

Series Title: *Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*
(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)
Book IV: *Il Prete di Luna, Lo Schiavo di Carne*
(Moon Priest, Flesh Slave)
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Chapter I - "Mysterious Eyes"

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For years Mane longed to be able to intervene in mortal affairs, especially when said affairs continually made his heart ache. Every evening the boy came to his temple and every evening prayed for the same thing. Death.

Far to the west on the edge of the great Desert lay a vast and sprawling city, it's culture and customs far different from the small little country order Mane loved most. Even the capitol city held less corruption than this cesspool of deception, slavery, opulence and luxuries offered to a select few.

Travelers came and were intrigued by the exotic city and often left spouting fancies of monkeys dancing in the streets, rich colorful silks in open air markets, spicy foods, and dark skinned, dark haired natives that spoke in heavy accents and smelled like fine perfume. To a traveler this was indeed what they saw, to the inhabitants of the city; it was far different underneath the surface.

Anything could be purchased in Istanian, even people. The fairer you were, the higher your price. The price of a beautiful flesh slave was ten times what even the wealthiest merchant spent on fine jewels. Komali was one such beauty. Born to a rich merchant father and his flesh slave mother, from his birth everyone commented on his remarkable beauty. His midnight hair thick and lavish and shone blue in the light. His dark coffee with cream colored skin flawless and his eyes remarkably pale blue as the skies. Mysterious eyes shrouded in thick, long dark eyelashes. Everything about Komali was exotic and beautiful and his father saw infinite riches when he looked at his young slave.

Komali was not considered his son; his sons had been born from his wife. Komali was the result of his flesh slave, one of many in his private harem. Komali was property like his mother. A commodity, a possession his future was sealed the moment he drew breath.

Komali never showed his face in public. Like all slaves they wore brightly colored veils over their faces when required to be outside of their owners vast palatial estates. They never spoke to anyone but their masters and they did as they were told or faced harsh punishments from their owners for disobedience.

The most beautiful of flesh slaves never lacked for material comforts. Their owners often keeping them richly fed, clothed and covered in equally beautiful jewels. They owned nothing, but were often kept like pampered pets. Their one single freedom was to go to the temple whenever they desired to pray to Sol or Mane. Even a slave had the right to religion even if they had nothing else.

Komali had spent the first years of his life at his mother's side. She was a gentle woman who never left Komali in doubt that she did indeed love her son.

Together every evening after the harem shared dinner, she would dress Komali and herself in veils and a heavily armed harem guard would escort them to the temple of Mane in the city where they would pray for an hour before returning back to the harem.

His first ten years were quite peaceful in the shelter of his mother's arms and protected harem sanctuary. He learned her courtly graces and manners, he learned to sing and play the harp to entertain his master father, he could dance as fine as any of the women even at ten, he had a passion for music and it showed as he played and danced for his owner. He was trained to be graceful and elegant and like his mother excelled in the art.

However such tranquility soon came to an end. His master father fell on hard times and one by one his harem dwindled as he sold them for a profit. Komali was twelve when his world came crashing down around his shoulders. Guards came to escort him and not his mother out of the harem to see his master father.

Komali saw the frantic fear in her eyes and watched her beg the guards not to take Komali. She was locked in her rooms and Komali was lead terrified to face alone something his mother seemed to fear.

His father was in his office with another man who smiled wickedly as Komali was brought into the office. "Take off your veil Komali." His master father ordered and Komali as always obeyed silently.

"Breathtaking boy. How old you say?"

"He's twelve now and as you can see perfect."

"He is indeed and untouched?"

"Never a hand on his flesh. He is worth ten times what I have asked for him. I will not haggle. Seven Million no less."

The man nodded looking pleased. "For a virgin in such condition I would not haggle. Seven Million is very fair. I will have the payment sent immediately."

"Done and we have done business before so I trust you to deliver as promised. You may take him with you." Komali's master father said and his young heart raced in his chest. SOLD! He'd been sold!

There was no farewell to his mother, no comfort, just a cold hand closing around his arm and leading him out of this master father's palace and into a waiting carriage.

"Put your veil back on boy. Only the richest of my clients will be able to look upon you." The man said and had Komali known then what that statement meant he'd have flung himself from the carriage and ran.

He had been sheltered in a private harem, his fate was something far worse than a comfortable harem and his new owner saw vast profits coming swiftly.

The carriage stopped in the middle of the city, just a few blocks away from the temple of Mane that he and his mother always went to. The large building, several stories tall was a luxurious place in gilded gold and silver. Men were laughing and drinking in the lower story pub and gambling house, several veiled men and women serving and standing silent beside men as they gambled.

This was no private home Komali was being sent to live in, this was not a private owner. This was a brothel!

Komali shivered from head to toe as the man affixed a golden chain around Komali's neck and lead him into the room and all activity coming to silence as eyes turned to view Komali. His young body draped in beautiful silks, his long dark hair loose down his back and his face was covered with only his beautiful, young and terrified eyes looking at men who were looking back in sudden hunger.

"Twelve year old unspoiled virgin male. First night for sale and the bidding begins at four million." Komali's new owner said and the shouts of bids began.

Komali was in horror and his mind went blank as shouts of several million went back and forth. He was in a horrible nightmare and he knew he was going to wake up in a moment in his mother's arms.

"Ten Million!" One large and brutish man with more jewels hanging off his large, fat and hairy body than Komali had ever seen shouted and when there was a silence for a moment Komali's new owner smiled and nodded.

"Payment first and you know the Rules Mastabeeb. No marks on his body. Is that clear? My merchandise must not be marked or his value diminishes."

"Aye. I know. What a fine boy, he will cry well." Mastabeeb said licking his lips as he paid and took the leash and dragged a frightened Komali behind him up the stairs.

That night Komali learned what true pain and torment was. First he was made to strip bare to the skin and then ordered to kneel on the floor in front of the man seated in the chair who undid his rich silk pants to reveal his manhood. Komali had only ever seen his own and had no idea what this man was doing or wanted until he seized Komali's head in his hands and shoved his manhood in Komali's face.

"Suck me boy. Open your mouth!" He ordered and Komali was sobbing and gagging as the man held his head and forced his manhood past Komali's lips.

This lasted several long and agonizing minutes until the man laughed and gripped Komali's hair painfully. "You really are a little virgin. Before I am through with you boy you will do more than weep. You will scream." He said, his eyes hard and cold as he dragged Komali to the bed and threw him into it.

"Get on your knees boy and face away from me." He said and shaking and silent Komali obeyed and the scream that left his lips as he felt the man push into his backside was sheer agony.

"You bleed like a woman, such a tight little virgin you are. I will buy you often!" Mastabeeb cackled as he mercilessly thrust into Komali's small body. He was screaming in pain and trying to get away now in reaction and the more he fought to get away, the more Mastabeeb did to hurt him. Soon Komali had lost all will to fight and lay flat on his stomach in agony, dead and lifeless as Mastabeeb raped him all night long.

Mastabeeb left in the morning and Komali lay in bed hurting from his hair to his toes. He couldn't move without pain, he was covered in semen; his own blood, urine and Mastabeeb had even shat on him once.

He couldn't even cry anymore, his tears spent, his eyes dead of emotion, his soul devoured and gone. All that was left was a used and pitiful shell where the boy had been.

An older slave woman came in quietly and just laid a cool hand to his young brow. "Of all the men to give you to on your first night Mastabeeb is the worst. Child what is your name?"

"Komali." He rasped and she tenderly smiled as another woman came in with warm wash water.

"Komali, I'm Geeta and this is Fandala. Don't try to sit up dearest, just let us tend you child." She said softly as Fandala came over looking upset.

“Poor dear, what was Master thinking selling you to Mastabeeb?” she asked rhetorically as she ran the warm cloth over Komali’s abused flesh. He winced and cried out as she touched his anus.

“Oh child I know it hurts love, I must clean you or it will get infected. You are bleeding still love.” Fandala said and Geeta just took his hand.

“Squeeze my hand child and cry, better to let it out than hold it in. You can be assured Master will not sell you again until you heal. Even he isn’t so cruel as to make you suffer too much.”

Hearing the word “again” took whatever life was left in Komali and extinguished it. His eyes turned dead, his skin grew cold and he blocked out all the pain, buried all his sorrow and just lay there not making a sound as the kind women cared for his body.

He didn’t see a third figure bent over him in tears; he never felt the warm kiss on his brow. “Komali, bright flower I am sorry my little one.” Mane said, tears falling like diamonds from his eyes as his faithful little Komali who always sang so sweetly on his altar was forever tainted in spirit by the cruel hands of fate.

“Mane, do not torture yourself beloved. This city is full of horror like this. You knew Komali’s fate would lead here. Sad as this makes us all, we cannot interfere.” Endymion said softly, laying his hand on Mane’s shoulder.

“It makes it not hurt less my love. His heart is pure and his faith in me always steadfast. I feel as if I failed him, even when I know this is but a part of his path he must follow.”

“Aye love. Come now, let the boy sleep. Geeta and Fandala will care for him in your name, they always do.” Endymion said leading Mane from the room and leaving Komali to sleep off the pain drugs Geeta had made him drink.

Brother Steffan, ever since he’d been a small boy in the order who had met a pair of visiting Brothers from Istanian had always wanted to travel there and see it just once. The stories they had told to the children had always painted his dreams with exotic perfume and mystery. Now at twenty-two he was making a pilgrimage of his own. He and two of his year mates Brody and Gavril were making the long trek to Istanian to visit the order in the city and see the city for themselves.

Steffan was the apothecary healer in the trio with a fair hand at the lute which was strung on his back as he traveled. Unlike his other traveling companions, the young lunar had an extra gift and connection to his God. He was sitting around

their camp fire, playing his lute when Mane appeared and just sat listening for a moment while the other two young priests slept.

“You have always had the gift of music little Steffan.” Mane smiled opening his eyes and Steffan returned the smile.

“Thank you my lord, you gave me this gift.”

“I didn’t. You were born with it, I just encouraged you to utilize it.” Mane said sitting down beside his young vassal. He looked troubled.

“My lord Mane, you look upset tonight.” Steffan said and Mane nodded.

“You are going to a place that is pretty on the outside and foul on the inside little Steffan. I have a word of caution to you or rather a request of you.”

“Anything my Lord.”

“Never give up on your heart. It will feel like it is being torn asunder and breaking but do not give up and flee the pain you will feel in Istanian. If you stay true, the pain will end.”

“What do you mean?” Steffan asked curious at this sudden conversation and the overly worried looking Mane.

“I mean simply this little Steffan. There is one who has always needed you who visits my temple nightly. He is there now, sitting on my altar and praying for death. He is Istanian at it’s most foul, victim to fates he believes he cannot change. It is up to you to teach him how to change his own destiny. This is the path before you Steffan and it will pain you in the beginning, but if you walk it and believe, the path you both walk with join and there will be happiness. That much I can tell you little Steffan. I meddle for the sake of the faithful who comes to me and begs for help. I send him you.” Mane said smiling at his vassal.

“What is wrong Mane? Why would one beg you, the God of Love to end his days?”

“Because he has forgotten Love Steffan. He can no longer remember a time he did not feel pain or torment. He has closed his heart to protect himself from the pain. Only you now can reach the place he hides in, lost, angry, bitter and alone.”

“Can I ask what has happened to make him so desperate to die?”

“The worst of men little Steffan. Suffered you did a similar incident before you came to the temple. Only his is far worse, far longer lasting, with no end in sight. He is a flesh slave.”

“A what?”

“Flesh slave, Istantia sells men and women as a butcher sells meat. It is the underbelly of that city and the traffic in human flesh is appalling. Born to a flesh slave, sold by his own father to a brothel when still a child and for the past eight years sold to a different man every night to be used until his spirit is beyond broken. But beyond mending is not, not yet.”

“Oh Mane, how am I supposed to heal that? Yes, I was raped, but only once and I’ve had many years with the brothers to heal me and even now sometimes I wake with the nightmare. It plagues me not anymore in waking, but in dreaming occasionally it still disturbs me. I cannot fathom what he has been through.”

“You can Steffan and you must. For his sake as well as your own.”

“My own?”

Mane just smiled and stood and laid a hand to Steffan’s cheek. “Endymion to Mane. Komali to Steffan.” Was all Mane said as he vanished leaving a cold dread sitting in Steffan’s stomach. Komali? Was that his name? Steffan wondered as he set down his lute and just stared into the campfire, trying to envision such a painful existence and failing.

Perhaps Istantia itself would provide the answered when they arrived in a few days.

It had only been a few days since he’d arrived and settled when Steffan finally got a chance to visit the temple of Mane. It was very late, but most Lunar priests kept much later hours and when Steffan arrived in the temple, Mane was sitting beside a small figure on his knees, silently praying at the altar.

His back was to Steffan, covered in expensive midnight blue silks, richly embroidered in silver accents. His long hair, braided down his back and shimmering in studded jewels. Mane smiled at Steffan and laid a hand to the youth’s head lovingly. The youth could not see and did not react. “Komali.” Mane said nodding at Steffan and then vanishing.

Steffan walked over to the altar and knelt beside the youth. His eyes were closed; sinfully long eyelashes kissed his cheeks. The rest of his face was hidden behind a matching silk scarf on loops that hooked over his ears.

“Mane cares for you a great deal.” Steffan said and the most beautiful pair of eyes opened and turned to face him. The sheer depths of pain trapped in mysterious beauty went right to Steffan’s heart and squeezed.

They closed again and the youth only shook his head ‘no’ once and then returned to his prayer. Steffan had learned in the few days since his arrival that anyone wearing a veil on their face was forbidden to speak to anyone but their masters in public and never above a whisper. The one exception to the rule being prayer in a temple or to a priest.

“You shake you head ‘no’, but not a moment ago he was here with you.”

“I know. Feel him sometimes I do. If love me, would set free.” Komali whispered and then stood and bowed to the young priest. The heavily armed escort took Komali and they vanished and Mane returned.

“Feels but cannot see.” Mane sighed turning to Steffan. “You have seen the pain.”

“Who can not see it in his eyes? My Lord are you sure it is I who can help him?”

“Steffan, only you can. He comes every night at this time. He returns now to be used and abused until dawn. He prays every night this is his last and the client will kill him or I take his soul before he is forced to return. Tonight will be close Steffan. Mastabeeb is coming for him again tonight. That man holds a special place in hell when it comes time for my father to judge him. Tonight Mastabeeb will go too far, Komali will wish for death unlike he has ever wished before. If you allow him to embrace the light he will die. Do not let him go, be alert for the call when it comes, they will come for a healer in four hours time, be ready to fly.” Mane said and Steffan nodded gravely and prayed for strength.

It was just after the midnight hour when a frantic summons came from the brothel and prepared for the worst, or so he thought, Steffen rushed to help.

From the naked eye, the brothel downstairs was opulent and rich and didn’t seem like a brothel at all as men gambled and drank with pretty men and women on their arms or in their laps, upstairs however when Steffen entered the room he almost vomited.

On the wall hellish straps and bondage devices hung and the figure in the bed was moaning, his body curled in upon itself, he was covered in blood and semen and feces. The stench was horrific. “Someone draw me a bath immediately!” Steffan ordered, going over to the half conscious figure in the bed as Steffan ripped off his robes to spare the white material from stains and in nothing more

than his pants carefully picked up the slender figure in the bed and cradled him like a babe. He whimpered as he was touched. "Just hold on Komali." Steffan said softly carrying the youth to the rapidly filling tub that Geeta was tending.

"I'm going to bathe him and examine him, For the love of Mane, clean that room, change the linens and remove the wall of torture. He needs peace to heal." Steffan said and Geeta nodded and went to work.

