



Can you keep a secret?



GENTLE
GREEN



The title 'GENTLE GREEN' is written in a white, ornate, serif font. The word 'GENTLE' is on the top line and 'GREEN' is on the bottom line. A white heart is positioned between the two words. The letters 'G' and 'N' in both words are decorated with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns. The background is a lush, textured green with various shades of teal and yellow-green, featuring stylized leaves and vines.

A Fantasy Romance Story

ANN SEPINO

GENTLE GREEN

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For thoughtful, hard-working Sua, the only things that matter in life are the happiness and safety of her friends and family. She's more than content to manage her late father's inn with her pet antula by her side. However, being an innkeeper in a small town isn't always easy... or safe. There's danger lurking in the woods, and only she is allowed to stop it.

Through a twist of fate, a mysterious traveler comes along and distracts her from the threat to her home. Sa Gin's new, handsome face becomes the talk of the town overnight. What's more, he has a charming personality, a purse full of money... and a weapon on his back. Can Sua trust this stranger with her terrifying burden and her inexperienced heart?

This newcomer who already has enough secrets of his own?

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CHAPTER I

The soft strains of an ancient lullaby, passed down from generation to generation, echoed against the brick walls of a warm, basement-level kitchen. The clink of delicate dishes being washed in a tub of water accentuated every bar of melody. In the background, burning firewood crackled inside the bowels of an oven.

Of the three sounds, the clinking was the first to stop. The squeak of fabric on ceramic replaced it as two hands started wiping the newly rinsed china. Slim, elegant fingers and palms that smelled of citrus soap worked diligently to dry them.

When all the dishes had been cleaned and dried, the same hands stacked them back inside the cupboards.

As the last plate touched the stack it belonged to, a chirrup interrupted the pleasant lullaby. A small, feathery head with two pairs of blue, beady eyes popped out from behind one of the cupboard doors. The rest of the feather-headed creature's eight-legged body, covered in downy blue and indigo fuzz, came into view as it crawled onto the cupboard shelf.

"There you are, Po! I was wondering where you'd gone."

The fuzzy creature, whose long, ribbon-like tongue unfurled for a moment before curling back into its mouth, chirped at its human. Then it spread the membranes between its limbs and glided off the shelf. It landed on the checker-patterned sleeve covering its person's round, relaxed shoulder.

"I'm all finished now. Should we head back up to the bar together?"

Little purrs escaped the antula's muzzle as it cuddled into its human's slender neck.

The human smiled at her pet's adorable antics.

She had raised her faithful companion since the day it hatched out of its spotty egg. It never left her side unless something interesting happened to catch its attention. It would always come back to her, though.

Now that they were once again reunited for the night, the human and her companion left the kitchen together. They ascended the metal steps of an intricate, winding staircase to the ground floor. They emerged behind the wood-topped bar of the only traveler's inn in Alola.

Here, no noise from the oven below could be heard. Instead, the giggles of three young ladies seated at the round table nearest the front window dominated the bar. They had smiles on their faces and excited gleams in their eyes.

"Are you finally done working, Sua?" The girl with braided brown hair waved her over. She leaned heavily onto the table, wrinkling the bodice of her

pink dress against the linen tablecloth. “We’ve been waiting for ages.”

“I don’t think I was gone for that long,” Sua replied as she carefully lifted her antula from her shoulder and allowed it to explore the wooden countertop. “What are you in a hurry to tell me about anyway? Is it that important, Guyaba?”

Another girl from the group turned in her seat and motioned for Sua to make haste.

“Only the most important news you’ll hear tonight.” She pushed back her wavy curls, revealing the freckles that graced her soft cheeks. “It’ll beat whatever gossip the old crone down the road will have harped about by tomorrow morning.”

The third member of their gathering lightly slapped her freckled friend’s hand.

“Now that’s not a very nice thing to say, Batani.” Her frosty blue eyes rolled as she scolded the other girl. “Nana Aba’s only two years older than your own mother.”

“Are we here to talk about something important,” Sua interjected, “or are we here to discuss the ages of every living woman in Alola? Because if it’s the second, I’d rather head to my room and rest up for the night. Spirits only know how many people will be pouring through the door for breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Guyaba flipped one of her braids over her shoulder, then planted both of her elbows on the round table.

“Something important, of course.” She cradled her chin in her palms and grinned from ear to ear. “Did you know that there’s a new face in town? We met him at the market this afternoon.”

Compared to the towns and villages that stood closer to the continent’s trading routes, Alola was a quaint and unheard-of farming settlement. Not many travelers or merchants came to Sua’s corner of the world. Even on nights during the week of the Thawtime Festival, only three rooms would be occupied at most.

In truth, Tamisna Inn was more sought after for its homey menu than the six rooms it sported on the second floor. Sua and her younger sister still kept the rest of the unclaimed quarters neat and tidy, however. Their dear father would probably roll in his grave and haunt their dreams if they slacked off or neglected to uphold his high standards.

“Not until now. And not that I really care unless they need a place to stay.” Sua pulled out the remaining chair and sat on it. She tucked the draping fabric of her skirt under her to make sure that its folds wouldn’t snag on her seat’s legs. “It’s been a while since we last had any overnight guests here. Mother’s starting to think that it’s better if we retire the inn after all.”

Sua’s frosty-eyed friend gasped at the mention of this idea.

“You can’t do that!” Her hands started fidgeting with the pleats of her lavender skirt. “Where else

would we go to chat every other night? And where else could we stay without getting harassed by some drunk shepherd boy or cowherder.”

That was one other quirk of Tamisna Inn that not many establishments in the countryside shared.

Her late father had insisted that not a drop of alcohol should ever be served within the inn’s grounds, even though it had a dedicated bar and a wine cellar beside the pantry, just opposite the kitchen.

Sua and her mother, Sarisa, supported this idea too. She had heard from her parents about the numerous brawls and feuds that used to interrupt the peace back when the place still belonged to its former owner. Under her family’s care, though, Tamisna had transformed into a cozy haven where people could grab a bite or simply mingle if they wished.

As small and quiet as the town was, they always had an influx of patrons in the early mornings and late afternoons. Most customers were farmhands who found it more time-saving and convenient to fill their bellies at the inn compared to cooking at their homes or quarters. A merchant or town ambassador would wander in from time to time, but that rarely happened.

Beside her, Batani scoffed.

“Of course she’s not, Pina!” she said. “She’s going to run this place ‘til she’s old and wrinkly. And when she is, her kids are going to take over. You aren’t

giving up on the inn, right? Sua?”

“While I can’t guarantee that I’ll have children or that they’ll take my place after I retire, I did promise Father that I’d take care of Tamisna for as long as I can,” Sua replied. It was the only thing her old man had asked for before he took his last breath.

Guyaba clapped her hands like a delighted child and wriggled in her seat again.

“See? Nothing to worry about, Pina.” She turned back to the rest of their group. “Now can we get back to the reason why we all decided to come here and find Sua?”

“Yes,” Sua said as she bent down and dipped her hand close to the floor. She’d felt her antula tugging at the hem of her skirt, begging to be picked up so it could curl on her lap. “I’d dearly like to know why I have to indulge you three instead of shooining you back to your homes. Why is a stranger, who probably has better things to do than entertain the likes of us, so important that I have to sit here and hear about them?”

Batani slammed her palm on the round table and leaned forward. “Because he’s male, handsome, unmarried, and wearing clothes that only the richest bastards on this side of the continent can afford.”

“Batani, language!”

The freckled girl groaned and poked the lacy sleeve of Pina’s dress. “You’re not my mother, Pina. Stop scolding me.”

Pina rolled her eyes again. “I’ll stop scolding you if

you stop acting and cursing like a vulgar sailor.”

“Ladies!” Sua pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. Thankfully, her antula noticed her stress and started purring to help her relax. “Unless you give me a valid reason as to why I should concern myself with a man whom I haven’t even seen or met, I’m heading to bed. Please lock the door on your way out.”

Guyaba grabbed her wrist before she could move Po from her lap and leave.

“Don’t go to bed yet, Sua! Can’t you see that we need your help?”

“With what?”

“Advice! You’re good at reading people and guessing at what they might be thinking. Can you help me figure out how to get the new guy to like me?”

Batani raised her hand. “Or me.”

Sua lifted one eyebrow at her two friends before moving her gaze to Pina.

The third girl shook her head before holding up her left hand. A silver ring crowned with a diamond, cut in the shape of a heart, glittered on one of her fingers. Small though it was, the gemstone still managed to reflect the flickering lights coming from the fireplace by the bar counter.

“Not me,” Pina said. “Well, romantically at least. I’m betrothed, remember? My father is more interested in finding out if the man would like to invest in our business. Other than that, I’m only here

to make sure these ninnies are safe indoors before midnight.”

A groan almost escaped Sua’s lips. If she didn’t love her friends, she would’ve walked away from their table without saying a word. On the other hand, if she had known that this was their reason for visiting, she wouldn’t have agreed to let them in just before closing time. For some reason, her friends believed that being an innkeeper had also somehow turned her into a mentalist or a seductress.

“You know,” she said as she lifted Po from her lap and tucked the creature into the cradle of her arms, “you really should be asking advice from someone else. Like my mother, if she weren’t already asleep. I mean, I’m not even engaged like Pina is.”

Unlike Sua, Batani didn’t bother censoring her reactions and just groaned.

“The only advice she’s been giving us is to act like ladies,” she complained. “We *do* act like ladies. We’re just not as good at it as she is.”

“Are you sure? Because no self-respecting lady would stay out so late at—” Sua glanced at the pendulum clock hanging behind the counter. “Ten in the evening.”

This time, it was Guyaba who raised her hand.

“We’re staying over at Pina’s house tonight, like we promised last week.” Her other braid fell behind her shoulder when she tilted her head. “You’re still welcome to come along, you know. This might be the last time we can have sleepovers now that one of us

is getting hitched in a few weeks.”

As much as Sua wanted to join them, she knew that now wasn't a good time. In fact, there hadn't been any good times to spend more than an hour with her friends since the day her father died. And since her mother had been showing signs of ill health recently, sleepovers wouldn't be possible at the inn until further notice.

Her younger sister was too young to help with the diners. The child preferred playing or reading one of their father's beloved books anyway. Leaving Ubi to man the bar while she was away would be disastrous, not to mention dangerous if—

“I'm sorry,” Sua finally said before she could dwell on her ominous thoughts. “It's going to be another busy day tomorrow, and I need all the sleep I can get. If you do still want some advice from me for some reason, maybe come by again after the morning rush.”

Guyaba and Batani whined, while Pina nodded.

“I'll bring your invitation to the wedding ceremony along, if that's all right,” Pina said as she stood up and hugged Sua. “Be there on my special day, at least.”

“I wouldn't miss it for the world,” Sua replied, hugging back. Even though she'd known Guyaba and Batani longer, she got along with Pina the best because they were alike in so many ways. “Congratulations again for finally finding your happily-ever-after.”

Her friend's frosty eyes warmed at her words.

"You'll find your happily-ever-after too, someday."

"We'll see."

Sua hugged the other girls as well. And before long, all three were out the door. She listened while they clambered into Pina's carriage.

After a few minutes, the driver whistled for the harnessed bovi to take them home. The large yet fast-footed creature let out one sharp snort before dashing off. When the hubbub had finally quieted down, Sua turned towards the winding staircase that led to the upper floor.

Their private quarters were on the opposite wing of the ones they offered to their guests. She and her younger sister, Ubi, shared a room at the front of the house, while their mother now slept alone in the bedroom overlooking their backyard. Their mother loved to admire the flowers and fruit trees from the window, especially the ones that their father used to tend.

As Sua made her way to the stairs, Po still in her arms, she decided that she'd pick some of the flowers tomorrow. The bushes needed trimming anyway, and a fresh bouquet would look lovely on the countertop. Perhaps she could give each of her friends a blossom to apologize for missing out on their sleepover.

Suddenly, Po's head perked up. The antula's tongue flicked out, as if trying to catch something

strange in the air. Just moments later, someone started knocking on the inn's front door.

“Those girls, really.” Sua chuckled before changing direction. Po crawled up on her shoulder and clung to her there. “Did you lose a hairpin, Guyaba? Or did somebody forget something under the table again?”

When she opened the door, though, she discovered that her friends hadn't come back like she thought. In fact, the person standing in front of the door didn't look like any of her friends at all. Even the antula chirped in her ear after noticing.

They both stared at the handsome, well-dressed, probably unmarried stranger who'd found his way to Tamisna Inn.

CHAPTER II

The light from the lantern hanging by their front door didn't do his face justice. It didn't help that dark clouds obscured the moon, deepening the shadows on his brow and under his eyes. Still, what little of his features Sua could see made her understand Guyaba and Batani's determination.

"Hello," Sua said.

"Hello." The man glanced at her antula for a brief second and smiled. Surprisingly, Po chirped at him, as if pleased that he'd acknowledged its presence.

"May I help you?" she asked as she opened the door a bit wider.

She trusted her pet's instincts when it came to strangers. Since Po wasn't hissing or making a fuss, she assumed that the man had no intentions of doing her harm. Or maybe the antula was just as smitten with the foreigner's strong, square jaw and dimpled chin.

Either way, it was too late to change her mind. The man entered the inn the moment she stepped aside. He looked around the place while Sua took in the rest of his tall, brawny body.

"The sign outside says that this was an inn." He didn't bother looking over his shoulder at her, much to Sua's relief. If he had, he surely would have caught

her staring not just at his broad back but also the leather strap that went over his shoulder.

“Um, yes. Yes, this is an inn,” she replied, finding it hard to hide how flustered she was. She wasn’t usually this tongue-tied around even the most difficult of guests, but there was something different about this stranger. “Well, this isn’t just an inn. Actually, we serve food here too. Breakfast, for example. And dinner. Any meal, really.”

Thankfully, her antula chose that moment to scuttle across her shoulders and launch itself at a flying insect that had also found its way inside. Po grabbed the bug midair with one of its sticky paws before rolling on the floor. It sprang up and popped the insect into its mouth as soon as it landed.

Her pet’s little trick impressed the man enough that he grinned.

“Feisty little thing you’ve got here.” He turned to her at last. “And he’s a beautiful color too. You don’t find a lot of blue antulas around.”

“Po’s a very special antula indeed.” Sua couldn’t help but notice the little creases that formed at the corner of his sparkling gold eyes. In fact, the more she looked at him, the more she found him intriguing. “I’m not really sure what he or she is, though. It’s hard to tell with antulas until they lay eggs.”

“Boy,” the man replied. “I can tell. Trust me.”

If he kept smiling at her like that, she’d trust him with anything. There was an oddly familiar aura

about him that she couldn't quite place. It's as if she'd seen his face before, even though she was sure that they had never met in the past.

The stranger blinked, and Sua realized that they'd been standing near the doorway for a while now.

"Um," she started, "anyway, I assume you're here because you're looking for a room."

"Yes." The man pulled part of his surcoat away from his hip, revealing a cloth pouch that dangled from his leather belt. Sua could tell just by looking at its bulk that it had been filled almost to the brim with kams. "I've been traveling for a while, you see. Mostly making camp by the trails or sleeping under the stars. But this time, I thought I'd bed down in a warm room for a change."

"Well, you've come to the right place." Sua got her act together and motioned for him to follow her to the countertop. Po scuttled ahead and climbed up the corner of the counter to wait for them. "All our rooms have stoves to keep them warm. We always stock them with enough wood to last the night too. I can head up first and prepare those while you wait here with some tea, if you prefer."

"That's all right." The foreigner leaned on the countertop while she took out a leather-bound ledger from one of the shelves beneath it. "I can make the fire myself. I've bothered you enough by coming in so late at night."

Sua shook her head. She placed the ledger in front of him and opened it to the appropriate page. She

also pushed a quill and some ink toward him.

“I don’t mind in the least.” Sua bent down again, this time to grab the wooden box where they kept the room keys. “It’s part of the job, and it’s always a pleasure to help someone out when they need it.”

“That’s very generous of you,” the man said as he grabbed the quill and started filling in the columns with his information. “How much do you charge for one room a night again?”

“One silver kamb,” she replied, “but you can add a bronze half-kamb if you want breakfast and dinner with your stay. Or a bronze kamb if you want lunch as well.”

“And baths?”

“The bathhouse is behind the inn, to the left.” Sua pointed to a door behind the winding stairs. It had a stained-glass panel decorated with colorful pond fish and pink water lilies. “That leads to the hallway for the bath chambers. The toilets are behind them. Water’s on the house, but you’ll have to pump it yourself into the chamber you want to use.”

“I see.” The man didn’t even look up from his writing. “I’ll give you six gold kambs for the room, then another two for the meals during my stay.”

Sua’s jaw nearly dropped to the floor after she did the math in her head.

“But—that’s eighteen days!” In all her life as an innkeeper and even when her father was still around, nobody had stayed for that long.

The only reason for that length of a visit would be

if a person from abroad had come to court one of the local girls. Which meant great news for Guyaba and Batani if this were the case. The only other possibility was one that Sua hesitated to accept.

Back in the day, wealthy, prominent, and often married men used to take their lovers to Alola because the town was far enough away from prying eyes. Many a bastard child had been born and raised in secret here, only to leave. Either their sires employed them under a different name or they were exiled.

Her father had put a stop to that soon after he came to Alola and got hold of Tamisna Inn.

Sua glanced at Po, who reassured her with its—or his—calm demeanor. Antulas had a sixth sense for things their owners deemed nefarious. If this foreigner was up to no good, it—or he—would have warned her already.

“Is there a problem?” the man asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“None at all,” Sua said. “I was just surprised. We’ve never had any long-term tenants here before. It’s as if you’re trying to see if this town suits you.”

She usually didn’t pry into other people’s lives, and the locals who came in to eat adored her for it. Her father had drilled it into her to respect their guests’ privacy. He’d also implored her to keep whatever confidence their guests shared to herself.

This time, though, she couldn’t help but become a little curious.

“I’m actually looking for a good home,” the man admitted as he laid down the quill. He blew on the ledger to dry the ink before speaking again. “Somewhere quiet and peaceful, with a job for someone used to working with their hands.”

“You’ll never find a place that fits those more than Alola,” she replied, even if her words didn’t always apply to herself. Sua took the ledger from him and skimmed through the words he’d written down.

She caught him grinning again from the corner of her eye.

“I’ll let you know if you’re right by the end of eighteen days.”

“Excuse me,” Sua said after looking at what he’d added to the book. “Sa Gin? Is that really your name?”

“Yes.” The man removed the pouch from his belt and placed it on the countertop. He took eight gold kambas from inside it and lined them up on the wooden surface.

