husband deserves some good old-fashioned pampering. He's a habitual over achiever and overworks himself to the bone. I'm going to make sure he gets rest now when he needs it and see to it he stays healthy." I said and Hardy sighed.

“He does work much too hard and his father is a right bastard. So long as you promise me to guard him against that man I’ll be happy. I think Sweet is the nicest bloke who ever walked into Greenborough and while I concede my losses to you, because I know quite well you have ever been his heart, I will be quite cross with you if you let that man walk all over him.” Hardy said and I held out my hand.

“Aye, we’ve already crossed verbal swords Handy and I. Never fear, Sweet will not have to deal with that man alone again.” I said and Hardy shook my hand. The man was revolting to the nostrils but his heart was in the right place for the most part. I knew men like him, desperate, grasping and always the last left standing in the end. He wouldn’t bother Sweet anymore, I felt rather bad at squashing his dreams but it was for the best. Now we had an ally and I couldn’t fault a man who did have Sweet’s best interests at heart.

“That’s good to hear. I’ll go see what is keeping my father.” Hardy said and went to speed up my meeting.

My meeting was short in coming and thankfully short in duration. Hardy had learned his hygiene habits from his sire. Sadly most Aegians of means thought it was a sign of wealth to wear ghastly perfumes to cover body odor. The worst offenders people like Hardy and Mayor Forthright who were country bumpkins with delusions of grandeur. My meeting with the local magistrate was far more productive and since my duties went hand in hand with his it was a good thing we hit it off well.

We were of an age which helped for starters and he too was newly married and we shared a good cup of coffee and went over his records while we talked. He was fascinated with my legal study in Torland and in Aegis and we talked of comparisons between protocol and application between the two cultures. We were into Southern Isle customs when I realized it was getting close to lunchtime.

I bid my new friend good afternoon and invited him and his wife over for dinner one evening so we could carry on our delightful conversation and then headed out to find my husband for lunch.

He was just heading up the road to meet me, coming into the village with about thirty other workers taking a mid-day break. I never saw a more beautiful sight. He was filthy, his head was covered in a gaudy purple scarf that kept the sweat out of his eyes, his shirt was tied around his waist, he was brown from the sunshine, his red pants had patches on the knees and the permanent dirt stains made him absolutely radiant to me. He was in his element and he was glowing. My Sprite thrived in nature and dirt.

I kissed him soundly and hooked my arm over his shoulders. "Where shall I treat you for lunch my pretty?" I asked and Sweet laughed and hooked his hand into my belt around my waist as we walked.

"I'm starving and there is only one place in town love. The tavern doubles as the Inn and restaurant in town. This is a far cry from crown city where we were spoiled for choice. It's whatever the inn is serving for lunch or we head home for lunch." Sweet said and I steered him to the tavern.

We got a table and a great basket full of fried fish and chips and two tankards of pale lager and enjoyed good and refreshing, down to earth fare. It wasn't Crown City, but then again nothing was this fresh in the city either. The food was fabulous and the locals were all laughing and cheerful and the pace was laid back and tempers were slow to boil. The slower pace of life out here in the country was a balm. I could see why Sweet liked the country life, it suited him and me for that matter. I'd spent most of my youth in Crown City and then in Toria, Capital City of Torland. Cities were cities and I was used to hustle and bustle. I could quite easily get very used to life as a country posted warrior quickly.

"I must remember to send Urbane a request for a permanent station today and let everyone know we're bonded. Our parents would never forgive us if we didn't." I said and Sweet smiled.

"Not to mention you're going to be wanting your things sent and you know we'll have to build a better stable for Prancer before winter. You know father Charger will want to help with that, he's the finest stable master Castle Keep has known as well he should be knowing quite well what living in a stable is like. I wish I could have seen what he looked like as a Centaur sometimes." Sweet said and I smiled.

"Me too. I saw quite a few in Torland and Grandmama and Grandpapa here always fascinated me as a child. Facially Papa and I still look very much like Centaurs, most Torlanders noticed my face and were taken aback when I didn't have hooves to go along with the rest of me. When they heard I was the son of a Centaur turned man most Torlanders nearly fainted. They thought me a freak I think, it's not every day someone half Centaur is walking around on two legs." I said and Sweet nodded.