Komali was still unconscious, just a series of pain riddled moans he uttered as Steffan cleanse him of filth. Especially his tender posterior which was still bleeding as Steffan washed him free of horror. Steffan cried silently as he washed, Komali was beautiful from the ends of his hair to his toes. Perfect in every way, his skin dark and flawless, his hair thick and lush, his lithe frame had never seen physical labor in the mundane sense. His muscles were honed to delicacy and grace like a dancer and not that of a laborer. His face uncovered was more than beautiful; he rivaled the statue of Endymion in the mess back home for sheer androgynous beauty. Like a dark version of the white lunar glory god himself.

There were no marks on the outside of Komali's body and Steffan was puzzled. The only blood came from his anus but his breath was labored and shallow. Steffan tested Komali's ribcage and found a broken rib and he frowned as he carefully picked up Komali and carried him back to bed.

Geeta had turned the room upside down with aide and fresh linens were on the bed, the haunting bondage equipment was being removed by concerned looking guards and through it all Komali remained frightfully dead with just the occasional groan of pain as Steffan first dried him then wrapped a bandage around his ribcage.

Steffan continued his examination and found two very distressing abnormalities. The first a small puncture wound in his arm and in his mouth signs he's been forced to do more than give oral pleasure to someone. Steffan shivered and fought vomiting as he cleaned the traces of fecal matter out of Komali's mouth with a clean brush and liberal amounts of mint flavored paste.

Geeta and the Guards were hovering in the door fretting when Steffan turned to them. "The man who did this, I must know for Komali's health his attacker's habits. I can tell from the state of this poor lad his attacker has a fecal fetish. However, there is a needle wound in Komali's arm. Does he force drugs on his men?" Steffan asked and Geeta's eyes went wide and came over to look with Steffan.

"Drugs are forbidden. We are to be used for only carnal pleasure; no marks are to be left on our bodies and no drugs in them. Mastabeeb however pushes limits

to breaking points. Komali ever his favorite to torment. Komali is always hurt inside for days after. This is not first time Komali had ribs broken.”

Stefan shivered. “But drugs, would this Mastabeeb try to use drugs if he thought he wouldn’t be caught?”

“Aye Father.”

“Then find him, search his person. I must know if there are drugs in his body so I do not harm him further.”

“The Master has him detained downstairs. I will go and ask.” One of the young guards said running downstairs.

A few minutes a later a richly dressed man came in looking angry and he tossed a bottle on the bed. “We find this on his client.” The man said and Steffan frowned and uncorked the bottle, sniffed and recoiled.

“By Mane’s crown! We move Komali to the Temple immediately! I will need far more to aide him than you can provide. He is on the brink of death if this is allowed to remain in his system without a cure. That is a hallucinogen and an overdose will cause him to have un-predicted hallucinations that can be quite violent. It will take weeks to purge this from his body fully.” Steffan said and the man looked horrified.

“My property does not leave my home.”

“Then he dies! As a priest of Mane and a healer I vow to protect him and to do that I need him where I can tend him around the clock. Send a guard if you wish, but for his sake do nothing and he dies!” Steffan said angrily and the man just nodded.

“Fine. Rashaad, go with the good father make sure only he sees Komali and that no one tries to steal him from the temple.”

The young guard who had looked the most concerned nodded. “Aye.” He said as Geeta packed a small bag of clothes for Komali and handed it to Rashaad. Steffan pulled his own Robe back over his soiled pants and carried Komali all the way back to the temple.

Installing him in the spare bed in his own chambers where a work table stood between them and he went right to work fixing something and plunging the needle into Komali’s cold arm, before covering him in many blankets.

Rashaad stood at the door looking pained and for the first time Steffan had a moment to notice a very similar look about Rashaad’s and Komali’s faces. Not

many similarities, Rashaad was heavier, stockier, and very masculine but still there was something eerily familiar.

“You are correct Father. Your eyes deceive you not. Komali and I share blood. He is my half brother. I am true son of our father, born of his wife. Komali was born of Shaara from my father’s harem. I am but two years Komali’s elder. When we were little, Komali and I played often. When my father sold him, I followed to try and protect him. Even though I was told not to, I loved him as a brother. It is not fault of Komali’s he born of my father’s seed. My mother hate Komali much for being born to flesh slave my father favored over her and it was she who arranged his sale to Pumaton when father lost his trade and they needed money. I failed Komali.”

“No, you didn’t. Please sit Rashaad and please just call me Steffan.” Steffan said and Rashaad gave him a weak smile and sat on another chair in the room.

“Please tell me all you can Rashaad, I am a foreigner to your city and I am finding many things I find sadly distasteful. Where I come from, slavery is illegal.”

“It is here too, but the rich have deep pockets and buy the law as they see fit. Even the judges here have flesh slaves. When the King visits from your Capitol he is shown not this it is well hidden from the King. If he came more often, he would see and believe his laws are being laughed at and broken by the rich here, most of us find it as detestable as you do Father Steffan. I cannot call my own brother as such, I have to watch him suffer every day and watch the one who used to smile so pretty never smile, never laugh and never sing. He used to sing so sweetly, like lark in the morning. Now his eyes are empty and he is all but dead inside.” Rashaad said tearing up and Steffan reached over and let Rashaad lean against him to sob and purge his own sorrow.

‘You are a good soul Rashaad. Mane smiles on those who love first and honor those they love. Even if they cannot do all they wish, it is the trying that matters and Mane is pleased when you try.’ Steffan comforted and Rashaad nodded.

“It is hearing him scream that is worst Father Steffan. Tonight was so terrible I was most frightened and broke the rules and entered the room. If I hadn’t I think my brother would have died. You saw not what I saw when I came into the room. Komali was hanging from the ceiling, like beef in a slaughterhouse. He was bleeding so badly and that beast had a spiked blade in him! Had the other guard not stopped me, Mastabeeb would be dead from my sword. The other guard arrested Mastabeeb and detained him and I cut Komali down. I tried taking that thing out of him carefully, but damage already done on the inside.”

“I know. He will heal and I have cleaned him. He is not cut as badly as you think, rest easier there Rashaad, the damage is not as severe as it first looks. That area just bleeds very easy. I have examined him and the worst of his physical

damage is his ribs which will also heal. It is the drugs I fear most right now. Those will take time to purge.”

“But they will right?” Rashaad asked and Steffan nodded.

“Aye. I will give him that same medicine I just gave him every few hours, it will ward off most of the hallucinations if all goes well. He will need sleep and rest and soul soothing things to help him heal. Pray tell me is there anything he likes that will help him find peace?”

“Music. Komali always loves music. Even now.” Rashaad said and Steffan nodded and went over and picked up his lute from the corner and began a simple soft ballad.

“There is a vacant room next door Rashaad, you can stay there close. I’ll play for Komali a while as he sleeps, music is food for my soul too, I can relate there I think.”

Rashaad just smiled and nodded and stood. “He will love your foreign music. It is most tranquil. Goodnight Father Steffan and thank you.”

“Thank you Rashaad, Mane’s blessings on your sleep and may he watch over us all.” Steffan said as Rashaad left and Steffan continued to play for the beautiful youth in the spare bed in his room.

“Stay with us Komali. Come listen to the music you love.” Steffan said softly and played until long past sunrise. Komali was sleeping peacefully at last.

Komali heard the strains of a beautiful stringed instrument, one of the foreigner lutes that he liked to listen to. It was tranquil like falling spring rain and he stopped wandering in the haze of his mind and listened to the soft melody.

“Komali listen to your heart little one.” Came a soft baritone and from the fog of Komali’s mind a tall man, dressed in black with diamonds imbedded like stars twinkled in the fabric. His midnight hair flowing and moving in invisible breezes, a silver diamond studded crown around his brow and his dark blue eyes were kind and the warmth of feeling filled Komali with a very familiar glow.

“My lord Mane, have you come to take me home at last my lord?” Komali said sinking into the warm embrace from his God.

“Nay little one, it is not your time yet dearest.” Mane said and Komali wept in his arms.

“Why? Why my lord? Why do you punish me with life?”

“Life is not a punishment Komali, it is a blessing. I know you have faced cruelty dearest; mortal free will often feels like a curse to other mortals. You have suffered more than others and I wish I could change your path so you suffer less, but I cannot you must walk your path Komali.”

“I’m so tired Lord Mane. Please take me home to the heavens.”

“One day I will show you the door to nirvana my faithful little Komali. When you reach the end of your path and you are still far from the end.”

Komali cried at hearing that and Mane held his spirit close, the one place he could show himself to regular mortals freely. He was always with his followers, but in the spirit realm of dreams when their souls walked free, Mane could hold them and comfort them without a corporeal form. “To still have tears, not all of your tender heart is lost. There is hope Komali, I have sent to you my vassal to protect you. To care for you and to ease your torment. Do not run from your heart Komali, follow it and while the pain may seem worse, it will lesson in time. You asked me to help you and help you I will when you learn to trust and help yourself. When you accept help from a stranger who wants nothing more than to comfort you now.”

“I am tainted.”

“Nay, you are not. Taint implies a soul that has grown dark. You still shine dearest; you are still pure where it matters most. A body is just a shell and cannot grow tainted. Only when you succumb to the pain and let it change you do you taint. You are still unchanged from my precious boy who used to sing to me. I would hear your sweet voice again my Komali. I would see you smile for joy again, I would see you love at last.”

“There is no such thing as love for one as me.”

“There is Komali and for you it will come too. It has already. I am the God of Love and to everyone there is a Mane or an Endymion. To one man you will be his Endymion and he your Mane. He is already here beside you, worried about you, playing his sweet music to comfort you in your sleep. His hand that will never strike you, his voice that will never yell at you, his smile that will ever be given to you and his heart that will ever love you and already aches to comfort you.”

“There is no such person. All men take.”

“Not all Komali. Not all. Does Rashaad take from you?”

“Nay. Rashaad is unique soul.”

“Not so unique where Steffan comes from. Most men in this world are like Rashaad and Steffan. You just have seen only those who would take from you, open your eyes Komali to the good men in this world, the men like yourself. They are out there and they will aid and comfort you. Steffan above all others. Steffan is my dear Vassal, even having walked a path like yours once he still never lost his faith or his pure nature. He understands your torment, has felt it himself once. However, he has learned that what is done to a body cannot affect a soul if you do not allow it to taint. He is wise beyond his years with gentle hands and a warm heart. Fear not his embrace Komali, for in his embrace you will find freedom.”

With that final statement, Komali felt a gentle push and he felt again the aches in his body as his eyes opened to a room he did not recognize. He was disorientated and fearful until he turned his head and saw across the room the same handsome young priest he had met earlier that evening. He was sleeping in the bed across the room, a lute propped against the wall near his head.

Komali took a moment to look at the handsome foreigner. So different from the men Komali was used to seeing. The young priest's skin was pale and white, the early dawn light making him glow like moonlight. His fair hair was like spun gold, a color very rare in the desert. In the desert all hair was black or the darkest of browns. Skin was almost as dark, but this lunar priest was like pure sunlight. What Komali envisioned what Sol must look like in the flesh. Sunlight in Moonlight robes. A contradiction but exotic to Komali who had never seen a man so pale in his life.

He vaguely remembered this young priest had light blue eyes. Not as pale as his own, more like the cornflowers that grew in a garden as opposed to the winter sky that was in his own eyes. He was beautiful to Komali, there was no beard on this man's face, he was clean shaven and his jaw line was firm. He was tall, Komali could tell even in his sleep, had he not had his knees bent, his feet would dangle from the bed. The robes had been misleading earlier, without them Komali saw a lean frame, but a strong one. His chest was wide and his shoulders broad. He looked like he was no stranger to work but not excessive amounts. Naturally fit from working out of doors often.

To Komali he was strange and beautiful and his face was full of kindness. That much Komali remembered intimately from their brief exchange earlier and could still see even with the man asleep beside him. He was Mane touched; he could feel the same warmth from the mortal that he always felt when in the temple. Was this the Steffan that Mane mentioned?

Komali was afraid but hopeful and just looked at the sleeping man whose eyes opened as Komali stared and he sat up so abruptly he almost frightened Komali.

“Are you aware? Can you understand me Komali?” a tender baritone asked as the man moved over to Komali and laid a warm hand to his brow, his face a mask of concern.

“Yes, Understand. Where am I? Who are you Father?”

“You are in my rooms, you are unwell and please I beg you not to move yet you’re injured. Call me Steffan and I vow to Mane I will take care of you Komali. Please trust I will not harm you.” Steffan said softly kneeling beside the bed, amazed Komali was even conscious yet.

“Music, did you play the music?” Komali asked and Steffan smiled and nodded.

“Aye. Your brother told me it comforts you.”

“I thought I was following heaven music to Mane in my dreams.” Komali sighed and Steffan smiled.

“I think that is the best compliment I’ve ever received. Thank you Komali. Would you like me to play for you more? Does it help you sleep?”

“Aye. Heaven music made me dream of Mane. Please Father Steffan?”

“You have ever but to ask Komali. Go back to sleep now and let my medicine work and I’ll play for you.” Steffan said picking up his lute and playing again as the groggy and half asleep Komali drifted back into a peaceful slumber.

Mane appeared on Steffan’s cot. “He is so lost still. Even now he forgets our talk and thinks it nothing but a dream.” Mane said and Steffan smiled at his lord as he played.

“Most men do my Lord. You told me that yourself many times.”

“Because you see me, even when I wish you didn’t sometimes. Like my little Gallus you have eyes that see beyond normal mortals. You see souls.”

“And the one before me bleeds my lord. How do I help him? I feel so lost myself right now.”

“Because your will to aide all who are hurt is warring with your desire. He is beautiful.”

“He is more than beautiful. He is also fragile as eggshells and I don’t know what to do for him. It is all well and good I heal him now in the moment. But what then? Send him back into hell again? Only to be abused again. My Lord I beg you to tell me how I spare him.”

“That I will tell you when it is time Steffan. Trust me I will not abandon you when you need me now. I am ever watching and when it is time I will lead you myself down your perilous path. For now, just show him your heart openly. That in itself will heal him more than you realize at the moment. You are already in love with him.”

“Aye. Who wouldn’t lose a heart to him with one glance? Let alone lose a part of a soul to learn the torment he has suffered.”

“You’d be surprised how many can ignore pain little Steffan. Your heart is different, your soul is different and this love is not wrong. It is meant to be, he is your Endymion you already know this.”

“Aye. I know.” Steffan said smiling at Komali who slept deeply, oblivious to the conversation happening around him.

“It is well past the time you too should be sleeping Steffan. He will sleep for many hours yet, find your own rest now beloved. I’ll watch over him for now as he dreams.”

“My lord Mane, how I wish I had your heart. I love you my lord.”

“You do have my heart Little Steffan and I love you too. Sleep dearest and dream.” Mane said as Steffan crawled back into bed. Mane’s corporeal form faded but his spirit remained watching over his most favored vassal and his faithful Komali who would at last be getting rewards he had long deserved and Mane was now able to give him now that Steffan had arrived. Some rewards just took longer to create than others.

Series Title: *Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*
(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)
Book IV: *Il Prete di Luna, Lo Schiavo di Carne*
(Moon Priest, Flesh Slave)
 Author: D. Sanders
Chapter II - “*Calanthe Blooms in Mane’s Garden*”
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Komali awoke later to see his brother and the young priest having a very quiet conversation nearby and when he opened his eyes, the young priest was smiling at him tenderly again and coming back over to sit by his bed. “Komali, how are you feeling? Can you tell me?” He asked once again checking Komali’s brow for fever with soft warm hands.