“And... are you really from Karokal?” Sua asked after taking a second glance at the birthplace he claimed to be from. She was so puzzled by his answers that she didn’t even see Po scurrying across the counter to sniff at the gold kambas.

“Yes.” Sa Gin politely distracted the antula by offering him a hand to play with instead. Po’s nose twitched as he investigated the new scents in front of him.

Sua tilted her head up, and that’s when she

noticed her pet playing with their guest.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Here. Let me get him away from you.”

“I don’t mind.” Sa Gin scratched the antula’s head, making him purr. “I like the little guy.”

“I think he likes you too.” Sua took Po off the counter and transferred him to her shoulder anyway. Then she put Sa Gin’s key in Po’s place. “I’ll give you one of the rooms farthest from the stairs. That way, the noise from our breakfast crowd won’t bother you in case you sleep in.”

“Thank you. That’s very thoughtful.” Sa Gin took the key. “For the record, I’ve never met an innkeeper as nice and pretty as you before.”

His words spurred her into ducking down and putting the ledger back on its shelf. Sua hoped that he wouldn’t see the blush on her cheeks. It was one thing to get compliments from the local bar patrons, but quite another to receive one from a handsome stranger.

But he wasn’t a stranger now, because he had a name. And he was from Karokal. He even had the accent and the clothes, gold-embroidered with that famous town’s traditional twining diamond pattern.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” she asked, even though she had already seen the curved blade attached to his leather strap. “They’re not allowed upstairs for safety reasons.”

“Just my blade.” The man removed his weapon from its strap and surrendered it to her.

Sua turned around so she could access the compartment behind the bar's north wall. She used her body to block Sa Gin's view of the dials on the paneling. Once she'd reset the dials and pulled on a hidden lever, the wall slid down and revealed a narrow space where objects could be stored.

The compartment was empty save for an older, simpler blade that looked like it hadn't been used in years.

Sua took a moment to look fondly at the item before placing Sa Gin's blade on the stand beside it. She yanked the lever up, and this moved the wall back to its original position. She waited for the mechanism to click into place before returning to her guest.

"All done," she said. "Would you like to go to your room now, or would you like a warm drink first?"

"My room, please."

Sua obliged by walking ahead of him. The footsteps he made against the metal stairs echoed a bit louder than hers. As they ascended, she wondered what kind of sight she made with her black hair all askew and her dress somewhat wrinkled after a long day of work.

Then she silently scolded herself for dwelling on such things. For one, she wasn't supposed to be acting like Guyaba or Batani when she was working. She was serving a customer at the inn, not trying to hook a man like her friends.

That being said, at least now she had an excuse to

stay away from the girls' antics. She couldn't very well tarnish the inn's restored reputation by snitching on one of its guests. But to help her friends along, it might be okay to tell them when he is around and what food he likes based on what he eats the most during meals.

They made their way through the dimly lit hall after they reached the upper floor. A few seconds later, they stopped in front of a solid wood door painted white. Sua stepped to the side so Sa Gin could use his key on the brass doorknob.

He opened the door, revealing the simple but cozy room he'd be sleeping in. As promised, a small stove and crate filled with firewood were at the corner, directly in front of the threshold. Adjacent to that stood a dresser, and in between was a comfy-looking sofa with a matching footrest.

A bed, piled high with overstuffed pillows, faced the dresser. A nightstand and writing desk, complete with a ladder-back chair, separated the bed from the door. Sua took a candle holder from the desk and used the lamp on the hallway wall to light it.

"I hope this room is to your taste," she said after showing him in.

Sa Gin gave her a nod of approval.

"It's clean and inviting. I like it," he said.

"Wonderful. Breakfast is at eight, but I can hold back a serving for you if you prefer taking it at a later hour. As for baths—"

"I beg your pardon," Sa Gin cut in before she

could finish. “Sorry for interrupting, but there’s a little girl looking at us from down the hall.”

Sure enough, after looking over her shoulder, Sua spotted the girl that he had pointed out.

The child had a loose knitted robe over her frilly shift and cloth slippers on her dainty feet. Long black curls cascaded over her narrow shoulders as she clutched a doll to her chest. Her lips quivered as she looked from one person to the other.

“Sua, I can’t sleep.”

At those words, Po jumped from Sua’s shoulder and hurried to the child. He scaled the little one’s robe so he could cuddle against the doll. Once there, the girl began to stroke his head.

“That’s my sister,” Sua explained. “I’m sorry. It seems like I’m needed somewhere else for the rest of the night. Will you be fine on your own?”

“You’ve done more than enough for me tonight,” Sa Gin replied. “Go to your sister.”

Sua sighed in relief. It seemed like their guest was a kind person, which is more than she can say about the last male who’d ordered her to go away. She brushed that thought aside before it could sour her mood.

“Would you like me to read you a story?” she asked as she approached her sister. Behind her, their guest gently shut the door and locked it from inside.

“Yes, please,” sleepy little Ubi replied, rubbing at her tired eyes. “I liked the one you read the other night. The one from Father’s old storybook.”

“Which one?” Sua took her sister’s hand and led her back to their room. “There are a lot of stories in that old book.”

Ubi yawned.

“The one about Sa Gin of Karokal, please. I liked that story a lot.”

CHAPTER III

Sua ran her finger across the old storybook's spine. She traced the embossed letters of the thick tome before opening it to her younger sister's favorite pages. The paper, worn and yellowed by years of exposure, crinkled under her touch.

Her gaze landed upon the colorful illustration just above the story's title.

Two golden eyes stared back at her from a square-shaped face framed by long, wavy hair. Behind the man's image loomed the majestic mountains of Karokal. Just over his shoulder peeked the jewel-encrusted hilt of a curved blade.

No wonder their guest had seemed eerily familiar. Unless she was hallucinating or had dreamed everything up the night before, the Sa Gin now staying at their inn looked and dressed exactly like the fictional warrior god in her father's book. And this was the most peculiar thing she had ever seen yet.

However, before Sua could further ponder this coincidence, a series of soft knocks from outside the room distracted her. She placed the tome atop the dresser between her and her sister's bed. Then she grabbed her robe and put it on while walking towards the threshold.

Her mother's radiant smile greeted her when she pulled the door aside. Despite her pale complexion, her slim shoulders, and the shadows under her eyes, joy painted the woman's features. Not much could bring down her mother's mood, even a long-standing illness.

"Good morning, dear," Sarisa said, opening her arms to her daughter. "Did you sleep well?"

Sua gladly stepped into her mother's embrace. The scent of lilac soap and lavender shampoo tickled her nose, making her feel safe and grounded. She wasn't a child any longer at five-and-twenty, but her Mama's hugs were always welcome.

"I slept like usual, Mama," she replied.

"You didn't come to wake me this morning, so I figured that you must still be in bed." Sarisa stepped back and fixed Sua's robe.

"Ubi couldn't sleep last night, so I read her a story." Sua allowed her mother the chance to fuss over her. Sarisa preferred that her daughters never looked too bedraggled, even if they were still in their sleeping clothes. "That was after a guest came at the last minute and asked for a room to stay in."

"A guest?" her mother asked. "From where? And for how long?"

"He'll be staying for eighteen days at the least. And he's from Karokal." Sua ushered her mother into the room. "And by the way, his name is Sa Gin."

Sarisa paused mid-step and blinked.

"Exactly," Sua said when she noticed her mother's

reaction. “I don’t know if he’s telling the truth or he’s merely oddly obsessed with a fictional character, but he doesn’t seem to mean any harm. Po doesn’t think he’s dangerous.”

At the mention of his name, the antula blinked his eyes open and chirped from where he had curled up on Ubi’s bed. His call was so short and quiet that the sleeping girl beside him didn’t stir. Po stretched his fuzzy legs before skittering down the bed and nuzzling against Sarisa’s ankles.

“Good morning to you too, my handsome boy.” Sarisa bent down and petted the little critter. Po purred, happy with the praise. “Thank you again for guarding my girls last night.”

“Mama,” Sua said as she took out a new dress from her wardrobe, “is it all right if I go ahead and ready the kitchen?”

“Don’t you want a glass of milk first?” her mother asked while heading for Ubi’s dresser to prepare the child’s outfit.

Sua shook her head. She grabbed her towel from its rack on the wall and her basket of toiletries from its shelf above it. She rid her feet of their cotton slippers so she could slip them into the shoes she’d left by the door.

“If I don’t bathe and grab more firewood from the back already,” she said, “we’ll be late for the opening. “And we have a staying guest to feed, after all.”

Her eyes strayed to the arched window above the nightstand, where she could see a view of the

outside.

Dawn was starting to break, painting the sky in hues of purple and orange. A few stars still twinkled in the distance, right next to the two crescent moons slowly sinking on the horizon. She had roughly three hours left before the first customers trickled into the inn and asked for breakfast.

“Then we’ll catch up with you as soon as I’ve helped Ubi dress.” Sarisa combed her younger daughter’s hair away, causing the child to wake. Po chirruped from her shoulder.

“Mama?” Ubi yawned and stretched her arms over her head. “Is it morning already?”

Although Sua usually greeted Ubi in the morning too, for now, she chose to forego that ritual. She couldn’t idle away with her family over warm glasses of milk when she had little time to prepare for the day. It didn’t help that she needed to bring more wood for the kitchen oven inside since they’d nearly used up the last pile.

Sua went down to the first floor and into the bathing chambers. She did her business and cleaned herself as thoroughly as possible with the same soap and shampoo their family always used. Then she donned her new dress, a plum-colored wrap with a checkered pattern and a red sash for her waist.

Brushing her black hair out and braiding it into a singular, long column at her back took Sua a bit of time, but she managed to finish before the clock outside struck the next hour. Still, she had to keep

moving. She didn't want to start making the breakfast meals late and keep the diners waiting.

In her haste, she didn't notice the footsteps approaching from the other side of the bath chambers.

Then the door opened and hit her in the face.

Sua yelped as she collided with wood and stained glass. She managed to keep hold of her things, but she did lose her balance and land on her bottom in the chamber's narrow hall. She hissed when the sting of her fall finally registered.

"Spirits be!" Sa Gin rushed through the door and knelt beside her. "I didn't mean to hit you, Miss! I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

"I'm not dead or concussed. And my head didn't fall and roll away." Sua chuckled as she looked up at the man. The deep shade of pink over his cheeks belied just how embarrassed he felt. "No need to worry, Sa Gin. I'm perfectly fine."

"I'm still sorry."

"It was my fault, really." Sua readjusted her legs to push off the ground without letting go of her towel or basket. "I should have looked where I was going."

She prepared to stand—only to feel two hands steady her just above the elbows.

"Here," he said. "Allow me."

Sa Gin guided her up with little to no effort at all. She was back on her feet before she could even blink. Or back on her toes, to be precise, since the man was tall enough that he'd lifted her higher than expected.

“Th-thank you,” she stuttered.

“You seemed like you were in a hurry,” he said, letting her go.

Sua’s soles touched the floor, and so did her spirits. For a moment, she’d experienced his warm, gentle grip, and it had felt right. Losing it, on the other, somehow felt wrong.

“That’s because I was,” she said as she secretly forced herself to dismiss her strange reaction. No innkeeper in their right mind would allow themselves to wonder at—or pine for—the tender caress of their tenant. “I’m about to cook breakfast in the kitchen, you see. But before that, I have to get some wood from the back.”

“Let me help you.” Sa Gin held the door open as wide as it would go so she wouldn’t walk into it again.

“But you’re our guest,” she replied. “And weren’t you going to take a bath yourself?”

“That can wait.” Sa Gin reached for her again, but this time to gently herd her out of the bath chambers by placing his hand at the back of her waist. “I may be your guest, but I’m also a gentleman. At least let me make up for hitting you in the face.”

“But—”

“I can carry twice the number of logs you can in half the time,” he insisted. “If you let me help, you can start cooking earlier than you intended.”

His words made sense, considering how many cuts of spiced heasa meat and malla egg omelets she

had to prepare. Then there was the coffee to brew while everything else cooked. She couldn't say no to him after hearing his logical argument.

Or perhaps she couldn't deny him because she was too distracted by his hand.

"W-well, in that case," Sua gulped, "I'll save you two servings from breakfast today. One to eat, and one for a sandwich to snack on later."

"Deal."

Sa Gin smiled, and it was all Sua could do not to choke on the air. She had to look away lest he noticed her blush. He had no right to be that handsome, charming, or kind enough to take the blame for an accident that wasn't even his fault.

They went past the counter, heading for a door built discreetly into a corner of the bar.

It led to a stone footpath at the side of the inn, one protected from the sun by a tiled awning attached to the building. A clothesline made of sturdy rope and stakes driven into the ground bordered the path on its other side. They followed the walkway until they reached the garden at the back, where an old well and a shed with stone walls stood among beds of flowers and groups of fruiting trees.

Sua worked off the lock on the shed and gestured for Sa Gin to enter.

"We use these for kindling," she said, pointing to a crate holding bundles of straw and dry sticks. "The bigger logs and pieces of wood are for making the fire last."

Sa Gin hummed. He hefted two thick logs near his foot and gathered some sticks and straw from the closest crate.

“Tell me how much you need, and I’ll carry them in for you.” He slung the logs over his shoulder and turned around. And since he’d forgone his surcoat that morning, anticipating a bath, his shirt stretched over his chest and arms.

Sua’s throat nearly dried out when she noticed how his muscles flexed. She was sure that if her friends were around, they would have fainted by now. Sa Gin’s looks and physique were definitely criminal.

“Two... more... will do...” she struggled to answer. “Just in case...”

She couldn’t even finish that thought, not when the man was fast approaching her with determination in his eyes. He clearly wanted to do a good job for her. That being said, she felt like a fool for deriving so much pleasure from that fact.

Sua shook her head and trailed after him. She needed to think of something else to occupy her mind. Still, her eyes drifted to the man in front of her.

“I wanted to ask,” she started before she could lose her courage, “are your parents fond of bedtime stories?”

“Hm?” Sa Gin paused. “That’s an odd thing to ask.”

“Because of your name,” Sua explained. She stood at his side and met his curious gaze. “You share the

same name as the hero in our storybook. You look so much like him too. And you come from the same place.”

Sa Gin tilted his head.

“Is that so?” he said. “I’m not familiar with a lot of bedtime stories.”

Sua’s brow furrowed.

His reaction didn’t make sense. Everyone knew about the old legend of the warrior god. If not from a book their parents read at night, then from some lesson they received at the schoolhouses.

“But you’re from Karokal. Surely you’ve heard of Sa Gin’s tale.”

“Who?”

“Sa Gin of Karokal.” Sua sighed. “Once, a maiden was trapped in a river by evil spirits. Her father was so distraught by her fate that he prayed for the gods to rescue her. One of these gods, Sa Gin, came down from the godly realm to free the maiden from her prison.”

Sua realized that he was engrossed by her tale when his eyes widened.

“Then what happened?”

“All sorts of things,” she replied. “He had to go through many challenges to defeat the spirits, one by one. In the end, though, he vanquished them all and rescued the maiden. Then the maiden fell in love with him.”

“And they married and lived happily ever after?” he asked.

“In a way.” Sua shrugged before starting on the path again. The man followed her to the inn this time around.

“Sa Gin couldn’t accept the maiden’s love because doing so meant that he couldn’t return to the godly realm or remain immortal.” Sua made a brief stop at the clothesline. She slung her towel over the rope to dry under the sun. “Instead, he brought her to Karokal and built her a house there. He would return to her on occasion, and when he was around, Karokal flourished with fair weather and bountiful harvests.”

“That doesn’t sound like a happy ending at all,” he said.

“Well, that’s the lesson of the story.” Sua entered the bar and kept leading her companion to the counter. “The moral being that happiness isn’t the same for everyone. Some people think Sa Gin should have given up being a god. But for Sa Gin’s maiden, having his heart and her freedom was enough.”

Sua looked over her shoulder... and realized that Sa Gin had remained at the threshold.

“Are you all right?” She set her basket on the countertop so she could talk to him. “The story didn’t upset you, did it?”

“No.” Sa Gin frowned. “It just occurred to me that we’ve been discussing the likely origin of my name.”

“And?”

“So, you know who *I* am, but I don’t know who *you* are,” he pointed out. “I don’t know what to call

you, Miss.”

The corners of Sua’s lips turned up. Then she giggled, and Sa Gin laughed along with her. Talking to him had felt so natural that she hadn’t even thought or remembered to introduce herself since receiving him.

She remedied that straightaway.

“You can call me Sua,” she said. “Just Sua.”

“And you can call me Gin,” he said after wiping a tear from his eye. “Just Gin.”

Sua opened her mouth, intending to repeat his name, but a small, wrinkled object sticking through the bar’s front door caught her attention. She narrowed her eyes at it. Her breath seized upon making out the white rose with half-burnt petals.

Her blood ran cold at the clear message behind it.

CHAPTER IV

Nobody in Alola could deny the fact that Sua was one of the best cooks around, second only to her mother. The food she served kept the business as a whole standing. Her sauces were rather popular, especially when paired with the tender, juicy cutlets that she fried to perfection.

On any other day, Sua would have found the sauce of her heasa meat dish a little too sweet. She had added more than the usual amount of sugar, no thanks to her distracted state. The cuts were a little burned at the edges too, courtesy of the numerous times her mind had wandered to their handsome guest.

On the bright side, everything was still edible. The charred portions of meat would add a smoky flavor and texture at least. And their regulars preferred sweet foods over tart and spicy ones anyway.

Sua laid the warm cutlets on a serving dish and poured sauce over the arrangement. Then she covered the large, oval-shaped plate with a silver lid and carried it to a linen-covered table in the middle of the kitchen. Once there, she placed it in a basket attached to a pulley.

Sua reached for the bell she'd left on the counter and rang it. As soon as it tinkled, the pulley moved

up, lifting the basket through a chute in the kitchen ceiling. She waited for the basket to disappear before returning to her station by the oven.

Her father had come up with the idea after more people came flocking to the inn. Sending the meals out this way was faster and easier than if she'd carried them up the winding stairs. Her parents used to take turns manning the bar and the kitchen, and the pulley would be what connected them as they worked.

At present, her mother could only do the lighter tasks involved in running Tamisna Inn. She received guests, delivered meals, and offered people her charming smile to keep them coming back for more. That left Sua to attend to the more menial tasks, such as cooking, housecleaning, making repairs, and cutting firewood.

Speaking of firewood, she noticed that the flames in the oven were big enough to keep the kitchen toasty. And since she had no meals left to cook, there was no reason for her to stay. Sua untied the apron from her waist and hung it on its wall peg.

No sooner had her hand released the apron strings when the door burst open and her friends stumbled into the room.