"Love, our whole family is about as unorthodox as they come. A triple bond with a king dragon bonded to all three of them, a servant who's not a servant, a servant's bastard son unofficially adopted and all of us packed into a small apartment and happy as pigs in a sty. I'd say we all grew up rather freakish when it comes to the norm. Add to that the eldest son and the bastard bonded later in life? What are the odds?" Sweet said and I had to laugh.

“Very true Sprite. I wouldn’t be surprised at this point if we got delivered a baby via your cabbage patch to raise together like the old wives tales used to say babies came from cabbages.” I said and Sweet chuckled.

“I don’t want green babies who would taste good with corned beef.” Sweet said wrinkling his nose at his jest.

“Me either. However eventually I would like to adopt our own to raise if we can. Unlike Mama I doubt you’re going to magically change into a girl and goodness knows unlike granddad who can change blokes into girls you and I are not capable.”

“Honestly I wouldn’t want to either. As much as I love you Shindoh I have absolutely no desire to be a girl or to push something out of me like a watermelon out of a nostril. I could never wrap my brain around your grandmother who is not a woman yet became one to have father Wise. Healers and Mages and all this gender bending can confuse even the most intelligent. I like being a boy and wish to remain one. If we do have children I agree we adopt one who needs love. Goodness knows I was adopted and had the happiest of childhoods.” Sweet said and I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Sprite I couldn’t have said it better.” I said as our lunch hour ended and I went to work with my lovely spouse who put my city hands to work.

Everyone was bringing in the last of the harvests and I was encouraging stubborn ox to pull laden carts. It felt good to be working and watching Sweet blossom before me. Gone was the little boy and a competent man had replaced him. The simple life made Sweet shine and I certainly found it just as stimulating, I felt useful and needed and went home that evening with a sense of well earned pride over a job well done.

When we got home, I took care of feeding the animals and seeing to Prancer while Sweet went inside to start our own dinner. Work took half the time when two hands were taking care of matters. It was only natural I take over the care of our limited livestock. I was beast gifted and I had lovely conversations with our goats as I milked them and Patchwork supervised me from a perch on the stall wall. Cats amused me, they lived in their own worlds and in those worlds even Kings were mere servants to the royalty of felines. Patchwork was no exception, we belonged to her, not the other way around.

She waited patiently for me to finish milking the goats and then followed me into the house demanding a share of the wealth. I set her down a saucer of the warm milk and then poured the rest into the empty jug in the cold cupboard. I was

grateful my father seemed to have put cold charms in this particular cabinet, food would last longer chilled and milk was always better nice and cold.

“We should get a nice dairy cow. I prefer cows milk.” I commented as Sweet stood frying us sausages and potatoes in a skillet with fragrant onions. I always liked the smell of cooking onions.

“As do I, but we don’t have the property required for a cow. She’d need to graze and I only have the immediate land here. Less than a quarter acre love. You’ll have to ride Prancer to exercise him as it is, I’d love that pasture behind the back fence but that belongs to my father and he wouldn’t sell it to me if I begged him for it just for spite.” Sweet said flipping our sausage.

“That would pose a problem, we don’t want him doing us any favors. What about across the road? It would be nothing to walk across the animals across the road daily.” I said and Sweet thought.

“I think Farmer Plowright owns that. You could ask him for an acre or so I suppose. He might sell you that much, we don’t need more than that. Unless you plan on being enterprising and bringing a menagerie of animals here.” Sweet said and I grinned.

“Love, who are you talking to here? Of course I plan on surrounding us with beasties. I’d love to breed horses out here. I want to, or rather Prancer is hinting he’d like a nice mare about and horses would bring us good extra income. I’d like to get us a few dairy cows and again we can sell the excess. Maybe even a flock of sheep.”

“You want a bloody farm. Where is my city boy gone?” Sweet asked grinning and I chuckled.

“You lured him to the country. There was just never enough room in a city for all the animals I wanted to tend and surround myself with. Sprite, just like you thrive with your hands in the dirt, I thrive when I’m taking care of animals. This is the life and we can make it happen if we put our minds to it. Tell me you wouldn’t want a nice big garden not confined to pots in a greenhouse.” I said and Sweet laughed.

“True. However, you need more land than what we have immediately available around the house here. We’d have to buy a whole farm and start from scratch. Unless you can convince my father to let go of the forty acres standing fallow behind us. Not to mention buy animals and feed and that can get expensive. You’d need a loan from Urbane to get started.”

“I can write him and I bet if Urbane worked the negotiations we could get that forty acres from your family. That man is highly persuasive when it comes to business ventures.”