“Hurt all over. Stomach upset.” Komali said quietly, barely above a whisper and Steffan nodded.

“The drugs I’ve been giving you will upset an empty stomach. Can you try to eat for me?” Steffan asked going over to the fire in his room and pouring out a bowl of broth he had simmering on the fire. He set it on the table that held all sorts of medicines and herbs and he brought out a large wedged shaped pillow from beside the bed.

“Rashaad, I need your help. I’m going to move Komali up, please place this pillow behind him to help him sit up.” Steffan said gingerly picking up Komali so not to jar his aching body and Rashaad did as instructed. Steffan lowered Komali back down into almost a seated position.

“Is that alright Komali? Are you dizzy sitting up? Is it too painful on your ribs?” Steffan asked and Komali shook his head slightly.

“Not dizzy, head groggy though.”

“That’s the drugs, you will be groggy for days yet.” Steffan said pulling up a stool beside Komali and picking up the bowl and blowing on the spoon to cool the broth before lifting it to Komali’s lips. “Eat.”

Stunned at the gentleness of the man acting like a mother over a babe Komali obeyed and let Steffan feed him. He was too weak and too exhausted to argue the strange treatment.

Rashaad was sitting at the foot of Komali’s bed looking concerned, his hand resting gently on Komali’s foot under the covers. “Mali, He not hurt you again. Your master has banned him from the brothel now. Never touch you again he will not.” Rashaad said and Komali shivered involuntarily and Steffan sighed.

“Let’s not talk about it right now. Think of nothing but getting well again Komali.”

“No point. Others like him anyway. You should have let me die, free then.” Komali said refusing the next bite, his tears evident and Steffan set down the bowl and moved to sit on the bed and pulled Komali gently into his embrace and let him cry defeated against a warm chest, softly stroking his hair as a parent would over a frightened and lost child to comfort him.

“Rashaad, can you leave us alone a moment please?” Steffan asked and Rashaad looking pained nodded and got up and left the room. Knowing from talking to the young priest that morning he was more than a physical healer, he was a mental one too. He would be able to counsel and comfort Komali better than he so he obeyed and left the kindly young priest alone with his beloved brother.

“Komali, I know how you feel, I really do. I once thought death was the answer too, but it isn’t.” Steffan began, still cradling Komali against his chest, his hands gently stroking a warm back that shook with tears.

“When I was a boy, before I came to the temple to follow my calling. I was a servant in a lord’s house. My mother was unwed and I never knew who my father was. She worked in the kitchens and I helped her from the moment I was able to carry things and be of use to her. She was not unkind, but there was no love lost between us. I was a burden to her to support, unwanted, an accidental birth. She was far more interested in the stable hand lover she had taken than her eight year old son. She never saw the duality of her lover’s nature. The way he’d sneak into my room at night and touch me after he’d bedded her. For a time it was only touches in the dark, but unwanted touches that frightened me. He made me feel dirty and vile and would tell me if I ever told anyone about him coming into my room at night I’d be sent away, my mother would hate me and I’d be all alone in the world. That is very terrifying to a child.” Steffan said and Komali sniffled against his chest but was listening and calming.

“When I was ten, it became more than just touches, he forced me to touch him back. He would relive himself on my face and body then leave me to clean myself up alone. Making sure to remind me never to tell anyone or I would be cast out. I felt more than dirty, I felt like Mane himself had abandoned me and that it was all my fault and I had done something terrible to anger my god to where he punished me.” Steffan continued, telling Komali a tale only three people knew the truth about. His old mentor Father Mordigan, The man who committed the crimes, and his mother.

“When I was eleven, he was no longer satisfied and took me one night. The pain I felt was something I will never forget. Worse, my cries alerted my mother and woke her and she came in and caught her lover and her son together. She cursed me, called me vile and a host of other things. Claiming I’d stolen her lover, me a child victim to a cruel man who had no more control over the situation than as if I’d tried to stop the season’s changing. She did indeed cast me out that

very night. I was bleeding and broken. It was almost winter and I had nothing but the blanket from my bed to cover my nakedness. I wanted to die, thinking death was the answer and I curled up under a tree by the road and prayed for death. That was the first time I saw Mane. He came and held me, kissed away my tears, told me I was not a bad child and that the evil in my life came not from my hands, nor were they a punishment sent. He was so very warm and I fell asleep in his arms only to wake in a warm bed with a kind Priest tending me. Father Mordigan had come and found me on the road under the tree, surrounded by lunar glories and took me back to the temple. He became the father I had never known, my teacher, my friend and my confidant. He is the only other person I have ever told this story to and I tell you so you can see this is not a punishment Komali, you are victim to fates you cannot control as I was. Know in your heart I understand your torment; I have felt what you feel. I have learned through the love of others that my soul is my own and I may not have control of what happens to my body sometimes, but no one can ever harm my soul unless I allow them to." Steffan said as he gently rocked the lost soul in his arms, who reached back to hold Steffan in return as he cried silently.

"Twelve. I was twelve." Komali said and Steffan nodded into dark hair under his chin, letting Komali purge his own tale.

"Master father lost his riches, began selling all his slaves. Until it was only mother and I left in harem. Then me, master father sell me to Master Pumaton. I not even have moment to tell mother farewell. No one tell me what happening and then in less than hour I am being auctioned to highest bidder. I had never in my life known what flesh slaves really were. Mother always hid from me the truth, I was a child still, and she had thought I had a few more years to grow before I needed to know about carnal matters. I knew not when I was taken to the room what was going to happen. I had never even seen nakedness before. Mastabeeb was my first experience and I will never forget the pain and the fear for as long as I live. He is very cruel and every month he comes and every month is a new experience in torture. He is not alone either, I have been used by more men than I can count anymore." Komali wept into Steffan's chest.

"Seven Million Master Pumaton paid for me that night and made a profit on my very first sale. Every time since is pure profit to have bought me a hundred times over. It is pain to know you are only money and not human. A body to be rented to the highest bidder night after night. Feelings matter not, love is nothing but something others have and I will never have. I will heal and go back to be sold again. Hurt again. Until I am no longer desirable to others and Master Pumaton either casts me out or sends me to work in the back brothel for poorer men. A place where marks on my body are not forbidden and they will whip me, beat me and torture me more than I already am and for even less profit to my Master. I will die of disease in that place where the men are filthy with lice and smell of unwashed bodies, or one will go too far and kill me. Either way I will die, so I pray for it sooner rather than later. However, Mane takes me not, instead he sends

you to torment me. Kindness hurts more Father Steffan. You would be kinder to leave me to die!" Komali sobbed and Steffan just held him tighter, his heart shattered for this young man, desperate to be free.

"I vow to you Komali, I will do all in my power to help you. Mane himself promised to aid you, you are not forsaken Komali, I will do all I can to prevent you returning to torture."

"Make not empty promises father. There is nothing you can do to stop Pumaton. He owns me and when I am well he will sell me again. If you think you can stop this you are a fool."

"Then call me a fool, but I believe and have faith I will find a way to help you Komali. If I have to run across the country with you I will. I will not give up, that is a promise I make to you Komali. I refuse to give up on you or give you up to cruelty without a fight." Steffan said laying a warm hand against Komali's cheek as he gently disengaged Komali from his chest and laid him back against the high pillows.

Komali's eyes were desperate. Wanting to believe Steffan's words and fearing to trust knowing his life and the false hope those words promised. "Why? Father, why do you make such promises?"

"Because I mean them Komali. I have never lied in my life nor do I intend on starting now. You need me and I will not forsake you when you are in need." Steffan said picking up Komali's limp hand and laying a chaste kiss to his palm.

"If it takes my whole life Komali, I will see you smile, I will see you have joy in this life." Steffan said laying Komali's hand back down and picking up the cooling bowl of broth.

"However, now I will see you eat and gain strength again. Every path walked must start at the beginning and must be traveled one step at a time. This is the first step, eat lovely Komali." Steffan said holding the spoon to Komali's lips and he ate, his remarkable blue eyes never looking away from Steffan's. The first shimmering of hope beginning to emerge from their depths.

He ate the entire bowl and yawned as Steffan set the bowl back down and then carefully removed the large wedge pillow helping Komali to lay prone again. He brought the blanket up over Komali's bandaged chest and then smoothed Komali's hair off his face with a gentle smile on his lips. "I'm going to give you more medicine now and then I want you to sleep again. Would you like me to play again for you?" Steffan asked and Komali's eyes took on a look of longing and he nodded.

“I would like very much Father.” He replied and Steffan nodded as he administered another shot into Komali’s arm and then settled on the stool again with his lute.

“Call me Steffan, Komali. There is no need to be so formal when we are alone and it is just the two of us here together. I am not all that much older than you are truth be told. I always found being called ‘father’ by someone my own age a little unsettling to be honest. What would you like to hear?” Steffan winked, his face honest and amused and Komali couldn’t help the gentle spread of his lips in response to such a charming and handsome youth. Steffan invoked peace and calm and his gentle honesty so rare in Komali’s life he could not help but smile slightly as the warmth of Steffan’s presence filled his very empty soul.

“I would hear you play anything Steffan. Your music of your land is so very beautiful. It is like Mane is singing in my dreams when you play.”

“It is a good thing I have not an ego, or else your compliments to my playing would swell it greatly. Thank you Komali. For both the compliment and your beautiful smile.” Steffan said beginning to play a soft melody and when he took a breath and sang of a lover’s smile Komali was irrevocably lost.

The playing itself had been beautiful, but Steffan’s mellow baritone even warmer on his senses. It was a clean, strong and masculine voice. Gentle as the sea as Steffan sang of the beauty found in a lover’s smile. The love found in a lover’s eyes, the longing of souls when lover’s parted.

Komali closed his eyes and in that moment knew keenly how much his own soul would ache when he was no longer allowed to be in this man’s presence. How he would die even further in soul when he could no longer look upon Steffan’s beauty or hear his wonderful voice. The words Steffan sang were so very true.

Steffan’s smile was beauty, his eyes were love and Komali’s soul would ache even more profoundly when parted from Steffan’s gentle spirit. The pain in Komali’s body paled to the pain now filling his heart. For the first time in his life, Komali knew the pain of love. He was in love with Steffan, in moments he’d been lost against his will and he’d do anything to keep this man in his life. Anything at all. Mane’s words in his dream coming to haunt him as he hovered between waking and sleeping. Steffan was Mane to his Endymion, light in his darkness, kindness in his torment. It was vastly more painful than he’d ever dreamed it could be and yet, the pain thinking it would end even worse.

His tears ran down his face and Steffan paused playing and those warm hands were back wiping Komali’s tears. “Please, forgive me for making you weep Komali.” Steffan said concerned and Komali just turned his face into the touch and his weak hands came up to clasp Steffan’s hand and a tender kiss was laid to Steffan’s palm.

“My heart betrays me. Your music steals my will to fight. Your kindness steals my soul. You are Man in man flesh and I am powerless against you.” Komali wept into Steffan’s hand and that hand moved to cup his cheek as Steffan sank to his knees beside the bed and laid his brow against Komali’s.

“Then follow your heart Komali, as I follow mine.” Steffan breathed and laid a gentle kiss to both of Komali’s closed eyelids and Komali shivered as he tilted his head back and offered his first willing kiss to anyone, to Steffan.

Steffan’s lips against his own were soft and gentle. Chaste as a virgin’s and filled with more love than Komali had ever felt in his life. Steffan didn’t take like other men Komali had known, he gave. He gave his heart, he gave his love, he gave his kindness and he offered sanctuary to the lost.

He wanted nothing more than to be lost in Steffan’s embrace, to be surrounded by the peace it offered, to be sheltered in the protection it promised. “Hold me please.” Komali begged and sighed when Steffan moved to lay beside him, holding him gently against his chest. Safe, warm, protected and loved.

Komali slept lost in the warmth around him, sheltered in Steffan’s embrace.

When Rashaad returned his eyes widened at seeing Steffan laying still fully clothed on top of Komali’s covers, Komali using Steffan like a body pillow and Steffan’s arms holding him close. Steffan raised a single finger to his lips for quiet as a shocked Rashaad came back into the room.

“He’s finally asleep again.” Steffan whispered and Rashaad nodded sitting in a stool.

“What are you doing father?” Rashaad asked and Steffan just smiled.

“Giving him the comfort he needs right now. He’s so very lost and alone.” Steffan replied quietly, his hand absently stroking Komali’s hair.

“He never... he never wants to be held. Father what power do you possess to have him find comfort in something he runs from?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps he can feel I care for him and that gives him solace. I pray that is so.” Steffan said as Komali sighed and snuggled deeper into Steffan’s chest, his arm coming up to hold Steffan back.

“Be careful father. Pumaton if he sees this will be furious. I can see it is chaste, he will assume otherwise. Dangerous for you both.”

“Then keep him out Rashaad. Komali needs real affection right now, from both of us.”

“Aye. All I can to help you I will for my brother’s sake.” Rashaad said before smiling.

“He looks nice with you Father. He looks happy.”

“I’d be lying if I said I was immune to him Rashaad. I love him too.”

Rashaad smiled. “You first man to say you love him. For that alone I stand with you father. I do all I can to help, I vow. Vow to me you love him well and protect him and I give blessing.”

“Rashaad, I promise. I’m a lunar priest for a reason. When I love, it is without restriction.”

Rashaad nodded. “Aye, you all like that. I am most happy too then. I leave so he can rest with you, I’ll keep watch and warn if you will be disturbed.” Rashaad said standing and leaving again, feeling content inside.

Finally, Komali had a man who would love him as much if not more than Rashaad did. Rashaad had only been waiting for that man to arrive and now that he had, he would put his plans in motion. Komali would get out of Istania as soon as he was well again.

Now that a man had come who could protect Komali and that Komali wanted in return Rashaad would not stop in aiding them both.

Steffan was just about to drift to sleep himself when Komali began to struggle, hallucinating in his dreams and screaming. Steffan was immediately awake and trying to bring Komali back to his senses. His eyes were wide open in terror, his arms were fighting and clawing at Steffan, but Steffan held firm.

“Komali! Wake up, there is nothing here to hurt you Komali!” He said over and over as Rashaad raced in to help.

“Hold him Rashaad! I need to give him another dose!” Rashaad nodded and carefully pinned Komali down so he didn’t hurt himself further thrashing and Steffan plunged the needle in his arm. As he removed the needed Komali’s arm flung itself free and cracked Steffan in the eye. The pain was blinding for a moment and Steffan knew in a few hours he was going to have one hell of a black eye. It always amazed him how strong people got when under the influence of terrible drugs. Even Rashaad was having a difficult time holding Komali at bay.

Pumaton chose that moment to arrive to check on his property and stood in the door in horror watching Komali shriek like a madman and fight back like he life was in danger.

“What is going on?” Pumaton demanded at the top of his voice, setting Komali off even worse at the sound of it.

“It’s the hallucinogens you fool! Stay out of the way!” Steffan barked crawling behind Komali to physically restrain him while Rashaad sat on Komali’s legs.

Finally, after several long minutes, Komali wilted like a leaf as the medicine Steffan gave him began to work and he was once more asleep. Steffan crawled out from behind him and checked his ribs for further damage before settling him back again in pillows. His face was cold and hard as he turned to face Komali’s owner.

“I hold you responsible for this! He suffers needlessly! Is money so important to you you’d allow this to happen to him? Look at him! He’s broken and injured and pumped full of illegal drugs! He’s a human being not a possession! How dare you let it get to this point sir!” Steffan growled his anger ignited and Pumaton for a moment looked taken aback. Priests never yelled like this, especially not to the wealthy in Istania. The foolish foreigner did not know his place!