“What the—what in a spirit’s name are you two doing here?!” Sua asked. “You know only staff are allowed in the kitchen.”

Guyaba grinned, pulling her in and slinging an arm over her shoulder.

“But *you’re* the *only* staff,” the girl pointed out. “And we got permission from Aunt Sarisa.”

Sua pinched the bridge of her nose. Her mother was far too lenient with her friends. She had no problems having them around, of course, but this did mean that it would be harder to get away from the house and—

A second arm, courtesy of Batani, hooked her by the elbow and led her away from the oven.

“She told us you were finishing up in the kitchen,” the freckle-faced girl said, “so we offered to fetch you.”

Sua narrowed her eyes at her friend. The gleam in Batani’s irises spoke of something else. Excitement coupled with trepidation blatantly shone from those rounded orbs.

“I have a feeling that you aren’t dragging me out of this kitchen for nothing,” she said. Still, she allowed them to escort her through the hall and up the winding staircase. “What’s going on?”

As soon as they reached the ground floor, Guyaba waved her hands toward a table along the bar’s east wall.

“That’s what’s going on!” The girl could barely contain the glee in her voice. “I had a feeling that he’d end up staying here, but I couldn’t say for sure. Not until we walked in this morning and spotted him having breakfast. I can’t believe our good luck!”

Sua barely heard her friend’s rambling because of the sight that awaited her.

Sa Gin was sipping the water that came with his meat and omelet... while surrounded on all sides by the locals.

She recognized the miller's daughter and the shoemaker's sister among the crowd. Even the fisherman's wife had joined the throng, despite the fact that she'd been married to her husband for nigh on eleven years. Pina was there too, albeit hanging on her fiance's arm instead of leaning toward Gin like the rest of the spectators.

Some men stood in the group as well, eager to ask Sa Gin who he was, where he came from, and what places he'd passed through before arriving here.

Sua heard someone's familiar chuckle behind her, and only then did she stop gawking. She turned around, determined to ask her mother what had happened while she was gone. Sarisa's amused expression was the first thing she saw.

"We may have found the new star attraction of our inn," her mother mused. "Your warrior god has been sitting there for the past hour, politely receiving everyone's introductions."

There was no hiding the blush that grew on Sua's cheeks. Luckily, her friends had rushed to rejoin the crowd around Sa Gin, leaving her and her mother to look on.

"He's not mine," she said. "And he could just excuse himself from the commotion if he wanted to."

"But he hasn't," her mother replied. "I've tried breaking up the ruckus twice already, but apparently,

he was waiting for someone to show up. Says he doesn't mind talking to everyone while he eats."

"Who?" Sua asked, returning her attention to him.

At that moment, Sa Gin happened to look up. He smiled at her when their gazes connected. And of course, everyone's heads swiveled her way.

Years of experience running the inn had prepared her for all kinds of strange circumstances. So despite the icy, dagger-like glare from the fisherman's wife, she managed to stay calm and smile back. If she hadn't been so busy trying to keep herself composed, she would have noticed how Pina's glance volleyed between her and Gin.

Sarisa patted Sua's back.

"I'll grab his dishes and bring them down," she offered. "You go talk to him, as he seems to be fond of you."

Gin stood up from the table, causing part of the crowd to disperse. Guyaba and Batani got ready to follow him, but Pina's hands grabbed their wrists to hold them back. Not that Sua had time to wonder why because her guest was getting closer.

"Hello again," he said.

"I'm back." Sua tried to look past his shoulder, worried that someone might start pestering him again and cause him to cancel his stay. Thankfully, everyone seemed to have backed off, although there were a few lingering stares latched onto the man before her. "Have you finished eating? How was the food?"

“Yes, I have. And it was fantastic.” Gin smoothed the same surcoat he’d worn yesterday over his stomach. Sua had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep herself from thinking back on what he’d looked like without it.

“That’s good. That’s wonderful to hear. And I—I’m glad you liked it.” Sua licked her lips. She wondered why he could render her near-speechless when she normally had a good grasp on her duties as an innkeeper. “Would you like me to, um, fetch your second helping now? Or...”

“Actually,” Gin scratched the back of his neck. The boyish gesture looked so unnatural for a man of his height that it made him appear more endearing. “I was wondering if I could have my blade back today.”

“You’re going out?”

“Yes,” the man replied. “I’m not just here to sightsee or find work, although that is part of the plan. There’s somewhere I need to be. Something I’m looking for. And I usually carry my blade around for protection.”

“Of course.” Sua gestured for him to follow her to the front of the counter. Along the way, she noticed how many of the girls in the inn kept sneaking glances at Gin. “Let me get it for you.”

Like the night prior, she accessed the compartment storing the weapons. She removed Gin’s blade from where she’d placed it... and retrieved the other item that was there. After making sure that her mother was still in the kitchen, that is.

Gin's eye strayed to the weapon as she tied it to her sash.

"Do you know how to use a blade as well?" he asked.

"Oh no." She chuckled. "This old thing is due for a cleaning. That's why I took it out. It's a family heirloom, you see."

"Ah." The man nodded. "Whoever owned it is lucky to have family that takes care of it. Most people would have recycled or thrown that away by now."

"It's very precious to me," Sua said.

She caressed the scabbard that protected the retracting blade from the elements. The jewels that used to dot its length were long gone, and the carvings and flourishes had faded away, but to her, no other blade in the world could look more beautiful.

"I have one more thing to ask, if you don't mind."

"Anything." Sua looked at him, ready to fulfill his request to the best of her abilities.

"Is there a library or records office in town?" He strapped his blade to a leather harness and secured it over his surcoat. "I have a bit of reading and researching to do."

It appeared that Sa Gin was more mysterious than Sua thought. Only those who'd been tasked to carry out important, confidential business sought the whereabouts of the town library. Usually, most visiting folks just asked her about this or that.

"The library's on the other side of town, close to

the medicine shop. Alola's too small to have any sort of records office," Sua supplied. She refrained from meddling with his dealings despite her curiosity. "Unfortunately, the metalsmith's forge is the other way. I'm afraid I can't walk you there."

A delighted squeal came from her left.

"I can take you there," Guyaba declared. She extracted herself from Pina and hurried to Gin's side. "I know exactly where it is since I happen to be the librarian's assistant."

"And I'm the morning clerk at the medicine shop," Batani added after overhearing her friend's words. Not to be outdone, she moved to Sa Gin's other side and latched onto his arm. "We were heading to that area after eating here. You might as well walk with us."

Relief and disappointment swirled in Sua's stomach. On the one hand, she needed to escape the people here some time during the day. Guyaba and Batani were doing her a favor by getting Gin out of her hair.

On the other hand, her dearest friends had been with her through thick and thin, including the death of her father. She was supposed to root for them and help them get closer to the person they were infatuated with. But right now, she felt rather jealous that they would get to show him around town instead of her.

While she tried to make sense of her reactions, her sister's light footsteps rushed down the staircase

leading to the second floor. Po's happy chirps accentuated the tapping sounds as Ubi came onto the scene. The antula had chosen to ride on the child's shoulder again.

"Hello, everyone!" Ubi jumped off the last step and waved her hand. Gone were the tired rings on her eyes from the night before. "It's time for school!"

Everybody in the bar greeted her back, even the fisherman's wife. There was no denying how much the locals loved having Ubi around. She wasn't the only child alive in Alola, of course, but she was the best-behaved of the lot.

Alas, it was the sight of her younger sister that helped Sua make up her mind. She turned back to Gin and shrugged her shoulders. He had his tasks to deal with, and she had important things to do.

"As you can see," she said, "it's time for school, and I need to get my sister there. But you can depend on Guyaba and Batani here to walk you to the library."

Guyaba beamed, and Batani nearly shook the man's arm off as she giggled.

"Don't worry," Guyaba said. "We'll get him there in one piece. He's safe with us."

"And I'll be next door to bring him back if he forgets the way." Batani winked at her, much to Sua's amusement.

Thankfully, Gin took it all in stride.

"How could I say no to these two beautiful ladies?"

The women squealed like schoolgirls, which then reminded Sua that she had her sister to attend to. She ushered Gin and her friends out the door, then called Ubi over. The girl came, but only after fetching their haircloth mantles from a cabinet downstairs.

Sua helped her sister with the smaller mantle before donning the longer one over her shoulders. It draped low enough to conceal the blade at her hip. Only then did she inform her mother, through the chute by the counter, that they were leaving.

“Stay safe!” Sarisa called from below. “And make sure to listen to your teacher, Ubi!”

They passed Pina on the way out, who told them that she’d left the wedding invitation with their mother. Ubi even received a bag of sugar candies from her friend’s fiancé. The girl carried the treats all the way to her schoolhouse, intending to share it with the other children there.

As soon as they reached the small, one-room building, Sua wished her sister good luck and held her hand out for her antula.

Po gave Ubi’s cheek one last nuzzle before hopping over to her. The animal climbed up her arm as she left the school’s grounds. Her father’s worn blade, tucked into her sash, swung at her hip as she retraced the path that would bring her back to Tamisna Inn.

Along the way, though, she turned at an inconspicuous corner and followed the abandoned goat trail there instead.

She had no intentions of returning to the inn just yet.

Sua walked deeper into the grassier, woodier area bordering Alola. With every step she took, the canopy above her grew thicker. The trail she followed got narrower and narrower as she ventured farther in.

Brambles and low-hanging branches attempted to block her, but she brushed them aside. Her heart started pounding loudly as she got closer to her destination. Beads of sweat formed on her brow, and the roof of her mouth dried so quickly that she found it hard to swallow.

By the time she'd arrived at the shady, secluded clearing nobody else in Alola knew about, she was finding it hard to breathe. Her only source of comfort, her antula, was just as tense. Po bristled as he took in their dark, eerie surroundings.

A shadow moved behind them, and wicked laughter echoed all around. A heavy, otherworldly, sinister presence descended on the area. This malicious air got too much for Po, who hissed before latching securely onto Sua's neck.

Sua took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She removed her father's blade from its scabbard. The old sheath fell to the ground as she raised the weapon in the air.

She was ready to fight.

CHAPTER V

Four red eyes glowed against the darkness that stretched out before her. They surrounded a large, round mouth filled with jagged teeth. All these were stuck to a bulbous head capped with whip-like locks of black hair.

The rest of the evil spirit's body materialized from the shadows as he approached. His stumpy, barrel-shaped torso expanded with every breath, and the bulging muscles on all four of his limbs pulsed whenever he moved. The angry red scales that covered his body rippled with them.

"You've chosen to play again, little girl?" the spirit asked in gruff, echoed tones. His round mouth, which took up almost all of his face, stretched out as if to grin. "How foolish."

"I'm not here to play, Binasa," Sua said, her voice thin. Despite the many times she'd faced this monster already, he still frightened her. "I'm here to fight for my mother."

"Even more foolish!" Binasa stepped to one side. He started circling the clearing and, as a consequence, trapping her at the center of their makeshift arena. "Your mother's soul belongs to me. It was mine the moment she borrowed my magic to help defeat your pathetic father's enemy."

Sua clenched her teeth at the insult.

“My father was *not* pathetic.” She raised the blade higher. Her fingers turned white from clenching the hilt. “He saved my mother from being auctioned off to the highest bidder. He won Tamisna in a duel. Turned it around into a good business. A *respectable* business.”

“With *my* help!” The spirit lurched, and Sua stumbled back. “Your father was a weak man of the books with no talent for the blade. He would have lost that duel if I didn’t possess him, and your mother knows it. *You* know it. You were there the moment he died.”

Sua’s hands shook as the memory returned to her of its own accord.

She remembered the night her father stumbled home, bruises painting his body blue-and-black, blood dripping from a cut on his lip. She remembered her mother’s anguished tears as they helped him to bed and stayed by his side until his last breath. She remembered his apology for not being able to fight back against the ruffians who’d robbed him.

“He may have been frail, but he tried his best. Just like I will.” Sua pressed a stud on the blade’s hilt. The sharp weapon started spinning like a top. “I’ll slice your heart out and win my mother’s soul back from you!”

Sua lunged at Binasas. She held the blade out, hoping to pierce its twirling tip into his stomach. But

the evil spirit jumped over her head to escape.

Binasa kicked her in the back before she could turn around and chase him. The spirit's large foot connected with her side and part of her spine. The painful blow knocked the breath from her body as she fell to her knees.

Luckily, she managed to swipe the dial on the hilt before the blade could cut her. It retracted through one end of the metal handle and emerged at the other end. The weapon's tip dug into the ground, and she used this to get back on her feet.

Another quick swipe of the dial brought the blade back to where it was. It arched in the air as she spun around to go after Binasa again. She ran towards him, the weapon raised over her head, intending to slash his shoulder.

Binasa, however, had anticipated the move. He dove low and tackled her before the blade could come down on him. His blunt but hard fingers dug into her stomach as he gripped her and flung her away.

Her back hit the ground with a loud thud. Her weapon tore through part of her mantle, but she paid the damage no mind. She stumbled to her feet and clutched the blade once more.

"Foolish, foolish girl," the spirit mocked. He brought his hands together and cracked his knuckles. "You end up battered and bruised every time, yet you still come back for more."

"Stop feeding off of my mother's soul!"

Sua attacked again. She tapped on the stud, and the metal segment swiveled. Its sharper edge now curved inward instead of out, revealing her intent to hack at him from the side.

She rushed to Binasa, who knew what she'd wanted to try the moment he saw her weapon's configuration. The spirit jumped over her again, this time snagging her by the scalp and throwing her onto her back once more.

If it weren't for Po holding tight to her nape, protecting that part of her body despite his own fear, her neck would have snapped backwards and her head would have rolled off. Instead, her crown smashed against the dirt, making her teeth rattle from the impact. What's more, her left ankle landed on a rock.

Still, she got up a third time.

Her assault on the evil spirit continued, to no avail. Whenever she was within arm's reach of him, he would grab her and either throw her aside or toss her over his shoulder. He would even hold her down sometimes, threatening to cut off her breath, before backing away and waiting for her to recover.

Sua knew that Binasa was toying with her. The six minutes he'd allowed her to try to rip his heart out felt like forever. But she couldn't give up, despite the never-ending pain.

Another attempt at maiming him with the spinning blade sent her flying to the edge of the clearing. Every joint on Sua's body stung as she

rolled in the dirt. She landed on her side, her hair covering her battered cheek.

Sua hissed when she regained her senses. Her foot was on fire, her back was likely covered in large bruises, and her head felt like it had been struck with a hammer multiple times. Her wrists throbbed from having to bear the shifting weight and position of the blade.

“Had enough, pet?” Binasa taunted. “Your six minutes are almost through. We might as well end now.”

Sua’s vision blurred as she lifted her head, and not just from her dizziness.

With every day that passed, Binasa consumed more of her mother’s soul, making him more powerful. The more it disappeared from the world, the sicker Sarisa became. If she didn’t find a way to defeat the evil spirit and recover what was left, death would come eventually.

“I beg of you,” Sua said, eyes filming. As much as it hurt her pride to ask for mercy from the spirit, she had no other options to resort to. “My scars prove how powerful you already are. You have no need for my mother’s soul. Give it back!”

Binasa scoffed. Acrid breath poured from his mouth, making Sua gag. It didn’t help that she already felt like fainting.

“You seem to be forgetting something, girl.” The spirit moved part of the skin fold wrapped around his chest. He revealed the cage of bones, covered in

pulsing webs of blood vessels, that surrounded the glowing red heart in his body. “I didn’t steal your mother’s soul. She made a bargain with me.”

“She didn’t know—”

“She knew enough to agree,” Binasa insisted. “A life for a life, a death for a death. The slow death of the brothel owner after his injuries from dueling with your father. The slow death of your mother after your father’s own passing. That was the deal. You are lucky I even allowed you the chance to reclaim it.”

Sua didn’t feel lucky at all. If anything, she felt sick to her stomach. She didn’t know how many more of these beatings she could endure without losing her mind.

“I’ll take all the chances I can get,” she declared. “I’ll never give up.”

“And that concludes our six minutes, little human.” Binasa contorted his mouth again to mimic a person’s grin. “You’ve failed again.”

Po confirmed that by loosening his embrace around her neck. The poor animal whimpered pathetically as it slunk behind her ruined mantle. Sue could feel the antula shaking inside its inner breast pocket.

The blade dangled from her hand as her body went limp. Her finger accidentally swiped against the dial, making the curved weapon slide halfway into the hilt. The grating creak from this motion revealed the thing’s old and rusty state.

“Give me... more time...” Sua panted. “I can... go again...”

Binasa, bored by her stubborn streak, turned away from her.

“Six minutes is all I have for you today, brat. I have other more interesting things to do.” The evil spirit blended back into the darkness, but not before plucking a perfectly white rosebud growing from one of the bushes nearby. “If you’re set on passing away before your mother does, find someone else to maul you to death.”

And just like that, Binasa left. Not even his footprints remained to prove that he’d been around. To Sua, the incident had become almost like a terrifying nightmare.

The dull pain all over her body, however, reminded her that this encounter hadn’t been a bad dream. It had happened, and it would happen again as soon as that rose appeared behind Tamisna Inn’s doors.

Sua gulped, then staggered out of the clearing. It was barely midday, but already she felt like immersing herself in a warm, soothing bath. Perhaps indulge herself in a good cry while she was at it.

Thankfully, few people chose to linger at the bar soon after breakfast. Most would have already shown up to work in town or headed to the fields to check on their herds. She could sneak around the inn and enter through the side door, so she wouldn’t run into anyone.

Except for her mother.

As soon as Sua shut the door behind her, she heard Sarisa's footsteps rushing up the basement stairs.

"I knew it! I just knew it!" The woman didn't grab her daughter for fear of hurting her even more, but she did push Sua's mantle up her arms. She wailed when she saw the darkening bruises. "There's only one reason you'd take this long to come home, and that's the only thing I've ordered you not to do! How many times have I told you to let it go, Sua?!"

"But Mama—"

"Don't reason with me again!" Sarisa gripped her hair and shut her eyes. "We've been through this before. Stop going to that monster and letting him hurt you!"

"But you'll die if I don't!" Sua removed her mantle completely and held out her arms. Po managed to wriggle out of the garment and jump over to a pocket in her mother's apron. "And it didn't hurt that much, if you must know. I know what I'm doing."

"Then why are you walking with a limp? Tell me that, Sua." Sarisa swiped her hand over her face. "Didn't hurt that much, bah! Even your father wouldn't have tolerated such a blatant lie. He would have expected better from his daughter."

Shame washed over Sua.

Her mother spoke the truth. Her father wouldn't have appreciated being lied to. All his life, the man had stood by his morals and convictions, and he'd

encouraged his young child to do the same.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” she whispered. Sua didn’t feel remorseful about going to that clearing and facing that monster, but she did regret dismissing how her mother would feel about it. “I was only trying to help. I just... It’s just that I don’t want to lose you.”

