

“Deceptive Beauty”

A Wielder and Wellspring Story

Author: D. Sanders

Introduction - Of Wielders and Wellsprings

The world of Holst was a wild and untamed land full of dangers from the skies, the land and the seas. The only protection the people had were the ones called Wielders, those few men born with the talent to wield the magic of the land to protect and shelter. Wielders were always men, in the history of Holst, not a record existed of a woman being born a wielder. Wielders could use the energy in the land to shape magic and battle the beasts and natural dangers that threatened the land and its people. A Wielder could use any source of natural power to manipulate magic to protect the people of Holst. A Wielder was the most revered profession in the land and all Wielder's were highly respected and given rest, food and lodging in any village he chose to protect, even if they never stayed long and had wandering feet while young and unmated and looking for his perfect Wellspring of power.

A Wielder became even stronger when his Wellspring was found. A Wellspring could be either gender but was usually always a woman and they naturally and instinctually were born capable of drawing out energy from the land, collecting it like a pool within them from which their Wielder would drink. A Wielder and Wellspring pair would always be drawn to each other and more often than not, once they connected together as a pair, would never part from each other. Love was a foundation that made stronger bonds between a Wielder and his Wellspring.

It also was quite genetically common for a Wielder to be highly possessive of his Wellspring. Once he found, connected and mated to his match a Wielder was likely to kill a man over just looking at his Wellspring. It was a side effect of their deeper bonding of power. Once a Wielder supped from a matched Wellspring, he was a man possessed and would never lose the desire to drink of the power his match fed to him. It was more addictive than a drug and more potent than an aphrodisiac.

Male Wellsprings were rare and it was even rarer they bonded permanently to their Wielder. Male Wellsprings were often kept at hand just as an extra source of power in emergencies from which many Wielders could drink from simultaneously during battle. Male Wellsprings often died young, drained of power and used until the breaking point. It was accepted truth and it was the norm that a male wellspring was kept apart from others in his village, knowing that his duties were to the people and the land and not to himself. They did not socially interact; they were objects and tools and made no familial attachments. Knowing their fates were short lived and the fewer people to love him, the fewer would be hurt when he died.

After all, Wielders were always male and the Wellspring he was fated to partner with in life would be more than a source and bolster of his power, but a mate to bear his children and keep his bed warm at night. Very few Wielders would choose a male to be his Wellspring and certainly no children could be bred from such a pairing. It was imperative that Wielders and Wellsprings passed on their powers to their offspring; it was a hereditary trait that needed to be carried on for survival.

Male Wellsprings being the exception, they were not encouraged and in fact forbidden to mate. They were a genetic anomaly and it was not a desirable trait to be passed on to children. If a Wielder's son was born as a Wellspring and not a Wielder he was immediately given to the temple to be raised apart, severed from his family at birth. It was an insult to the Wielder's pride to have a son that did not have his gifts and rather than get attached to a child that would die before the parents, the parents gave him to the temple scholars to be raised and taught his duties to the people.

He was village and public property, he was less than a man, he was simply a village commodity, a source of power for wandering Wielder's to use at will and drain dry.

It was the way of Holst for centuries and not to be questioned but to be accepted...

Ulgar and Marnie took refuge in an abandoned old barn off the side of the road about five miles from the nearest village, the baby was coming early and caught them off guard. Marnie would not have made the village, their first child decided it wanted to be born quickly and Ulgar held his beloved's hand as she strained and pushed. They were both young and both terrified but joyful as the baby was born and wailing immediately.

Then both their hearts stopped and joy turned to fear. "No, oh gods no." Ulgar said as he held his newborn son, so beautiful and so very much a wellspring.

"Ulgar!" Marnie was hysterical and he just held her and the baby close and cried.

"I'm not giving our child to the temple! I don't care what the law says! He's our son!" Marnie was grief stricken and Ulgar comforted her.

"No Marnie, we won't but if we raise him like our son they'll take him from us. No one must know he's a boy. We'll raise him like a girl, we'll hide it Marnie. No one has to know the truth." Ulgar said as he looked down toward the fragile infant, his heart aching with the thought of never seeing the child he and Marnie created together. His precious son.

“They’ll know in the city, we can’t go back.” Marnie said, clutching her baby to her breast, feeling him settle to suckle and ripping her young heart out in the process.

“You’re right, we’ll stay here then. I’ll build us a house here, we’re close enough to the village I can be useful as a resident wielder but far enough away we won’t have visitors. We can do this Marnie, we have to or we’ll lose him.” Ulgar said and Marnie nodded through her tears.

Therefore, they stayed. Using the barn as a home and little by little Ulgar rebuilt it into a proper home for them to live peacefully in hiding and they named their son Umi, a sexless name to keep suspicions from rising. They made sure no one was near when they changed his diapers and dressed him in girl’s clothes and when asked Ulgar would proudly beam about his ‘child’ refraining from ever confirming the gender outright. Let other’s assume by appearances, Umi was his firstborn and he was not about to let go of his beloved Umi.

As time passed, fears were relived as Umi grew into a rather fey child. His bright blue eyes brilliant and clear, his raven black hair shimmering almost blue in the sunlight and his ivory skin like moonshine. He was a beautiful child and when dressed as a girl looked like one. They kept his hair long and braided like a girl’s and with him looking so much like his mother everyone just assumed he was a girl.

They stressed to him early on, the minute he could understand, the importance of him never telling anyone he was a boy. Umi was smart minded and understood that if he wanted to stay with his Mama and Papa and not be taken away he had to pretend he was a girl and never tell a soul he was indeed male.

He didn’t play with the other children from the village unless Marnie could supervise constantly, they needed to make sure no one, especially innocent children who didn’t realize that telling the truth sometimes was wrong, found out what lay hidden under Umi’s frilly skirts.

Ulgar and Marnie had two more daughters and the family was happy together even if Umi, now fifteen was getting increasingly frustrated and sad.

He’d grown up beautifully and his face had retained a very feminine look inherited from his mother. His frame had also remained lithe and delicate like all wellsprings which helped add to the illusion he was a girl. However, it ended at illusion and the older he grew, the less contact he made with the villagers. Especially the boys. Like all wellsprings, he was attracted to males and Umi knew the bitter truth if he wanted to remain free, no one must know what he kept

hidden underneath his skirt. So the less contact he made with boys he liked, the less likely they'd learn that 'the prettiest girl' in Haversmead was in fact 'the prettiest boy' in Haversmead.

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Act I - A Crossing of Paths

The bell of the local bakery rang and the baker looked up and smiled when Umi walked in. “Pretty as ever lass. What can I get you?” He asked and Umi smiled.

“Mama said I could pick out a cake for my birthday.” Umi said, his seventeenth birthday was that day and the baker smiled.

“My word it is your birthday. Seventeen yes?”

“Aye.” Umi smiled looking into the display case, his long braid tumbling over his shoulder as he inspected the cakes.

“You like strawberry yes?” The baker asked and Umi nodded.

“Aye. However, Mama and my sisters like chocolate best. I like that too so I want to pick something everyone likes.”

“Such a kind lass. It’s your birthday, it’s your favorite that matters today sweetheart.”

“I know, but I don’t mind really. Chocolate is just as nice. I’ll take this one.” Umi said pointing to a small chocolate cake in the case and the baker took it and placed it in the box and then took the small strawberry one made for a couple to share and put that in it’s own box.

“The little one is my gift to you dear. Have a wonderful birthday.” The baker said and Umi beamed.

“Thank you so much!” Umi cried paying for the chocolate cake and then shuffling off in swishing skirts with both cakes and the old baker smiled as he watched Umi hurry off down the street.

“Won’t be much longer now your wielder will come following his nose and take you away my pretty. Every boy in the village pining over you and you so determined not to give false hope. Such a good girl, your Papa must be so proud of you.” The baker commented going back to his counter to work his wife coming out from the back grinning.

“Umi’s such a sweet girl. A bit boyish in figure, but with that pretty face I don’t think her wielder will care much.”

“Not every man likes his lassie ample bosomed and you know bonded pairs Bessy. They fit like two peas in a pod they do. Whichever young lad out there is destined for our Umi, he’ll be the sort who likes his ladies lean, mark my words.” The old baker winked and his wife chuckled.

“Lean? Love you can see daylight through Umi she’s so skinny. All of Ulgar’s girls are like their Mama. Eat every cake in our shop if they wished and not gain an ounce.

“Wellsprings love. They’re all tiny little things they are. Have you ever seen one not as petite as Marnie and her girls?”

“Nay and all sweet as pie. All Marnie’s girls take after her they do. Poor Ulgar is outnumbered by women.”

“I don’t think he’s complaining love.” The baker said as the next customer of the day walked in, a handsome young stranger, in his very early twenties, his clothes threadbare and his wielder insignia on his chest faded from the sun.

He was all bright smiles as he came in and his blond hair was bleached from the sun as much as his insignia patch was on his chest. His hair was fairly long and shaggy, it had been months since it had seen a pair of sheers and his boots were worn from long hours on the road but he looked vibrant as he strolled over to the bread case.

“Can I help you Master Wielder?” The baker asked and the youth just smiled.

“Just call me Cole and I’m just looking for a nice loaf to go with the cold meat I just picked up from the butcher’s. I like dark bread.”

“Then I have just the thing Cole sir. Like pumpernickel? Bessy just made a batch.”

“Adore it.” Cole said walking over to the counter as the Baker handed the still warm from the oven loaf over to the young wielder.

“What brings you to Haversmead?”

“Just wandered in about an hour ago, thought I’d take a day to rest up before hitting the road again. Do you have an Inn in town?”

“Nay, but Ulgar is our resident Wielder, lives about five miles out of town. They always put up on the road wielders and wellsprings; they have a spare guest house for the purpose. You just missed his daughter, but you might catch her on the road back. Umi will take you home with her.