“I will overlook your disrespect to me Father because you are not from here. However, Komali belongs to me and you will remember that. What I do or do not do with my possessions is none of the business of the temple. I suggest you learn this; you are not in your little country order anymore. This is Istania and here he is not human, he is a slave. He will do as he is told, when he is told. I lose millions every night he is unable to work for me. Heal him quickly and hold your pious tongue Father. His body belongs to me and to my clients he is a temple and altar. You pray to stone gods in stone temples, let real men pray to beautiful flesh. That is the way of the world and his place in it. He knows this and I suggest you learn it. You will have him healed in two weeks no more. Ribs broken or not he can still service men in other ways.” Pumaton said turned and left and Steffan felt punched in the gut and turned and rammed his fist into the wooden door and then shaking his knuckles in pain.

Rashaad shook his head and sighed. “I hate that man. I work for him for the sake of Komali.”

“I am learning how to hate, that is for certain and I like it not!” Steffan fumed pacing the floor and rubbing his knuckles. “Help me Rashaad, how do we get Komali out of this nightmare?”

“You run and do not stop Father Steffan. However, in no fit state is he to run and you would both be caught before you made it ten leagues from the city. You would be killed and Komali severely punished before he is sent back to the brothel again. I have never known a flesh slave to be stolen who was not recaptured again. Even if it takes years, these men refuse to lose profits and will hunt you until they find you.”

“But how far would they seek? What if I took him back to where I came from? I could hide him in the order with me. All the brother’s there would protect him too. Slavery is illegal, they have no basis to take him where I come from.”

“They’d accuse him of other crimes. Theft most common and extradite him back here.”

“But they would be lies and we’d have proof. It’s not like he has anything of value they could accuse him of stealing.”

“Then they’d claim him a murderer. I’ve seen it happen Father Steffan. The cost of a long search is not expensive compared to the value of his body. They would spend the money to get him back again and then take it out of his hide when he returned.”

“I can’t do nothing Rashaad. I’m not going to sit here and hand him back to hell in two weeks. I refuse. There has to be a way of running without getting caught. If he were a priest it would be a completely different scenario. Priests if they commit crimes, which really have you ever, heard of one that has? They only get sent back to their own orders for judgment from the brothers. Even then, Mane or Sol have long since intervened and ... By Mane’s crown that’s it!” Steffan said and Mane appeared smiling.

“Always so smart Little Steffan. This is why I didn’t tell you, you figured it out yourself. You need go soon too my son, you need a head start.”

“But Mane, he’s in no fit state to travel yet. His ribs are broken and he’s still under the influence of the drugs. Not to mention it’s winter back home, the cold will make him ill on top of every thing else the further north east we travel.”

Rashaad sat stunned, Mane himself was standing in the room clear as a man and he’d just materialized out of thin air.

“But you will have help. Rashaad, kneel before me.” Mane said and Rashaad fell to his knees immediately.

“Vow to me to protect all those who walk under my stars, shelter those who are cold, feed those who are hungry, and nurture those who need comfort.” Mane

said reciting the vows all lunar priests took when they entered service to the temple.

“I vow my lord Mane.”

“Then stand Father Rashaad, vassal servant and priest of my order. I charge you to go with them and protect them with your sword if needed.”

“I vow My Lord Mane.”

Mane turned to Komali who lay in bed still asleep and looking wan and he laid a gentle kiss to his brow. “You have ever been most faithful my little Komali. I reward you for being a perfect lunar glory under my stars. When you awake, your wounds will have healed. You will still be weak, but you will recover with speed and I change you to be the living flower Endymion to your Mane.” Mane said and Komali shivered, but a smile was on his lips and he was peaceful.

“What did you do? What does that mean My Lord?” Steffan asked and Mane only smiled.

“You will discover that on your own little Steffan, a reward to you both I give. Make ready to fly tonight. I will protect you with the darkness of a new moon; you will have five days before Pumaton discovers you are missing. I can give you no more time. Make the most of the time you have. The other priests have forgotten you even journeyed with them; you will be as if you’ve never come to Istanis. Sol has seen to Brody and Gavril they will profess you had become ill before the journey and stayed home. The others here will think men mad for claiming you were here, for they have forgotten your very existence. It is all the protection Sol and I can give you. Pack now, flee as soon as the sun sets and darkness falls.” Mane said as white robes appeared for Rashaad and a novice robe in pale pink for Komali, but not like the boys wore, but what women of the temple wore in service to Mane. Moreover, the ones the wives of the lunar priests usually wore. Except the color was all wrong and it didn’t make sense other than the female cut to the garment.

Steffan’s eyes grew wide in shock and Mane only smiled. “They seek a man, not a woman Steffan. Take your love and run.” Mane said vanishing and Rashaad stood on shaky legs.

“I’ll go find us horses. Komali cannot ride; he will have to ride with one of us. I’ll pack rations and meet you at the back gate of the temple at sunset.” Rashaad said dashing out and Steffan turned to Komali in bed and he had to know what Mane had done.

He pulled back the blanket and first tested Komali’s ribs. They were sound and he was breathing much easier, the drugs were rapidly wearing off. As he

unwrapped the bandages around Komali's chest, nothing looked different. Komali had already had non-defined chest muscles previously, they had always looked like tiny bumps of flesh on his chest. He hadn't been flat breasted before, he'd had two peaks of soft flesh that had before been just weak pectoral muscles, and nothing seemed amiss or altered. Until Steffan touched them carefully, and distinct and small mammary glands were under the surface. Not something males had.

Yet he still had an Adam's apple which was only a male trait. Steffan pulled the blanket back completely, and again male anatomy was still evident, until Steffan gently spread Komali's legs apart, and behind his male anatomy was female anatomy. Now he knew what Mane meant. Endymion and all flower gods were hermaphroditic, both male and female in one form. Just like flowers were asexual and embodied male and female aspects and relied on bees to pollinate them.

Steffan's throat ran dry and his nose suddenly smelled nothing but lunar glories and a soft chuckle was heard and Endymion appeared at Steffan's elbow smiling. "Your flower drone. He will make you happy and he will bloom with your love." The voice spoke; dual timbre's of male and female speaking simultaneously.

"I lived as a mortal male, I thrive as my God's flower. He will too. It is a blessing Mane gives you. See the joy it can bring." Endymion said as a tiny child, looking around four, if one could measure a god's age, poked his head around Endymion's shoulder. He had eyes like Mane's deep blue and his hair was pale pink and his skin as white as Endymion's.

"You are the first mortal to ever see the seed Mane planted in me, our son, Calanthe." Endymion said and the beautiful child smiled and handed Steffan a pink lunar glory.

"For your flower." The tiny god spoke, also in that strange dual quality. He was perhaps the most adorable child Steffan had ever seen and he smiled as the tiny god handed him the beautiful bloom.

"Thank you my lord Calanthe." He said bowing and the child chuckled and clung to Endymion's leg as all children so small did with parents in the presence of strangers. Endymion stroked his hair as Mane appeared and picked up his son.

"You are the first to take this news back with you Little Steffen. That is my son's first bloom you hold. It has the power to heal. Like Endymion's blooms when distilled cure pains in the heart, Calanthe's purify blood of sickness. Plant that bloom in the earth when you return home and watch it grow. Distill it into a powder like you do the white glories and those with blood disease will feel better as those with heart disease ease in sorrow when supping from Endymion."

“My lord, I... I didn't know. Congratulations on your son.” Steffan said and Mane smiled and kissed his son's cheek.

“You are the first to know little Steffan. I am blessed with my flowers as you will be one day my son.”

“He is not sterile like other hermaphrodites?” Steffan asked, knowing that all those born naturally hermaphroditic were generally genetically always sterile and Mane just shook his head.

“No. He is a true mortal flower in all ways and I set his task to care for my Calanthe's blooms when you return home. He already knows his duty to me, he heralds the birth of my son and will care for his first blooms, we have already spoken in his dreams. He is waking now, leave on the hour.” Mane said leaving with Endymion and Calanthe and Komali stirred and just sat up smiling and turning to Steffan.

When he spoke, Steffan shivered, the same dual quality was now in Komali's voice. “I have been changed.”

“I know.” Steffan gulped and Komali just stood and gracefully walked over and into Steffan's arms.

“Mane spoke to me in my dreams and told me my path. I am to care for Calanthe. I saw him, I held him in my arms and he was so very lovely.”

“Aye. He was very lovely. Mane is very proud of his son.”

“As you will be when I bear yours one day Steffan. I belong to you, I am your flower.”

“You belong to no one but yourself beloved.” Steffan said wrapping his arms around Komali and kissing him deeply. Even Komali's breath smelled like flowers. His hair and his very skin. His soul was that of a god's in mortal flesh. The roots of his black hair already showing signs of changing color, the palest of pink strands, like the pink bloom in Steffan's hand.

In no time he would be changed completely and no one in Istanica would ever recognize him again. Like Endys had been the mortal flower of Endymion to Mane, Komali was the mortal form of Calanthe, to herald his birth as a god in mortal flesh.

“Come love, we go now.” Steffan said wrapping the pale pink robe around Komali's shoulders and grabbing his lute and his medical kit off the table and secretly heading toward the back gate, hand in hand.

Series Title: *Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*
(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)
Book IV: *Il Prete di Luna, Lo Schiavo di Carne*
(Moon Priest, Flesh Slave)
 Author: D. Sanders
Chapter III - "*Petal's Bloom in the Moonlight*"
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Steffan and Komali hid in the shadows by the back gate until they heard the sounds of hooves coming up the back alley. Steffan clutching Komali's hand tightly, His nerves on the edge as much as Komali's. It was too dark to see where they hid together silently and then Rashaad's frantic whisper alerted them he was there. "Hurry." He said and Steffan pulled Komali from their hiding place and both Steffan and Rashaad gasped as the dim lights from the street illuminated him.

Gone was his midnight hair and his hair was a pale pink that matched his robes, his skin had lightened only slightly, like coffee mixed with heavy cream. The largest change was his silhouette, it held decidedly more feminine curves than before, still considered boyish in frame, but there were definitely small breasts where there had been none before and his scent was strong and smelled like lunar glories in full bloom.

"Komali..." Rashaad breathed and Komali reached out to embrace his brother.

"I will explain what has happened later my dear brother." Komali said and Rashaad nodded and grabbed a white cloak with a deep hood and threw it over Komali's shoulders and from a saddle bag, silk slippers for his feet.

"You need more than the dress. Clear night will be cold travel." Rashaad said tying the cloak together and lifting Komali into the saddle and slipping the shoes on his small delicate feet.

Steffan strung his lute over his back and shoved his medical kit into the saddle bag and climbed up behind Komali. "If anyone asks Rashaad, Komali is my wife." Steffan said and Rashaad nodded as he climbed onto his own mount and they slowly headed toward the city gates.

The guards at the gates paused and Rashaad halted. "It is late Father's why travel in the night out of the city?" The first guard asked and Rashaad smiled as if nothing was wrong.

"We are urgently called to assist a fellow in need. My Brother Priest is a healer let us pass please."

"The woman will be cold. I hope is not a long journey Brother Priests." One male said, gazing at Komali seated in front of Steffan, her beauty indescribable and her hair escaping her hood a shade unnatural but haunting.

“My wife will be fine, thank you for your concern.” Steffan said making sure the guard making hungry looks at Komali knew Steffan had claim to the beauty sharing his saddle. He felt a stab of possessiveness that was unsettling and Komali just laid a hand over Steffan’s as they rode forward out into the night.

“I don’t know what’s coming over me.” Steffan hissed and Komali took one of Steffan’s hands from the reigns and wrapped it around his middle.

“What Mane intended Steffan. I am no longer like others and I am yours.” Komali said softly as they picked up their pace down the road. Once a fair distance from the city on the open road, the horses traveled side by side and Rashaad was told precisely what Mane had done to Komali.

“You really are a woman now?”

“Yes and no brother. I am both. I am a flower.”

“I can smell you from here. You smell like lunar glories.”

“You should smell him from my position my brother. I am downwind and getting drunk on the scent.”

“It is night time, lunar glories bloom at night Steffan love. I will only be this pungent at night.” Komali said and Steffan chuckled and wrapped his own cloak around Komali to keep him warmer.

“I am not complaining Mali. You smell wonderful love.” Steffan said adjusting Komali more comfortably in the saddle. “Are you warm enough dearest?”

“Aye. A little tired but that is I think the residual drugs still in my body. I am in no pain now, Mane healed me completely.”

“He did more than heal you. I feel as if I’m in some strange dream and none of this is real.” Steffan admitted and Komali shifted where he rode side saddle and placed a kiss on Steffan’s chin.

“That real enough for you?”

“Oh aye.” Steffan said smiling down at his ‘flower’ he couldn’t call him male or female anymore, just looking at Komali was like looking at a living god and goddess in one. Hiding Komali was going to be impossible, not with his suddenly unnatural colored hair and his dual toned voice. If anyone doubted Komali was god touched they’d have to be blind and deaf without any sense of smell or soul.

“If we continue this pace, we can make the village of Kukuri by dawn. Rest a few hours in the order there and find Komali some undergarments. It will get colder.”

“We should stop at all the orders along the way, we have a duty to Mane to see too on top of our flight. None of our brother’s will ever doubt Komali is a living herald of Calanthe. They will recognize the import and shelter us along our journey.” Steffan said and Rashaad nodded.

“Not a living flower in flesh in two hundred years. Not since Endymion was reborn.” Rashaad said and Steffan nodded.

“No, and even then I come from the order in which Endys lived and there are records of him there still. Even he wasn’t as Komali is now, he was mortal completely until he was reborn into a god. He never walked the land as Komali does now. Certainly entirely male until his rebirth. This is the first time I’ve ever heard of a flower living mortal among us.”

“Because it is the first. Mane told me that himself in my dreams. I am no god and never will be. I am simply a vassal of Calanthe. I am his first bloom and nothing more. I am and will ever be mortal, just different from others. I still bleed, I still feel, and I still love.” Komali said resting his head on Steffan’s shoulder.

“I love you too Komali. I did from the first moment I saw you praying in the temple actually. I never saw anything so beautiful or something that touched my soul like you in my life. Your eyes destroyed me, I wanted to help you so desperately when I looked into your eyes.”

“And helped me you have Steffan. I would be dead without you, my soul would still be so very empty.” Komali said and Steffan just held him closer.

“Mane told me I’d find you in Istania, but I never really believed I’d fall in love as quickly as I did. I knew nothing about you and still know so very little, yet I cannot look at you without wanting to throw a wall around you to protect you. You spark in me things I didn’t even know I had in me.”

“And in me. You are the only person in my life I ever wanted to touch me. You make me feel safe. It is hard to describe, but your gentleness I’ve never felt before and it touched my soul against my will. I am so very glad now it did, I now wish to live, something I haven’t felt in many years.”

“That itself is a miracle. My dear brother is back again and if I hadn’t already sworn myself to Mane I would right now in gratitude! This is the Komali I love best. The one I missed so very much.” Rashaad said and Komali smiled at him.

“You ever stayed with me and I am grateful beyond words. You set aside your own happiness for me.”

“You would have done the same Komali had you been true son and I the slave. We share blood and that is something I cannot and will not ignore. I do have happiness again seeing you like this. I feel I have a purpose at last, to protect you and serve Mane. I think I have at last found my own calling.” Rashaad said smiling and Steffan smiled back.

“Being a Priest is very rewarding work. My order is very old and peaceful and in a lovely farming village in the country. Shall I tell you both?” Steffan asked and both nodded.