Her desperate tone was what finally drained the anger out of Sarisa.

“Oh, darling.” Sarisa wrapped her in a gentle embrace and shushed her as she wept. Sua could only hug the woman back while she felt soft, comforting pats on her mussed hair. “I may be dying, but you’re not going to lose me completely. When I’m gone, I’ll watch over you from the other side, just like your father is doing now. Surely, he’s sending us a miracle as we speak.”

“I’m tired of hoping.” Sua sniffled. Her antula mimicked her worry by mewling from his safe, little cradle. “And I’m tired of being weak. I try again and again, but I’m just not somebody who can fight.”

Her mother let go of her and tried fixing her hair.

“You don’t have to fight. At least, not like this,” Sarisa said. “You can fight by living a full life, if only for me. Do the things that I won’t get to when the time comes. And don’t make the same mistake I did. I let my emotions rule me in that moment. If I’d waited, we might have found a safer way to bring down the brothel and secure my freedom.”

Sua shook her head.

“You did the best you could.”

“Thank you, dear,” her mother smiled at her. She fished Po—a little better now that he’d had time to hide—out of her apron. “Now, chin up. I have time to help you tend to those wounds before the lunch crowd comes by. We shouldn’t let them see you like this, or they’ll become suspicious.”

Which was a mild word for what would actually happen if they discovered that she kept in contact with evil spirits.

Alolans weren’t keen on gaining the wrath of spirits, especially those who sought to make deadly bargains in desperate situations. Sua winced just thinking about how she’d be driven out of town if word got out. Even her friends would likely reprimand her for bringing them so close to danger through their association.

And if their guests found out too...

Sua bit her lip as she took Po from her mother. The antula curled up in her palm, exhausted from their ordeal. Word would surely spread if someone staying at the inn saw her in this state and put things together.

“Sweet spirits of midnight!”

Both Sua and her mother froze when they heard Gin’s swearing. Even Po jerked, startled by the noise at the front door.

“Are you all right?” The man’s eyes widened the longer he looked her over. “What happened?”

CHAPTER VI

Her surroundings were silent, save for the ticking of a grandfather clock at the corner. Its brass fixtures and wooden casing, stained mahogany, set off the tall, white shelves nearby. They lined up in neat rows across the tiled floor of Alola's spacious library.

Her father had volunteered to help renovate the building, delighting the local librarian. The two had been best friends since, and their daughters had become playmates. She and Guyaba often used to play hide-and-seek among the bookshelves, much to the vexation of the other visitors and older students from the schoolhouse.

Now, Sua's mind was too preoccupied to even think of looking for her friend. She still couldn't believe that she'd managed to make up an excuse for her fading bruises. Thankfully, Gin had believed her when she said that a herd of startled bovis had accidentally run across her path, knocking her around in their panic.

And luckily, her mother had gone along with the tall tale.

"He wouldn't tell anyone, would he?" Sua mumbled as she rifled through the pages of a book. She'd taken the hefty thing from a section of the library holding new acquisitions, hoping it contained

the answers she sought. "I'll never live this down if the others find out. Or worse. People might think on it deeper and sense something suspicious."

"What something suspicious?"

Sua almost yelped when she heard Guyaba's voice.

"You surprised me, Gui," she hissed. She kept her thumb on the page she was reading so she wouldn't forget. "What on earth are you doing back here when you should be up front manning the desk?"

Her friend shrugged her shoulders and pulled out the ladderback chair beside the one she was sitting on. Guyaba plopped her bottom down and cupped her chin in both hands.

"Daddy told me to take a break."

"Did he?" she asked, "or did you sneak away like usual?"

Her friend scrunched her nose, which only meant that she had snuck off without telling her parent.

"It's not like there are a lot of people here now that the show's in town," Guyaba replied, referring to the traveling fair that moved from town to town across the continent. Whenever they stopped by with their theater plays, musicians, puppeteers, candy stalls, barbecues, and auction booths, the local shop owners would close up to treat themselves to some entertainment.

"I know what you mean," Sua said. "Even Ubi begged us to close shop so she could watch today's puppet show."

"Is that why you're here instead of at the inn?"

"You know Mama rarely says no to her younger daughter, Gui." Sua rolled her eyes. Between her parents, Sarisa was always the indulgent one, while her father had been the disciplinarian. "And since there's going to be a pop-up kiosk for the next few days, you can bet that we'll be closed again for dinner too."

Not that she could blame the locals for flocking to the fair's foreign cuisine. She would have loved preparing the same dishes for the bar, of course, but shipping the rarer ingredients would not only take time but also result in extra expenses. On the bright side, she'd only need to cook for her family and their guest every night.

Less work, more portions.

"We're straying from the topic." Guyaba leaned closer, perhaps to make sure that her father wouldn't hear her and realize where she'd gone. "You were saying something about 'suspicious.' You're not referring to our local celebrity, are you? Because, I swear, I won't be able to take it if he turns out to be a bad person."

"Um," Sua furrowed her brow. "Who?"

"Sa Gin, of course." Her friend pointed toward an alcove reserved for readers who preferred reading in peace. Sua gazed over and realized that her guest was also on the premises. "He's been coming and going the past week, skimming through piles of newspapers dating as far back as two decades."

Sua tilted her head. It was indeed an odd hobby. She only knew of one person, a wandering scholar and tutor, who did something similar, and it had been her father.

"What else does he read here?" she asked. If Gin was in the same profession as her parent—despite his curved blade stating otherwise—then he might have knowledge of how to solve her problem. "Topics of interest? Specific novels or almanacs?"

Guyaba raised one eyebrow.

"What's in it for me?"

"Gui!" Much to Sua's dismay, her friend chuckled. "Come on. Surely there has to be a pattern to his visits here."

"I'll spill if you tell me what you know about him from your end," Guyaba negotiated. "You did promise to help me out so that I could grow closer to him."

"But he's been coming over to the library for days."

"As a customer and not a visitor. Daddy warned me that I shouldn't be flirting on the job." Her friend pouted. "He always sits in the alcove, so I couldn't even greet him unless he came out to grab another pile of periodicals. And when he does come out, all we ever talk about is you."

"Me?" Sua paled. If for some reason he'd mentioned something about the fake bovi herd incident—

"He worships your cooking," Guyaba said. "And

he's always praising your inn's amenities, your bar's ambience, and even your antula. Imagine, Po gets more attention than I do, and I'm a human!"

The mere mention of Po's name was enough to summon him from the depths of Sua's skirt pocket. The antula emerged from his favorite napping spot to climb up her dress and huddle against her shoulder, as always. He chirped at her friend, as if to say that he could hear her, before closing his eyes and settling in for a second nap.

"First of all, you're being too loud for a librarian's assistant." Sua reached up to give her pet a little pat. "Second, it only means that you have an angle to work with."

"Explain this so-called angle to me."

"It means that Sa Gin likes food, that he likely enjoys pleasant spaces, and that he'll probably be interested in the local fauna if he sees them." She opened her book again, intending to resume her reading without breaking away from the conversation. She didn't want to waste any more time on things other than research. "So what you need to do is ask him out to the fair. You and Batani could take him."

"Are you insane?" Guyaba hissed as she clenched her hands on the table they were using. "I can't do that. I can steal away to meet you here, but I can't run off to the fair. Daddy will have my hide."

"You have a point." Her old man may have had high expectations for his children, but her friend's

father was stricter in many ways. He didn't like the idea of his only daughter cavorting with foreigners who didn't have plans to put down roots. "I suppose I could think of something that doesn't involve having to spend the full day at the fair. You still make time for lunch, right?"

"Only an hour or so. I have to sort and stack the disorganized collections after that."

Sua nodded. She flipped over to the next page after concluding that the text she'd read hadn't revealed anything helpful. So far, the only relevant information she'd found was the fact that evil spirits could possess other spirits with their permission.

The week before, she'd read that they could also theoretically possess gods who didn't have any familiars. Which somehow implied that running around without the creatures ensuring their immortality could make any god vulnerable. It wasn't something she needed to know in her case, but it was interesting all the same.

At least it supported the idea that only other gods and magical entities could match an evil spirit's power.

"That'll have to do," Sua said, setting the finished book aside and reaching for a new one. "I'll meet you behind the library tomorrow for lunch, and we can discuss further strategy then."

"You know," Guyaba picked up the tome she'd just discarded and tapped a finger on its hardbound spine, "you and our handsome reader over there

seem to have similar tastes."

"Huh?" Sua's hand faltered, failing to reach the book she intended to read next.

Guyaba shook her head and clicked her tongue.

"The only things I've ever seen him read, aside from newspapers, are books about spirit entities," her friend confided. "Is there some sort of secret coven you're both part of or something?"

She scoffed. Not loud enough to alert Gin or the stragglers on the side of the room, of course. Only so that Guyaba would understand that the notion sounded ridiculous.

"Surely we're not the only two people on the continent interested in this topic," she said. "Sa Gin's mysterious, yes, but I don't think he means any harm. If anything, we can trust Po's intuition. Antulas are never wrong, especially rare ones like mine."

Po chirruped without opening his eyes or moving from his spot on Sua's shoulder.

Guyaba sighed.

"I hope so. I'm not ashamed to admit that his looks drive me mad. But not mad enough to marry, say, a criminal in hiding." The pining brunette stole a glance at the oblivious Sa Gin one last time before standing up. She grabbed all of the used books on the table to return them to their proper places. "If you need me for anything, I'll be at reception."

"No need. I was about to leave anyway." Sua handed over the last book she'd been holding. "If

your father gives you a scolding, tell him that I asked you to come over and help with these. He has a soft spot for his favorite godchild, after all."

"I knew I could count on you." Guyaba grinned. "Thanks! And see you tomorrow!"

Sua would have reminded her friend to talk more quietly, but Guyaba was off with the stack of books before she could say anything.

With nothing left to do after three hours of pointless reading and researching, Sua decided to leave the library. As she walked to the side door, eyes running over countless titles and leather-bound spines all the while, she bumped into a shoulder and nearly tripped.

"Oof!"

"I'm so sorry. I—Sua?"

"Gin!" She exclaimed, before remembering that they were in a library and were supposed to stay quiet. She looked up at the same man she'd been chatting about and noticed his surprise. "We should talk outside if you're leaving. We wouldn't want to disturb the other readers."

Sa Gin bowed a little and gestured for her to lead the way.

"After you."

They stopped beneath a tall, gnarly tree between the library and the medicine shop that Batani worked at. The wide canopy of bright green leaves and spreading branches cast long shadows over the pebbled path beneath their feet. The few people

passing by smiled briefly at them before going their own way.

"You've been busy," Sua said while waving back to the baker's child, who happened to be walking on the other side of the path. Po, who had yet to move from his perch, followed up the greeting with a friendly chitter. "Have you found what you've been looking for at the library?"

Gin leaned against the tree's rough trunk, folded his hands, and shook his head.

"Not yet, but there's still time," he said. Then he regarded her from toe to brow, pausing momentarily on her antula, and he smiled. "So you go to the library too? I should have known you were into reading, what with your intimate knowledge of folk tales and children's stories."

Sua didn't exactly know what to think. He'd remembered and noticed things about her just as accurately as she had noticed stuff about him. That fact alone pleased her enough to stain her cheeks pink and make her lips curl up.

Hearing the word 'intimate' from his lips didn't help matters. Sua was sure that he'd meant that in an innocent sense. But coming from a man with his face and physique, it could easily allude to other things entirely.

"You're going back to the inn, then?" she asked, taking care not to show how thrilled she was with his attention. Her antula must have sensed the tension in her neck, because he started nuzzling her chin to

soothe her.

"I was planning to find a tailor shop first." Gin scratched behind his ear. The ends of his fingers disappeared under the long waves of his dark hair. "I noticed that my clothes have been getting me a lot of attention."

Sua silently agreed with him.

She recalled the day he'd come back to the inn after checking in on his gelding at Alola's public stables. He'd arrived with a sizeable satchel that looked to have been made from the finest leather on the continent. She could only guess at the elaborate clothes and other personal items he'd stored inside it.

"Well, most people here aren't used to seeing your level of finery." She chuckled. "It's not every day that we're treated to such a spectacular view."

"I'd like to be less of a spectacle and more of a person, please." Gin rolled his eyes. He still smiled, though, which meant that he knew she'd only meant to amuse him.

"You know," Sua said after a moment of thought, "if you don't mind hand-me-downs, we have some shirts and pants at home that just might fit you. That way, you wouldn't have to pay for anything."

The man's golden eyes lit up like the two moons that would soon rise into the sky.

She had never seen anything more beautiful.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I can pay for them if you like. I have plenty of kambs to spare."

Sua pondered his offer until she remembered her promise to meet with Guyaba the next day.

The first threads of a plan started to weave themselves in her mind. The inn could always do with more kambas, especially for its upkeep, but there was an opportunity here that she didn't want to miss. One that involved her cooking and a humble but fresh wardrobe for the handsome man keeping her company.

CHAPTER VII

His enthusiasm convinced her to head back to the inn instead of catching up with her mother and Ubi at the town square.

While they walked, they talked about everything and nothing. And they occasionally greeted the people Sua was acquainted with. Including the fisherman's wife, whose only response was a curt nod and a brief complaint about not having anyone to take her to the fair.

"I hope you don't mind Pa Ting's theatrics," Sua said after they'd wished her good luck on finding a companion for her outing. "She used to live in a big town like Karokal before moving here. Her husband spends long hours out at sea, so oftentimes she gets bored. She'll often amuse herself by flirting and talking about how beautiful she was in her youth."

"Is that why she looked like she wanted to snap at you?" Gin kicked aside a rock with his boot so that she wouldn't step on it.

"What has that got to do with her shenanigans?" She smiled at him when she noticed his kind gesture.

"You must remind her a lot of how young and beautiful she used to be," he said. He looked at her from the corner of his eyes, making her blush. "She's probably a little jealous that you're everything she

hoped to have forever. Youth, beauty, and a giving heart.”

“W-well,” Sua stuttered. She turned her head and pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I think Missus Pa’s beautiful in her own way. Her husband certainly thinks so. I mean, he’s been with her for eleven years.”

“They’re lucky to have each other. It would be nice if all souls shared the same luck.”

Sua hummed. Her parents’ union had been cut short after eighteen years. And while their marriage had lasted longer than Pa Ting’s to date, it still didn’t feel long enough.

She’d hoped that her father would have grown old and gray, just like Nana Aba from down the road. She’d imagine what he would do if she brought home a gentleman caller or a lover. She wondered if he would notice how her face flushed so quickly when Sa Gin was nearby.

He’d likely study the man like a hawk studies its prey before telling her if he was a good catch.

“I would’ve been mortified,” Sua mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Oh nothing.” Sua giggled to convince Gin that she’d been talking to herself. “My mind just wandered a little.”

After arriving at Tamisna Inn, she instructed him to wait in his room while she got her father’s old clothes from the trunk in the ceiling space. By that time, Po had fallen asleep, and she hated to wake

him with her movements. She deposited the animal in their room, on the softest pillow she owned.

Then she got out and walked to the end of the hallway. Once there, Sua pulled on the hook that released the trap door to the attic. The ladder came down onto the hall, bringing with it clouds of dust and little pieces of debris that made her cough.

Finding her father's traveling trunk despite the dusky lighting was easy. It was transporting the clothes that she had difficulty dealing with. So when Gin heard her struggling with the hefty bundle, he rushed out to see what was going on.

"Let me help," he offered, even as he steadied the ladder so it would stop rattling under her weight. His hands held the two braces flanking the rung close to her calves.

"I can manage," Sua replied, descending slowly. "You just keep holding on to the ladder."

"Don't be stubborn," Gin insisted. "At least hand that over to me. How can you come down safely if you can't even see where you're going?"

"I'm fine."

"No. You're going to fall if you don't—watch out!"

Before Sua even realized that her foot had missed one of the ladder's rungs, Gin had wrapped his arms around her waist, grabbing her before she could topple over. He spun her away and managed to set her on her feet despite the mountain of clothes between them. She didn't know how unusually strong he was until he carried her just now.

Almost as strong as Binasa.

“Th-thank you.” She ducked her head and bit down on her tongue. Sua silently reprimanded herself for comparing such a kind man as Gin to that monster. “L-let me go through these first to see which ones are still wearable.”

“Are you all right?” he asked. His fingers still clutched at the sash around her waist.

Sua pulled away from him, knowing that staying in his arms any longer would make her wish he would pull the sash off, along with the rest of her—

“Yes. And I’m sorry,” she said, cutting off her wicked thoughts. Whenever they were this close to each other, it was easy to forget that he was paying her for food to eat and a bed to sleep in. “I shouldn’t have been so hardheaded.”

Gin placed his palms on his hips and sighed.

“I’ve told you time and again that you can ask me for help.”

“But you’re our guest.”

“And I’m also your friend. At least, I thought I was.” The man leaned forward and tilted his head, imploring her to tell him the truth. “Am I?”

If she didn’t think that she’d drop the clothes she was carrying, she would have leaned away from him. Their proximity was doing things to her that no other man had ever done before. Like making her lightheaded and prompting her heart to gallop like an excited quin stallion.

“Y-you won’t b-be anymore if you k-keep

crowding me like this,” she replied, tripping over her words.

“That’s a shame,” Gin said as he finally backed away. “Depriving me of such a nice view. You look so much prettier up close.”

Sua couldn’t get out of the hall—and away from Gin’s teasing—fast enough. Luckily, Po didn’t wake from the noises she made rushing back into her room. She dumped the garments on Ubi’s bed and took a deep breath before starting on her task.

It took her a while to pick out some items that would sit well on Gin’s broader shoulders, but she eventually found three loose shirts with embroidered cuffs and two pants in darker, complementary tones.

She handed them to him at his room’s threshold, then requested that he let her see them on him so that she could make any needed alterations later on.

Of course, once Gin put them on and walked into the hallway to show her, the shirts did fit more tightly over his brawny torso. It only meant that she could see how well-built he truly was. There were muscles on his upper arms that could only have been developed through years of sparring or actual combat.

Thankfully, her father had preferred a looser style of pants than the ones that were forever fashionable in the bigger towns. The articles didn’t hug Gin too tightly down below, but they did hint that he was rather... gifted. If women already followed him around with their eyes because of his looks alone,

they'd drop dead at the sight of his other assets.

“A bit clingier than I’m used to, but it’ll do,” he said as he lifted his legs and admired the impeccable stitching on the pants’ seams. “Whoever owned these has an eye for good quality and an impressive sense of fashion.”