Cole shivered, the last thing he wanted was an unmatched wellspring to deal with. He was exhausted with the same ritual in whatever town had a wielder resident who had an unpaired daughter at home. They were all nice enough girls and Cole just felt bad knowing he was a non-breeder and girls sparked as much fire in his loins as the thought of washing his loins with sandpaper.

He liked girls as his friends but not his lovers and he knew darn well the possibility of finding a male wellspring for his own was as remote a chance as him bedding a girl. Especially considering for the past hundred years every boy wellspring born had been packed off into temples and drained dry long before they had a chance to bond. Cole was resigned to a life as an unmatched Wielder; he entertained no false hopes or dreams. They only served to depress him.

The door chimed again as he stood at the counter and a beautiful girl walked in laughing. "I forgot the bread I came in for too." Umi said and the baker grinned.

"Umi! Just the lass I need. Cole, this is Umi, Ulgar's daughter I mentioned. Umi this lad here could use your father's guest house for the night." The baker said and Cole was rather taken aback at his own reaction to the girl when she turned and smiled. She was exceedingly beautiful and was perhaps the only girl in his life ever to kindle a spark of interest.

Her own reaction shocked him even more, not a hint of flirtation or anything more than friendly behavior. "That's what papa built the guest house for. He knows well the road can be hard on poor feet. He and Mama spent five years as a wandering pair before they had me and settled. Just follow me Master Wielder, I'll take you." Umi said collecting the bread in addition to her boxes.

"Happy Birthday Again Umi." The baker waved as Cole followed her out.

"Thank you!" She waved and Cole smiled.

"It's your birthday? Happy Birthday." Cole said and Umi smiled as they walked down the road together.

"Thank you Master Wielder." Umi replied and Cole grinned.

"I hate that. Call me Cole please I can never get used to being called Master. That's my father."

Umi laughed lightly, her voice rich and low, almost too low for a girl's range. Falling from alto into almost a tenor really, it was rather sultry unconsciously.

"You sound like my Papa. He prefers to be addressed by his name too. We should stop and tell him you'll be at the house when he comes home, he's just over in the courthouse." Umi said turning down the path to the small single room

courthouse where Ulgar was hearing a dispute over the boundary line between farms. Cole and Umi stood at the back of the room and when the case was decided Ulgar looked up and smiled at his 'daughter' and then quirked an eyebrow at her young companion.

"Papa. Cole here just arrived and I'm taking him over to the guesthouse." Umi said walking over to his father and indicating they had a guest and Ulgar smiled and extended his hand to his young peer.

"Welcome to Haversmead Cole. The guesthouse is yours to rest in as long as you require it."

"Thank you. I've been on the road from Waysmeet for a fortnight and sleeping in hay sheds, it's appreciated."

"Don't I know it? Marnie and I spent a good many nights freezing our jacksies off in hay sheds and barns. Hell we had Umi in one seventeen years ago today." Ulgar said and Umi laughed.

"We still live in Papa." Umi said and Ulgar turned loving eyes to his son and just cupped his chin with his strong hand.

"Aye. Wanted to give you a good home we did. Happy Birthday Dearest." Ulgar said kissing Umi's cheek and Umi just smiled, the love between parent and child very warm and made Cole miss his own parents slightly.

"Thank you Papa. We're off see you later." Umi said and Ulgar nodded and went back to work as Umi and Cole resumed the long walk back to Umi's home.

"You and your father are close." Cole remarked and Umi nodded.

"Aye. My father is the best of men he is, never a day he let us go without. He turned that old barn into a house for Mama and my sisters and I, we're very blessed to have him in our lives."

"You really were born in a barn then?" Cole asked and Umi nodded.

"Aye. I decided to come early and caught mama off guard before they could make Haversmead. I can be impatient at times." Umi said and Cole laughed.

"Obviously. You have sisters too you said?" Cole asked making small talk as they walked and Umi nodded.

"Aye. Margarie is fifteen and so pretty and Mimi is five, she was rather, ah, unexpected." Umi said cheerfully and Cole nodded.

“So was I. All my brothers were grown and out of the house when I came along too. Mother thought she was going through the change of life and here I came along instead.”

Umi laughed. “Bet she was surprised.”

“Not as much as my Father. Here he thought he’d have a nice retirement and instead had to chase a toddler around all over again.” Cole said enjoying the conversation for a change. It was so very nice to just talk and not have to be on guard around an unmatched wellspring. She gave off no signs of interest beyond friendly conversation, she was genuine and real and it was Cole amazed with himself that he was the one interested, in a girl no less.

“Ah, but children are fun too. Mimi is a joy in our house; she’s always getting into something amusing. Last week it was a turtle from the creek she came lugging home wanting to make it a pet. A turtle and a snapping one no less. We were all surprised it didn’t hurt her.”

“Goodness gracious. I was like that myself. Brought home a were feral cat hissing and screaming and my mother nearly had heart failure.”

“I just brought home regular strays thankfully. Dogs, cats, a rat once. Mama didn’t like the rat much but at least it couldn’t shred me or snap my hand off.”

“Just give you illness which is worse sometimes. A rat?”

“I was a strange child. We live so far out from the village I didn’t play with other children much. Any animal was a good substitute to play with.” Umi said a hint of sadness in her voice which Cole noticed and cocked his head.

“You sound lonely.”

“Sometimes, but I keep busy enough. Papa not only runs the courthouse, but not long after I was born he planted some grapevines and we make wine too for the village now. I’m fairly busy most of the day. I have today free from chores because it’s my birthday.” Umi said grinning and Cole smiled.

“But you’re running a chore now.” Cole said and Umi laughed.

“Not really. Since I was buying a cake for tonight it’s not really a chore to buy the bread too since I was walking to the village anyway.”

“Good enough reasoning I suppose. So that’s what’s in your box?”

“Aye.” Umi said patting her bounty.

“My Mother used to make the best strawberry cake in all of Holst. Every birthday she’d make me one.” Cole said and Umi turned and smiled brightly.

“Strawberry is my favorite too. I bought chocolate because that’s what Mama and my sisters like best, but the little box is strawberry, the baker gave it to me as a present I’ll be happy to share it with you later, it’s too big for one person.”

“You don’t have to, but thank you for the gesture.”

“My pleasure and it’s my birthday and I get to choose to share or not.” Umi said winking with mirth and Cole held up his hands.

“Defeated by logic I am. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. However, thank me after the dinner I put you through. I got to pick tonight’s menu too and only Mama and I really care for Liver and Onions. I said I’m a strange one, I like what most don’t”

“Not all. I’m already salivating with the thought. I love liver and onions, I picked the right day to land on your doorstep unannounced.”

“So you did!” Umi laughed as they reached the little picket fence that ran around the house and Umi led him inside where Cole met Marnie and Umi’s sisters and was taken to a small house in the back yard. A single room with it’s own bathroom. Perfect for a traveling single or bonded pair to rest very comfortably in for a few days and recover from road weariness. The large house itself looked very much like a cozy converted barn and the guest house had probably once been the old hay shed.

Margarie was out in the back hanging washing and while she and Umi looked very alike, and both like Marnie, Margarie was vastly different in demeanor. Just as nice as Umi, just as charming but her immediate flirtation was evident while Umi’s was nonexistent.

Umi left Cole to get settled in his room while he went off to attend chores he technically didn’t have to do that day and Cole sat at the small table in his room to eat his lunch and Margarie kept making excuses to come over. Did he want any wine or beer? Towels for the bathroom, did he need anything more to go with his lunch? All personable and sweet gestures but obviously designed to be used as excuses to come talk to him.

Cole was lost musing at the table. Margarie was a pretty girl, with curves in all the right places that probably had boys lining up in town to court her. Umi on the other hand in Cole’s opinion was just so much more beautiful. Her voice low and sultry, her frame slender and almost like a boy’s frame. He hadn’t noticed the

lack of breasts at first, but when he caught sight of Umi standing next to Marnie the differences became clearer.

Umi stood just a little taller than her sister, her chest very flat where her sister's was not, her hands larger and then had Cole not been looking so closely and scrutinizing Umi he'd have missed the most crucial difference, an Adam's apple. Only boys had Adam's apples in their throats.

"By the gods, Umi's a boy!" Cole gasped to himself and then laughed uncontrollably. No wonder he was attracted to her, because it wasn't a "her" at all. Umi was a boy in a dress and a beautiful, tantalizing, glorious boy at that.

Now all of Umi's behavior became clear. He was in hiding, pretending to be a girl. There was no way Umi was going to flirt or make advances because the minute someone lifted up his skirts the truth would be plain as day. "Gods balls no wonder you seemed so lonely. What did they expect? You'd go your whole life celibate?" Cole asked and then his brain supplied the answer.

Yes.

Celibate in a temple or celibate in a loving home. He could see now exactly why Ulgar and Marnie had raised their son as a girl. To protect him from the laws that would have cast him into a temple to live as an outcast. At least here he was loved and would live and not be abused until he died. Cole sank into his chair deflated. He couldn't let on he had figured out the truth, it would be a death sentence for Umi and Cole genuinely liked him.

More than liked him, he wanted him. Once the realization dawned on Cole that he was attracted he knew. The first "girl" to ever catch his fancy, they shared tastes, they shared a similar sense of humor, the first wellspring he'd ever been drawn to specifically and now the sudden desire to catch Umi alone and kiss him breathless and more. Cole just smiled lazily.

Oh for an excuse to tap into that well of Umi's to see if they bonded was going to drive Cole mad. Whatever the case, Cole had a feeling he was going to stick around Haversmead a few days at the very least and hope for that excuse to come up and if it wasn't a bond a discreet liaison at the very least. Umi was perhaps the most deliciously beautiful boy Cole had ever seen and it was going to take all of Cole's willpower not to jump Umi the first chance he got.

Umi chose that moment to knock on the door and he poked his head in smiling. "Dinner's almost ready Cole if you'd like to join us." Umi said and Cole smiled and locked eyes with Umi as he stood.