“It is still Far East of here, it took many weeks travel to get here. It is as different from Istantia as Komali is now different from other mortals. There is a lake that is so blue it looks like sapphires color the water. It is said it is the very lake Mane was sitting beside when the Mother Goddess made Endymion and showed him Mane for the first time. The very lake the fireflies first came to be born as a crown of light for Endymion to wear from his lover. The temple of Mane overlooks this lake and in summer at night you can sit on the stairs of the temple and watch the fireflies dance on the water.” Steffan began, telling them of his home and their destination.

“The land itself is green and fertile and Sol’s temple is in the middle of fields. We grow all our own food. We have orchards that span acres, fields of flowers right next to vegetables and fruits. We raise our own livestock for meat and we have the oldest archive in the entire country. Scholars from all the orders visit us to further their studies in ancient histories. We have our own healing arts and strictly academic schools and children from both the order and the village study in our order.” Steffan said wistfully as he described home.

“It’s funny, I used to think when I was younger I wanted to see the world and visit Istantia to see it’s wonders. Now that I have? I cannot wait to get home, home may be simple, but that is what makes it so special I guess. Where everyone smiles and greets each other over breakfast in the mess in the morning. Where everyone knows everyone else’s names and faces and where one is free to follow one’s calling. No one is forced to do anything that is not in their nature. My calling was in healing so that was what I studied. I was given the choice when I was thirteen to either take vows to enter the brotherhood or just continue my schooling and leave to join the village when I turned eighteen. I was shown both sects. Sol and Mane and I was given the choice to choose which sect I wanted to dedicate myself to. Granted, my choice was easy, I have ever been able to see Mane and I have always known my path was to follow him. However, I was still given the choice of my own free will. Even Mane never said I had to follow him; he just loved me and encouraged me to follow my own heart. I am more than blessed.” Steffan said and Komali smiled and laid his cheek against Steffan’s chest as they rode.

“It sounds like paradise. Does it snow? I have always wondered what snow looks like.” Komali asked and Steffan nodded.

“Aye, it snows and it’s cold in winter. Nevertheless, a good fire in the hearth and warm stew and cider on those nights makes the cold outside beautiful to look at out of a frosted window. Spring is always full of color in the fields, Summer lazy and hot and swimming in the lake perfect to cool off again. Autumn is again a feast of color on the eyes when all the trees leaves change to red, orange and gold. The harvest comes in and we have a feast to celebrate the bounty of Sol’s gardens. His festival is always grand and leaves you so full and bloated you don’t want to move again for fear of bursting your seams. The first day of Summer is Mane’s lover’s moon and again it is a night of love and music under the stars. Mid-winter is a time spent with friends and loved ones. Drinking warm spiced cider, singing cheerful songs to pass the long hours of dark and cold, and the one time of the year you give gifts to those you care about for no reason at all except to show them you care. It can be any gift at all so long as it come from the heart.” Steffan said and then laughed.

“I remember my first mid-winter there. I was still recovering and my mentor gave to me a kitten. All orange and white fluff and so small he fit in my hand. I had to bottle feed him at first, Father had found him all alone in the barn abandoned and he’d just opened his eyes. I love that damn cat, I miss him terribly I will be glad to see the fat bastard again even if he does get hair all over my robes and leaves dead mice, birds and gophers in my bed as gifts. He comes and goes as he pleases and I notice quite a few strays around that bear a striking resemblance to my over indulged Tom. I was quite unoriginal naming him.”

Komali chuckled. “I had a cat once when I was little. She was very pretty, all white with one of those faces that always look angry at the world. She was so very sweet natured. She was old though already when I was born and she died when I was five, but I will never forget her sleeping on my pillow at night and her purring keeping me awake.” Komali said and Steffan chuckled.

“Cats are good at that. You sleep when they say you can. I’ve been awakened quite a few times with a tail in my face and Tom demanding I get my lazy carcass out of bed to feed him. Even if I had been up very late in the temple. He keeps his own time and expects me to adhere to his schedule.” Steffan said and Komali chuckled.

“He is a cat. Did you not know it is we who are the pets and not the other way around?”

“I didn’t at first, I do now.” Steffan said as they carried on light conversation as they rode a decent quick pace all night long. They made good time and by dawn had reached the village and they rode straight to the order and quickly hid inside before the village even stirred.

The moment the brothers saw Komali and the pink glory he held in his hands as Steffan helped him down off their mount, several of them got to their knees in prayer.

“Please, I am no God. I am just the messenger flower.” Komali said making the brothers rise. They immediately ushered the flower inside and sat him by a warm fire.

Steffan told them of their flight from Istantia and bade all the monks keep Komali’s name a secret. The news of Calanthe’s birth was all they were allowed to mention, the messenger identity, beyond being a living flower, needed to remain a secret.

All agreed that wise and vowed to protect the flower on his journey and Steffan and Komali were ushered to a comfortable room to sleep, they were road weary being up all night traveling. Rashaad was already asleep in his own room next door.

This was the first time they had been truly alone together since Komali’s transformation and the first time they would be sleeping together as a married couple to each other and to say Steffan was flustered was an understatement. He so desperately wanted to look at Komali but was afraid to, he wasn’t sure if he could handle himself if he did. Not to mention up until yesterday, Komali had been a flesh slave, raped and abused and the last thing Steffan wanted to do was cross a line he had no business crossing. Husband or not.

His fears however melted away as he sat on the edge of the bed debating whether he should take off his robes or not. Delicate hands reached around him from behind and slid into the neck opening of his robes and were hot against his bare chest and Komali’s voice whispered in his ear. “I am yours Steffan, you are the only man allowed to look at me and touch me when he desires to. I am changed my love, there is a part of me now still virginal and you will be the only man ever to know this part of me. As a man I was used, as a woman I am pure again.”

“You were always pure Mali. I’m afraid of myself not of you. I would not hurt you for all the world.” Steffan sighed feeling Komali’s arms hold him across his chest and he closed his eyes and tipped his head back to rest against Komali’s shoulder.

“Steffan, you could not hurt me if you tried. It is not in your nature to be anything but gentle. I am very blessed to be your wife.” Komali said and Steffan opened his eyes and looked into the sky masking as eyes that loved him.

“But are you my wife or are you my husband? You are both.”

“There is no word to describe both Steffan. If I were to choose which I would rather be called, I would choose your wife. Look at me dearest, even as a man I looked more like a woman, and now even more so. I have breasts, I have hips, I have a womb unspoiled. I will one day carry your seed and bear your children as their mother. I am more your wife than your husband and if I am being honest, it pleases me this way. Mane could have made me entirely woman and I’d have been happy. I was never a man like other men.”

“I will call you whatever you wish Mali. If you wish me to treat you as a woman and call you my wife I will.”

“Please Steffan. Endymion may prefer to be addressed as ‘he’ even though he is exactly the same as I am. I however wish to say good-bye to the old Komali and embrace the new. I am ‘she’ who belongs to Steffan, ‘she’ who loves him, ‘she’ who will only ever be touched by one man. The old slave is dead; the flower only remains. Even Mane treats me as a woman. Look at the clothes he gave me, the body he gave me, the man he gave me to.”

Steffan choked back a sob and turned to crush Komali in his arms and wept with love into her hair. “I love you. I don’t care what you are Mali, I never have. It is you I love and the soul is unchanged.”

“And never will change. Look at me Steffan, I am yours and only yours.” Komali said sitting back on her knees and opening her robe to let it pool around her knees where she knelt on the bed. She did indeed look more female now than ever. The only part remaining that was indeed still male was half of her sex and even that was smaller than it had been before, making room for the female anatomy to grow. Her breasts were small, but evident, her belly was smooth and rounding into definite hips.

Her almost white hair dusted in pale pink shades tumbled over her shoulders down to her waist, her skin was dark and smooth and even her dusting of pubic hair above her male self had changed to white. Steffan’s breath quickened as did his heart rate. She was indescribably beautiful and he could no longer resist the desires Komali had inspired in him from the first time he looked into those beautiful mysterious eyes.

He stood a moment and shed his robes and pants and Komali smiled a genuine smile of appreciation as Steffan bared himself to her. His aching sex leaving no doubt of his desire for his wife. She just held out her arms and Steffan fell into heaven. He kissed her back into soft pillows and his hands roamed smooth plains of trembling flesh, cupping small breasts and kneading the flesh under his hands that had her moaning in desire.

“This is the first time this has happened in my life.” Komali breathed taking Steffan’s hand and showing Steffan her male arousal. “Never has this happened, never do I want as I want now. Take your flower Steffan; please I beg you take me before another man takes me from you. Let me feel the joys of a virgin as it should be. I’m so afraid that if we wait anymore I will never know what real love is. End my fear Steffan please, show me what it’s supposed to be like.” Komali wept and Steffan crushed her in his embrace.

“Dearest, no one will take you from me now. No one.” Steffan said, crawling between open and inviting legs and with a gentle push, her new virginity was gone. She clung to Steffan and wept as he made love to her in their marriage bed. Her back arched into him and her head thrown back in joy as Komali learned what love finally felt like, learned how it felt to be a woman, to feel Steffan deep inside her body and claiming her as his own. Felt his seed fill her belly with warmth and her womb belonged to one man alone.

He was sobbing into her chest for joy, kissing the valley between her breasts and picking up the one of the pearls that littered the bed from where Komali had come in orgasm for the first time. His first experience in pleasure. “You really are a flower. Your seeds are pearls.” Steffan said tasting one and rolling his eyes in ecstasy.

“The first I ever spilt. Oh Steffan that was beautiful.”

“You are beautiful Mali. I love you so very much.” Steffan said crawling up to cradle Komali in his arms and pulling the blanket over them.

Komali nestled against his chest and ran her fingers over Steffan’s bare chest. “You have no hair on your chest like men in Istanian. I think you are so very beautiful Steffan. Like golden sunshine you are to me. So pale, look how dark I am beside you.”

“I love your skin Mali. To me you are the one who is exotic and you never had hair on your chest either.”

“No, I never did. Rare that, proof again I as ever more female than male. Look at how hairy Rashaad is and we are brothers. Rashaad is typical of Istanian men. I was always atypical, which is why I was so expensive to be bought.”

“I never want to talk about you being a slave ever again Mali. You said yourself the old slave is dead and leave him there behind us. My wife is fresh and lovely and free and I will pamper her all my days. Rashaad can just get used to having a sister instead of a brother. I must admit I prefer you a woman too. I had never had a problem with male lovers or female ones, I had loved both looking for a love like I feel with you, but I do prefer loving you as a woman. Soft in all the right places.” Steffan purred and Komali chuckled.

“Soft am I?”

“Aye and you smell divine.” Steffan replied, nibbling on her ear.

“I feel divine for the first time. I wonder now that you have loved me, if you’ve marked me.”

Steffan chuckled. “Only time will tell Mali. If by the time we reach home you are having morning sickness we’ll know. Only way to tell is waiting. The journey is ten weeks, you should have at least two moons, if you’ll even have them at all, but I suspect as mortal you will logically have to in order to be fertile. So if you have none before we arrive and if you are cursing the thought of breakfast when we get home, we’ll know you are expecting.” Steffan said and Komali chuckled.

“Aye. I can say that is one part I am not looking forward to. Fandala had the worst morning ill when she was pregnant. I suffered in sympathy for her. But worth it to give you children Steffan. I never thought I’d ever have my own children and certainly not the one to bear them.”

“It must be strange to you suddenly being a woman after being wholly male.”

“Not as strange as it would seem. I am comfortable in my body at last. Perhaps this was always meant to be and up until now my discomfort in myself was because this was my future. We will never know unless Mane tells us otherwise, but it really does not matter. I am so happy I don’t care.”

“Aye love, I don’t care either. I have you and that’s all that matters to me. We should sleep, we only have a few hours before we need to be moving again.” Steffan said yawning and Komali nodded and just curled up against her husband.

“Aye. Sweet dreams my love.”

“They already are dearest.” Steffan replied, letting pure exhaustion send him to sleep holding his precious flower close to his heart.

For two weeks, they traveled hard, stopping in every order to spread the word of Calanthe and refresh for a single night before pushing forward again. It was the fifteenth day of travel when the first signs they were being pursued caught up to them. They had just made the village of Evaarsmead at sundown when they spied two very Istanian native men, heavily armed stopping citizens and questioning them.

Rashaad's hand was on his sword and Steffan had a death grip on Komali's middle, his hands on the reigns ready for flight when the men stopped them. Komali hid her face in her cloak and she trembled with fear as they approached.

"We are looking for a Priest, a soldier and a Murderer. Priest Steffan is aiding a fugitive. Show us your face!" One demanded and Komali looked up and let her hood fall back.

"You can stop scaring my wife, the Flower of Calanthe, at any time gentlemen and let us pass we are on a holy pilgrimage for Mane." Steffan said angrily and both hired guards stared shamelessly at Komali.

"She is real. We heard of the flower searching for Komali. Our master has offered one hundred million for her." One said and at that Rashaad drew his sword.

"You would dare insult a messenger of Mane? Would illegally and openly suggest slavery of her? Ask her husband to sell her? Vile dogs, this is not Istanian and I would have you both arrested for even the mere suggestion of slavery here." Rashaad said angrily and both men finally took notice of the soldier's sword and the Istanian man in lunar priest robes.

"What priest carries a weapon?"

"One who was a soldier before he took vows to Mane. I am the protector of his messenger, charged with keeping her safe by Mane's will. You will stand down and cease disturbing the flower." Rashaad said livid and Steffan held a trembling Komali close.

A crowd was gathering now, and sounds of awe and respect were being uttered.

"Leave the flower alone you brutes!"

"She is holy! How dare you accost her!"

"Messengers of Mane are pure! What business do you have detaining her?"

"If you dare touch the flower, you'll have more than the soldier priest to deal with!" One large man said, obviously a former mercenary from his many battle scars barring his own sword.

Other men with swords, pitchforks, knives and various other deadly weapons surrounded Komali in protection, Mane's words ringing back again that most men were like Steffan and Rashaad, they cared and Komali's heart swelled and he cried moved with love for people. She spoke with a voice that sent shivers down everyone spines when the dual voice she carried spoke.

“Everyone, you touch me greatly in my heart. I thank you for protecting me and I pray Mane sends you all blessings for the love you show me.” Komali said as Steffan smiled.

“Aye, I will pray tonight thanks for everyone’s kindness. It does my heart joy to see so many love my flower as I do. Thank you.” Steffan said tapping his heels to his mount and trotting past with Rashaad into the stone walls of the order which shut behind them.

“That was too close for comfort.” Steffan sighed helping Komali down off the mount as the order brothers came to help them.

“Two days they’ve been here, looking for what they say is a murderer.”

“I am no murderer good brother. Before Mane made me his Flower, I was a flesh slave in Istania. Bleeding in near death from abuse when my Steffan saved me and then Mane healed and changed me. I am who they seek, but not for murder, to be sent back to be a slave again only. Knowing my former master is also looking for me now as I am troubles me greatly. He’s offered so very much money for my capture we will be hounded now.” Komali said and the brothers in the order looked shocked.

“We’d heard rumors Istania had sexual slaves, I never in my life thought them real.” One gasped and Komali sadly nodded.

“It is an ugly and vile practice in that city, and it is appalling. Beauty is a curse in that city. The more beautiful you are, the more men will pay to be cruel.” Steffan shuddered and the brothers looked horrified. The flower was stunningly beautiful and they could only imagine the horrors she’d face if she were captured.

First to be returned to a fate she’d barely managed to escape at all, and then as the flower her torment would only increase. “Bolt the gates, no one is to enter while the flower is in residence!” The head solar priest shouted and heavy bolts dropped on the gate. He turned kind eyes to her and bowed and kissed her hand.