Sua smiled.

“They belonged to my father,” she said. “He used to travel and teach in other towns before settling here. Sturdy garments were necessary during his trips.”

“And where’s your father now?”

“He’s dead.” Sua bent her head. She clasped her hands and rubbed one thumb over the other. “Thieves beat him within an inch of his life to get his money. He barely made it home to take his last breath here. We were devastated.”

Of course, time had somehow lessened the pain, but it would always be there. And with the impending demise of her mother, Sua knew that there might be no end to it. Ubi had already lost their father, though her younger sister could barely remember him.

But if Ubi had to endure grieving their Mama’s death... and to learn that it had been by an evil spirit’s doing...

“I’m sorry.” The warm touch of Sa Gin’s fingers on her hands brought Sua’s attention back. “It’s always hard to lose someone or something important to you, especially so unfairly. You’ll still miss them no

matter how long it's been.”

When Sua looked up, she noticed the gentle, understanding light in the man's eyes. It was almost as if he, too, had experienced the same sadness her family did. There was nothing there saying that he pitied her.

“It does, yes. But you know what?” she asked quietly.

“What?”

“I'm lucky I got the chance to know him.” The corners of Sua's lips rose. “I'm glad I got to be his daughter.”

“That must make him very happy, wherever he is,” he replied.

His hands still held hers in their gentle hold. His chest was so much closer to hers now that he'd leaned forward to offer his condolences. If she took one step toward him and pressed her cheek to his heart, she was sure she'd feel like the luckiest woman in Alola.

Almost as if reading her thoughts, Sa Gin moved nearer still and raised his other hand to her cheek. She felt his palm brush against her skin, cooling the heat that had built up there. She couldn't look away from him as his throat bobbed and his lips parted slightly.

She was an innkeeper, and Sa Gin was her customer. She had a code of ethics and a list of rules to follow to maintain Tamisna's reputation. But if the man were to kiss her now—

A cough from down the hall jerked Sua and Gin out of the entrancing moment.

When she looked to the side, she spotted her amused Mama and her oblivious younger sister. Her mother raised an eyebrow, while Ubi let go of her hand. The child launched herself at Sua before anybody could utter a word.

“Hi Sua! Is Po in our room?! I bought ‘em some treats! And I got to see the puppet show! All my friends from school were there too. They asked me where Po was so they could give treats too, but I told them Po didn’t come with me. So now Po has *lots* of treats!” the girl chattered on and on. “Oh! Hello, mister! Would you like some treats?”

Sa Gin chuckled while Sua, embarrassed by her little sister’s antics, blushed hard. Thankfully, the man took it all in stride. He even let go of her hand so he could pat Ubi’s head, earning him a giggle from the girl.

“I’d love some,” he said, “but I’m afraid I might get carried away and eat them all.”

“Hey! My papa wore these,” Ubi piped up, pointing to his outfit. “Are you playing dress-up?”

“Ubi, calm down,” Sua said. Judging by her younger sister’s energy, the girl must have indulged in quite a lot of candy at the fair, courtesy of their mother. “Yes, Po is in our bedroom. You can check if he’s woken up yet. Give him the food and see if he likes it.”

“All right!” And just like that, Ubi was off, leaving

the three adults in the hall.

Sarisa spoke first.

“I haven’t seen that shirt in years,” she said as she approached them.

“I can explain.” Sua got between her mother and Gin, even though keeping them apart likely wouldn’t do anything. The man was built like a fortress, and she wouldn’t disrespect her Mama by blocking the woman from talking to their guest. “Sa Gin needed a new set of clothes because the ones he brought made him stand out. Father’s things were rotting away in the attic anyway.”

Surprisingly, Sarisa gave her daughter a nod of approval.

“The style suits him,” her mother said. “You know, for a moment I thought I was seeing things when I came up. Imagine my confusion when I saw someone dressed like your father with a younger version of myself here. Only to find out that it was you and this strapping gentleman.”

Sua looked at her own clothes and noticed that, indeed, the mustard yellow dress with checkered patterns had been handed down from her mother. In her haste to prepare the kitchen that morning, she hadn’t even noticed the change of clothes she’d grabbed from the closet. Her cheeks got hotter from imagining what a sight they may have made.

“Is it all right if I use these garments, then?” Sa Gin asked her mother directly. “I can pay for them if you prefer. I told your daughter, ma’am, but she

didn't want the money.”

“Is that so?” Sarisa turned to her with a smirk on her face. She didn't think it was possible to raise one's eyebrow as high as her mother could. “Did you have something else that you wanted in return?”

Sua gulped. It looked like her mother had figured her out. Knowing that she couldn't wriggle her way out of her dilemma with her Mama watching, she turned to Gin and cleared her throat.

“I'm going on a picnic with my friend tomorrow,” she told him. “Maybe you'd like to take a break from the library and join us.”

CHAPTER VIII

Sua fixed the lace cuffs that hemmed her dark blue dress' elbow-length sleeves. She'd pinned them up earlier so that they wouldn't get dirty while she prepared the day's meals and finished her other chores. This managed to keep them clean, but it also wrinkled the trailing fabric.

Thankfully, her apron had protected the rest of her outfit from a similar fate. And because she didn't have to worry about looking any more bedraggled, she'd finished early enough to prepare for their picnic. Not that she needed to, because this outing wasn't exactly for her.

Sua had no doubts that Guyaba would be delighted to have Gin's pleasant company for lunch. She'd sent word early that morning, of course, to make sure that her friend could get ready. Guyaba would have wanted to look her best in front of the most eligible man in town.

"This is as good as I'll look," she said after coiling her braid into a bun on her head and pinning it in place. She stooped down and held a hand out for her pet. "Let's go, Po."

The antula chirped before jumping onto her palm and scurrying up to her shoulder. If it weren't for the mottled pattern of his fur, he would have blended in

with her bodice. They went down to the bar—and Sua stopped in her tracks when she noticed her waiting escort.

As usual, the few people who had stopped by the inn to catch a break from the fair huddled around him. She counted two men and five women, all of whom were dying to get a word in before the others could. One of the girls—Sua believed she was some relative of the local schoolteacher—had been coming and going for three days now, her excuse being that she preferred the lemonade they served.

But that's not what had grabbed Sua's attention the most.

For that lunch hour at least, Sa Gin had traded in the plain clothes she'd given him for something a bit flashier.

He'd chosen to wear the whitest shirt she'd ever seen and gray pants embroidered with white flourishes at the seams. A tan jerkin with fawn-colored stripes hugged his broad shoulders and tapering waist. It also highlighted the beauty of his gold-flecked eyes.

Those eyes seemed to sparkle as soon as they met her gaze.

"There you are," he said instead of answering the question that the lemonade-loving woman had asked him. "You were gone for so long that I was starting to get worried."

"I'm sorry for taking a while. I had to put my hair up." Sua waved at the crowd. "Thanks for keeping

him company, everyone.”

One of the men nodded at her.

“Closing up again, Sua?” he asked as the three women who’d been standing behind him said goodbye to Gin and slipped away. It couldn’t be any more obvious that they’d come around for one person and one person only.

“Yes,” she replied. She walked to the counter, with Gin following her every move, to retrieve his weapon from the compartment behind the wall. “There’s no point in staying open when the rest of Alola will be at the fair anyway. Have you gone yet?”

“No,” the man replied as another woman bid Sa Gin farewell, “but me and the missus will be there for the auction.”

The last woman, the one who’d been ordering lemonade, tapped Gin on the shoulder. She was leaning so close to him that it was impossible for Sua to misunderstand what she was doing. Thankfully, Gin had the good sense not to look lower and peek at the girl’s suggestive neckline.

“Will you be going to the auction, Gin?” the lemonade girl asked. “They say there might be rare sets of jewelry up for sale. If you’re planning on buying someone a gift, you’ll never find a better source.”

Unfortunately for the woman, Gin stood up before she could put her figure on full display for him. Sua would have cackled at the situation if she were any less polite. Instead, she chose to smile at the man as

he made his way over to her.

“Thanks for the suggestion, miss,” Gin said over his shoulder. “I’ll be sure to keep it in mind.”

The woman left then, with a little pout on her lips, much to the amusement of the two men who’d been hovering around Gin with her. The pair settled back into their seats, content to spend the rest of their stay free of female company at last. They struck up a different conversation, leaving Sua to have her escort all to herself.

“Did you have to dismiss her so?” she asked once he had reached the counter. She took his blade from its designated shelf before closing the wall again. “I think she really likes you.”

“Better to gently turn her down now than make her think she can carry on like that,” he explained. “It wouldn’t be gentlemanly of me to embarrass her down the line by leading her on. Isn’t that right, Sir Po?”

Much to her surprise, Po meowed with delight and jumped over to Gin’s vest. The antula clung to him as if he’d known that man for the longest time. Her pet hadn’t done anything like this with strangers before, which confused her a great deal.

Then again, Sa Gin was no ordinary stranger, what with his unusual name, unusual looks, and equally unusual blade. The gilt weapon weighed nearly twice as heavily as the one she’d inherited from her father. She wondered if this would work better at subduing Binasa.

You can't, her conscience warned her. It's wrong to steal from other people. And even if you did, what use would it be in your inexperienced hands? You can barely lift your father's blade. How do you expect to wield this one?

Sua blushed, finally realizing how foolish her idea had been.

“Let me get him off of you,” she said to Gin when she noticed that her antula was starting to make himself comfortable on the man’s jerkin.

“I don’t mind carrying him around for a spell if it means that your shoulder can take a break,” he answered. “I’ve grown pretty fond of the little fellow.”

Po purred, as if to say ‘likewise.’

“If you’re sure.” Sua handed him his weapon, and he sheathed it in the scabbard on his back. “Let’s go then?”

Something thudded on the countertop behind them, and Sua turned around to see what had happened. She found her mother standing by the counter, one hand on her hip and the other atop the picnic basket she’d placed on the wooden surface.

“Not so fast,” she said, patting the woven wicker. “It’s great that you’re both excited to leave for a few hours of fun, but aren’t you forgetting something?”

Both she and Sa Gin looked at the basket, then at each other, and burst into fits of laughter. She’d been so eager to kick her plan into action that she’d forgotten the very picnic lunch she’d promised to

feed him. Thank goodness Sarisa had heard them leaving and brought the meal out.

“Thank you, Mama,” Sua said as she took the basket from her mother and hugged her goodbye. “Are you sure you’ll be fine without me?”

“Yes. And if anything happens, Ubi knows where to find you,” Sarisa replied. “Now go.”

They followed her mother’s orders, and pretty soon they were in front of the town library, awaiting the third member of their party. They didn’t have long to stand around, for as soon as Guyaba noticed them from the other side of a glass window, she came rushing out to greet them. Her father’s reminder to return in two hours and to stay away from the fair boomed behind her.

Sua couldn’t help but notice the new and pretty pink dress her friend was wearing. Yes, she could buy something with the same gold-embroidered lace and silver silk ribbons as Guyaba’s attire. But it would hardly be practical to wear them in the inn’s kitchen.

“I’m so glad you could come with us, Gin!” Guyaba exclaimed, barely able to contain her joy. She reached for his hand immediately and tugged him away. “I noticed your fondness for animals the other day, and I know this place with lots of cute pinnip. Would you like to see?”

Sa Gin glanced at Sua, but she ushered him to tag along with Guyaba instead of walking beside her.

She followed them to the pebbled road that

headed out of Alola. All the while, she couldn't help but think what a striking couple Guyaba and Gin made. Both had attractive foreign features, and Guyaba was tall enough that the top of her head reached his eyeline.

The fact that Gin could kiss her friend with ease if he so desired made her chest burn with dread.

You've no right to be jealous, her conscience chided her again. You're the one who asked him to come so he could get to know Guyaba. If you're regretting that this happened, and if they do fall in love, you have nobody to blame but yourself.

The morose thought helped Sua remember that she was doing this for her friend. She wasn't supposed to feel anything for the man, whose purpose in coming to Alola was as cryptic as his origins. Her only role was to provide him with what he needed at Tamisna, and that was it.

As soon as they reached the town's border, right where the road forked in two different directions, Guyaba guided them over the path that led to the lake.

They reached the body of water not long after their short walk. And once there, she excused herself from Gin and Guyaba's company. This not only encouraged the potential couple to explore the area together, but it also allowed her to prepare their food on the blanket of soft grass that thinned towards the shore.

While her guest and her friend cooed over the

colonies of pinnip basking under the sun, their elongated bodies and colorful collar fins on display, Sua laid out their lunch. She'd brought more than enough lepori steak sandwiches and steamed vegetable and cheese dumplings to satisfy even the hungriest man. She'd also prepared a salad of leafy greens for their sides and malla egg rolls as appetizers.

And to top off their meal, Sua had made jelly pudding from the freshest quin cream she could find on short notice. It was her and Guyaba's favorite dessert, and she hoped the food would win over Sa Gin too. She finished laying out the dishes just as her companions came over.

"I could smell those steak sandwiches from the lake, Su!" her friend said. "You must have worked extra hard to get that spicy aroma just right."

"Settle down and grab a bite, you two." Sua reached for two plates and started serving her friends. She knew that they could have gotten their portions on their own, but having worked at the inn had ingrained the task into her system. "Did you see the pinnip pups up close, Gin? They were born a little over a month ago, after the Thawtime Festival."

"I did," Gin replied. "They looked adorable."

"They're Guyaba's favorite animals because of that," she said, trying to sneak her friend's name into the conversation. She looked at the woman, who surreptitiously gave her a thumbs up from behind the cover of a wood plate. "If you have any questions

about them, or any other animal, for that matter, Guyaba probably has the answer. She's very well-read, not to mention kind to those little critters."

"Just as kind as you are to your antula, I presume." Gin tore off a chunk of his lepori steak and fed it to the creature still clinging to his jerkin. "Po was holding on to me earlier, but he'd sometimes move to my shoulder to keep sight of you."

Sua blushed.

"I hope you didn't mind his fussy ways," she said, following up Gin's offering to the antula with a piece of her egg roll. The creature grabbed it with an eager limb. "I'm actually surprised that he chose to stay with you. Usually, he'll come running to me when he's too far away, unless I've told him to stay with Mama or Ubi."

"Might just be a fluke today. I mean, if I had such a nice lady as yourself to be loyal to, I'd come running as well," he replied, one corner of his mouth pulling up.

"You don't need to flatter me to get more food, Gin." Sua rolled her eyes, even as a grin tried forcing itself onto her face. "All you have to do is ask."

"Then may I please have a second serving of this savory dumpling that your talented hands have crafted?"

"They're not as talented as your smooth-talking tongue, I think."

“Well—”

A sharp cough from the momentarily forgotten Guyaba interrupted Sa Gin’s reply. Sua inhaled sharply. Her friend looked at her, an eyebrow raised and lips pulled to one side.

“You two seem awfully friendly with each other,” Guyaba said. “Listening to you talk, one would think you were best friends.”

Gin shrugged as he started on his second vegetable dumpling.

“I’ve been pestering Sua to let me help out at the inn,” he explained. “I guess our banter stems from that.”

“How very odd.” Guyaba finished her last bite of pudding and set her plate down on the picnic blanket. “She tends to shoo Batani and me away whenever we try to help her. But she lets you meddle with the inn even though you’re supposed to be its tenant? That’s a first.”

“Is that so?” Gin turned to her. “I’m honored to receive such special treatment.”

Sua shrank away from Gin’s grin. She could call him out on how persistent he was, of course, but that would only start another verbal exchange that would alienate her friend a second time. So instead of latching on to the man’s bait, she excused herself from Gin to pick some flowers.

“Ubi will want to press some petals to add to her collection,” she said. “Meanwhile, can you two pack up our things once you’re done?”

Of course, Guyaba agreed because it meant being alone with Gin.

She walked past the basking pinnip colonies and headed for the stalks of water hyacinths that grew close to the bank. Their purple flowers swayed in the breeze as the wind stirred the once-still surface of the wide lake. Fluttering pillion buzzed around the blossoms, their iridescent, humming wings adding to the lazy ambience of her surroundings.

Once there, Sua knelt by the water and started plucking the flowers that grew closest to the bank. She gathered the stalks in her hand before carefully inching her way over to the next patch of blooms. Their fragrance distracted her from the rest of her surroundings—

Until a huge codilia surged from the water, its maw wide open.

“WATCH OUT!”

Sa Gin dove toward her, blade in hand, and Sua hit the ground before she could scream for help. Purple petals fell around them from the collision. Gin twisted away from her, pressed the gilded hilt of his blade to spin it, and swung the weapon in an arc.

The sharp metal struck true, hitting the codilia on its leathery jowl. Blood splattered on Gin and over part of her dress. The animal yowled in pain before retreating with its bleeding muzzle back into the water.

The man didn't wait around for a second attack from the creature. Gin hoisted her up with one arm

and dragged her back to their picnic spot. All the while, he kept his blade pointed in the departing codilia's direction.

"Oh my spirits, are you all right?!" Guyaba helped her down to the blanket. "What happened?!"

"A c-codilia. In the water," Sua stuttered. "It m-must have s-strayed from a nearby stream."

"Calm down." Gin held her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. Po, who'd hidden himself in his shirt pocket, moved quickly to her shoulder to nuzzle her. "Breathe. Slowly. You're fine. You're safe."

Sua did as instructed. Meanwhile, Guyaba placed a hand on Gin's shoulder and praised him for his valiant rescue.

"Thank goodness you got to her so fast," she said. "I didn't even know you were gone until you yelled."

Sua blinked, then stared at where she'd been gathering the hyacinths. She realized how far Gin had needed to run. Which puzzled her because it didn't make sense.

Judging by the distance, Sa Gin couldn't have possibly heard, seen, or known that a codilia was about to attack her.

CHAPTER IX

She couldn't concentrate on the spare tablecloths and linen napkins that she had yet to fold. Usually, Sua would be humming some merry tune as the birds twittered and the leaves rustled outside. Instead, she was far too busy nibbling on her lower lip and wondering what part of the bigger picture she was missing.

Only a few days were left before the fair ran its course in Alola. After that, the locals would crowd Tamisna Inn once more. Until then, all she had to worry about was the idea that their only guest might be more mysterious than she thought.

Like a compass needle forever pointing in one direction, Sua's eyes lingered on Sa Gin. The man sat across the empty bar, right where her friends had been sitting the night he'd arrived at the inn. He was nursing a mug of coffee, one she'd prepared with freshly ground beans, a bit of dark chocolate, and a small dash of cinnamon.

She watched as the fragrant liquid moistened Gin's lips, giving them a darker sheen. His throat bobbed while he swallowed, and Sua couldn't help but imitate the motion. Then he turned toward her, and she fumbled with the napkin she'd been holding.