"Absolutely." He said as he walked over without dropping eye contact. It was Umi who blushed and looked away first.

Umi looked flustered for a moment before he collected himself and regained his air of indifference as he led Cole into the main house for dinner, where everyone was already seated to indulge in the birthday feast.

Margarie had purposefully set up the extra chair next to hers, but all the better in Cole's opinion this placed him directly opposite of Umi with an unobstructed view and Ulgar was at the head of the table in-between them and he was laughing as he passed the wine bottle around the table.

"Just yesterday you were a baby. I swear where does the time go?" Ulgar said smiling at his son who smiled back as he filled his glass with wine and then poured Cole's glass for him before passing the bottle to Margarie who gave him a little glower. She apparently had wanted to serve Cole and Umi gave her a small apologetic look, he hadn't meant to step on her toes, he had just reacted cordially to a guest and nothing more. Well not exactly, he liked Cole.

He more than liked Cole. He was young, handsome, and friendly and had been a joy to talk to that day. Usually Umi was very nervous around attractive young men, because he knew he was attracted to them and he didn't dare let on to any of them he was. Because if the boy in question was a non-breeder like himself there were going to be problems. The first being they'd assume he was a girl and just politely decline the advance and if they did accept they'd know he was a boy too and Umi would be packed off into a temple before he could blink and his parents fined for breaking the law on top of losing their son. Umi's desires weren't worth the risks involved.

However, Cole was different. For the first time in Umi's life here was a man who didn't make him nervous even though he was attracted to him. Cole was genuine and honest and quite witty. They'd had a long conversation on the walk back home and it had been as natural as breathing. He'd learned quite a bit on that walk about the guest in their home.

He was almost twenty-one and unmatched which was odd for starters and Cole had just brushed it off with a shrug. He had been working as a wandering wielder since he was seventeen and enjoyed it even if at times it was exhausting work. They shared similar tastes in food, in humor, in music and overall had gotten along fabulously from the moment they met by chance in the bakery.

Umi was glad he'd forgotten the bread and had to go back, the subsequent walk home had been lovely and for a change the traveling wielder hadn't made any advances. The last one that had come had been young too and although hadn't bonded it wasn't for lack of trying. He'd been scratching around Umi's well and when the connection wasn't made had simply just tried wooing Umi to his bed, which Umi politely declined with the acceptable excuse that 'she' wanted to wait for her own wielder. Which the last man accepted gracefully with a smile and

stated that when her wielder arrived he was going to be a lucky man to have her on his arm as his wife.

Umi sighed, he was as likely to find his wielder as he was going to find he really was a girl and tomorrow his manhood would be missing from between his legs. Neither likely to happen.

Cole was the first man, not to assume and just immediately try to tap his well and bond to him. He respected personal space and didn't cross boundaries uninvited. He was the first to just talk to him and not overly gush about how pretty 'she' was with false flattery with hopes of wooing 'her' to his bed.

In fact, it seemed Cole wasn't interested in girls at all. Margarie had been all but throwing herself and him all afternoon and that was when Umi made the startling realization. Cole was probably a non-breeder himself, which meant...

Umi's hand shook as he tried passing the bowl of onion gravy over to Cole and he dropped it as Cole's fingers brushed his own and he pulled back as if bitten. The gravy spilled and Umi flustered raced to get a towel.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I'm so clumsy sometimes." Umi said coming back with the towel to clean the mess off the table and Cole just smiled.

"Just an accident Umi. There's more on the stove dear." Marnie said getting up to help and refill the gravy boat.

Margarie looked positively livid but was hiding it well as she fussed over Cole making sure none had gotten on his clothes.

"I'm fine miss Margarie, just the table seems to have been affected. It happens. I can be a right bull in a china shop myself. I have a tendency to have horrible elbows that knock things off shelves if I'm not careful." Cole said with a wink at Umi who just smiled embarrassed.

This however only served to fuel Margarie's petty jealousy and she frowned at Umi who just turned away with the soiled towel.

Umi returned to the table and just picked at his meal, his stomach in knots and Ulgar laid his hand against Umi's forearm.

"Are you alright dearest? You look pale." He asked and Umi just smiled.

"Fine Papa, I guess I'm just not that hungry tonight."

"And your favorite too, that's not like you." Marnie said coming over to test Umi's brow for fever.

“Really I’m fine Mama. I’m not sick. I think I’m just tired. I moved those kegs for you earlier and they were heavy.”

“I told you not to do chores on your birthday honey and your father could have moved those out of the way. Honestly Umi, you worry me sometimes love. Can’t sit idle a minute.” Marnie said and Umi just shrugged.

“I’m sorry to be so out of sorts this evening. Would anyone mind if I asked to be excused? I think I just need a little fresh air before bed.”

“Certainly love.” Ulgar said a little worried, Umi never acted like this and certainly never left his favorite dinner untouched on the table.

Margarie however looked happy as Umi begged leave politely and then grabbed a shawl from the hook by the door and went for a walk.

Cole’s eyes followed and then he turned to Ulgar. “Is Umi alright alone? It’s getting dark outside.”

Ulgar smiled. “Umi won’t go far, she won’t leave the fence line and I have barriers up around it she’ll be fine.” Ulgar said and Cole looked relieved which Ulgar noticed and then he met his wife’s eyes and she smiled and just turned back to her dinner.

They were no fools, there was something different in the air tonight and it involved a handsome young wielder and their son. Cole’s face had been genuinely concerned and his eyes kept straying to the door as he too just picked at his meal where before Umi had fled he’d been eating with relish.

They noticed the compatibility of nature, they noticed the stolen glances and the tension Margarie was putting into the mix. Perhaps Umi’s wielder had come for him at last, it was quite obvious Cole was only being polite to Margarie and there was no interest there. The interest lay solely on Umi and it showed to bonded pairs who could see a bond forming a mile away.

“We had some fox tracks out by the chicken coop last night. Don’t know if they’re were feral or not.” Marnie said and then sent privately to her husband. ::Urge him to follow Ulgar. I know you see it too.::

::Aye. He’s about as non-breeder as they come if Margarie can’t get a rise out of him at all with all her wiles. Are you sure you think it’s safe?::

::Aye. Umi won’t go far if it’s not a bond, trust him. If it is a bond Cole is itching to follow Umi right about now and now is the perfect time to let them see for themselves.:: Marnie said and Ulgar nodded.

“Foxes eh? I’d better go check then, I don’t want Umi out alone if there are beasties out there.” Ulgar said making a move to get up when Cole got to his feet so fast Marnie had to stifle her laugh.

“I’ll go Ulgar. It’s the least I can do for thanks for putting me up and feeding me so wonderfully. I’ll go check your barriers and make sure Umi is alright. Finish your meal sir.” Cole said and was out the door before Ulgar could object and Margarie pouted.

“You can stop pouting right now young lady and you can stop flirting with Cole and giving Umi dirty looks. I want you to leave them both alone is that clear?” Marnie said and Margarie looked stunned.

“But Mama...”

“Don’t but mama me. Not every boy likes being flirted with he’s humoring you.”

“But Umi is a BOY! This is silly why should I have to stop he might bond to me! Certainly not to Umi!”

“I am not hearing this. I raised you better than that Margarie!” Ulgar said angrily and slamming his fork down.

“But Papa!”

“Don’t you dare Margarie! Who told you boy wellsprings cannot bond? I certainly did not and neither did your mother. The only reason we pretend Umi is a girl is so he’s not taken from us. Would you like to go live all alone in a temple and be used until you die? Would you wish that on your brother? There are men and women out there in the world who are born and choose to love people of the same gender. Like Umi, which means there is at least one wielder in this world meant for him. Who are you to determine who is and who is not for Umi?”

“But...”

“I don’t want to hear another ‘but’ from you Margarie. Cole is interested in Umi and not you. You leave them alone and if it’s a bond it’s a bond, if it’s not at least Umi gets at least one boy showing him attention over you for a change. Face it young lady, Umi is just as human as you are and has the same needs and he backs away in deference to you time and again and has spoiled you because of it. How about for once you show him the same courtesy?”

Margarie looked taken aback and just nodded, her father was right and she was acting like a spoiled brat and she knew it. It took harsh words to have her see how stupid she’d been acting and she’d apologize to Umi later.

“Deceptive Beauty”

A Wielder and Wellspring Story

Author: D. Sanders

Act II - When Lies Unfold

Umi was walking the fence when Cole appeared at his elbow. “Mind if I walk with you Umi? Your mother mentioned foxes out and about and I’d just feel better if you weren’t alone in the dark. Beasties are drawn to wellsprings.” He said and Umi cocked his head.

“Foxes? She didn’t tell me about them. Where did she say she saw the tracks?” Umi asked curious why he hadn’t been told.

“Near the chicken coop she said.” Cole said falling into step beside Umi as they headed over toward the coop.

“I don’t see any tracks. I think my mother is going blind.” Umi said walking around the coop and Cole smiled. The devious woman had set them up.

“Better safe than sorry then I guess. Let me just check your father’s barrier here.” Cole said purposefully avoiding tapping into Umi for power and tasting the power of the land itself that Umi’s presence with his mother and sisters purified.

It was sweet like wine and Cole could see distinctive touches in the land. A constant comfort which was Marnie, a young novice touch which was Margarie, an even more innocent and pure line which was Mimi and then a powerful, strong and steady force, masculine in strength in comparison to the others. This was Umi’s power in the land. He was much stronger than the others and the whole area was strongest with his signature touch.

Cole turned to Umi and smiled and extended his arm. “I’d still like to escort you Umi if you don’t mind. I’d rather you be safe.”

“You don’t have to Cole. I really will be fine, I don’t leave the yard at night I know it’s not safe for wellsprings out in the open after dark. You’re awfully kind, but please don’t trouble yourself on my account.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I very much enjoy your company and I’d like to talk to you more if that’s alright. If you’d rather be alone I do understand.” Cole said and Umi sighed and refrained from taking Cole’s arm but nodded ascent to company.