“Word spreads faster than you can travel Flower of Calanthe. We have already prepared you a room to rest in and food to warm you. No one will harm a messenger of Mane in any order and of either sect, we all protect you Lady Flower.” He said and Komali’s fragrance seemed to intensify with peaceful happiness.

“We are all children under Sol and Mane. Thank you vassal of Sol, may he bless you for your honor.” Komali said and allowed the old head priest to offer his arm as he led the trio inside. Steffan smiling as he followed. No matter where they went, young and old clamored to be in the presence of the holy flower, but only he had more than her beautiful smile and the touch of her hand. She gave to him

more than her body, she gave her heart and she gave her soul. He loved her more now than he had when they fled Istania. Komali was the gentlest soul he'd ever been blessed to know, and she was his and his alone.

The mess hall was filled with brothers celebrating the birth of Calanthe and gazing at the beauty of Calanthe's messenger. She was as delicate as the bloom she wore in her hair. It never faded, never withered and was the same shade of palest pink as her hair and dress robes. Small feet in pink silk slippers poked out from under her robes and her dark skin and sky blue eyes were complimented by the soft pastels she wore.

After dinner, her husband healer brought out his lute and played and when Komali opened her lips and sang in harmony with herself everyone sat in blissful silence to listen. The male tenor voice singing the melody and her female alto voice singing in perfect harmony. It sent shivers down everyone's spines and both Komali and Steffan could see Mane and Endymion sitting in the back of the room with Calanthe listening to the music. Calanthe, young and gay dancing up and down the aisles where brothers sat oblivious to the child Flower God.

Komali however just smiled, every time they stopped this happened. There was always a feast to celebrate Calanthe's birth and every evening Calanthe would dance under his parent's watchful and indulgent gaze.

He would always end up at Komali's feet, smiling up at his bloom and every time Komali wanted to reach down and pull the child into her lap and sing to him. He was the most precious, beautiful and adorable presence Komali had ever seen and she loved the god she represented as a mother would love her own child. Even God's it seemed started out as innocent children when born of God parent's. There was no taint, no sin, no prejudice only light and joy and Calanthe's spirit always infected the entire room when he danced.

He was definitely the God of Love's son. Born of the purest of love he shared with his Flower Endymion. Such a creation could only be pure and sometimes Even Sol joined the celebration, to sit and watch over his nephew with a fond smile on his face of sunlight.

Tonight was one of the nights Sol was also in attendance and it amazed Komali how accurate his initial assessment of Steffan had been. The first time he had seen his husband, all golden hair and pale skin he'd mused that he probably looked like Sol in Lunar priests robes and he did resemble Sol greatly.

The first time Sol had shown himself to Komali and Steffan he'd had an amused smile on his face when Komali first looked at him and then her husband and he'd laughed at Steffan's stunned face.

“Coincidence. I unlike my brother have no desire to be a father. Uncle is as close as I care to get.” He’d winked and settled with a myriad of other beautiful flower gods around him to listen to the music and dance with his many lovers in his garden to the music. Roses, Irises, wisteria, plumeria, hibiscus, all of them indulging the newest flower in the heavenly gardens and dancing with the child to the music Komali and Steffan performed every evening.

The other brothers could not see the Gods joining in the celebration, but the fragrance of so many flowers filled the room and the holy presence was overflowing.

Tonight however was different, when Calanthe reached Komali’s feet he materialized for all to see and gasps filled the room when the child suddenly appeared next to Komali and moved to crawl up in Komali’s lap. “Sing the one about my Mommy being reborn for Daddy. I like that one.” He said and Komali chuckled and smiled.

“Anything you desire my Lord Calanthe.” Komali said singing of Endys and Mane with a warm and happy little god sitting in his lap like a normal child, swinging his feet happily. Oblivious to the wide eyes all around the room and Mane chuckling to himself in the back of the room and shaking his head before dancing himself with Endymion to the romantic ballad about their love.

Calanthe’s requests carried on for several songs, never leaving Komali’s lap and even reaching out like a child to drink the water in Komali’s cup. In fact he drank a lot of water, he thirsted for it and Komali refilled the glass several times from the pitcher to sate the little god’s thirst. When Endymion finally came to collect his son off his mortal’s lap he smiled. “His blooms thrive best near water. Unlike mine which like sandy soil, his need moist earth. He is still young and in corporeal form he is closest to his blooms and needs much water. Plant his bloom near the lake and they’ll thrive best there.” Endymion said, never showing himself to the others gathered and once he held his son’s hand, Calanthe’s corporeal form also vanished.

Komali was parched herself and was very tired. The hard journey between villages and the nightly celebrations for Calanthe were taking a toll on her body and the fatigue was catching up to her quickly. Especially now that the weather was getting decidedly colder and all flowers wilted in the cold climates and she shivered in her seat.

Mane walked over as Steffan set his lute down and smiled. “You need to rest Komali. You are a safe enough distance now from Istantia you can afford to rest. Yes, others will come if you delay, but you are safe here. Your body is delicate and the weather tonight will change. Winter is here and the temperature is going

to drop severely for the next fortnight. Do not travel in this weather, stay here and stay warm and rest. You can move again in the summer.”

“Summer? Not spring?” Komali asked and Mane chuckled.

“Dearest, you will also be in no condition for traveling in spring. You’re overly tired for more reasons than just the cold flower. Your drone is a fertile one and he pollinated you immediately. I knew he would, my little Steffan has ever been a healthy and efficient brute. Wait now until the babe comes. You are safe here. They will come, but there are many now to protect you. Be happy flower.” Mane said turning and leaving with his family for the night and Steffan’s eyes looked wide as saucers and a stupid lazy grin was spread across his face and he looked a fool and Komali chuckled.

“What did Mane tell you?” Rashaad asked, now intimately aware of how his ‘sister’ and brother could actually see and speak to Mane all the time. The other brothers anxious to know too.

“We’re having a baby!” Steffan laughed leaning over to kiss his wife and the brother’s cheered and clapped in congratulations.

“Mane told us to stay here until the baby comes. I hope you don’t mind extra extended guests.” Steffan said turning to the head priest who just smiled and shook his head.

“Of course not! This is a blessing we get to share indeed. Lady Komali, you will have our protection during your confinement.”

“Thank you so much.” Komali laughed wiping her eyes misty with joy.

That night Komali was showered with so much joyful affection she couldn’t stop laughing. Steffan was beside himself with joy, talking to her stomach as if the baby growing within her could actually hear his or her insane father. In times like these, Steffan showed his youth and his obsessive call to healing.

Was Komali comfortable? Did she need anything? On top of his immediate concern that she drank enough vitamins and ate healthy.

“Steffan stop!” Komali laughed as Steffan pattered about the room fixing her an herbal tea and repeatedly asking her if she was warm enough.

“I’m fine Steffan you dear fool. Nothing is different from this morning when you didn’t know I was pregnant. I feel no different either. Your baby is still about the size of a pea you realize. We have a quite a few months for you to worry yourself into a frenzied coma. How about pacing yourself?” Komali teased and Steffan had to laugh at himself and he flopped onto the edge of their bed grinning.

“I can’t help it Mali. You married a apothecary, this is what I do.”

“You cannot tell me you act this obsessive over other patients.”

“Other patients are not my wife and I retain the right to be a fool over you.”
Steffan grinned and Komali leaned forward and kissed him.

“My fool. I adore you. However, do pace yourself or I might have to drag my male side out of the closet and plant my foot up your backside. Don’t make me have to lift up my skirts and remind you I have a pair of balls too.”

“Beloved, I am gloriously reminded every time you lift those skirts. Speaking of which...” Steffan purred crawling across the bed to pin Komali against the pillows. “... It is quite safe to play for several months yet.”

“I know. Come here fool.” Komali purred right back pulling Steffan close and giggling happily as Steffan proved again he was indeed and insatiable drone over his flower.

Series Title: *Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*
(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)
Book IV: *Il Prete di Luna, Lo Schiavo di Carne*
(Moon Priest, Flesh Slave)
 Author: D. Sanders
Chapter IV - “The Truth of Mane’s Grand Design”
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The Temple gates remained barred and only those with business within order were allowed to enter while the Flower was in residence and in confinement. The temperatures had indeed severely dropped overnight and Komali huddled by the fire in their room wrapped in blankets and looking happy but cold as Steffan planned her daily meals for her health. Her tea would be herbal and a blend that would promote her health. Her meals would be balanced again to aid in keeping her and the baby healthy. Anything with alcohol in it was strictly off her diet, but Komali didn’t mind that at all, she had never liked alcohol to begin with, always preferring water, juice and tea to other beverages.

Several of the women in the order coming in to bring Komali warmer clothes than her robes and happily sharing stories of their pregnancies and giving tips and advice to a grateful Komali who absorbed the intimate knowledge with gratitude.

Mid-winter came a few weeks later and Komali awoke to Steffan coming in to feed her breakfast in bed with a little wrapped bundle on the tray.

“What is this?” Komali asked and Steffan grinned.

“Our first mid-winter dearest. Open your present.”

“Oh Steffan, I... dearest I forgot you told me of this tradition. I have nothing for you.” Komali looked highly upset and Steffan just leaned forward and kissed her.

“Mali, you are all I need. You carry our baby, I cannot ask for more. I know you never celebrated this day before there is nothing for you to be upset over dearest. Please, just open your gift my love.” Steffan said and Komali opened the tiny box to reveal a simple silver band with a moon design and inside inscribed:

“To my beloved flower Mali with my eternal love -Steffan”

Komali was in tears as Steffan slipped the ring on her finger. The inscription even bearing the nickname he had taken to calling her. He never called her Komali anymore, it was always Mali, he only ever spoke her full name to others and even then most times he referred to her as either just “Mali” or “My Flower”.

He was the single most caring, giving, loving and gentle man Komali had ever known. Not just to her either. He was always the most sincere and generous of men. Watching him with children with colds or skinned knees, with adults who were sick or injured his hands were ever kind and caring. He treated everyone

with respect and honesty. He had such a capacity for empathy and compassion that to Komali showed he was the embodiment of Mane. He was love, he was protection, he was caring, he was compassion, and he was a rock of support and a beacon of light.

With Komali he was all those things and so very much more. He gave her not only his compassion and support; he gave her his very soul. There was not a single thing he wouldn't give her if she asked. He doted on her constantly and he was always touching her in one way or another. Her hand in his, his arm around her waist, her arm through his, his hand on her shoulder if she was seated or just his knee touching hers if his hands were occupied with his lute. It was as if he had to reassure himself that she was real and it was a comfort to Komali.

She was never in doubt of his love for her; he displayed it continually from his smile, to his touch, to his voice that would whisper to her in the darkness as they went to sleep together. To his kiss in the morning to wake her, to his arms around her at night to protect her. He was always looking out for her health and well being. If she told him to dance through fire for her on his hands, he would and ask her to choose the music and tempo he danced to as well. He did it all with a smile on his face and a spring to his step. Komali threw her arms around his neck and wept for joy.

"I love you so much it hurts." Komali sobbed and Steffan just smiled into her hair and held her close.

"I love you too Mali. Please don't cry, I didn't mean to make you cry flower."

"I can't help it! You wonderful, beautiful, perfect man! The Goddess mother broke the mold when she made you!"

"Careful with the compliments Mali. You'll swell my ego." Steffan chuckled and then gasped as Komali rolled and proved there was quite a bit of male in her still as hidden strength suddenly had Steffan on his back in bed with Komali sitting on his stomach.

"I'm going to swell more than your ego my beloved." Komali said and it was the last thing she spoke while she had Steffan moaning in bliss in bed. She was doing things to his body she had never done before.

She had him a willing prisoner to desire her lips and tongue doing sinful things to him, bringing him to the edge of madness and then back down again. A slow divine torture to his senses, ending the madness by writhing on top of him, first taking Steffan inside her body as a male and then ending it as a female. Giving and gifting him both sides of his flower in sheer ecstasy, but taking his seed within as his wife, this was always something Komali did in the end. No matter how they chose to be intimate together, Komali made it known quite clearly that

when Steffan came; he came inside her as a woman and not a man. Not because other men had seeded Komali as a man, but as a woman only Steffan had ever come in her there, and only he was allowed to. That was his territory and his alone and Komali was adamant he claim what was his in the end.

Not that Steffan minded in the slightest, having her at all was a joy and he was not about to complain about his beautiful flower that excited his body as much as she stimulated his heart. Whether he loved her as a man or a woman didn't matter at all. What mattered was the love in and of itself.

He was delightfully surprised and sated and covered in Komali's pearls by the time she finished loving him boneless. "Mali, you never cease to surprise me." Steffan panted as Komali lay on his chest and smiled up at her husband.

"Then we are even dearest. I love you."

"I love you too. By Mane's crown I do."

"I know you do, I love my ring."

"Flower, that was the best 'Thank you' ever." Steffan chuckled rolling to tumble Komali off his chest to kiss her soundly. Komali smiled and chuckled.

"I will thank you again later too I am sure." He said and Steffan laughed.

"You will kill me, but what a way to go." Steffan winked sitting up and pulling over the breakfast tray again. "But do eat first dearest." He said hand feeding her from the tray and trying not to get aroused again when Komali nibbled at his fingers as well as her breakfast.

Steffan was called away a few hours later to help tend a few patients suffering winter ailments which gave Komali time to be sneaky. She found Rashaad in the company of a rather handsome young Lunar Priest in the mess sharing coffee. In fact, it seemed he was keeping all his company lately with this young man she'd noticed over the past few weeks.

Rashaad smiled as Komali came over. "I'm not disturbing you am I brother?" She asked and he shook his head.

"Of course not. Mali this is Toba." He said and the way he said the youth's name made Komali smile. Finally Rashaad was finding his own happiness. She held out her hand.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Toba. Is my brother being good?" She asked and Toba smiled.

"He is being more than good." Toba said and his eyes spoke volumes as did Rashaad's and Komali forgot his mission for the moment and sat down grinning.

"Are my eyes deceiving me?" She asked directly and Rashaad chuckled and took Toba's hand in his very large one.

"No Mali. They are not. These past few weeks I find more than rest here and quite by accident. Who knew when I went to find a book to read in the library I'd run over my heart." Rashaad said and Toba chuckled.

"He does mean run over too, but then I was not looking where I was going either. It was like running into a brick wall. I'm afraid nothing short of an ox would knock Rash off his feet and even then I think the ox would stumble too." Toba laughed and Komali grinned. Toba in comparison to Rashaad was small, but all men really seemed like children sitting next to his rather large framed brother. Toba was of average height and build, his bright red hair a mess of untamed curls around bright green eyes.

To Rashaad he must seem more than exotic. No one in Istantia other than visitors had curly red hair and green eyes. Had Toba been born there, he'd have been a highly sought after slave and Komali shivered internally at the thought and knew Rashaad probably had the same reaction the first time he laid eyes on the handsome youth. Komali shoved those horrible notions born from experience aside and smiled.

"So do tell me more. I must know what happened." Komali said and Rashaad chuckled.

"Before or after I picked him up off the floor?" Rashaad replied and Komali laughed.

"After of course."

"After my eyes were replaced back in their sockets again and Toba was once again on his feet he helped me find my book. You know I always liked to read about geography. When in the desert the sea seems fascinating. Toba is not from here originally and rather than a book about the sea I got a story from one born next to it." Rashaad said and Toba smiled.

"Aye. When I was little, I lived on the eastern sea. My father was a fisherman. I could swim before I could walk. My mother died giving birth to me and sadly when I was eight, my father died in a boating accident. I was already studying in the order back home and when my mentor came here to teach where he had

grown up, I came with him and here I am. I'd always been fascinated with the tales of the desert myself and I think Rashaad and I spent far too many hours sharing stories with each other. We both lost track of all time. I must say I am eternally glad I never went to Istania, the monkeys and markets are not worth the risks I hear." Toba shivered and Komali nodded.