Luckily, Po managed to grab the cloth with one of

his limbs before it could flutter to the floor. She took it from her antula's grasp and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. She tried to compose herself before returning Gin's gaze.

"You didn't see that, did you?" she asked sheepishly.

"Not if you don't want me to," Gin replied as he set his now-empty mug down and ambled over to her. His cheeky smile and unexpected wink almost made her drop the napkin again. "That was a close shave, though."

"Not as close as that shave back at the lake," Sua said, relieved that nobody else was around to listen in on them. "I'm grateful that you haven't told anyone. I don't want Mama to worry."

Thankfully, Gin had agreed to keep that incident a secret from her mother. Sarisa would have a fit if she knew, and that wouldn't help her failing health at all. Even now, the woman was in her room napping, with Ubi keeping her company.

This month, with the traveling fair, was the only time in the year when Sarisa could rest her weary body. It seemed that as the weeks wore on, the woman tired more easily from doing the simplest tasks. Sua didn't want to further stress her mother out by revealing that she was still searching for a way to defeat Binasa.

Or that a twelve-foot-long, leather-backed, wild animal with powerful flippers had nearly eaten her.

She heard from Guyaba that it had taken fourteen

town guards to drive the beast back to its original habitat, one with moving freshwater. Of course, her friend had kept quiet about her close encounter. She'd simply informed the Alolan guards that they'd spotted the creature in a place where it wasn't supposed to be.

"You can count on me to keep your secrets, Sua." Gin placed a hand on the table she was working at. He didn't pull his gaze away from her. "I'm sorry about your mother. If I'd known she was ill, I would have insisted on helping her around too."

And that's all she'd allowed Gin to know.

The rest of the story, including Binasa's existence, she would keep to herself.

"She would have hushed you out of the room as soon as she heard your offer." Sua shook out a tablecloth before spreading it over her work area and smoothing out the wrinkles. She then grabbed two corners and folded them down. "She's even prouder than I am. She'll only push your generosity onto me."

"I'd have no problem with that." Before Sua could stop him, he reached for a different cloth and repeated what she'd just done. "In fact, I'll help you right now."

"But—"

"Sua," Gin countered, "your mother is out for the count, and your little sister is taking a nap too. Since I'm not dodging questions and niceties with a curious crowd at the moment, I may as well help you."

For a moment, Sua thought about further protesting his aid.

However, she did remember that she was supposed to meet with Pina today if she had the time. Her friend had managed to schedule a wedding dress fitting despite the traveling show. If she finished with the dining linen now, she might make it to the boutique before it closed its doors.

“This is the last time,” she said, handing him the next set of napkins. “I can’t have you slaving away with me whenever we’re together.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” he asked. “I enjoy it. And so does your antula, I think.”

Po chirruped away on her shoulder.

“Hush, you.” Sua shook her head after gently reprimanding the creature. “People are going to get the wrong idea, Gin. And in a small town like Alola, you don’t want that happening.”

Gin stared at her for the longest minute. His silence stretched on for so long that she wondered if he actually understood what she meant to say. Alas, the man sighed and went back to folding.

“I suppose you’re right,” he agreed. “The truth is, though, that I like being with you. You don’t fawn all over me like the others do. So I often catch myself wondering how to spend more time in your company.”

Sua’s breath caught at his words. She ducked her head and twiddled with the edge of the napkin she was folding. He couldn’t possibly like her in the way

she thought he implied.

Could he?

“Well... uh... you have my company now,” she started. She knew this was a bad idea, but she couldn’t help herself. “And if... if you’ve got nothing to do after this... we can walk part of the way to the library together... But only if you want to... of course.”

“Of course I’d love to walk with you. How can you think otherwise?”

She wasn’t expecting Gin to place his hand over hers.

But he did, and her fingers nearly trembled from surprise. She hoped that he couldn’t feel how quickly the pulse in her wrist had jumped. Just one touch from him, and she turned into a blubbering mess.

“G-good,” she said, stumbling over her words for the umpteenth time. “Then we’d b-better get this d-done quickly.”

Gin smiled at her and went right back to work. If his stare had lingered for a while, he would have seen how her cheeks pinked. And he would have known then and there that she wasn’t as immune to his charms as he thought but was just very good at hiding it.

Eventually, they got through the rest of the linen, which she then deposited in the backroom of the bar, to the right of the bath chambers. Then she went up the stairs to quietly wake Sarisa, tell her mother where she was going, and ask Po to stay with her

resting family. That done, Sua went through her usual routine of grabbing Gin's blade and walking with him out of the inn.

She couldn't help but feel conscious of the attention they were getting during their stroll.

"I'm sorry about this," Gin whispered in her ear, which sent shivers down her spine. "Can you please bear with me a moment?"

Sua's brow furrowed.

"Bear what?"

Before Gin could answer, two ladies caught up to them, hailing him with the brightest smiles they could manage. One had plaited her blond hair into a coronet around her head, while the other had tucked a flower with coral petals behind her ear. Judging by the foreign patterns on their gowns and the colorful appliques on their sashes, they seemed to be part of the traveling fair.

"Good afternoon, ladies." Gin bowed to them both, making them titter. "Did you catch a break from your shows?"

"Oh, yes," the blond replied. "We're sightseeing at the moment."

"We could use a guide, you know." The girl with the flower fluttered her lashes, clearly begging Gin to agree with her. "You've been here for a while, right, Mister Gin? Maybe you can show us around sometime."

"I'd love to, but I'm busy right now." Much to Sua's astonishment, the man moved closer to her

and wound his arm around her back. She could feel the heat of his palm at her waist. "I have this lovely lady to walk with. Then it's off to the library for me."

Sua didn't know how to react when both girls shifted their attention to her. The second one eyed her with envy, whereas the first seemed surprised to see that she was there. Half of her wanted to gloat over receiving Gin's favor, while the other half worried over the disdain she might receive from the wrongful impression they were giving.

The blond lady pressed her lips together before stepping back.

"That's a shame," she said. "Perhaps we'll see each other before leaving then."

"Or you can leave Alola with us." The flower girl did the silly thing with her eyes again, which started to irritate Sua. "You did say you were only passing, just like us. As one of the bigger artists, I have a wagon all to myself when we travel. It's always open to friends."

Sua didn't believe her one bit. There was only one reason the strumpet would invite Gin into a traveling wagon, and it wasn't because they were friends. No wonder the man had clung to her as soon as he spotted the flirty pair.

She opened her mouth before she could stop herself.

"If you would please excuse us." Sua placed her own arm around Gin's middle. Her hand rested on the small of his back, just under the scabbard of his

blade. “Although we’d love to chat, the boutique is closing in half an hour. We have a wedding dress fitting to get to.”

Then she guided Gin away from the two women before they could inquire about what she meant. She caught the way they looked at each other, their shell-shocked faces as comical as the ridiculous, loud colors on their clothes. Giving those overly forward tarts their comeuppance had felt more satisfying than she expected.

“I can’t believe it.” Gin drew away from her as soon as they were out of the pair’s sights. “Did you just do what I think you did?”

She felt a tiny bit upset after losing his touch, but the wicked grin and sparkle in the man’s eyes more than made up for it.

“Did you see the looks on their faces?” she asked, prompting Gin to laugh. “That gossip will be hard to straighten out if it goes around town, though.”

“Then why did you do it?” he asked.

There were a number of reasons for what she’d started, and not all of them were benign. She could tell him the truth—that jealousy had reared its ugly head when the second girl asked him to join their departure. But that would mean admitting that she did feel fond of him, and this wasn’t something she could afford to do.

Her mother was dying, her other parent was already gone, and her friends had staked their claim on him, so to speak.

In the end, she decided to answer with the safest possible excuse.

“Because you protected me from the codilia.” Sua clasped her hands in front of her and smiled. She took in his silky hair, his beautiful eyes, and the other charming features on his head. “It would’ve drowned me in the lake if you hadn’t come running. You saved my life, and now we’re even.”

The longer they looked at each other, the faster Sua’s heart thumped. She must be seeing things, because she swore that Gin was drawing closer to her as they walked. His eyes certainly hadn’t strayed from her face.

“I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if something happened to you,” he said. “I rescued you, and that’s all that matters. You don’t owe me anything.”

If she wasn’t already a little in love with him, this would have been the moment she fell.

“Gin,” she murmured, wary about what she’d say next, “um, I meant to ask. How did you know I was in trouble and that a codilia was coming for me?”

Gin blinked, and Sua had a feeling that she might regret asking him. Her question broke the spell of longing glances they’d bestowed on each other. The man pulled back, and a slight hint of panic came over him.

“W-well, I... It’s not something... I’m supposed to—”

A tinkling storefront bell, however, interrupted whatever explanation he meant to give.

“There you are!” Pina called from the other side of the road. That’s when Sua realized that they’d reached their destination. “Thank the spirits you could make it and—you brought him along?”

Sua wished she could shrink to invisible proportions in front of Pina. She had hoped to part with the man before anyone at the boutique spotted them. It was one thing to play along with Gin’s antics in front of strangers and quite another to do so in her friend’s presence.

“He was going the same way, that’s all,” she said. “In fact, he’s heading to the library right now.”

“Please have a wonderful afternoon together, Miss Pina,” Gin followed up, to her relief. “I hope to see you at Tamisna some time.”

“Likewise.” Pina nodded at him and held the door open so Sua could enter the shop.

When the door closed behind them, Pina pulled her past the racks of frilly veils on the left side of the store. Sua didn’t even have time to take in the mannequins dressed in party gowns of glittery lace or the display cases of leather shoes in the center aisle. A glass cabinet protecting fancy brooches and decorative pins reflected her friend’s incredulous face.

“Tell me the truth,” Pina demanded. “Something’s going on between you and Sa Gin. And don’t you even attempt to deny it, because I’ll know.”

“But—It’s not—”

“You’re blushing to your hairline, Sua.” The

woman put her hands on her hips. “The truth. Now.”

Sua didn’t really have a choice then. Reluctantly, she admitted that she did enjoy Sa Gin’s attention and that she wished she could spend more time with him. Most importantly, she hoped that he’d extend his stay in Alola or perhaps not leave at all.

“And that’s where we’re at.” Sua wrung her hands and thanked the spirits that the boutique’s owner hadn’t heard them from the backroom. She stopped, though, when she picked up her friend’s chuckles.

“You *like* him,” Pina teased. “You’ve found someone you’re attracted to at last.”

Sua scrunched her nose and turned away. She almost groaned when the first thing her gaze landed on was an emerald engagement ring on the cabinet’s top shelf. Even the damn store was trying to make her admit that she was infatuated with Gin.

“And it just had to be the same man our friends want too,” she pointed out. “They’ve asked me to help them get closer to him. If I add myself to their chaotic fiasco, what does that make me?”

“A woman in love,” Pina replied, “and that’s all there is to it. Our friends know that it’s not something they can change.”

“*Pina.*”

“They’ll understand, Su,” the woman insisted. “I think Guyaba already suspects. She told me about what happened at the lake, and something’s different with the way she talks about Gin now. Maybe it’s because of you.”

“And Batani?” Sua followed her friend to the backroom, where they’d agreed to meet with the store owner and seamstress. “She hasn’t had her chance to see if she and Sa Gin would suit each other. What if they’re more compatible?”

“I don’t think so,” Pina said. Then she stopped in front of the back door, forcing Sua to halt with her. “But if you want proof, then by all means, set them up on their own little outing. I heard from Guyaba that Batani’s going to the traveling show’s last auction.”

Pina had offered an amazing suggestion for her dilemma. The problem was that Sua didn’t feel like taking it. Batani was even more forward than Guyaba, though not to the same degree as that flower girl from the fair.

But she’d promised her friend, and she had only herself to blame.

“I guess... we’ll meet Batani there.”

CHAPTER X

Every inch of the town square, from stone benches to bird baths and miniature fountains, was festooned in gaudy and sparkly decorations. Wood chimes with colorful streamers that fluttered in the wind hung from the low-lying branches of ornamental trees. The lamp posts and the archway into the area hadn't been spared from garlands of bright pink, coral, and orange wildflowers.

In any other town with posh districts and elegant houses, such a chaotic display would seem out of place. But Alola was the perfect venue for the garish style. The local children certainly seemed to love it, because they kept coming back to look and hang out.

“Now remember,” Sua said as she held her younger sister's shoulders and looked her in the eye. “No wandering past the caravan trail, even if your friends invite you to. And make sure to check your change if you decide on buying sweets, all right?”

Ubi's ponytail bobbed as she nodded. The child held her woven wool purse against her chest. The money Sua had given her tinkled as she bounced on her heels.

“I promise,” Ubi said. “Can Po come with me today? My friends really want to play with him.”

Sua felt her antula quiver with excitement on her

shoulder. Unfortunately, both Po and Ubi would have to be disappointed today. The last time she'd let the little creature near her sister's friends, he'd ended up puking from all of the treats they'd given him.

"I'm afraid Po stays with me today," she answered, "unless you can promise that nobody will be giving him even the tiniest bite of food."

"Aw. That's no fun."

"*Ubi.*"

The girl continued to pout.

"You sound just like Mama when she's angry."

Her sister's words reminded Sua that, unfortunately, their mother could not come with them to the fair. Sarisa had been feeling so poorly that morning that the woman had declined a stroll to at least see the town square's decor. It almost made her second guess her decision to carry on with her plan.

But as soon as Sarisa heard that she was going with Gin and Batani, the woman herself urged her to go. It didn't help that Ubi begged to come along and meet with some schoolmates after hearing them. In the end, Sua promised that she'd be back with Ubi soon after the auction ended.

"If you don't follow the rules and end up making trouble for me, Mama *will* get angry." Sua patted her younger sister's hair. "Now go."

Ubi stuck her tongue out before running to her waiting friends. Sua shook her head and turned in

the opposite direction, determined to do something about her dilemma. Like before with the picnic, Gin had agreed to come with her to the fair.

This time, though, he'd fetch Batani from the medicine shop and walk with her to the square. Sua could only imagine what would happen during that stroll since she wouldn't be there. Perhaps her friend would link elbows with the man again or actually get him to hold hands with her.

After all, Batani had a charm of her own. Her friend might be ditzzy and pushy sometimes, but the woman was loving, not to mention skilled at treating cuts and bruises. If Gin ever got hurt, Batani would manage to help him quickly.

Though if it were up to Sua, she wouldn't let him get hurt in the first place.

So much loyalty, and still you're trying to set him up with someone else, her inner voice whispered.

Before she could tell it to shut up, the bang of a heavy gong resounded throughout the area.

"Attention, one and all!" A man yelled out to the crowd from the platform where the gong was mounted. His surcoat and pants had polka-dots in the same colors as the paper streamers and tassels hung around the vicinity. "The last auction is about to start! Step right up and see what treasures we have for you today!"

Sua moved away from the circle of games, stalls, and food carts that enclosed the clearing. As soon as she did, she heard someone calling her name from

close by. When she looked, she spotted Batani and Gin.

And the two were holding hands.

Logic told Sua that they were only doing it so neither would get lost in the crowd. The final auction did tend to draw bigger numbers because it included some of the traveling show's rarer finds. The bit of envy she felt, however, was doing its best to tamp that explanation down.

Fortunately for Sua, Po sensed her unease and started purring against her neck. The antula got her to compose herself. This was the objective of their outing, and she was determined to stick to it until she could conclude, without a doubt, that her friend and her guest would get along.

If the woman and Sa Gin ended up liking each other, she'd support them fully. But if they didn't, then she'd do her best to cheer Batani up. And if Pina was right and Batani would understand, maybe she could—

"Has it started?" her friend asked, startling Sua out of her slump.

"It will, soon enough. Perhaps we should go closer and take our seats already," she said. "Did you have a pleasant time getting here?"

"Oh yes!" The woman used her free hand to grab Sua's wrist and tug her along, just like she'd done with Sa Gin. "Gin here was great company. We talked about a million interesting things. *Didn't we, Gin?*"

For some reason, the man tilted his head to the side and blushed. Furthermore, he raised a finger and scratched at his cheek. Even Po found his reaction odd, for the animal chirped in Sua's ear.

"I guess so," he replied. "Just one or two things, but they *were* important. So, yes, we did."

He was acting all shy around Batani, and Sua didn't enjoy the confusion it stirred within her. Her friend appeared rather thrilled, but the man looked like he didn't want to talk about it. Perhaps the woman had confessed her feelings to him, and Gin had accepted them, or at least promised to think it over.

She wanted to ask him a few questions to figure out what was going on, but the auctioneer's booming voice distracted her again.

"Our first item!" The purveyor raised two drinking goblets with beautiful engravings while she and her friends took their seats on the grass. "A pair of golden goblets cast in the forges of Tanso Village! Said to bring good health and prosperity to those who drink from it! With a starting bid of three bronze half-kambs!"

Hands began to rise for the items. Vineyard owners and winemakers from the surrounding farms started competing to bring the pretty drinking vessels home. Even the baker joined in, despite the fact that his daughter had been forever telling him to curtail his drinking habits.

In the end, though, it was a barley farmer who

won the items—at the price of two full silver and one half-bronze kambs.

The auction went on as such for three other lots that neither she nor Batani were interested in. Then, the auctioneer brought out a fifth item that grabbed Sua’s attention. It was a hairpin crowned with blue pearls and cloth flowers of pale purple.

Somewhat plain, but it would look perfect on her mother.

“Are you going to bid on that?” Sa Gin asked behind her.

She did want to get her mother a souvenir from the fair. It was the last day, after all, and there was no telling when they would swing by again. Even if two of its performers had tried flirting with their guest, she did enjoy the rest of what it had to offer.

Sua looked around and noticed that nobody else seemed interested in getting it, especially for two silver kambs. Someone would have to find special meaning in the trinket to pay that much for it. She started to raise her hand, but then she spotted a sudden commotion.

“What’s wrong?” Batani tapped her on the shoulder.

Sa Gin leaned forward so he could hear what they were saying.

“Aren’t you going to buy it?”

Sua lowered her hand and shook her head. Then she pointed to the couple that was sitting a few spots away from them. Both of her companions followed

her gaze, which had been locked on the fisherman and his hopeful-looking wife.

Pa Ting had both hands wrapped around her husband's right arm, while the fisherman lifted his left hand as high as it could go and yelled. The older woman's eyes sparkled as the man she was holding onto bid for the item she wanted. Thankfully, the auctioneer realized that he was the only taker the hairpin would get.

As soon as the host announced their win, Pa Ting squealed and hugged her husband tightly around the neck. The man blushed like a shy schoolboy, while everyone else around them laughed. Sua couldn't keep the grin off her face.