“You’re serious!”

“Of course I am Sprite. I’m thinking of our long term future here. This is our home, let’s make it ours in truth.” I said as Sweet brought our dinner to the table.

“I adore you. If you want a farm so badly I’ll support you any way I can if this makes you happy.” Sweet said kissing my cheek as he flipped sausages onto my plate.

“It does Sprite. You, this cottage and dreams of a future with you make me very happy.” I said and Sweet just sat down across from me at the table and smiled at me with his chin resting in his hand.

“Then do what pleases you beastman, that makes me happy.” Sweet said giving me a nickname too it seemed in the process.

I chuckled and we ate hungrily and talked of lofty plans still pipe dreams. I wrote letters to our parents and Urbane while Sweet took care of the dishes and then we both headed to a nice hot bath before bed.

It took every ounce of my self control not to try and ravish him in the bath. Sweet was far too irresistible dressed in just his skin. I did manage to control myself to just an extension of this morning and we got clean in between stolen kisses and shameless caressing.

It was Sweet who crawled out of the bath first and gave me a very come hither look as he padded to our bedroom in the nude and dried himself with a towel on the way.

I followed and he was laying in our bed smiling at me seductively. I devoured him, yet at the same time felt equally consumed. Sweet may have been shy around others, but he certainly was not with me. He was bold as you please in our bed and when his hand gripped me with a purpose I nearly lost my resolve immediately in response.

Oh but my Sprite had magic hands and when a bottle of lotion appeared and he coated me and stroked me with it I saw stars. For a virgin, he was incredibly knowledgeable and before I could even voice that thought he purred in my ear.

“I’m not totally in the dark how this is done. I am a boy after all, what boy hasn’t figured out lotion is good for other things than making hands soft?” He chuckled and nipped at my earlobes and stroked me almost until the point of no return.

I had to take matters into my own hands and took control by sitting up and seizing the lotion. It was my turn and I had him just as mindless before long. I took my time and not sparing the lubrication I toyed and played with my ultimate

objective. I had him on his knees and panting into the pillows before I finally could not stand the torture any longer and took my mate for the first time.

Sex is never as fulfilling as when you share the act with one you truly love. Then the pleasure becomes magical and goes deeper than the physical aspects. When your lover cries your name in joy and follows you down that path, heart to heart, it is mind blowing.

We made a right mess of our bed and sheets and wrestled and played and explored innumerable positions before we ended together, facing each other. Chest to chest and stomach to stomach, lips to lips and then oblivion. I felt him release just moments before I did. His warm seed on our bellies and mine within his even warmer body. I don't think either of us expected it to be so good or so wonderful and we kissed and laughed and tried finding lost breath and stamina as we blindly reached for our shed towels to try and rectify ourselves again.

We made a cursory swipe of towel to skin to clean the worst of the mess from our bodies and then salvaged our bedding as best we could before we gave up the ghost and slept.

For the first time in my life I knew what love really felt like and it was indescribable. I had the world in my arms and it was named Sweet. My Sweet, my Sprite, my bonded husband.

“Nicknames”

Book Five in the Namesake Tales

Author: D. Sanders

Chapter Three - City Farmers

It didn't take long for my letters to reach our family and even less time for everyone to arrive on our doorstep on the back of Snowstorm and Frostbite or on the swift hooves a Centaurs. Everyone including our grandparents descended upon our little house to make merry.

It was a fabulous time having all of us crammed ass to cheek in our little cottage. That didn't stay little for long. My grandfather, Colt, negotiated the sale of land between Sweet's father and us. It was very hard to say 'no' to a mage who very literally could turn you into a toad if he wished.

We were all grateful my grandfather, still looking almost as young as I, had no such delusions of grandeur and was quite content to spend his magic on making he and my grandmother quite spry and youthful 'old' men who spent half their lives in Aegis and the other half in Torland.

We went right to work getting our dreams in motion. My father Charger helped me build stables while my Centuarian Grandparents decided they'd choose my first horses as a wedding gift to Sweet and I.

Sweet's mother and mine ran errands and since the crops were now all in and Harvest fest behind us we had plenty of time to devote to our home. That was until the snows decided to fall so we had to be quick about it.

With all of us working and having more fun than should be legal when working, we had a decent barn raised and a good warm stable. With so many mages, we'd never need firewood to keep the barn, stables and house perfectly climate controlled.