“I like your company too Cole. I enjoyed our conversation earlier as well. I don’t mind if you walk with me.” Umi said as they continued along the fence, Umi clutching the shawl around his shoulders on the chilly spring night and Cole removed his light jacket and placed it over Umi’s slender shoulders.

"It's chilly and you're shivering." Cole said and Umi just smiled and held the jacket around his shoulders like a shawl.

"Thank you, but won't you be cold?" He asked and Cole shook his head.

"This is warm to me. I come from way up north where it snows nine months out of the year. I'm fine, please keep my coat." Cole said and Umi just nodded as they continued to walk.

"You're very nice. Margarie likes you." Umi said and Cole nodded.

"I noticed. I like her too, but not as she'd like me to. For starters she's a bit young for me and well to be honest and straightforward Umi, I'm a non-breeder." Cole said letting the proverbial cat out of the bag and watching for Umi's reaction. It was well guarded but evident Umi already knew the truth.

"I see." Was his only comment as they walked still highly guarded.

"Umi, can I ask you a question?" Cole said stepping forward and turning to face Umi where they paused at the back of the fence, the house a distant speck in the distance, they were very much alone in the darkness and only the full moon gave them light to see each other by.

Umi nodded that Cole could proceed with his question, his shivering now having nothing to do with the chilly night air.

"I already know the answer Umi, I just need to hear you say it. You're a boy aren't you?"

Umi's eyes shot up and widened with fear and he backed up a pace involuntarily. "W-what m-makes you say that?" Umi's voice shook, his terror very real and Cole just reached out and took his hand.

"Adam's apple. Only boys have Adam's apples Umi. Please don't be frightened, I'm the last man on earth who wants to see you hurt. I won't tell a soul your secret I just have to know the truth. I know you must be because I have never been attracted to women in my life and here I am hopelessly wanting to bond to you. Please, tell me the truth Umi."

Umi just nodded, tears falling down his cheeks as the truth came out to the very first person other than his family. It was like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders as he silently confessed and all his pent up anxiety released in a torrent of relief filled tears.

He didn't know why he trusted Cole with his secret, but he did, implicitly. Cole was everything he'd ever dreamed of and wished for and when Cole's arms pulled him into a comforting embrace Umi sobbed uncontrollably into his chest. Cole's hands softly stroking Umi's long hair in comfort as he held him close.

"I knew it. Umi, please I am begging you to let me touch your well. May I please?" Cole asked and once again Umi could only nod and he dropped his guards and Cole was awash in brilliant light.

The connection was immediate, the moment Cole's inner self touched Umi's rather than just a transfer of power to master it was a blend. Like two hands reaching out to each other and fingers entwining together. They sank to their suddenly weak knees in shock on the ground.

Umi let out a strangled sob of joy which was echoed by Cole who was now clutching Umi to his chest crying himself. "I knew it. I knew you were mine Umi! I always thought I'd be alone forever, I really did. By the Gods I never dreamed I'd find you beloved. I will never cease thanking your parents for keeping you safe, My beautiful Wellspring, my husband." Cole wept into Umi's hair, unfettered joy welling up from inside and bathing Umi in emotional euphoria.

"Cole, oh Gods Cole!" Umi shook from head to toe, disbelief warring with a happiness so complete it threatened to explode from within.

Cole's hands were suddenly on either side of Umi's face and he was being bathed in kisses. His hair, his cheeks, his forehead. Kiss after kiss and when they reached his lips flames erupted between them and Umi's mouth was plundered until he was gasping for breath and found himself flat on his back in the tall grass. Cole was on top of him and burying his lips in the juncture of Umi's neck and shoulders sucking and kissing sensitive flesh and a warm hand sliding up Umi's legs and under Umi's skirts and finding solid purchase and squeezing lightly, making Umi gasp and arch into the no longer forbidden touch.

Umi was ignited and every patch of skin Cole touched burned. His kisses, his hand that was stroking a hard erection with purpose and murmurings of love in his ears as Cole nibbled delicate earlobes which blinded Umi to everything but the man loving him right there in the tall grass.

Umi's skirts were shoved up and his undergarments ripped away and a warm mouth encased him and Umi choked back a cry of passion, biting the back of his hand to keep quiet as Cole brought him quickly to the edge of sanity and then tumbling into madness as he came.

He was still shuddering as he watched Cole carefully spit the semen into his hand and then use it to further touch Umi in places no one had ever seen, let alone touched before.

He was over sensitized and his well was wide open and blazing with power as Cole used his fingers to invade and stretch a willing and pliant lover. He looked to be struggling for control, his brow was beaded with sweat and he was panting for air and his free hand was tugging at his belt and shoving his pants around his knees. His own erection so red and swollen it looked painful.

He hooked Umi's legs over his shoulders and without anymore preamble, penetrated deeply with a forceful thrust. Umi sobbed, it was a sublime pain to feel and his legs were suspended on strong shoulders as Cole no longer able to control his maddening needs made love to him mercilessly.

The slap of skin on skin, Umi's moans of ecstasy and Cole's grunts of effort and disbelief as he muttered Umi's name with every thrust drove the hurricane of sudden bond reaction frenzied mating. Their bond demanding immediate copulation and consummation. So long they had both thought it would never be and now that it was, it was driving them to cling to each other in desperation and jubilation. The joy demanded to be reveled in, the love demanding to be acknowledged, their desires turning into instant passion.

Umi's hands were gripping Cole's forearms tightly where he was trussed up and immobile as Cole held him submissively beneath him and loved him for all he was worth. Never had it been like this, never had he so desperately wanted to claim and own a person like he wanted Umi.

He was suffocating in pure power, it robbed him of breath like fire robbed a room of air. He was loving an inferno of power and his own powers intensified ten fold. He felt alive and exhilarated and nothing on the earth was going to take this wonderful, beautiful creature out of his arms. This man was his, body and soul and any man foolish enough to try and take what belonged to Cole was going to feel his wrath.

Umi's body shuddered again and his whole body constricted like a python around Cole's strained manhood and Cole let out a gut wrenching sob as he shuddered and jerked in release. Filling Umi with his seed as he came unlike he had ever done before. Spasm after spasm rocked Cole's body in what seemed a never ending culmination of release. Until finally they ended and Cole collapsed on top of Umi and kissed him breathless once more.

"I love you. I love you. I love you." Over and over Cole repeated those three magical words Umi thought he'd never hear from anyone other than his parents and he was sobbing with equal joy and his arms were wrapped around strong shoulders repeating the same words to Cole in return.

It took a long time for them to come down off their happy and very much sated cloud of joy and Cole propped himself up on his elbow and ran a blade of grass down Umi's lovely nose.

"You are the best thing to ever happen to me Umi. I have never in my life been so enraptured to the point I'd do that with anyone so suddenly. When they say bonds are incredible and impossible to deny they meant it."

"Aye." Umi chuckled smiling up at Cole with such love in his eyes Cole wanted to weep again.

"I made a mess of you. I'm sorry." Cole said and Umi just sighed content.

"Clothes wash Cole. I don't care at all. That was beautiful." Umi said sitting up and smoothing his skirts down again, sticky with their love making.

"Aye, it was. I'm pretty sure we lit up the night and your parents already know we bonded, but I think we should go back and tell them and celebrate more than just your birthday beloved." Cole said pulling his pants back up and handing Umi back his underwear before they stood and hand in hand strolled back to the house.

Everyone was still seated at the table when the door opened and an exceedingly happy and very ruffled couple came into the room, Cole's arm tightly around Umi's shoulders.

"Mama, Papa we have an announcement to make." Umi said turning his smile and his eyes up at Cole who smiled back so brightly he lit up the entire room.

"We can tell by the grass in your hair Umi even if we didn't feel the whole area ignite when you both bonded. Congratulations." Ulgar said with a wink as Marnie got up to hug them both.

"I knew I liked you for a reason Cole. You promise me to take good care of my son." Marnie said and Cole hugged her back tightly.

"That's a Vow. I love him very much and I did even when I thought he was a girl which sent me for a loop since up until this morning I always thought I was strictly a non-breeder doomed to be alone for ever. It seems however I was mistaken and I didn't suddenly change sexual persuasions over night. He's wonderful and perfect and I'm still in shock at the moment." Cole said wrapping his arms around Umi's shoulders from behind and squeezing. Umi's hands coming up to rest lovingly on Cole's forearms. They did make a lovely couple and like all bonded pairs, fit each other like hand in glove. Instantaneous compatibility and comfort.

“You both then sit down and finish your dinner then since you both left unable to eat. I’m fairly sure you’re both hungry now.” Ulgar said with a wink and Umi blushed.

“Papa!”

“Face it son, I’ve been in your shoes. Your mother and I aren’t strangers to what bonds do to you. Sit down, we’ve got celebrating to finish here damn it. I want cake.” Ulgar said and Umi laughed and walked over to lean over and hug his father’s shoulders and kiss his cheek.

“I love you Papa.”

“I love you too squirt now sit and get all sappy on your papa later.” Ulgar winked and Umi and Cole took back up their chairs facing each other again and sharing blatant smiles of affection as they returned to their meals. Cole reaching over to warm the plate again with a wink.

“Power comes in handy when faced with cold liver.” Cole winked and Umi chuckled.

Cole then turned to Ulgar. “I cannot thank you enough for what you’ve done in keeping him safe and hidden all these years. We owe our bond to you.”

“I wasn’t about to give my son to a damn temple. Those laws are a crock of shit and any wielder or wellspring that willingly gives up their children aren’t right in the head! I doubt I’m the only father who tried to hide his son, I was just successful and I thank the gods every day I was. Let them fine me now, I don’t give a rat’s ass. There is nothing they can do to Umi now, he’s free and praise the gods he is.” Ulgar said holding up his wine glass.