Despite the ruckus, she heard Batani chuckling beside her.

"Ah, young love." Her friend bumped shoulders with her, almost knocking Po off. The poor antula was forced to scurry down her bodice and onto her lap to avoid a second near-collision. "Looking at those two, you'd think they just met yesterday."

On her other shoulder, Sua felt the weight of Gin's palm.

"That was very considerate of you," he said, "even though she'd been a bit of a snob whenever you walked past each other."

"Like I told you, she's harmless," Sua replied, smiling at him and patting his knuckles. Her eyes returned to the happy couple, who had finally calmed down. "And despite all appearances, they're

still very much in love.”

Sa Gin hummed.

“If only we could all be so lucky. Especially with those we’ve grown closer to.”

Sua’s brow furrowed at his sentiment, since this was the second time he’d mentioned it. Before she could ask him what he meant, the auctioneer approached the platform again, this time holding an ornate, varnished box with copper hinges. He opened the box—and revealed a beautiful teardrop pendant that seemed to shimmer in infinite shades of green.

“Behold!” The host moved the box around, letting everyone get a peek at the treasure laying on its velvet-padded interior. “This pendant is said to be made from the scale of a fallen god! A scale that, once eaten by a mortal, whether they be animal or man, will bind them to the heavens for good! To become their familiar! It also binds two people’s hearts, they say! Our bidding starts at one bronze kamb!”

The pendant was most likely a fake, fancy piece. An expensive imitation commissioned by some wealthy merchant’s lover, which had then been thrown away once the relationship went sour. Still, Sua couldn’t deny the craftsmanship required to create it.

Even Batani became enthralled enough to raise her hand.

“I’m winning that one,” her friend declared. “And

I'll give it to a very special person once it's mine."

Sua had an idea to whom Batani would give it, but she didn't say anything. She didn't have it in her to embarrass her friend in front of the man they both liked. So she simply sat aside and let the woman battle things out with the other bidders.

Unfortunately for Batani, it seemed that the other ladies in the crowd wanted the trinket too. Two girls had already raised the bids to one full silver and one bronze kamb, and it would only keep climbing from there. Still, her friend forged on, her face growing a little more worried whenever someone challenged her price.

Sua couldn't take it anymore and raised her own hand.

"Two silver and one bronze kamb! From this woman!" she yelled while pointing to Batani and hoping the auctioneer would hear her.

"Sua?!" Her friend dug ten neatly manicured fingers into her upper arm. "What are you doing?! I don't have that much money!"

"You will if I give you some of mine." She winked at her friend and watched as the woman's face lit up. "Now let's get back to bidding."

Sua kept pace with the other audience members, mindful of how many kambs her contributions would leave her whenever somebody raised the price. One by one, the competition began to drop, until only one other person started matching their bid in half-kamb increments.

One look at their opponent, and she recognized the lady's face. It was the girl who'd been going back to Tamisna Inn for lemonade. Sua couldn't believe that out of everyone at the auction, including the fisherman's wife, it would be this person who would try to ruin their day.

"One gold kamb!" The girl smirked at them from where she was sitting, and Sua seethed. Beside her, Batani ducked her head.

"That's it," her friend said. "That's as much as we could spend. I think we should stop now."

Sua's shoulders sank, but she knew Batani was right. Any more bids, and they'd have nothing left to use for the other attractions at the fair. Maybe later on, they can think of something that her friend could give to Gin.

But then, a surer, louder voice drowned out the auctioneer just as he was about to close the sale.

"Three gold kambs!" Gin said, to Sua and Batani's shock.

"Please don't," Sua pleaded after she noticed her friend's alarm. She even grabbed his elbow, desperate to stop him from spending so much on something as trifling as a fancy pendant. "I promise we don't really mind losing it to someone else. Your money will be better spent on something you actually like."

"Nonsense." The man grinned at her. "You were having lots of fun trying to win that thing. I simply don't want to be left out."

“You’re not a very good liar.”

Gin’s grin only grew wider.

“I am,” he replied. “Only, you’ve just learned how to tell my lies.”

The auctioneer’s gong rang out then, giving Sua no time to formulate her reply to his flattery. Panic seized her as she searched for the lemonade girl who’d been trying to outbid them. When she turned around, she found the lady staring slack-jawed at Gin’s satisfied face.

They’d won the pendant.

The victory was too much for Batani. She just had to jump up and dance around, making Gin laugh at her antics. Sua, on the other hand, sat dumbfounded at what had just occurred.

“I can’t believe it!” Batani pulled them up and into a group hug. That left Po to grumble discontentedly as he was once again dislodged from his comfy spot on Sua’s lap. “Thank you so much, guys! You’re the best!”

“You should collect your winnings,” Sua said, patting her friend’s back. Deep inside, though, she couldn’t help but become aware of how close Gin was.

Too bad the man seemed to pay no attention to her at the moment.

“I will,” Batani finally stepped back, but not before securing her grip on Sa Gin’s hand. “Come with me, Gin?”

“But they don’t allow weapons in the auction

wagon,” the man replied, gesturing to the blade on his back. “Maybe you and Sua can go instead. I’ll just wait here.”

Her friend’s face fell, and Sua couldn’t resist helping her a second time. She drew away from the pair and shooed them toward the wagon, where the auctioneer had disappeared to. Somebody else in there would hand Batani the pendant after she’d paid.

“Batani will have a hard time navigating the crowd,” she said. “I’ll stay here instead and hold on to your blade for you. If you trust me, that is.”

Gin blinked at her. Then, maybe because her impatient friend was waiting, he sighed and gave in. The man loosened the strap around his torso and handed it over to her.

“Be careful,” he said. “It’s sharp.”

“I will.” Sua watched as her friends disappeared into the throng of people.

She wished them both good luck, of course, even if it did hurt her a little. She got so distracted by her tumultuous feelings that she barely noticed the light tug on her sleeve. Only when Po chirped at her feet did she look down.

Ubi had finally returned.

“Did you have fun playing with your friends?” Sua crouched down to talk to the child. This allowed the antula to climb back onto his favorite perch, right beside her neck.

“Uh-huh,” Ubi said. “I even met a new friend. A

funny man with a big mouth.”

“A funny man? With a big mouth?” Sua frowned. Perhaps one of the traveling performers wearing a costume had stumbled upon the children.

Po crowded into her ruffled collar. Somehow, he instinctively sensed something unusual too. She would have soothed the poor creature if she weren't holding a heavy weapon with all of her strength.

“Uh-huh.” Ubi held out her hand, presenting the item she'd brought back. “And he told me to give this to you.”

Sa Gin's sword clattered to the ground.

CHAPTER XI

Sua's hand shook as she snatched the burned rose from her sister. Her grip had tightened so intensely that she almost snapped the flower's stem in two. She was filled with so much fear that she could barely feel the remaining thorns that poked against her fingers.

"Go back to the house, Ubi," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Po clung to her neck, making it harder to speak.

Her sister blinked, unaware of the danger she had just encountered.

"Huh?" Ubi tilted her head. "But you promised we'd play whack-a-pinnip when I got back. I wanted to win the prize."

"We'll go some other time." Sua straightened, picked up Gin's blade, and led her sister away from the direction of the caravan trail. She hurried Ubi to the town square's archway, determined to get the child as far away from the crowded venue as possible. "I need you to go home and check on Mama."

"But today's the last day!"

"UBI!"

Her sister's lips quivered at hearing her sharp tone. Her scolding distracted some of the fairgoers standing nearby. Sua felt slightly embarrassed, but

the fear of exposing Ubi to further danger overshadowed that emotion.

“Do I really have to go home?” her sister asked. At her despondent tone, Sua knelt down.

She pulled her sister close and rubbed the child’s back. Although Sua wanted to say something about the man who had given her the rose, she knew that she had to keep his identity a secret. Her mother would kill her if she involved Ubi in something the child wasn’t ready for, let alone capable of fighting against.

Her sister sniffled but didn’t pull away.

“Yes,” she replied. “It’s very, *very* important that you get back to the inn right now.”

“Why?” Ubi wiped away some of the tears that had slipped from her eyes. Taking pity, Sua got out her handkerchief and helped the child clean her face.

“Because Mama might be missing you. She’s all alone at the inn, after all. And nobody else will be coming for the rest of the afternoon,” she reasoned, hoping that the lie would suffice. Po seconded her reply through his high-pitched chirping. “You bought some treats, right? Maybe you’d like to share them with her.”

“Yeah.” Her sister hiccupped and finally drew away. “We got a lot of cookies and candies and stuff from the stalls. Do you think she’ll like ‘em?”

“She will,” Sua said, “but you have to hurry home. You know she doesn’t want us eating sweets at dinner time, so you’ll have to eat them together

before then.”

Thankfully, the prospect of sharing food with their mother convinced Ubi to skedaddle out of the square. That left Sua standing at the entrance, Gin’s blade still in her hand. Po chirruped on her shoulder as she looked down to take in the leather scabbard’s elaborate design.

Her right palm barely wrapped around the blade’s thick handle. However, the weapon looked newer and sturdier than the old one her father had left them with. It would be difficult to wield, but it might be strong enough to deal three times as much damage as anything she’d used before.

Po chirped in a questioning tone.

Her late father would be disappointed with her actions, and her mother would probably disown her. She would bring shame to Tamisna Inn if someone spotted her and word got out. And of course, she’d lose any and all chances of getting together with Gin the next time they faced each other.

But this was probably her only chance of using his finely crafted blade against Binasa.

So without telling anyone, she snuck out of the town square and headed for the clearing she always dreaded.

She kept Gin’s weapon close to her hip, using the satin layers of her magnolia white dress to hide it from view. Her whole body felt heavy as she walked past the town smithy, and it only got heavier as she passed the schoolhouse.

At last, she found herself back at the clearing, her gaze focused on the darkness, and her hands holding a stolen blade at the ready.

“I’m here, like you asked.” Sua gulped, then firmed her demeanor. “And I’ll defeat you for sure.”

The shadows moved, and Binasa’s face appeared out of the thicket. Black smoke gave way to his shiny, red scales as he came closer. His mouth, which his sister described as ‘big,’ gaped open to reveal his jagged teeth.

But instead of replying with his usual taunt, the spirit grinned.

“Where did you get that?” Binasa licked the rim of his mouth as he eyed the weapon in her shaky digits.

“W-what do you c-care?” She raised her arms higher, pointing the blade’s tip directly at the spirit. “Are you g-going to f-fight me or not?”

Binasa laughed long and hard, leaving Sua confused. It was as if the evil spirit felt no fear upon beholding such a lethal weapon. Perhaps she’d made a mistake by taking it with her instead of returning it to Gin.

“Are you sure you want to fight me with that thing, puny human?” Binasa widened his stance, already anticipating that she would make the first move. “Do you even know what that is? Or more precisely, who it belongs to?”

“W-what do you mean?” Her grip slacked as the evil spirit threw her into more confusion. Of course she knew who the blade belonged to, and that was—

“Someone stupid enough to expose their identity through you,” Binasa inched closer, ever so slowly, so that she wouldn’t notice. But even if he’d moved faster, Sua was in too much shock to react. “That’s who your blade belongs to, foolish human. Because of you, their freedom will come to an end at my hands. And their soul will be mine, just like your mother’s.”

“No! I won’t let you!” Sua spun the blade and lunged for the spirit, determined to slash his large mouth off his face. Binasa wasn’t going to touch a hair on Sa Gin’s head.

She couldn’t drag another person into her problems, no matter who they truly were.

“Too slow!” The evil spirit deflected her weapon with his right forearm. Then he used his left one to shove against Sua’s stomach.

Sua flew to the left, barely keeping her hold on the blade since it was so heavy. The spinning didn’t help with her balance either. She had to keep her elbows straight so that the sharp weapon wouldn’t snag her dress and rip it to pieces.

Sua landed on her side, but she forced herself to stand up. She had barely gotten back on her feet when she felt a push against her shoulder. She yelled in pain as she stumbled again.

Binasa didn’t pause to let her catch her bearings. As soon as she lifted her head a second time, he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her up. He clutched the front of her bodice and threw her once

more, this time harder and farther away from the center of the clearing.

Sua skidded against the dirt. What hold she had on the blade loosened completely. The weapon stopped spinning now that she wasn't pushing down the button on its hilt.

Instead, she was holding on to her injured shoulder, hoping that the evil spirit hadn't broken anything.

A kick landed on her back, sending her rolling toward a tree. Her knee brushed against a protruding root. Her lips quivered as she felt blood trickle from a cut in her gums and coat her teeth.

What was worse, she could feel Po's exhausted body barely clinging on to her neck. Any moment now, and the antula would be unconscious. Sua made the decision to remove the creature from her person and shove him in the foliage at the base of the tree, hoping Binasa wouldn't find him there.

Her hand had just cleared the overgrown grass when she felt Binasa grabbing her again. The evil spirit lifted her by the collar of her dress until her toes dangled inches from the ground. Over his shoulder, she could see Gin's blade lying useless and forgotten.

And there, behind Binasa's ribs, glowed the heart containing her mother's soul. So close, yet not near enough to seize. Sua could barely feel her fingers, so it was pointless to even try snatching it away.

"Let go of me," she said through blood-stained,

gritted teeth.

Binasa laughed.

“Not this time, pet,” he said. “Not anymore now that I’ve seen the blade. It’s my cue to end this silly game of ours once and for all.”

“You promised to let me fight you as many times as I can!” Sua clawed at his hand, trying to pry it from her clothes. But she was too weak to even scratch a scale off his knuckle. “Until my mother’s soul is used up! That was our deal! Mama’s soul is still glowing!”

Binasa shook her, causing her head to bobble. Sua choked from the sudden jolt to her neck. Without Po there to bite him away, he could snap it off.

“You naive little fool. Did you really think I’d go easy on you forever?” The evil spirit narrowed his eyes at her. “I was merely biding my time until something better came along. And judging by that weapon you were using, it finally has.”

Sua glared at him.

“You cheater!” She doubled her efforts to escape his grasp, but it didn’t work. “You tricked me! You lied!”

Binasa slammed her against the tree. Her crown hit the scratchy bark, making her vision grow dark for a moment. A dull, throbbing pain hammered under her skull as she struggled to stay conscious.

“Which one of us brought a blade tainted with magic today, hmm?” The evil spirit held her by the neck and breathed his accusation straight into her

face. “You tricked and cheated first, little girl.”

“M-magic...”

“You really don’t know, do you?” Binasa raised a clawed hand, intending to rip her head open if she attempted anything stupid. “Let’s keep it that way, shall we? You’ll be dead shortly, after all.”

Sua shut her eyes as fear and despair seized her completely. Tears trickled down her cheeks as her defeat finally set in. Something warm and wet flowed down her leg too, but she was too terrified to care.

She didn’t want to die. She needed to break away from the spirit and save her mother’s life. She had to return Gin’s blade to him and tell him she was sorry for stealing it.

The thought of Sa Gin, her mother, her friends, or—spirits forbid—Ubi finding her dead body in the woods horrified her.

“Please, don’t,” she whimpered. “P-please.”

Binasa laughed. His grip around her throat tightened. Sua started suffocating as gray spots danced in her vision.

A furious, inhuman roar echoed through the forest before it could go completely black.

Then a flash of green streaked into the clearing, colliding with Binasa and knocking him away. The attack had been so swift that she got loose from the spirit’s hold and was thrown to the side. By the time she regained her full sight, she realized that someone or something had saved her from death.

She scanned the clearing and tried to figure out

what was going on... only to find something she'd never seen before.

A second spirit had entered the scene and started prowling the clearing's perimeter, as if looking for something. Unlike Binasa, this magical being had a long, slender neck, a mane of feathers cascading down his back, a bushy tail nearly three feet long, and a pair of branched antlers protruding from his head.

Claws tipped this new spirit's fingers too, but they looked more like gold needles than anything. The rest of his body was covered in shiny green scales, as bright as the first leaves that sprouted after the snow had thawed. Two fangs peeked from the being's upper lip.

Two gold irises graced the spirit's eyes.

"DRAT!" Binasa cursed from where he was still sprawled out. He scowled at the intruder as he got to his feet. "I was hoping you'd be late to the ball."

"I can apologize for making it in time," the new spirit said, "but I don't feel the slightest bit sorry."

Chills ran down Sua's spine as the being spoke. There was a strange echo to his words, but she knew who that voice belonged to. Her suspicions only strengthened when she saw this new spirit pick up the stolen blade the same way its real owner would.

"Sa Gin?"

The being turned his maned head toward her. His golden eyes scanned her over quickly, checking if she was all in one piece. His nostrils flared at spotting

the blood on her lips and scenting her soiled dress.

Sua opened her mouth, wanting to repeat his name in case he hadn't heard. However, something crawled up her skirt, weakly making its way onto her bodice. She looked down and found that Po had finally regained consciousness.

Just as she scooped the antula into her hand, two strong, scaled arms hoisted her up and cradled her against a broad, warm chest.

"Count yourself lucky," the new spirit said as he straightened his shoulders. The blade, now mounted on his antlers, caught what little light could penetrate through the darkened clearing. "I must take this woman somewhere safe, but I *will* come back for you."

"It's not over, all right," Binasa replied. "Not until I get what I want from you. And I *always* get what I want."

Then, the being holding her ducked his head and ran into the trees, leaving behind Binasa's disappearing form. Tree trunks, rosebushes, and crooked branches zipped past them as he rushed through the forest. As they moved, he kept his hold gentle yet steady on her injured body.

It was a while before the new spirit slowed to a walk. By then, Po had buried himself beneath her bodice, over her beating heart. Sua's head started to throb, but she ignored it.

"You're Sa Gin, aren't you?" Sua asked.

"That would be correct, Sua."

“And you’re not a human,” she said, taking in the green scales that gave his chest an emerald sheen. “A spirit?”

“Not a human, but not a spirit either,” he replied without looking at her. Instead, he paused by the roadside, took a deep breath, and held it in for as long as he could. “And Sa Gin isn’t my real name.”

“Then... what are you?” She laid her hand over his sternum, silently pleading for him to be honest with her. She’d come clean with him too, if he asked. “*Who* are you?”

“What I am is a fallen god,” he answered. Only then did he meet her bewildered, slightly unfocused stare. “Who I am... well, I don’t really know.”

CHAPTER XII

Sua's lashes fluttered as she woke to the dawn of a new day. She turned her head and noticed that sunbeams were already crawling over her floor. The fluffy pillow she laid on cradled her aching temple, while the blanket covering her from the chest down hid most of the bruising on her skin.

She tried moving her arm, but her injured shoulder, swaddled in bandages, prevented her from waving it around too much.