"No. You would not be the first foreigner abducted and sold, Priest or not. Rashaad is correct. A pretty face like yours and your coloring are rare and dangerous attributes to have in Istania." Komali said and Toba nodded.

"I always thought myself fairly average really, I would have never thought twice about my appearance. Especially considering to me both of you are the ones exotic to look at."

"It's all in what you are used to. In Istania, Rashaad is the average man. Tall, broad, dark and if he didn't shave his face full beard in a few days growth." Komali said and Rashaad laughed.

"Oh aye. I always used to wish I shared full blood with you, I like not shaving but like beard less. You never had to shave I was jealous when at twelve I had to start shaving and you clean faced."

"I couldn't grow a beard if you paid me either. I get all of three hairs on my chin and a pair of tweezers every few weeks is more than enough. My father had this great mustache he used to wax into curls. I always wanted that when I grew up, but I too took after my mother it seems. Twenty and one and still baby faced. Whiskers are not going to appear on this face, I've given up hope." Toba laughed and Rashaad smiled.

"Face like yours should not hide under whiskers. Too beautiful to cover up." Rashaad said and Toba visibly melted and Komali grinned.

"We got off topic. What happened next after your talk?" Komali asked steering the conversation back to what she really wanted to know.

"We talked probably until dawn, then met again later that day to talk more. I laugh until sides hurt, talk until throat sore and by the end of that day I knew I was much in love."

"Same here. I couldn't sleep after we met properly. I had to admit that first night you came and we were celebrating I couldn't take my eyes off Rashaad. I have a rather serious attraction to big men, I'll not lie, I thought Rashaad was probably the single most handsome, exotic, bull I'd ever laid eyes on. Then I talked to him and learned the bull is a big bear on the inside. Intelligent, funny, charming and the most loyal person I've ever met on top of being handsome. I was a goner so I

didn't try to fight it and I love him to pieces." Toba said interlacing his fingers with Rashaad's.

"Tell me, you're coming with us then when we leave?" Komali asked hopeful and Toba smiled and nodded.

"Aye. I am. We're lunar priests for a reason after all. When we finally fall in love it's for keeps." Toba said and Rashaad looked so happy at last Komali wanted to sing for joy.

"Toba and I were going to tell you later we plan on taking vows too. The past two weeks have been so joyous for us. We were going to tell you both tonight." Rashaad said and Komali just reached across the table to hug them both.

"Congratulations. I'm so happy for you both. Steffan will be thrilled for you too. Speaking of Steffan, he is what I came to find you about brother. Perhaps you can help me too Toba. I want to give him something for Mid-winter. Do you know where I can find a lap harp? He has never heard me play."

Toba grinned. "That I certainly can help you with. I'm a music teacher and I have one. Come with me." Toba said leading Komali into his classroom and he pulled out a small harp case from the closet.

"I got this intending on learning to play it myself and never had a chance." Toba said handing the case to Komali who opened it and tested the instrument.

"When we get home I will teach you." Komali said running her fingers over the strings and testing them with a lovely ballad. "This is a fine instrument indeed."

"That was beautiful. It's all yours, keep it Komali. I do hope you'll play for us too later?"

"Certainly, now I must be off to hide this for later. I want to surprise Steffan. Thank you so much for your help. Come share dinner with us tonight and I'll play for you all properly." Komali said rushing off leaving Toba and Rashaad to continue their own holiday together.

By the time Steffan returned from helping with the infirm he returned to a transformed room. Candles burned on the table, four plates were set out with a covered dish of food the fire was burning merrily and they had company. Rashaad and the music teacher Steffan had found to replace his lute strings.

"What's all this?" Steffan asked and Komali smiled.

“Good news and surprises. Sit and have dinner first.” Komali said and Steffan just smiled and sat and Komali dished up the dinner.

“So what’s the Good News?” Steffan asked his insatiable curiosity getting the better of him and noticing quite good chemistry between Rashaad and whom he now remembered was named Toba.

“We have picked up a traveling companion it seems.” Rashaad began smiling and taking Toba’s hand. “Toba and I are... We will be taking vows before we set out again.” Rashaad set and Steffan cheered.

“Oh that is wonderful news. Congratulations! A toast to your new happiness, may it always shine like Mane’s Moon.” Steffan said holding up his glass of mulled cider and everyone drank to the toast.

He laughed as he set down his glass. “I can see Mane had other reasons to require us suddenly to stop our journey here. Time for you two to bond.” Steffan winked and Toba chuckled.

“Mane always has agenda’s he will never tell you fully about. What God ever tells you everything?” Toba replied and Steffan chuckled.

“Very True. Very True.” Steffan said as they ate dinner and Toba helped Komali clear the dishes before she moved Steffan to the comfortable chair in their room by the fire and she settled at his feet and pulled out a beautiful little lap harp.

“Now my gift to you my love. I have nothing but music to give you today, I hope this pleases you.” Komali said and the minute she began to play for Steffan, his eyes misted over and he watched and listened enthralled until his eyes closed of their own accord to listen to heavenly music fall from Komali’s fingers.

Toba was sitting with Rashaad, curled up in the second chair together, also both sitting eyes closed to listen to the music. Komali’s music was the desert, full of spices and mysteries, heat and colorful silk tents shimmering next to an oasis covered in palm trees. Eating dates and drinking wine in the shade while women in veils danced.

When she’d finished Steffan took a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and just got on his knees on the floor beside his wife, took the harp from her hands and kissed her. “Mali, that was beautiful. You are magic on my senses.”

“You are pleased then with your gift?” Komali asked and Steffan smiled.

“Oh aye beloved.” Steffan sighed.

The rest of the evening was spent with Komali playing the harp, Steffan his lute, Rashaad a small hand drum and Toba his fiddle while they talked and sang and blended as a family beside the warmth of the fire together. All four fitting together seamlessly, not noticing Mane in the fire itself, smiling and listening pleased.

By the end of the long winter, Komali was definitely showing her pregnancy at four months and the small rounded swell in her middle continually had her husbands hand on it. "Steffan my stomach shines you rub it so much." Komali laughed as she tried to get dressed with her husband's hand in the way.

"For luck." He winked allowing her to finish dressing before they headed down for breakfast in the mess.

A routine had been established, every morning they met with Toba and Rashaad for breakfast before Toba went to teach classes, Rashaad went to drill young boys in physical activity to keep them healthy and active, Steffan did rounds in the infirmary and Komali found various activities to lend a hand in helping with herself.

Winter turned to Spring and so far nothing seemed amiss. Komali was nearing her seventh month of pregnancy and the weather was warm again for the most part. It had seemed Pumaton had ceased the search and while the gates of the order were still guarded and barred it seemed it was an unneeded precaution.

Until one afternoon, Komali was watching Rashaad teach a bunch of youngsters a game of kick ball in the courtyard when the gate bells rang and Komali's heart stopped to see twenty heavily armed men, Pumaton with them.

"I know you harbor Komali in your order! He is no flower and he is a murderer and thief and you will return him to me immediately!" Pumaton raged and Komali felt Steffan take her hand, rushing out to be with her.

"You disrespect The Holy Flower! You will turn back and leave the Messenger of Mane and the Bloom of Calanthe unmolested!" The Priest at the gate spoke and Pumaton laughed.

"Did you think a clever story and bleach in his hair would fool my men? Komali is no flower!" Pumaton laughed and Komali sighed and began walking toward the gate and Steffan gripped her hand.

"Are you crazy? Stay here!" Steffan said and Komali just turned and gave a rueful smile.

"I am tired of running and hiding and living in fear. He must see to believe."

“And have you killed? I think not Mali!” Steffan said and Komali just shook her head.

“He will not kill me, I am too valuable to be harmed or marked. I plan not on getting close, just to the gate.” Komali said taking Steffan’s hand. “Just stand with me beloved and give me your courage. Trust me.”

Steffan nodded, hating the very thought and grabbing Rashaad they flanked Komali as she stood in front of the wrought iron gates, facing Pumaton through the bars. Steffan to her right and Rashaad to her left. She stood between her brother and husband dressed in only a sleeveless pink shift that distinctly showed her very swollen middle from her pregnancy.

“Pumaton, look at me. The Komali you knew as a slave is dead. I have been reborn or rather returned to what I was born to be. I was born on the same day, on the same hour, at the same moment as Our Lord Calanthe. I am the mortal flower to herald his birth. Mane protected me in my youth, made me wholly male to guard me, knowing my fate as a slave would be cruel and he protected my womb from harm at your hands. He sent to me two men to watch over me. First my brother, whose loyalty and honesty have ever been his greatest virtues. He protected me at my most vulnerable, sheltered me when I wept, kept me from falling into soul despair.” Komali said and crowds gathered to listen and watch.

“Across the world he sent to me my drone. My healer, my lover, my husband and my soul. He came at my most desperate hour, saved me from the brink of death, brought my soul back from wishing for death. The hour had come to return me to my purpose, change me back into what I was born to be. You may have spoiled and harmed my male half, but my female half was still pure and unspoiled. Mane himself cleansed me of the sins you forced on my body, restored my true form and sent us out to hail the birth of his son. To fulfill what I was born to do. I am the first bloom of Calanthe, I carry his seeds to his birthplace, I herald a new god in the heavens. I am not your slave, I belong to no one but Mane, the mortal form of his only son Calanthe.” Komali said stunning everyone by reaching down and pulling the shift over her head. Her hair tumbling free the fall over her naked shoulders, showing her body to all.

Female breasts, a very pregnant middle and undeniable male anatomy below. All of it indescribably beautiful and in total harmony and if anyone doubted her dual gender as her dual voice spoke no one doubted now. “Komali is dead. Here stands Mali, Flower of Calanthe. Male and female in one. Servant of Mane, Messenger of Calanthe. Sister and Brother to Father Rashaad the Loyal, Wife and Husband of Father Steffan the Gentle.” Mali said her hands coming to her abdomen.

“But only mother to my child yet unborn. Pollinated I have been by my drone, the future seeds of Calanthe growing within me. I herald the Coming of the God Calanthe but my children will nurture his earthly blooms. This is my purpose. This is who I am. Turn back Pumaton, you own me no longer, you will harm me no more, you will never touch this body again; never sell it to be broken again. I refuse to fear you any more; I refuse to run from you. I belong to Mane and I always have.” Komali said Pumaton sputtered a moment, all his men staring jaws agape.

Steffan took off his outer robe and laid it around his wife’s shoulders, standing shirtless in his trousers. “You seen enough proof of my Flower’s words and it is the last you see of her. I will not let you have her nor will Rashaad, nor will anyone who has seen her or heard her song ever allow harm to come to one who comes from Mane’s moon garden. There are some things in life far too delicate and precious to be anything but cherished for the blessing they are. Mali is one of them, and to me, everything I cherish most. Harm my flower and even I who vowed never to harm, would break my vows and harm you in return. As any husband would do to protect the ones that they love. Mali is my flower and carries my child and spreads the word of my God. My purpose in this life is to protect her so that the bloom grows strong. I will not let anyone harm her and no one will take her from me.” Steffan said moving a possessive and protective arm around Mali’s shoulders, sheltering her close to his side.

“All my life I had to watch Mali suffer. First by my own mother, jealous that my father sired children on slaves he favored over her. It was never Mali’s fault, yet it was Mali who paid the price, beaten in her own children’s stead when they did wrong. A whipping boy and servant in his own home. A home he could never call his own, a father he could never call father a brother he could never call brother. In my childhood, it was always Mali there to help me when I fell, when I cried, when I was lonely. It was Mali who taught me what loyalty was. I had everything and was never grateful for any of it until I saw that Mali had nothing and was still willing to give me his meal when I was being punished unjustly. It was Mali who cried under the lash when I did wrong. Seeing him be beaten for my wrongs changed me, made me consider everything I did before I did it. He had such reason to despise me as a child and he never did. Older still and I watched my father squander his money on foolish business and gambling. I watched him sell his slaves one by one; fearing the time it would be Mali. I had to listen to my mother push my father into selling him, she the one making sure Mali did not go to a comfortable home, but sold to a brothel! I was horrified. He was still a child and I hardly old enough to understand what a brothel was myself.” Rashaad began, his eyes filled with real tears of pain.

“I vowed to Mane to follow him, to protect him if I could. I ran away from home and chased your carriage back to the city. I was too late; you had already sold him, a CHILD into the hands of the most vile, brutal, malicious and cruel bastard in the city. You could hear Mali’s screams even above the noise of the tavern. No

one did anything! A child was in agony and you ignored him, you let him get torn apart for money! You barely let him heal before you sold him again. Then again. A part of my soul died as every day yet another part of the Mali I loved died a little more. How I would try to comfort him until even my arms held pain for him to turn to. Until all I could see in his beautiful eyes was pain and emptiness. I would take him to the temple and hear him pray for nothing but death. All I could do was pick up broken pieces day after day and try to put them back together again, keep trying to keep Mali's soul from completely dying." Rashaad was angrily sobbing, his hatred of Pumaton evident in his eyes.

"For years I tried finding anyone who would give us safe passage out of the city. I was looking for any opportunity to get him away from you! Istanica is a cesspool of money, sex and greed. No one would risk helping me free a slave. Nevertheless, one man did, one man came and saw the pain, saw the sin, saw my desperation. One man loved Mali as much as I, one man who could never be tempted by greed, who would not rest thinking on how to free Mali. The man who could do what I could not. A man whose very hands speak of warmth and healing, of gentle support and strength. The hands that never strike, the hands that never take and only give. The man who healed the broken pieces of Mali's soul, Finally a man whose arms Mali did not run from in fear, the only person Mali could be comforted by, the only man to reach behind the wall that Mali cowered behind in fear and tore it down, freeing Mali from his emotional prison, Steffan." Rashaad said laying his hand on Steffan's shoulder.

"A stronger more powerful man than I. The only one that could save Mali. I knew I had met my true brother ally at last. Then Mane came, when at last we his chess pieces had moved into our positions on his godly board. Made me Priest of his order and bade me use my sword to protect. Restored Mali to what she was meant to be and sent us on our journey. My sword ever protects the Drone and the Flower and if you dare come again, I will cut you down. I am Mane's blade, that is my purpose." Rashaad said pulling out a very wicked looking scimitar and facing Pumaton with fierce determination.

Mali smiled up at first her brother and then her husband and then turned to Pumaton. "It is over Pumaton, the truth is known, and all is laid bare before hundreds of witnesses. Men and women not cowed by the greed rampant in Istanica. Those who do not fear death if they cry injustice. This is the real world, Good men and good women living good lives under the sun of Sol and the moon of Mane. Istanica may be corrupt and held prisoner by the rich, but here in Sol's gardens and in Mane's heart of love all are born free and equal. Istanica is but a small place in the grand scheme of things. When you are born in it, it seems vast and inescapable. Yet once one walks out it's gates and sees the truth unmasked, freedom once tasted is never given up again. Even you, so conditioned to having it all feel the loss keenly. Welcome to the world of your slaves. You are reduced here. No more the mighty master here. You have no power over me here; no one cowers at your feet here. No one CARES how much money you have or do not

have. You are nothing more than a greedy man and a foolish one. You know the laws of this land forbid slavery. Even Istanian is subject to those laws, but you laugh at them. Not for long Pumaton. You could not leave me well enough alone, your greed over my high price has erred your judgment.” Komali said pointing at the men and women of the village, angrily looking at him.