“To my Son’s birthday, may he have many, many more. To our new son in heart Cole who is welcomed in our home and hearts always and to you both, may you both be happy always.” Ulgar said and Marnie raised her glass.

“Here! Here!” She cried and everyone drank except Mimi who just fidgeted in her chair.

“Can we have cake now?” She asked plaintively and Marnie laughed.

“Yes, now you can have cake.” Marnie chuckled getting up to retrieve the chocolate cake and bring it to the table and she cut four pieces and then set the box with the strawberry cake in-between Cole and Umi with a wink.

“Doubles as a bonding day cake too I daresay.” She said and Umi smiled.

“Aye. We’ll eat it later.” Umi said still finishing his dinner and looking up at Cole who was just staring shamelessly at him from across the table.

“Aye, later.” Was all he said turning back to his own meal with a smirk firmly in place.

Margarie turned to Umi. “I’m sorry I was giving you dirty looks Umi. I feel horrible now.”

“Don’t be Margarie. I didn’t think I was going to bond to Cole either. It’s alright.”

“No, it wasn’t. I was mean and I’m sorry to you both.” She said and Cole leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Umi’s right Sister Margarie. Don’t fret over it, there was no harm done. You couldn’t have known I was a non-breeder or that your brother and I would bond. It’s over and I hope you can settle for another big brother instead.” Cole said and Margarie smiled and turned to hug him.

“Aye. More than settle. I truly am very happy for you both.” She said and Umi smiled at her and just finished his dinner.

Mimi obviously didn’t care one way or the other she was absorbed in her cake and Cole just enjoyed watching the youngster get more cake on her face than in her mouth.

After dinner, Cole grabbed the strawberry cake box and a pair of forks and a bottle of wine while Umi disappeared upstairs for a moment and came back down with a small bundle of clean clothes and a nightgown and kissing his parents and sisters goodnight he followed Cole out the back door.

Once inside the guesthouse, the couple first shed soiled clothes and headed into the bathroom together. Umi was absolutely breathtaking in the nude. His frame lean and slender but very masculine when not in a dress.

His chest was flat and toned, his belly firm and taut, his arms and legs sinfully shapely and his round, smooth backside irresistible and Cole ran an appreciative hand over the smooth round flesh as Umi bent over to turn the taps on in the tub. Umi chuckled as he stood up again and turned to face Cole.

“You already abused that my love. I need this bath I am sticky and sore.”

“And gorgeous. I’m sorry for loving you so hard, I couldn’t control myself.”

“I’m not complaining Cole. It was wonderful, truly. I was just as lost to the bond as you were back there. Come soak with me?”

“Oh aye. I don’t intend on keeping my hands off you much tonight.” Cole replied climbing into the tub with Umi who rested against Cole’s chest as they soaked in the hot water together.

Cole urged Umi to lean forward and firm hands covered in soap massaged Umi’s back. “Oh that’s nice.” Umi purred and Cole smiled.

“I know. Now just tilt your head back, I’m going to finally loose my hands in all that wonderful hair of yours my midnight beauty.” Cole said and Umi complied and melted in bliss as Cole’s hands washed his hair.

Once clean, Umi had them switch places and it was Cole’s turn to melt under his wellspring’s hands. Slender fingers massaged his scalp and back and when they came in front to wash his chest Cole groaned.

“Like this do you?” Umi asked and Cole tipped his head back to rest on Umi’s shoulders and he smiled.

“Oh Aye.” Cole said taking Umi’s hand under the water to show him the reaction he was having to being pampered. Umi just squeezed and grinned.

“Were beast.”

“Oh Aye.” Cole agreed and accepted the kiss Umi bent over to give him.

“Let’s take this to bed.” Cole said climbing out of the water and grabbing towels they dried off as they walked over to bed where more languid lovemaking occurred and Umi was laying disheveled on his back in the pillows looking amused and exhausted all at the same time.

“I just had a bath and I’m dirty all over again.” He chuckled and Cole just got up and retrieved a washcloth from the bathroom and walked over to the bed and ran the rag over Umi’s chest and between his thighs.

“Easily rectified however when in a proper room and not in the middle of open air.” He said with a wink, running the rag over his own genitals before tossing it back into the bathroom sink and rejoining Umi in their bed.

“I love you.” Umi sighed rolling into Cole’s arms as they snuggled together in bed.

“I love you too dearest and I’m bloody knackered. You?”

“I’m about five minutes away from dreaming. I say we have cake for breakfast.”

“Here I agree with you. Goodnight beloved.”

“Goodnight love.” Umi yawned and they both were asleep not long after.

“Deceptive Beauty”

A Wielder and Wellspring Story

Author: D. Sanders

Act III - Freedom in Truth

Cole awoke the following morning to the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Umi was sitting up, leaning over him and tickling his nose with a feather smiling. His dark hair unbound and falling in messy wild waves over his narrow shoulders and his bright blue eyes were filled with amusement and sweetest affection.

Cole smiled lazily and stretched still laying on his back. “Good morning beautiful.” Cole said through a yawn and Umi leaned over and kissed Cole affectionately.

“Good morning Beloved. Did you sleep well?”

“Like the dead. You?”

“I'm your fellow corpse then. Do you like coffee?” Umi asked standing and pulling on a robe.

“Aye.” Cole said sitting up and dragging a hand through his tangled hair.

“I'll go get us some then, I'll just be a minute.” Umi said heading back to the house to retrieve coffee as Cole got up and visited the privy and just pulled a clean pair of pants on just as Umi returned with a carafe and two mugs and he set them on the table and poured.

“Sugar and Cream?” Umi asked and Cole shook his head.

“No, I like it black.” Cole said and Umi just poured the cream and sugar into his own mug as he sat at the small two person table as Cole sat opposite and took a good hearty drink of the bitter brew and sighed. He loved strong coffee in the morning to wake up.

Umi picked up a fork off the table and flipped open their cake box and filled the fork with a section of cake and held it out for Cole to eat. “Happy Bonding Day beloved.” He said and Cole smiled and accepted the bite and then picked up the second fork and repeated the gesture.

“Happy Bonding Day dearest.” He said feeding Umi a bite. The cake was lovely and light sponge with a hint of strawberry, very much like Cole's mother used to make and they fed each other until the cake was decimated and the coffee ran dry happily.

After their breakfast Umi stood and walked over to his bundle he'd brought out the night before and pulled out his clothes and began dressing.

"Can I ask probably a very stupid question Umi?" Cole asked as Umi tied the frock around his middle and Umi just nodded going over to find his brush to tame his hair.

"Do you actually like wearing dresses?"

"Gods no. I don't know how women stand it. My legs are always cold in winter and burning up in summer. I'm always afraid a draft is going to lift them and expose me to the world." Umi said sitting on the edge of the bed to brush his hair.

"Then for the love of the Gods let's go to town and rectify your wardrobe. I know I'd prefer to see you dressed as a bloke. I do rather fancy the fact you're all male underneath those skirts." Cole winked and the brush paused in Umi's hair.

"Do you think that's wise Cole?"

"Who's to argue Umi? We're bonded, not even the King could part us now. You have rights like any other Man, woman and child in Holst now. There is no reason to carry on with the deception anymore."

"True. Gods this will cause a stir when people find out though. I mean my whole life people have assumed I'm a girl."

"Well then they can un-assume. You are my husband not my wife." Cole said and Umi just smiled.

"True and I really would love never putting on another frock and running shirtless in the summer when it's hot."

"Then get your pretty toes in shoes and let's go into town my lovely." Cole said finding a clean shirt and pulling it over his head.

Umi quickly braided his hair and rather than twisting it up around his head like he normally did in a feminine style, he left it dangling behind his back and looping his arm through Cole's they headed into town.

The men's clothier had just opened when the door chimed and Cole and Umi walked in and the tailor behind the counter smiled up at Cole. "Can I help you sir? Good Morning Miss Umi." He said and Cole just grinned.

"Aye, you can help me and my lovely husband here. It's about time he was dressed as he should be." Cole said and it took a moment for the words to register and the tailor's eyes widened.

“Umi?”

“Aye. I’m not a girl sir, I’m a boy.” Umi said and the man sank onto a stool speechless.

“You’re not serious.”

“Do you see or have you ever seen breasts on me? Do I talk like a girl? I’m just a wellspring and we’re all small. I am sorry for all the deception but it was the only way to live here with my family. Cole and I bonded, so I’m free from the laws now that would have put me in the temple and I want to stop lying to everyone. Please help me.” Umi said and the clothier just smiled a little manically.

“I’ll be jiggered. Why didn’t I notice sooner? Adam’s apple staring me straight in the face.” He said and Umi nodded.

“Because no one noticed when I was little and you’re used to seeing me dressed like a girl.”

“Aye and boy or girl, you’re still our Umi aren’t you?” He said and Umi smiled.

“Aye.” Umi said and then the man did another double take.

“Wait a minute, bonded? You’re bonded?”

Umi laughed now. “Aye.” He said looking up at Cole who was leaning against the wall looking thoroughly amused.

“Well by gum. Congratulations! Come on, let’s get you measured then. Just step behind the curtain and take off the frock lad and we’ll get to work.” The man said and Umi stepped behind the curtain and disrobed to his under garments and stepped out again and the man swallowed.

“Sure enough, all lad under there. Lordy boy you’re skinny.” The man said coming over with a measuring tape.

“I’m a wellspring. We’re all puny.” Umi said and Cole chuckled.

“Hardly puny. Short yes, skinny yes, I’d not go so far as puny. Not after what I saw of you last night beloved.” Cole winked and the tailor chuckled as he measured Umi’s inseam.

Cole was right, Umi may have been short and skinny, but there were rather definite attributes he’d kept hidden well for the past seventeen years. He was

certainly not puny where it counted and there were going to have to be adjustments made to trousers to accommodate said attributes.