Urbane didn't loan us money, he sent us a small fortune with well wishes on a happy life together and gifted us the money I'd asked for and about thrice the amount on top of that. I wondered sometimes just where Urbane got that sort of money but I knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth and wrote him a properly groveling letter in gratitude.

By the first snows we had the barn and stables completed as well as seven of the most beautiful horses I'd ever seen taking advantage of their new pasture and stable.

Prancer was most grateful at his darling harem of mares and he was living up to his name walking about like the stud of studs.

We also had three dairy cows and a bull in their own paddock. One of my new chores at dawn was to go milk our girls. I was loving every minute of being a country boy.

We'd added onto the cottage too in this time. We were tired of falling over each other at night so a second story now graced our little farmhouse with the upstairs dedicated to spare bedrooms and an extra bathroom for guests.

We put in a larger tub in our bath too, it was much nicer now to bathe with my spouse in a tub of a decent size.

Everyone departed before the weather got too cold and as winter settled in the house seemed almost empty. However, the calm was nice. I went out every morning to tend the cows and horses and Sweet took care of the garden in the greenhouse and there was always hot tea and stew on the fire for me when I came in out of the cold.

Midwinter came and with it a squirming present from Sweet. "Open it quick!" He said and the lid of the box had several holes in it and I knew whatever was inside was just put inside and then rushed to me.

The most darling sheep-herder stock puppy came bounding out to cover me in exuberant affection and to tell me quite clearly he didn't like being in a box.

I laughed and assured him he didn't have to go back in again which satisfied the eight week old bundle of energy and pissed off Patchwork. She was adamant he be put back into the box again.

He'd be a handsome dog when he grew up and a good companion for me in helping guard our livestock. Which was why Sweet bought him for me in the first place.

"You always wanted a dog." He added and I grinned. I had and this one was perfect.

We named him Fang simply because his sharp milk teeth seemed to like my hands as his favorite chew toys and quite on accident our horseplay ended up with one of his baby fangs imbedded in my hand as it fell out. Leaving one solitary fang left to fall out more naturally. He was absolutely adorable with a lopsided look as his adult fang grew in to replace the one I now wore as a necklace.

Life was simple and fun and peaceful. The deep snows in the fields were as beautiful as they were fun to play in with Sweet and Fang.

We'd come in frozen and wet to warm up by the fire. Sweet made hot chocolate and popped corn and we just relaxed the winter away ready and waited for Spring plantings and the flock of sheep I intended to get come good weather.

We lived this way quite happily for months and Spring gave way to summer and then another winter. We never had problems with Handy since my grandfather had gone to see him. Whatever he had said to Sweet's father, he no longer bothered us and we were cemented members of Greenborough now.

We had many friends who came to call and whom we called upon. We shared birthday celebrations and harvest fest frivolities and nights sometimes in the pub singing drinking songs and getting tipsy before staggering home.

Sweet only worked outside of our farm during planting and harvest time and in-between my weekly duties in town with the magistrate's office I worked our farm.

Time seemed to fly by as our routines settled and it was our fifth winter in our little farm house when a terrible storm blew in, the blizzard was dumping snow like there was no tomorrow and I was out making sure the animals were secure when Fang, now a handsome and sturdy companion started barking into the night frantically.

He urgently wanted me to follow him and we pushed through the heavy winds and stinging snow toward the road.

There my heart stopped, I would never have heard the cry over the wind, but Fang had sensed the distress. A tiny girl, hardly more than three was half buried in a snow drift and near death with cold. She wasn't one of the village children, I knew them all and there was no parent in sight.

I scooped up the child and immediately felt her raw talent hit me and almost knocked me off my feet. Her panic had taken a latent gift and exposed it, she had the beast magic and had called for help and Fang had sensed her.

I rushed her into the house calling for Sweet. When he saw what I held he grabbed a blanket off the guest bed and wrapped her in it and took her near the fire. Rocking her gently and cooing softly. "Get her some of the hot chocolate off the fire love. She's frozen to the bone." Sweet said comforting the child as I got him a cup.

"I'm going to go fetch the healer."

"In this storm?"

“She needs her, look at her fingers. The darling is frostbitten. I can make it as far as the village at least with Prancer to carry the healer back.” I said heading back out to leave our little unexpected visitor with Sweet.

On the way to the village I found what must have been her mother. What was left of a wagon overturned into a ditch from ice and mother must have died instantly, her head was cracked open on a larger boulder off the side of the road.