“The people have large voices, they carry miles and miles. Look at the men behind you in King’s army uniforms. Every village has a post, and you’ve just exposed a great Istanian secret to the King’s men. Did you forget there was a reason Istanian didn’t have a post? How the judges and council of the city feared the King’s ears and eyes in their world? Once they learn you’ve exposed the slave trade to the King’s Sworn men, you’ll be a marked man. They’ll kill you themselves. You cannot go forward and you can now no longer go back. Mane is all knowing, all seeing and all too clever for mortals. Everything he does has a purpose and every action he takes usually has several reactions. Sol the god of the land and harvest, Mane the God of Love for the people. By helping to free me by sending Rashaad and Steffan, he’s freed us all. Mane weeps when his people suffer, and Mane always answers prayers. Thousands have just been answered by your foolish pride and infinite greed in chasing me. This game is now over, Checkmate.” Komali said and smiled a truly triumphant smile.

Pumaton’s eyes showed true fear, Komali was right and he reared his horse to run when then King’s guard surrounded him.

“Oh I don’t think you will be going anywhere sir. There a quite a few questions we have for you.” The large Commanding officer of the outpost said literally pulling Pumaton from his saddle.

He held Pumaton’s rich garments as he bowed to Komali through the gates. “Holy Flower, might I meet with you later for a statement for the King?” He asked and Komali nodded.

“At any time Captain.” Komali smiled and felt Steffan’s hand squeeze her shoulder with pride.

As the Captain led Pumaton away to be questioned, his men looked frozen in their saddles. Until one finally came to his senses, climbed down from his horse, ripped his sword from his belt and threw it on the ground and knelt.

“Holy Flower, you’ve freed my mother.” He said weeping. The next joined him.

“My Rabia, we were going to be married when Judge Turbar stole her for his harem. I haven’t seen her in twenty years.”

The stories continued. Cousins, brothers, sisters, mothers, lovers there wasn’t a single man who hadn’t had slavery touch his life in one way or another. Common

men, poor men, forced to serve the very rich corrupted bastards who had hurt them just to survive in Istanina.

“Open the gates.” Komali said and walked out to these men to comfort them all in tears of her own. They kissed her hands and her feet and all of them grateful.

“Go home, all of you. Spread the word, herald the news give hope and find your loved ones and wait for Mane’s blessings to fall from the heaven’s.” Komali said and men took up their arms and horses and turned back west again.

The hunt was over; Istanina would fall and be reborn again. Komali clutched Steffan’s robe around her soldiers as she watched them vanish in the distance.

Then as she turned she crumpled like a leaf. “MALI!” Steffan raced to her side, she was clutching her stomach in very real pain and Steffan’s robes were wet.

“No. Oh, Mane no! It’s too early! The stress was too much, Hold on Mali.” Steffan looked horrified and frantic and scooped Mali up into his arms and ran as fast as he could carrying her to their rooms. Two of the other healers following him to aide a shocking turn of events.

Series Title: *Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*
(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)
Book IV: *Il Prete di Luna, Lo Schiavo di Carne*
(Moon Priest, Flesh Slave)
 Author: *D. Sanders*
Chapter V - "The Garden Grows"
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Komali was terrified; she'd been terrified since the moment Pumaton showed up, her fear an ache in her stomach she'd tried to hide. Her fears now utter terror. "Steffan! What's wrong with our baby? Tell me I'm not losing our baby!" She sobbed and Steffan just soothed her brow with his hand as he laid her down in their bed.

"Flower, it's just coming early. I can't answer that question beloved. This just happens sometimes when mothers are too stressed this late in term. You have to try dearest to relax, please, fear will not help love." He said, trying to stay calm for her even when all he wanted to do at the moment was panic himself as he moved to lay a sheet down to catch the blood and get her undressed again.

Seven months was dangerously early and so very few born that early survived. He would not tell her this, he didn't want to think about it himself either. One of the other healers took Steffan's arms stopping him from working. "You will do no good as the healer here Steffan. Just be the husband now and hold her hand. She's terrified and needs you more as her husband than her healer this time."

"Aye." Steffan said moving to sit beside the bed to hold her hand. Mali was sobbing, her contractions violent suddenly. "Mali, Mali look at me love. Focus on my eyes dearest." Steffan said and Mali's eyes were once again filled with agony and fear, just like the first time Steffan had looked into them. It stabbed his heart clear to his soul.

"Mali, dearest do not fear beloved please. It's alright, these are normal labor pains, just early but not abnormal." He said softly, smoothing her hair back from her face and kissing her temple. She clutched his hand in hers and every contraction she gripped harder. Reminding Steffan there was still male strength in her as his fingers felt like they were about to break in half.

He reckoned he rather deserved it considering he wasn't the one in labor and it was his fault she was after all. Poor trade off for Mali considering.

"Hurts, By Mane's Crown I never thought it would hurt this much!" Komali wept her whole body felt on fire.

"How close are the contractions together Mali?"

"What do you mean? It's constant!" Mali groaned and Steffan leaned over to look at her cervix.

“RANDEE! GET OVER HERE SCREW THE WATER! THE BABY IS CROWNING ALREADY!” Steffan yelled and the other healer raced over.

“She can’t have dilated that quickly!”

“Tell that to the baby! She must have been in labor since this morning and just didn’t realize it! The stress just accelerated the labor, her contractions are constant, the baby is coming right now!” Steffan said turning to Mali. “Push Mali, push hard dearest it’s almost here.” Steffan said and Mali’s face contorted in pain, Steffan’s fingers were totally deprived of circulation and his knuckles on fire as she squeezed and pushed.

Mali let out a half moan half scream when Randee cheered. “The head! We have the head! Push Mali! Almost!”

“That’s it flower, one more good push!” Steffan said, crying himself seeing the baby emerge, head, shoulder and then completely, taking its first breath and wailing.

“It’s a boy!” Randee said cutting the cord and quickly wiping the infant free of blood. Steffan was laughing and sobbing, Mali was laughing and sobbing and everyone took a collective grateful breath as Randee first handed the baby to Steffan who through his tears laid him on Mali’s breast.

“He’s so small, but he looks alright.” Steffan said checking toes and fingers and listening to a healthy cry that indicated his lungs were thankfully developed enough for a premature baby.

“He’s so beautiful.” Mali wept, running fingers over white blonde hair. A mix between her white pink and Steffan’s golden blond. His skin too a mix of his parents. Not quite as dark as mother and not fair like father. He had what looked like a natural healthy tan and rich caramel skin.

“Aye.” Was all Steffan could choke out, his son, his beautiful perfect wonderful baby boy. All he could do was weep into Mali’s hair. His shoulder shaking with overwhelming emotional euphoria and relief.

Mane and Endymion appeared at the end of the bed smiling and Calanthe appeared in bed next to Komali his little face inches awake from the baby. He leaned over and kissed the baby and then grinned up at Komali.

“First seed of my flower. He can play with me.” Calanthe said and Komali smiled.

“Aye.”

“But not yet Calanthe. Mommy told you already, you have to let him grow a little first.” Endymion said leaning over to look at the baby.

“This is actually his fault Komali. Calanthe got impatient waiting. Twenty years old for a God is still as you can see quite infantile. Now say you’re sorry Calanthe for scaring your flower and drone.” Endymion said sternly and Calanthe pouted just like a four year old.

“I’m sorry.” He said and Steffan smiled.

Mane came over and kissed the baby. “Health to you little one. I mend the early damage my son caused. Lungs healthy, heart stable. I was so busy watching the three of you; I wasn’t watching the imp this morning. He’s been watching the bud in the garden and I told him not to touch it until it bloomed on it’s own and he did anyway when I wasn’t looking.” Mane said glaring at Calanthe who pouted even more.

“I’m sorry Daddy.”

“You’d better be Calanthe. You could have killed the baby and I told you this before. We will talk later my son, go now with your mother, you’ve seen him now. I need to talk with your flower and drone.” Mane said still firm and Calanthe nodded and vanished with Endymion and Mane turned and grinned like a youth instead of a God.

“At least yours when he disobeys does not cause world catastrophes! I am sorry and I am so very proud of you.” Mane said kissing both Steffan and Komali affectionately.

“Thank you my Lord Mane.” Steffan replied as Mane took the baby from Komali’s arms and cradled him as he laid a gentle kiss to his brow.

“You will grow much faster than Calanthe, but for a time at least they will have fun. Even Gods as children like to play and he’ll keep Calanthe out of mischief and occupied. It is lonely for Calanthe having no playmates which is why he was so impatient for his arrival. He will be so with all your children, but be assured this will be the only one he rushes to birth.” Mane said handing the baby back to Komali.

“Just how many are we talking here?” Steffan gulped and Mane laughed and winked.

“Oh, a few.” Was all he said and Komali sighed but smiled.

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted with your son. You did wonderfully today and Komali, I must say you are the first mortal to figure me out so accurately. Gallus

always got close, Endys obviously knew everything once he awoke to his soul, but you surprise even me. Such a smart little flower you are indeed. I always knew you were dearest. Rest well and be happy." Mane said leaving and Steffan and Mali settled in bed together gazing at the baby now sleeping peacefully against his mother's chest.

"What do you want to name him?" Mali asked and Steffan toyed with the baby's soft hair.

"Callan? In honor of Calanthe's flowers? It seems appropriate." Steffan said and Komali smiled.

"I like that. Endys the moon flower and Callan the blushing moon. So very appropriate. Callan it is." Mali smiled and settled in Steffan's arms as they welcomed their first born son into the world.

Rashaad was sitting in the chair beaming at the tiny newborn in his arms. He refused to hold his nephew standing up; he did not want to drop something so small out of his large hands. Toba was sitting on the arm of the chair making faces at the baby and getting the newborn to hold his finger. "He's so tiny, but what a good grip!" Toba said smiling and Rashaad grinned.

"Sword grip he has. I will teach him." He said and Mali looked horrified where she lay in bed recovering.

"You will not Rash! What on earth will he need sword play for?" Mali said and Rashaad smiled.

"Good activity keeps you in shape, and the best defense is a good offense. When traveling bandits care not if you are Priest, lord, lady or commoner, all priests should know how to at least defend themselves from attackers."

"He's got a point Mali." Steffan said where he was mixing up some diaper powder for the baby at the table.

"Who's to say he'll be a Priest when he grows up?" She asked and all three men in the room quirked eye brows.

"Considering who his parents are and that a little God is just waiting to play hide and seek with him? Like he's not going to be a lunar priest?" Toba asked and Mali sighed.

“You do have a point. I concede to logic. But ONLY enough swordplay to keep him fit and able to defend himself. I don’t want him running off to be a soldier one day!” Mali said and Steffan chuckled from his chair.

“Mali, I think we have just a little while before we need fear him crawling let alone running off to join the King’s Army love.” Steffan winked.

“I can’t help it, I’m his mother.” Komali said and Toba took a turn holding the baby.

“And I’m uncle Toba and I get dibs on teaching you music Callan. Good grips also make good lute players and with your daddy being such a fine player himself and your mommy too I’m just itching to see what talent you inherited.” Toba grinned carrying him back over to Komali.

“I don’t think he’ll be lacking for teachers that for certain.” Mali said looking at three good role models in the room. Callan would never lack in guidance, not with all the love he had in the room currently.

A few weeks later, two steeds were traded for a nice family wagon and a pair of sturdy plough horses and Mali, Toba and Callan rode comfortably in the back amidst Toba’s belongings while Rashaad and Steffan sat on the driver’s bench and they waved farewell to Evaarsmead and began their journey east once more the first week of summer.

All along the way, news of their coming preceded them and they were welcomed with joy in every village they stopped in and by mid summer, everyone turned out with cheers and celebration when they at last made it home again at their journey’s end.

The order had a huge welcome home banner up, a feast had been prepared and Toba was in heaven finding a large music department with a Priest glad to retire and turn the reigns over to Toba as the next music teacher. All of his new students turning out to play at the celebration.

Rashaad was welcomed with awe and wonder, the strange foreign lunar brother as big as an ox with intentions of “whipping young boys and girls into shape” as he put it. Steffan all in favor of daily physical activity being a requirement for good health.

By the end of the first week, Rashaad was an instant favorite. Young novices running around in just their short pants playing vigorous games of kick ball and dodge ball. With some of the older students eager to learn real lordly sword play and signing up to learn from a master swordsman.

Steffan was thrilled to be back in his large infirmary with all his apothecary needs at his disposal. He was glad to be back teaching again advanced healing methods and best of all, just being a father.

Callan at four months old was a bright and cheerful baby who always had a smile when Steffan walked into the room. His huge pale blue eyes a shade darker than Mali's and a shade lighter than Steffan's always lit up like stars when Steffan came in sight.

Most of Steffan's time was always spent in the infirmary which was attached to their family rooms and Mali and Callan were always near while he was working and most times Steffan worked with Callan sitting in his lap, his father telling him which herbs he was working with and Mali always laughed when Steffan did this.

"You do realize he does not have a clue what you're saying daddy." Mali would tease as she tended to tasks to help Steffan in his job, only daily going to the lake in the morning to tend the large Callan blossoms that now surrounded the Lake.

She'd planted the single bloom on the lakeshore the first day they'd arrived and by the end of summer the blooms were everywhere, thriving in the moist soil.

When she wasn't tending the flowers, she was Steffan's assistant and caring for Callan and thriving herself as Wife, Mother, lover and Holy Flower. Steffan had never seen Mali look so radiant.

"He'll understand eventually love. Best to start early I say." Steffan only chuckled and continued his dissertation on the proper mixture of baby bottom powder while Callan made a mess with talc on the table top.

Steffan had all he'd ever hoped for in life. He had Mali, the most precious, wonderful creature he'd ever had the joy of loving to call his wife. He had the profession he loved, he had great friends and family and Callan, nothing compared to the joys of fatherhood. Watching a life he'd created with Mali flourish. Hearing him laugh, seeing him smile, rocking him to sleep at night, watching him play on the blanket on the floor and seeing a little of himself and a little of Mali blend perfectly in the tiny boy in his lap.

This was what his journey had been for, his calling and his mission, the events of his life that lead him full circle and back home again. It was the simple things in life that meant the most to Steffan and he had them all in abundance.

Mali smiled as she took the baby off Steffan's lap and leaned over to kiss her husband.

"It's nap time and you promised Toba you'd go over that piece of music he'd written this afternoon." Mali reminded as she sat to rock the baby to sleep and Steffan nodded.

"So I did. I'll bring back dinner from the mess on my way back." Steffan said standing and Mali smiled as she rocked.

"Thank you. After Callan goes down for his nap I promised Brother Gaar I'd go over and proofread his manuscript about Calanthe for the archive."

"You are the expert Flower." Steffan winked and Mali laughed.

"But not a writer. Gaar is far better at writing it down for historical purposes than I am."

"He's better than everyone. Be prepared for a novel."

"I am." Mali winked and as the baby drifted off and Steffan headed out to see Toba, Mali sat down to read.

She read her life as she'd told Gaar and he'd penned. All of it seeing a lifetime away anymore. The Komali that had been was no more, only the Flower remained. At peace with herself, in love with her gentle husband and beautiful son, and finding a place to truly belong and call home at last.

She had come into full bloom, the Holy Flower tending Calanthe's first earthly garden and teaching the novices about him. She had a wonderful man to curl up with at night and share her life and love with and she had her son.

All the pain in her life worth going through just to watch a life she'd helped to create sleep peacefully in his crib sucking his thumb. A life that would have never been born had she given up to despair and achieved the death she'd longed for once. That angelic boy, so innocent and pure would have never drawn breath had she failed to live. Mane was right, to all things there are a purpose and you may not see your miracles now, but if you have faith and believe, eventually all prayers are indeed answered to those who wait.

END