“I’m going to ask a question you probably have no answer for lad. Which side do you dress on?” The tailor asked and Umi looked puzzled.

“Which side of the seam in your pants do you hang your tackle beloved.” Cole supplied the meaning and Umi laughed.

“Do bloomers count? The closest thing I had to pants and if they do, the right.” He said and the tailor nodded and then went and grabbed a pair of trousers off the wall.

“Try those lad, those should fit.” He said and Umi slid into the pants and smiled. They fit perfectly, even if just a little snug around his genitals. The tailor frowned and scratched his chin.

“Those will do for today I suppose. The waist and hips and length are fine in that size but boy you look like you have a pair of socks shoved down your britches. Are they too binding?” He asked and Umi adjusted himself and shrugged.

“Not too badly no, a little snug but nothing binding.” Umi said turning and looking at himself in the mirror. Shirtless and in his first pair of pants. Cole’s reflection was smiling at him in the mirror and Umi smiled back. “How do I look?”

“I think your ass is perfect in those actually. It’s a tight fit in all the right places. You’ve got a great body and I am shamelessly biased Beloved.” Cole winked and Umi chuckled.

“Beast.” Umi chuckled turning back to the tailor who was amused as he pulled down a sleeveless vest and shirt from the wall to match the trousers.

“Try those.” He said and Umi finished off the ensemble and Cole clapped.

“Perfect.” Cole said, loving the package. The black trousers and vest with a red shirt suit Umi’s midnight coloring perfectly. “Now all he needs is boots.” Cole said and the man had Umi sit and measured his feet then brought out a pair of black leather boots and socks.

Completely dressed Cole was positively salivating. “You are gorgeous my love. You look beautiful in red.” He said and Umi smiled at the compliment as Cole turned to the tailor.

“Can you alter him a half a dozen more pants too. He needs a completely new wardrobe and you’re right about the crotch, these will do for the day, but

everyday not so good. I'd like to get him completely outfitted." Cole said and the tailor nodded.

"I'll get him sorted for you Master Wielder. Leave it to me. With Umi's coloring he's a joy to dress in bright colors. I'll work up a nice variety for you and have them ready by the end of the day. They are simple alterations." The tailor said and Cole nodded and picked up the discarded frock and walked over to the rubbish bin and shoved it inside ceremoniously.

"Good riddance." Cole said turning to offer his arm to his now obviously male Umi. "Shall we just wander about town a while as we wait for your clothes?"

"Fine by me. Its market day there's plenty to see." Umi said taking Cole's arm as they headed out. The tailor smiling as he went to pull clothes off shelves to alter.

"Prettiest Girl in town before and damn if you're not the most handsome lad in town now Umi. Your papa was a smart man to do what he done for you. I'd have done the same." The tailor remarked to empty air as he worked.

The market was setting up and people were already happily bustling about the town square as Umi and Cole wandered the crowd and it took a few minutes before people noticed and when they did all activity ground to a halt and people were blinking in disbelief.

"Umi is that you?" The old baker said from his stall and Umi turned and smiled.

"Aye." He said and the old man looked flabbergasted as his eyes traveled up and down Umi's form.

"By gum you're a BOY!" He finally exclaimed and Umi nodded.

"Aye. I am sorry to have been deceiving everyone. We had no choice." Umi began to apologize and the old man cut him off laughing heartily.

"Don't be daft Umi! It don't take much intelligence to figure out why your Papa and Mama had you frilled up like a lassie! Had us all fooled and I don't see how now that I look at you. Here Bessy and I just yesterday was a sayin' you had a right boyish figure for a girl. Seems the figure is just right for a boy." The old man winked and Cole chuckled.

"Aye. Perfect for a boy indeed my beloved is." Cole said and now the old man blinked again.

"You don't mean to say the reason for the sudden change is you're bonded!" He gasped and Cole nodded.

“Aye and I do believe you can claim we first met in your shop my good man.” Cole said and the Baker laughed and came out from his stall to hug Umi and Cole.

“Mark my words! Bessy and I was also a sayin’ Umi’s wielder should have come sniffing about soon. I should be a damn oracle I should! Congratulations!” The old baker laughed.

“Please stay a baker, your cake was wonderful. We shared it this morning for our bonding as well as my birthday. It was delicious.” Umi said and the old baker smiled.

“Glad to hear it. I hope you both are happy.”

“Very much so, thank you.” Cole smiled as others came over to offer congratulations to Umi and a boy about Umi’s age walked over sheepishly to offer his and Cole cocked an eyebrow.

::He used to try to court me, I think he’s feeling a little foolish.:: Umi explained telepathically and Cole nodded.

::Probably if he thought he was courting a girl aye. I’ll refrain from becoming the jealous husband.::

::You’d better, Andrys is harmless, and he gave up a long time ago on me.:: Umi replied with a smile and Cole nodded.

Once everyone got a chance to relay their well wishes, business resumed and Cole and Umi walked the merchant stalls out on the square.

Ulgar and Marnie arrived not long after with the girls in the family cart and the extended family walked the market happily. Marnie was grateful for Cole’s extra set of youthful strong hands to help load the cart with her purchases of a few large barrels of necessities like flour and sugar.

Mimi had taken to Cole and was currently riding her ‘big brother’s’ shoulders as the family headed out of the farmer’s market and into the shop stalls. Cole bought Mimi a little pinwheel when it caught her attention to indulge her and Umi smiled, Cole was the perfect big brother figure just being himself.

Mimi lost her lofty perch when Cole had to set her down to see about getting a new belt for himself as they hit the tanner’s stall. His old belt was getting very worn and the tooled leather in the tanner’s stall was beautiful. There was even a belt designed with the wielders insignia repeated in the design and was the one Cole bought for himself as he shed and discarded his old belt for the new one. Even the buckle was a blazing sun to match and Umi nodded appreciatively.

“We need to get you a patch for your breast Umi.”

“Mama has some at home for her own clothes we can sew onto mine later. She’s always got spares for both her and papa when they’re working.”

“Very true, people can’t tell by just looking at us our professions after all. I need new patches myself, mine are all faded and old.”

“Being out in the sun will do that. I’ll sew more on for you later, Mama’s got a whole box of them from the capitol in the sewing room at home.” Umi said as Ulgar came over to the tanner’s booth.

“Nice belt Cole. Tymdar always does marvelous leather work doesn’t he?” Ulgar commented and Cole nodded.

“Aye and if he had the moon pattern for the wellspring insignia Umi would have a new belt too.” Cole winked and Ulgar laughed.

“I always liked the wellspring insignia better myself. Ours is all gold and red and stands out like a bad sore on some of my vests. Marnie’s blue and white moon blends into most of her clothes.” Ulgar said and Cole nodded.

“Aye. However, ours need to stand out more really. I’d rather not have a target on my wellspring’s breast thank you very much.” Cole said and Ulgar nodded emphatically.

“Too true son. I’d rather not have eyes on my wife thank you. I like that the patch gives her rank and respect but I agree I like that it’s muted and not a bulls-eye target on her chest either. They were probably designed to be that way now that I think about it.”

“Aye. What wielder ever wants his wellspring in the line of fire? Thinking about it gives me the shivers and then some. I want Umi to have respect but I’ll be damned if I want every eye to be drawn to him with a big old red and gold marker on his chest.”

“Welcome to the world of possessive bastards Cole. None of us like our wellsprings to be ogled. I once broke a man’s nose just for commenting on her beauty. Granted he did it rather rudely. I think he said to his friend she was beddable and that’s as far as I let that comment go in my hearing. Before my fist was in his face. I still get all unbearable and nasty over her. I love her more today than when I was an eighteen year old boob in constant heat over her. It comes with the bond my son. We can’t resist them, it’s impossible. That first year we were bonded I don’t think she saw much of the land I had her skirts around her ears most of the time. It’s how we are son, we can’t help it and they don’t make

us stop because they know we need to strengthen the bond. They need it as much as we do too, they just aren't as aggressive as we are. We can be right brutal bastards when it comes to bond needs and even more brutal against those who we perceive as a threat to our wellsprings. Real or imaginary." Ulgar winked and Cole nodded.

"So I heard and so I am finding out. I have to keep reminding myself they are only looking at Umi because he's dressed as a boy now and they aren't after what my man keeps in his pants. That is mine and I'm not ashamed to say it either."

Ulgar laughed. "Precisely lad. Precisely." Ulgar said as Umi and Marnie stood over and off to the side with the girls looking at some of the tanner's leather pouches oblivious to Ulgar and Cole's conversation. The men rejoined their wellsprings and they continued shopping and enjoying the day together as a family.

They all had lunch purchased from vendors in the square and for the first time in his life Umi was open and carefree and unguarded. The change in him was noticeable. He looked alive and happy and the ever present cloud of timid fear was gone. In its place was a vibrant young man, in love and filled with joy. It was infectious and wherever Cole and Umi went that day they left smiles behind them in their wake.

Umi and Cole were enjoying a game of lawn bowls with a group of other young couples and the old baker came over and nudged Ulgar's arm.

"That was a right good thing you did for him Ulgar. Don't know of many men who'd go to such lengths for his child."

"Any father that didn't at least try Manter is no father in my eyes. He's my son and I wasn't about to let him go from me without a damn good fight." Ulgar said smiling at his son who cheered and danced when he made a good shot on the pins.

"You look sad though."

"A little Manter. He's not a child anymore and now letting go is going to be hard. I'm not the most important man in his life anymore." Ulgar said with a bittersweet smile as he watched the man who had taken his place applaud Umi's shots in encouragement.

"The curse of parenting Ulgar. You eventually have to watch them leave the nest. Love you they still do, but they all grow up far too fast and leave us to make lives of their own."

“That’s the hard part. Now I know how Marnie’s father felt when I took her off with me all those years ago. She was even younger than Umi. The same age my Margarie is now. God it makes me sick thinking tomorrow I could lose her too. The wellspring follows the wielder, they always do and that boy has restless feet. They won’t be staying long before Cole takes my baby boy away.”