She had all her possessions in the wagon and I could tell from the gear, mother must have been a minstrel. They were all wanderers and usually took their children, if they had any, right along with them on the road. The horses were fine just tangled in the rigging and I calmed them and got them up again and gave them mental instructions on how to reach my stables and warmth and they headed off.

I’d come back and salvage what I could from the cart and bury mother when there was more time. The little one needed help now.

I fetched the healer and Prancer ever sure footed got us back quickly. Sweet had the little one in a warm bath. “She was just so cold, I thought this might help better. She’s so listless.” Sweet said near tears as he tried to help the girl.

“You did just right Sweet dear. Get her out now and let’s get her in a bed and I’ll take it from here.” The old healer woman said following Sweet into our bedroom, where he laid her in our bed and pulled one of his warm flannel shirts over her head like a night dress before tucking her in-between our pillows.

The old healer examined her fingers and toes and her magic hummed as she healed the damage of the cold. “Not too bad, you got her in time you did. Just sleep, warmth, rest and security will take care of the rest. She’s going to be distraught without her mother. She’ll need comforting most when she realizes mama isn’t coming back.” The old woman said and I nodded.

“I know. We’ll take care of her. I’m going back out now to take care of her mother. I’m not leaving her to the elements like this. Besides, I want to see if I can find out who her mother was, see if she has any living relatives if I can.” I said heading once more back to the site of the accident with a team of my horses.

I couldn’t bury her mother in the frozen ground, nor did I want to spend more time than necessary in the blizzard. Therefore, I wrangled the frozen corpse into a tarp and loaded her as reverently as I could into the wagon. I gathered the scattered debris and got the cart back into my stables.

I first checked on the girl and Sweet was by her side monitoring her as she slept and he gave me a half smile when I poked my head in the door. “She’d still sleeping. Her name is Lark. She managed to tell me that much before she lost

consciousness. She's absolutely lovely and so scared. Poor darling." He said softly finger combing her brown curls away from a cherub heart-shaped face.

"Aye. I'm going to build a pyre and take care of her poor mother. Do we have anything we can use as an urn for her?" I asked and Sweet got up and found a beautiful vase for me.

"This will have to do. We can bury this come spring and give her proper rights with a priest of Tor then." Sweet said and I nodded and went to take care of sad business.

It was a very long night. I burned the minstrel and then carefully placed her ashes into the vase and corked it tightly before I began the even sadder task of going through her belongings to try to find family bonds or a name for mother in the wreckage.

I found a trunk of clothes and toys that obviously belonged to our little survivor and I brought those into the house for Sweet to manage then returned to the stables.

The winds howled all night long and I was grateful for the heat charms in the stable that kept me warm as I sorted through trunks. I discovered the minstrel's name was Lyre and in a personal journal I learned her history and that of Lark. Lyre had been an orphan that a traveling bard had picked up one day as an apprentice when he'd heard the child singing for pennies on the street.

He had died when Lyre had been fifteen and she had continued traveling on her own. She had no idea who Lark's father was, like most minstrels, lovers came and went in flights of fancy. I'd bet my last copper Lark's father was a beast warrior in a posting somewhere. She had the talent and that only passed with parentage. Short of questioning every Beast Warrior stationed in posts if they slept with a wandering bard woman just short of three years earlier, Lark's father would remain unknown.

I took my findings into Sweet to read just before dawn. He was dozing with Lark, one hand resting on her so he'd awake if she did.

He read Lyre's journal and then closed it and set it aside. "We have two options. We send her to Crown City to the Orphanage or we keep her here with us. I know which one I'd prefer." Sweet said and I smiled.

"I do, as do I. We keep her here. We'll raise her and teach her. We're both masters, we won't have to send her to the school to learn. Besides, we did want to adopt. She needs us and I am not getting any younger. I'll be twenty-nine here next week. If I'm going to be a papa, I think this is my one and only chance at it.

Hell I've been an uncle now for six years, my little brother is way ahead of me." I said and Sweet smiled.

"Aye. She does need us and I already adore her to pieces. Fang hasn't left her side since she got here. I think we have just been blessed by the White Lady and I'm not about to send this darling away. I just hope I'm a good daddy." Sweet said and I leaned over and kissed him.

"I'm sure we'll both make mistakes, but last I heard, parenting doesn't come with instructions. We just love her and do right by her and I'm sure it will all work out for the best eventually." I said changing out of my wet clothes and into one of my nightshirts and then crawled in bed with my husband and our new daughter.