“They come back though occasionally, never enough but they do. Like we visited our own parents much after we flew the coop?”

“Nay. Hind sight is always perfect Manter. Gods I need a drink.” Ulgar sighed and Manter just slapped his back.

“I have just the thing Ulgar, lets toast the young ones with good spirits.” Ulgar said pulling out a hip flask that contained liquid fire.

Ulgar and Manter toasted the children and just watched youthful joys before them. Remembering themselves when they had been that young and in love once.

After the game Cole and Umi went about making additional purchases for themselves. Their own travel cart and sturdy horse. Cole wanted to take Umi north to meet his own parents who were getting up in years. His father was already seventy years old and Cole wanted to make sure his parents met Umi at least once before they passed.

Their cart itself was a wonder and as soon as Cole saw it for sale he bought it. It was what his mother called a gypsy cart. It doubled as a mobile home complete with a built in comfortable bed inside and wood stove. It would be warm on cold nights and secure out in the open country. Most of the traveling troupes of entertainers used these sort of wagons as mobile communities and it would be perfect for a traveling young bonded pair.

For the inside of their new wagon Cole practically emptied his purse buying necessities. Blankets and pots and pans for their stove. Trunks to keep their supplies in and various other sturdy pewter dishes that would stand up well to rough use. They’d be more than comfortable while they traveled Holst together.

The main driver’s seat folded down and opened into the wagon itself. Easy for Umi to crawl in and out of the wagon if needed while driving. He could even remain inside and still be able to carry on a decent conversation with Cole as he drove their horse.

It was already agreed Cole would be driving, the wagon was large and the horse almost as large and Umi didn’t trust his strength to handle their wagon on his own fighting reigns. He had a difficult enough time driving the old mare and the family pony cart.

Ulgar was admiring the wagon. "By gum, I should have had one of these when I was traveling with your mother. This would have been so much better than our little cart and sleeping in barns. It's even a feather bed in here!" Ulgar said as he inspected the wagon.

"Look it's got a stove even! I daresay we'd still be traveling had we had one of these when Umi was born! This is heaven for travel work!" Marnie exclaimed as she opened cupboards and marveled at the compact home on wagon wheels.

"Mom, any more than two in here is a tight fit. Can you imagine all five of us crammed in here?" Umi said laughing as he stowed away blankets in the latched drawers under the raised double bed in the back of the wagon.

"Good point. For two boys this will be a grand holiday. You'll see more of Holst than either your father and I did." Marnie said as Mimi came flying in and flopping on the bed.

Umi chuckled and scooped her up in his arms. "Not a play house Mimi and you have dirty shoes my pretty." He said and Mimi just grinned.

"When are you leaving Umi?" She asked and Umi turned to Cole.

"A day or two. I want to make sure we have everything we might need and have a good rest before we head out north. I want to reach the northern ridge by mid-summer at the latest. Anything later and its ice storms and blizzards and I'm not driving a cart in that mess. We'll winter up north and then come first good weather head south to warm up again." Cole said rigging up the horse to drive the cart back to Ulgar's house.

"Sound like a plan. Well let's head home for supper then." Marnie said turning with her girls and Ulgar to their own cart and Umi climbed up beside Cole on the driver's seat. Cole clicked his tongue and snapped the reigns and they were off home, ambling comfortably down the road. The wagon ride smooth and the Shire horse's gait steady and sure.

"This will be wonderful this wagon. It already feels like home almost." Umi said and Cole smiled.

"Aye, it does and will probably be our home a long time Umi. Traveling is hard work, but rewarding. You get to see wonders everyday, places and people and cities and a colorful landscape. I love traveling."

"I can't wait to see the world with you. So many places I've always wanted to visit."

“And I’ll take you to them all beloved.” Cole said turning to smile at Umi who snuggled up against his side comfortably as they made their way down the road.

“Deceptive Beauty”

A Wielder and Wellspring Story

Author: D. Sanders

Act IV - Home is in Thy Arms

Cole came into the wagon looking frozen to the bone. Umi immediately wrapped him in a warm blanket and bolted the door behind his husband.

“Gods, it’s cold out there.” Cole shivered and held his hands out to the stove to warm them up again.

“How’s the horse?”

“He’s fine. I have him tethered and in a barrier to keep him warm and he’s got his nose in a bag of oats and looking fine. You know Sandy is tough he’s probably thinking I’m a pussy for shivering.” Cole winked and Umi laughed and held out a warm mug of black coffee for his mate.

“Well drink that and you’ll warm up soon enough.” Umi said turning to add more wood into their little stove, the wagon sublimely warm in comparison to the winter storm blizzard blowing outside. For two days Cole had just made camp right at the side of the road when the storm blew in suddenly and they were in the middle of nowhere about twenty miles from a village in any direction.

Thankfully they were fully stocked with supplies and there were plenty of trees nearby if they got low on wood. The ax was hanging above the door and Cole was grateful he’d bought the tool, it had come in handy on more than one occasion over the past three years Umi and he had been bonded.

Cole watched Umi putter about their small wagon. It was always neat and clean and everything kept in its proper cupboard and secured. Umi had a skillet on top of the stove and he was frying up sausages and onions for their dinner and the whole wagon smelled good as he cooked and just made sure Cole warmed up by refilling his coffee and adjusting the blanket around his shoulders. Over the years Cole had learned Umi was what he called a ‘fusser’. He was never satisfied until he was positive Cole was cared for.

Cole chuckled. “Baby I love you, I’m fine just cold but warming up nicely. You have it toasty in here.” Cole winked as once again for about the fifth time in as many minutes Umi checked his blanket.

“You were outside a long time Cole. I can’t help but worry about you either. Who is it that goes loopy when I’m out of your sight for five minutes? You call me the fusser but you have the honor of being the worst obsessive bastard in this relationship.” Umi winked and Cole chuckled.

“I know, I know. Maybe one day I’ll learn to let you go take a piss by yourself but I doubt it.” Cole said and Umi laughed as he flipped their sausage in the pan.

“So do I, but I’m not complaining dearest. I’m never in doubt you love me that’s for certain. How many sausages do you want, they’re almost done.”

“I’m hungry as a bear Umi. I’ll eat whatever you don’t baby.” Cole said standing and tossing his blanket on the bed and pulling down the table that folded up against the wall when not in use. They used the flour and sugar barrels as stools as Umi brought over plates and dished up their dinner.

Over the last few years living in the wagon they’d established a very good routine and lifestyle living constantly on the road. The wagon was their home and it was always warm and comfortable. Even if it was small it wasn’t really cramped but very cozy. It held all their possessions, supplies and tools. They ate, slept and worked out of their mobile home on wagon wheels.

It even held small personal touches. Like the bright blue fabric curtains over their currently shuttered windows that matched the bright blue down blanket on their bed and Umi had painted all the dark wood inside with a whitewash that made the small space look less like a cave and more like a cheerful little country cottage. He’d painted the cabinets with the wielder and wellspring symbols like artwork accents and overall it was Umi’s loving touches inside that made the wagon truly feel like home.

The outside surrounding always changed, but the inside was their comfort zone and their soft place to fall at the end of a hard day. The bed was large and comfortable and currently the stray pup they’d picked up was curled up in the center of it rather than in his basket on the floor.

Cole reached over and scratched the pup’s ears and he blinked open sleepy eyes and wagged his tale and happily accepted a bit of sausage from Cole’s fingers.

“You’ll spoil him Cole.” Umi half heartedly scolded. He wasn’t innocent of feeding the dog off his plate either. He was just a mutt, all mottled patches of gold, amber, auburn and white with one blue eye and one brown eye and had been just about the most adorable puppy Umi had ever seen when he’d found him. Mother and the other pups had been attacked by something unmentionable and the little pup was the only survivor and half starved for lack of mother.

Thankfully he’d been about six weeks old and able to eat out of a bowl and he’d been with Umi and Cole ever since. He was at that gangly stage of four months where ears and feet were larger than the rest of him which Umi found endearing.

He was a good dog and had already learned quite a few commands. He came when called, he was already housebroken or wagon-broken in this case and would go on command if required. He was also, like most animals, highly attuned to power with a natural and keen sixth sense. He knew when storms were brewing or when beasts were about before Umi did. On several occasions he'd awoken his masters with barking and alerting them the horse outside was in danger and being stalked and Cole would go out and deal with the beast and then reward "Patches" when he returned with a good old fashioned scratch and a bit of beef jerky they always kept on hand because it traveled well.

Patches had taken to riding on top of the wagon itself when they were on the road. He liked it on top and he'd sit behind his masters where they sat on the driver's bench and look over and between their heads as the scenery passed by. Cole installed a safety rail along the outer edge of the wagon just to insure Patches didn't accidentally slip off and hurt himself and he built a box on top that was padded like their bench so the dog was also comfortable and when he got tired could just curl up and sleep behind them.

He was their surrogate child really, they doted on the dog almost as much as they doted on each other. Neither of them was innocent where it came to spoiling Patches. He had become a fixture in the wagon in a very short time and where they went, Patches went always dutifully trotting along beside them. He never wandered far and if he was poking about outside exploring he was always within earshot and came running when Cole or Umi whistled for him.

Cole often laughed and remarked they had a male traveling sanctuary. They were male, Sandy their horse was Male and Patches was male. "It's a bloke's wandering paradise." Cole would joke and Umi would laugh and agree even if it hadn't been planned it had ended up that way in the end.

Patches hopped down off the bed and went and curled up in his basket on the floor, his chin resting on his favorite ball and went right back to sleep as Umi and Cole finished dinner and then scraped their leftovers into Patches bowl and he'd eat when he was hungry.