She was utterly spellbinding in that cute as a button way. She had wild springy chestnut curls and round little cheeks and a tiny round nose that begged to be pushed to make her laugh. She was so quiet and was sleeping so deeply I was concerned and Sweet smiled.

"So was I, and I woke up the healer in our guestroom to check her. She told be to stop being a worry wart and that all children her age sleep like the dead. Especially since she was so close to it to begin with it's natural. I still can't sleep myself. I'm so afraid she's going to wake up and need me. We're going to have a rough start. I do not look forward to telling her that her mama is dead." Sweet sighed and I echoed him.

"Aye, me either. However, thankfully she's still so little she'll get over it quick enough I hope." I said and as if our conversation was a catalyst, Lark woke up.

Her crying broke my heart and her wailing for her mommy I thought would be my undoing. Sweet rocked her and stroked her cheeks and just held her as she sobbed. He promised her she was safe and that Daddy and Papa would take care of her and he got her calm and then handed her to me to take over her comforting as he went to get her some juice and some crackers and cheese to eat.

It was dawn before we got her back to sleep and found a few hours for ourselves before it started all over again. Mid-morning with the snow still blowing outside.

That first week was the hardest. Nevertheless, eventually she stopped looking for her mother and turned to us for comfort. Fang helped a lot in her healing, she was fascinated with him and he kept her occupied and her mind off her mother.

By winter's end, like all toddlers, she adapted swiftly and she was riding my back in the evenings playing 'horsy' before bedtime and her toys were always scattered around the living room.

Our home was alive with the presence of a child. She was light and life and joy and I could not have asked for a more wonderful child to call my daughter. We turned the original guest bedroom on the ground floor of our cottage into her bedroom.

I spent a small fortune in the village outfitting a child of three with everything she might possibly need or want. Soft toys and frilly bed linens. Warm clothes and shoes and everything else that could be bought in the village I laid my hands on.

Our parents braved the cold and arrived on the back of Snowstorm to come meet their grand-daughter and they brought with them even more contraband to delight a three-year-old.

Caring and my Mother sat with Lark around the coffee table playing tea-parties with Sweet making little cakes gleefully in the kitchen to have over tea. My father Charger built her a little wooden hobby rocking horse to play on and my father Wise was charming paper birds to flutter around the room. Snowstorm made himself even smaller to play in her curls and Lark loved every moment of their short visit.

We were now a family and I was enjoying every minute of being a city bred farmer and raising my tomboy of a daughter.

As she grew and learned it was common to find her out racing our horses in the fields and wailing like a banshee as she leapt over fences barefooted and riding bareback.

Sweet had lost the battle of frills. No sooner did he have her dressed in them, she was out of them again and wearing boys breeches and shoeless. He gave up when she was six, he knew a losing battle when he faced one. Our daughter lived with men after all, and she had her own wild view of the world. She wore pants bold as brass and rode horses like she'd been born in the saddle.

Our country life suited her and us and watching her grow slowly into a fiery young woman made me proud. She was a warrior through and through and no one would dare call my little girl a meek little flower. She'd eat them alive if they dared. At times I mused she could very well have been my actual daughter with the way she favored me almost eerily.

Sweet just through up his hands in defeat and smiled at us over the dinner table. I could not have asked for a life I relished more. I had everything.

I had Sweet, my lover, my best friend, my confidant and truest soul mate. I had my spit-fire daughter who made me smile and swear on a daily basis. I had my wonderful working farm and a good healthy lifestyle out in the country.

I knew blessings when I saw them, and I had a multitude of them indeed. I thanked the White Lady and Tor every evening before bed and kissed one of my blessings goodnight.

“Goodnight Beastman.” Sweet would tease as we settled in for the night and I’d throw a nickname right back at him.

“Goodnight Sprite.”

It had been twenty years we’d lived as lovers and forty years of knowing each other. There wasn’t anything we didn’t know about one another and that itself was a comfort. Whatever vicissitudes we faced, we knew one thing as deeply as we knew ourselves. We could face anything together and know as sure as breathing we’d stand the test as one.

I loved my Sprite more today than I had as a youth and would probably love him more tomorrow. That was the joy of a lifetime spent together. Like fine wine, Love aged and mellowed and just grew sweeter as time rolled by and seasons of springtime youth shifted into golden autumn years together before it would be our sweet winter still ahead of us to enjoy.

No I could not ask for more... I had it all.