Umi collected the plates and went to the bowl basin they used as a sink and washed their dishes as Cole folded the table back up and moved the barrels they used as stools back against the wall. Then stoked the fire in the stove before he shed his dirty clothes into the basket they kept beside the bed for the purpose and pulled on his warm flannel night shirt from the drawer from under the bed. Umi followed suit as he dried and staked the dishes back into their cupboards and he shed his own clothes in favor of the long night shirt and crawled into bed with Cole for warmth.

In summer, they slept blissfully in the nude but in the cold weather they'd managed to still be intimate and stay warm at the same time. Night shirts pulled up and back down again easily.

Umi could read Cole like a book and it was a very rare occasion Cole wasn't amorous in their bed at night. He had to be very tired or very preoccupied with worry not to want to be intimate with Umi.

Tonight like most nights was not one of those occasions and the minute Umi snuffed out the lantern and settled in bed with Cole he was smothered in affection and it wasn't long before Umi's night shirt was shoved up around his arms, neck and upper chest and Cole was between his legs roughly making love to him. The entire wagon rocked when Cole was especially in the mood and Umi's moans filled the wagon.

Nothing was as nice when Cole loved him. Cole wasn't particularly romantic and foreplay lasted just about long enough for Cole to make Umi's sphincter ready to accept his lover but Umi didn't mind. The lovemaking itself took long enough to complete on it's own. Cole had the stamina of their horse and he took a very long time to reach his climax most nights. Umi would be boneless by the time Cole was finished marking his territory. Cole was romantic in other ways. Subtle ways.

The touch of a hand to Umi's cheek out of the blue in the middle of a conversation. The time Umi woke up to roses, presents and cake breakfast in bed on their joint anniversary and his birthday. Cole's always constant reminders of how beautiful he thought Umi was and how much he loved him. The term 'baby' that he'd begun calling Umi not long after they bonded and he used in private when they were alone together. The way he never failed to provide and protect. The random surprise of Umi's favorite sweets when they were in a village or that little wooden carving of a cat that sat on the small shelf by their bed Cole had whittled one day when they'd made camp in a nice copse of cedar trees. It was the small gestures that happened daily that were romantic to Umi. What made him love Cole beyond their bond and love the man he was.

Cole never yelled and never raised his voice in anger unless it was a threat against Umi and then he became a changed man and violent. No one laid a finger on Umi, Cole was that obsessive over his wellspring.

Umi would never forget the time just outside of Traverspool when they'd encountered bandits in the forest. They'd gone to investigate the reports that there were highwaymen robbing merchants and they were posing as merchants as they drove the wagon through. Umi back in a dress and pretending to be the wife and sitting alert beside Cole even if he was feigning sleep for appearances.

The group of about twenty men suddenly appeared around the wagon, not suspecting a wielder and wellspring pair. One man landing on top of the wagon

and his fatal mistake was reaching down to touch Umi with a leer. "We got a pretty one too here boys. Lassie we'll show you what real men can do." He said and it was the last thing the man uttered.

Cole flew into the worst rage Umi had ever seen and the man literally erupted in flames screaming and Cole stood and cast a curse that bound the others feet to the ground and Umi watched in horror as Cole used his gifts to castrate them all.

"No woman will suffer again. I bind you all to impotency for the rest of your natural lives and you are all under arrest by order of the crown for highway robbery and you can all stand there until the constables come and collect you." Cole spat and then left them all there rooted to the ground out in the open with no protection and he drove off again.

When the constables from Traverspool returned only three men had survived out of the twenty. One Cole had killed the rest attacked by were-beasts in the night as easy prey and the three that had survived were badly wounded and would never be mentally sane again. Cole regretted his actions only slightly later, he didn't lose any sleep over it. At the time of his sentencing against them his only thoughts had been on rape. Not only the verbal intent of threat on Umi but how many other women had actually suffered the deed before him. Cole had zero tolerance for men who were rapists and he ultimately felt they were punished as deserved. He thought rapists no better than beasts and if he had his way he'd make the whole lot of them impotent if he could.

Umi found out that night a part of Cole he hadn't known before because Cole hurt to talk about it. He'd had an older sister, she was twelve years older than Cole and the youngest of the children before him. Cole had been five years old and his sister and he were the only ones home. His parents had gone off to the village about seven miles west to tend to Wielder and Wellspring business as usual. They went every month to hear disputes and render judgments on top of lending aide when times of emergency descended.

Colby was seventeen and Cole described her as perhaps the most beautiful girl in the world to him. Blonde like Cole and even though rather plain of face for a girl, looking like their father as Cole did he said her beauty came from her soul. He had adored his big sister, she'd always been by his side caring for him like a second mother and not just a sister. Cole remembered vividly her making him supper and then tucking him into bed with a bedtime story about southern dragons painting rainbows in the skies with their wings. He'd gone off to sleep dreaming of eating bananas off a tree and riding on the back of a big red dragon. He woke up to her screaming and he was terrified and had peeked out his door to see what was wrong.

Colby was tied face down on the table, bent over it and her skirts thrown up to expose her. A group of rough men mocking her plain face and tormenting her

while taking turns on her and gang raping her brutally, a few of them even using the hilts of their swords on her in painful sodomy that had her screaming in agony. It was like a joke to them watching her suffer and all of them saying if they didn't have to look at the ugly face on her, the body was good enough only as a toy. They were monsters and for hours they used her before the last one slit her throat. "Putting her out of her ugly misery like a lame horse" and "Sparing the Wielder his ugly mare of a Wellspring and he should be grateful of it." he'd said as he slid the knife across her jugular and laughing as he did so cruelly.

They hadn't noticed Cole watching in frozen horror out of the crack of his door and he had crawled under his bed to hide in shock. Praying for his parents to come home and the men were laughing and drinking his father's beer when they did come home. Every last man was killed and Cole would never forget the sound of his mother's sobbing as she held her murdered daughter in her arms. He'd never forget his father's frantic search and calling for him nor the way his father wept as he clutched his son tightly to his chest in relief he'd been spared. He'd never forget Colby's funeral pyre that lit up the night and how for years he'd suffered nightmares of that night. From that day on, whenever his parents had to go to the village, Cole went with them.

He'd cried telling Umi that story and his rage had a very personal bias fueling it. "I saw you in her place and it drove me over the edge." He confessed weeping and Umi just held him close that night.

Umi agreeing with Cole the men had gotten the punishment they'd deserved. No woman deserved that sort of fate and Cole's reaction had been warranted in his opinion. Cole knew first hand the horrors of those crimes and he'd made sure those men never harmed another. Umi was proud to call Cole his husband, his integrity and his honor and his will to protect may have been rage filled with past horrors remembered, however, women could breath a sigh of relief so long as Cole had breath in his body to protect them. No rapist would face a peaceful death at Cole's hands. He'd make them feel the horror themselves before death claimed them.

Umi was propped up on his elbow, looking down on Cole's sleeping face. Umi always slept in the back of the bed against the back wall, Cole adamant his own body lay in-between Umi and the door. The only light coming in their wagon came from the glass section of the roof line over their heads. Thick glass and only large enough to let in meager light so it wasn't pitch black inside when the windows and doors were shuttered and closed. There were paw prints from Patches' feet on the glass but it let the moonlight in and it illuminated Cole's face. Umi could see the snow blowing outside and come morning Cole would be on the roof of their wagon sweeping collected snow off again.

Many nights they had laid in bed, looking up at the stars through that single pane of glass and had fallen to sleep together under their watchful gaze. Tonight

however Umi wasn't looking up but down. Down on the man who had set him free from the lies, from the fear of discovery and had loved him like no other had before or would ever after. Cole was his very soul, the man who was the first person he thought of in the morning and the last one on his mind before he drifted to sleep.

The man Umi wanted to care for, to comfort, to stand beside in bad times and in good times. They were blessed to have more good than bad moments and the bad always came from outside sources. They never argued, rarely disagreed and when they couldn't see eye to eye on topics rather than argue, they just opted to agree to disagree. They lived in very close quarters and it was futile to let petty disagreements disrupt their lives. They lived and worked together daily, shadowing each other and helping each other. They each took on the tasks they were suited for best without complaint and fell into the most natural of rhythms very early on in their bond.

Oh they'd had some moments those first few months that were comical when looked back upon. The discovery that neither of them cooked very well for starters and it had become Umi's chore on the basis at least he didn't burn things as much as Cole did. Over the years however Umi had learned and their meals were always simple but at least edible. They both loved coming into villages where meals could be purchased and neither of them had to cook those nights.

The early discovery that Umi was a perfectionist and never left a chore half finished and Cole was the worst slob Umi had ever met. Cole was under pain of castration that his dirty clothes went into the basket for washing and not on the floor and that he did not leave half full cups of coffee sitting on the shelf to tumble into the bed and stain their sheets when they were moving.

He'd learned rather quickly and after a few tongue lashings from Umi to always make sure to pick up after himself and to dump the coffee he didn't finish in the morning out before they set out. It was habit now and it had been at least two years since the last time Umi had found coffee in their bed or Cole's socks on the floor.

Cole was lightly snoring and rolled on his side to face Umi and his arm came to rest on Umi's hip and Umi smiled. Even in his sleep, Cole telegraphed his love for Umi and Umi leaned over and laid a gentle kiss on Cole's brow.

"I love you dearest, don't ever change." Umi whispered settling down himself nose to nose with his husband. This was home, not the wagon, not the old barn house, not some Inn, but Cole. Cole was home to Umi. It didn't matter the space they occupied, home was love and it was found simply in Cole's arms.

Wherever the road led, whatever turn their lives took in the future Umi knew that so long as they traveled those paths together they would succeed and their bond would only grow stronger the more years they had together.

Umi said a silent prayer to the Gods as he drifted off to sleep, praying for many more years to stand beside this man, to love him and to watch him grow old and gray like his father had been when Umi met him. Seventy years young that man was and Cole was his father's son.

He prayed for those life's blessings as he fell asleep listening to the steady beat of Cole's loving heart and feeling the comfort of home in Cole's arms.

END