Luckily, Binasa had only managed to dislocate her joint instead of shattering any bones. Batani had no problem setting it back in place before securing it so the swelling would go down faster. The memory of her friend finding out what had really happened to her made Sua sigh.

There had been no way of hiding anything from Batani after Sa Gin returned to Tamisna Inn with her barely conscious body in his arms. Her mother had quickly figured out what the cause of her injuries was, and she wasted no time fetching the ditched woman from the town square. Sarisa had banked on her daughter's friend to keep the truth hidden from anyone else.

Batani thankfully pulled through and fixed Sua up in the privacy of the inn. Then she'd made up some

story about Sua contracting an illness from one of the traveling show's members. Thus, she had to remain in her room so as not to infect anyone else.

The only other people she'd confided in were Guyaba, who took Ubi in so the child wouldn't know what was really going on, and Pina, who volunteered to deliver groceries and other supplies whenever they needed anything. And of course, there was Gin, who offered to take over the menial tasks that needed to be done around Tamisna. Not that he had to do much since they couldn't open the bar or the guest rooms again until after she had healed.

Sarisa had given her an earful for that before letting her motherly instincts take over and pampering her to the fullest. Sua had apologized for worrying the older woman, of course. Now, she just had one person to say sorry to, if she could find the time to talk to him.

As luck would have it, the knob rattled when someone in the hall made to enter her room.

The door swung aside, and Sa Gin peeked into her quarters. He held a feather duster and a tin of floor polish in his hand. He stopped himself from entering when he noticed that she was awake.

"It's all right," Sua said. "You can come in."

Gin moved at her prompting. He strode to her bedside, and she noticed that he had donned another set of his more expensive clothes. But they didn't look very clean now that they were covered with dust and stained with streaks of polish.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he settled into the chair beside her bed. “Are you hungry? Thirsty? Does anything hurt?”

“Not hungry, a little thirsty, and everything still hurts. Better than yesterday, at least,” she replied. “Why aren’t you wearing my father’s clothes? You’ve gotten yours dirty.”

“That’s precisely why I didn’t put them on today.” Gin set the duster and metal tin on the floor so he wouldn’t have to keep them on his lap. “I’m fine with ruining my own garments, and I don’t want to disrespect your late father by destroying his. I know his memory’s very important to you.”

Sua’s brow furrowed as she bit her lip.

“I hope you can forgive me, Gin.” She picked at the creases on her blanket, wrinkling them even more. “Because of me, your stay in Alola has been ruined. Instead of relaxing, researching, and exploring the town, you’re stuck here having to help. And I also... I also saw you... how you look like as a g-g—”

“God,” he answered after noticing how uncomfortable she was even mentioning the truth. “I’m a god. A fallen one. And that creature you were fighting?”

Sua gulped. Clearly, the time had come for Sa Gin to question her about the problem he’d involved her in. She didn’t have the heart to lie to him, not after he’d saved her from the brink of a painful death.

“Did Mama not tell you?”

“She offered,” he said, leaning forward, “but I told her that I preferred hearing the truth from you.”

His decision to respect her and let her explain everything in her own words touched Sua.

So for the next several minutes, Sua told him about how her father had bargained for her mother’s freedom and ownership of Tamisna Inn through a duel. How her mother had given her soul to Binasa in exchange for her beau’s victory. How that had resulted in a sickness that got worse over time, as well as her own decision to try to reclaim her mother’s soul.

As she relayed her tale, Gin’s face grew paler and paler.

“How could you do that?” he asked after she was through. By now, his hands were clutching the side of her bed. “All this time, you were getting beat up by that... that monster? All for his sick entertainment?”

“It was for my mother,” she defended. “I didn’t think Binasa would even offer the bargain at first, but that’s what happened. And I accepted, much to Mama’s dismay.”

Gin hunched over and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“At least you didn’t offer to take your mother’s place,” he said. “That would have been worse.”

Sua ducked her head as the stipulation in her bargain with Binasa—which she hadn’t even told her mother—came to mind.

“Actually,” she took a deep breath, then released it,

“I did throw my own soul into the deal.”

“YOU WHAT?!”

“But only after he’d used up my mother’s soul!” she added, even though that didn’t make her foolish decision from back then any better. “If I couldn’t beat him before my mother’s soul vanished, he could take mine too.”

“Which would give him the chance to entice your younger sister too, once she’s old enough!” Gin raked his hands over his hair. His gaze, clouded with frustration, landed on her. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?! You put yourself and the rest of your family in danger!”

“Oh, and were we not in danger before then?” she replied, even though talking to him for this long was starting to hurt. “He approached my sister at the fair before he even knew what you were. He was killing my mother from afar! He still is!”

“And he was going to kill you too! All because you jumped right into his trap!”

“Because I love my mother enough to try to save her life!” Sua clenched her fist and pounded it against her soft mattress. Only to regret the action when that caused her shoulder to burn.

Gin saw her wince.

“Enough already.” He caught her wrist and gently pinned it down against the sheets. “You’re not doing anyone any favors by hurting yourself, Sua.”

“If you’ve ever loved someone before, you’d know why I did it!” she said, ignoring his warning. She

could feel her tears coming on as she continued to speak. “But you haven’t, have you? You’re so used to having people fawn all over you that you’ve never even tried earning someone’s love.”

This seemed to take Gin aback. The man retreated, and his jaw tightened as he took a deep breath. He inhaled once, then twice, and let the air out through his nose.

“Hard as it might be for you to believe, Sua, I *have* loved someone before,” he said. “Although I didn’t know it back then. And it’s something I’ve regretted ever since.”

His confession threw Sua off. And in the following silence, she realized how judgmental she had been. She had lost her temper and hurt someone who was only trying to look out for her.

Someone whom she still admired despite knowing he wasn’t a mortal like her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I shouldn’t have accused you like that. It was a horrible thing to do.”

Surprisingly, she felt the warmth of a wide palm press over her knuckles. A tear fell from her eye when she realized that Sa Gin had reached out to her despite her cruel response. When she looked up, she noticed his faraway gaze.

“I had a familiar once,” Gin started. He licked his lips before completely settling into his story. “I can’t remember their name or what they look like, but I do remember that I lost them because of my own selfish desires.”

“How so?” Sua asked, curious to know who Gin really was under his gorgeous—and probably fake—features.

“During one of my visits to this realm, I met a maiden,” he explained. “I can’t recall her features either, but I believe she must have been beautiful. Or at least charming enough to convince me that she would make a better familiar than the one I already had.”

Sua gasped. She’d heard of gods losing their familiars to death or because their familiars had decided to raise families of their own. But to hear of one dismissed by its own master...

“You replaced them?”

“My obsession with that maiden overshadowed my friendship with my familiar. It deafened me to their warnings and blinded me to my former lover’s true intentions.” Gin’s grip tightened around her hand, giving away how troubled he was by his actions then. “Because of my stubbornness, my familiar had no choice but to hand over their role to a woman who would betray me. She was using me for my endless wealth and my powers.”

Sua’s chest ached for him. She couldn’t even summon the strength to be jealous of his former lover. All she wanted to do was cradle his cheeks and assure him that not all human girls were like that.

“How did you find out, Gin?” she asked, albeit gently, to let him know that he could keep that information to himself.

“When I told her that I was thinking of relinquishing my immortality to be with her,” he replied, “she told me that she was carrying the child of another man.”

That news curled Sua’s stomach. Her mother, her friend Pina, and even the fisherman’s wife were loyal to their own partners. In fact, all the women she knew in Alola had never done something so abominable.

“I’m so sorry.” Sua turned her hand over to entwine their fingers. “That must have been devastating for you.”

“It probably was.” Gin finally looked at her, one corner of his lips lifting. “So much of that day is a blur now.”

“What do you mean?”

“In addition to reviving gods from the realm of the dead, Sua,” he replied, “familiaris allow gods to keep the memories they make in this realm. If you lose a familiar, you have to find a new one to keep staying in this world or to return to the heavens. And if you *can’t* find a new one, you start losing your memories.”

“Then...” Sua frowned. If Gin had already lost memories of his old familiar, of his traitorous lover, and of his own name, that meant only one thing. “Why didn’t you find a new familiar already, after you had to break away from the one that betrayed you?”

He pressed his lips together before answering.

“I couldn’t. Not after I realized my mistake.” His golden eyes started to well, just like hers. “I wanted to right my wrongs by working with my old familiar again. I would ask for forgiveness and work with them if they’ll still have me. I couldn’t do that if I found a different person to take their place. It truly sank in how much they meant to me.”

Sua couldn’t stand seeing him, someone so kind and strong, struggle with his past in front of her. His sweet, noble decision to remain loyal to his old familiar impressed her. He was humbling himself and trying to make amends in the best way he knew how.

“All this time,” she murmured, “you were traveling the continent to find them. Going from one town to another in the hopes of catching a glimpse or hearing news about them. And I guess that explains the visits to libraries and records offices.”

“Yes.” Gin finally sat up straight and rubbed his eyes free of the tears before they could fall. “But it’s been years. It’s getting harder and harder because of my fading memories. And I can’t tell anyone because people like the woman who betrayed me might try to take advantage.”

Sua couldn’t yet figure out how to address her situation, but she could at least try to solve his. If somebody knew everybody in town, it was her. Even if the person Gin was looking for wasn’t in Alola, there was a chance that she might have met passing travelers who had heard of them.

“What can you remember about them?” Sua asked. “You can trust me, Gin. Maybe I can help you if you mention something familiar.”

The man—or god—blinked. Sua prayed that she was correct and that he trusted her enough with what he knew. After one light squeeze of his hand, he relented.

“I have no name to give or face to describe.” Despite that, determination shone on Gin’s face. Sua felt happy that he was holding on to hope. “I do remember that they might be close to fifty by now. They were always complaining that they were born in the wrong era. They liked to study animals, and they had a peculiar fondness for antulas. They liked to teach me about the animals.”

A niggling feeling started in the pit of Sua’s stomach. She couldn’t quite explain it, but something about the person Gin described felt oddly familiar.

“Go on.”

“And they loved books,” the god continued. “They used to bring back rare tomes with fancy lettering and beautiful pictures. I vaguely remember a collection of tales about gods and spirits. It was probably their favorite, because they carried it around everywhere.”

“What else?” she urged, getting a little impatient. Her unease grew as the pieces started falling into place.

“A voice that was firm yet understanding,” he

added. “A preference for simple, functional clothes, even though I could have afforded us a full wardrobe. And lavender. They always had the scent of lavender about them.”

Sua couldn't take it anymore. The clues were there, laid out before her very eyes. She had to tell Gin what she was thinking.

He would have been fifty-one by now if he'd lived. He'd brought her an antula egg to hatch and raise as her companion. He had owned a beloved storybook with the most lifelike illustrations she'd seen.

A firm voice. A simple man with a strong sense of justice. A preference for the scent of lavender, which he loved best on his dear wife and favorite little girls.

The fact that she knew nothing of his life before becoming a wandering scholar fortified her theory.

“Gin.” Sua struggled to sit up. The god tried to come to her aid, but she bade him to stay seated in case he felt faint after hearing her speak. “This might be unbelievable and hard to accept, but... I think my dead father was your familiar.”

CHAPTER XIII

Sa Gin stood in her room, eyes locked on the open pages of her father's book. The man's gaze held a yearning that she'd last seen on her mother's face. She could tell that he was trying his best to recall more than just what he already knew, but he was having a hard time.

"His name was San Diya," she said. "He had dark hair, just like mine, and he was just as fair as Mama. A little leaner than you, as you already know from his clothes. He liked to read that collection to me when I was younger and to Ubi when she was just a baby."

"San Diya..." He walked back to her bed, cradling the tome she'd just lent him. "I wish I could tell for sure. I wish I could have seen him while he was..."

Sua swallowed as she watched him sink into the chair he'd been using before. Gin laid her father's book on the sheets, stooped forward, and buried his face in his hands. He didn't want her to see, but it was easy enough to guess what expression he wore.

"Oh, Gin." She braced for the pain as she leaned toward him and reached for his shoulders.

She drew him closer, and he went willingly. Even though her whole body ached from just that short task, she paid it no mind. She let the man lay his

head under her chin, just over the chest that held her beating heart.

“I could have saved him,” he said, his eyes shut tight and his eyebrows scrunched with regret. “If I’d been there the night he was attacked... but I wasn’t. If only I wasn’t so selfish. If only I hadn’t cast him aside—”

“Then he wouldn’t have wandered here and met Mama. Wouldn’t have been the happiest man alive after marrying her and having children.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “My mother would have become a working girl in a brothel. And I wouldn’t be here with you.”

Cautiously, Gin laid his arm across her middle. Sua didn’t mind. The blankets had fallen low enough to allow it, and she was decently dressed.

“Was he truly happy?” The man’s eyes were still closed, but his brows and forehead had smoothed out.

“I’ve never seen anyone happier in my life.” Sua tilted her head, pretending to think. “Well, there was that one time when the baker won a cake-making contest abroad. He looked pretty smug when he got back to boast about his accomplishment. And *rather red* after drinking his winnings away.”

Gin chuckled, and Sua smiled. He’d done something stupid, but that didn’t mean he was solely to blame for his familiar’s death. Some things were meant to happen, even if they were sad or scary.

“Thank you for easing my anguish, Sua.” Gin

pulled away from her and fixed his clothes. He peeked at her nightdress too, to make sure he hadn't left any dirty marks on it. "If all this is true, then I think my familiar—your father—did a wonderful job raising his children."

Sua's shoulders sank.

"It's unfortunate that I ended up disappointing him."

"That's not true."

"It kind of is." She picked up the book he'd placed close to her lap and moved it to the nightstand between her and Ubi's bed. "I was supposed to be running Tamisna Inn and helping make Alola more popular throughout the continent. Instead, I'm sitting here crippled after fighting an evil spirit. I'll never regret it, of course, but I'm not happy with it either."

Her companion sat silently for a while, and she mulled over her thoughts during that silence.

Then Gin moved his chair closer and took hold of her hands. His approach would have thrilled her if he didn't look so serious. And if she wasn't black and blue over most of her body, of course.

"Binasa wants to take my soul and possess my body so he can use my powers," he predicted. "And I believe he'll offer to give your mother's soul back and release you from his barbaric deal if I comply."

"But—you can't!" Sua's grip on him tightened. He couldn't possibly consider giving up his own freedom for her and her mother's. "He'll only hurt other

people if we give him more power than he already has.”

“I could challenge him too,” the man added, “as is my right as a god. But it won’t be easy.”

“Surely anything’s better than just letting Binasa have what he wants.” She couldn’t let him sacrifice himself without a fight. And she wouldn’t let him solve her problems on his own because she was the one who’d revealed his existence in the first place.

“We gods may be blessed with eternal youth and resistance against sickness, but we’re not infallible.” Gin’s voice shifted, hinting at how important it was to understand the consequences of challenging Binasa. “Only a familiar can call my soul back from the dead and prevent evil spirits from using or destroying it. Fighting without one and then losing will end me for good.”

“Isn’t it better to challenge him still?” she asked, not seeing why he needed to tell her about all this. “I’d much rather we try to defeat him than just surrender.”

“There’s more to this, Sua.” The man licked his lips. He started avoiding her gaze, much to her confusion. “Evil spirits use the souls they’ve stolen to vanquish their opponents. He might not have used much of your mother’s soul against you because you’re a mortal, but he’s going to have to suck it dry against me.”

All the color drained from Sua’s skin.

“Y-you mean...”

“There’s a high chance that your mother won’t live all that long after I rescue her soul, if I even succeed.” He looked grim as he finally turned to her. “And there’s a chance that she might die before then.”

Those were the most horrifying words Sua had heard in her life.

“Then there would be no point in fighting him if that were the case,” she said.

“If we free her soul, though, she’ll at least be able to join your father when she passes.”

Obviously, this was better than just vanishing as if one never existed. There was comfort in the fact that people could be reunited with their loved ones in the realm of the dead. Sua knew that her mother would prefer this option too.

“I need time to think.” She had the rest of the day to heal up, and she could ponder Gin’s suggestion while doing so. The truths he’d revealed weren’t that easy to digest.

Gin nodded.

“I’m going to clean the other rooms now, but I can come back afterwards to eat lunch with you if you want.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. Then, as if realizing what he’d done, he released her and stood up as quickly as he could. “Um, if you need anything before then, just holler.”

Sua touched her hand to her chest while she watched the man leave. The shells of his ears had turned red by the time he slipped out of the room,

which amused her. He'd probably done it to comfort or reassure her, though, so she didn't make a big deal out of it.

She had more pressing matters to tackle in solitude.

Now that she was alone, Sua carefully got out of bed to start the day. It took her longer than usual to come down the stairs, wash herself, and change into a loose, light dress. By the time she finished, she could smell the scents of fried lepori and heasa casserole by the bar stairs.

It wasn't long before her mother came up the steps with a tray in her hand. Sarisa had placed three plates heaped with food on the salver, one for each of them to consume. Po, who'd been perched on the woman's shoulder, chirped happily when he saw his owner.

The woman hurried to the nearest table as soon as her gaze landed on Sua.

Sarisa set the tray down and helped her into a chair. This allowed Po to dive from her shoulder and into Sua's lap. The antula purred in delight before nuzzling against her.

"How are you feeling?" her mother asked. "You should have waited for me to check on you. I could have helped you so your shoulder wouldn't hurt."

"I managed fine on my own," Sua responded, smiling as she patted Po's fur. She helped Sarisa remove their lunch from the salver using her better arm. "Gin's still cleaning upstairs, Mama. I'm a little

winded at the moment, so if it's not too much trouble, can you call him down instead?"

"In a while." To Sua's surprise, her mother sat down and clasped her hands on the table. Sarisa didn't even bother touching her silverware to eat. "Did you tell him about it?"

She should have known her mother would want to get this out of the way first. After all, tackling things head-on was one of the traits the woman shared—not just with her but also with her father. Behind Sarisa's soft, matronly exterior, there existed a woman of steel.

"Yes, I did." Sua tapped her pointer finger on top of the table. She mulled over her thoughts before deciding to tell her mother what they'd talked about. "There's something you must know, Mama. It's about Gin and Papa. I'm not sure if you'll believe me, but I swear I'm not making this up to further complicate things."

Sarisa moved her seat closer and patted her daughter's head.

"Of course I'll believe you," she said. "You might be stubborn, just like your father, but you'd never make up stories about someone else."

"I don't think he'd be very happy if I did."

Her mother's permission prompted Sua to relay everything she and Gin had talked about upstairs. She included the part about betting her soul, of course, as well as the price for fighting Binasa with Sa Gin's full power. Lastly, she mentioned the idea

that her father might have been a god's familiar.

"That explains why he looks like the man in the book's picture, then," Sarisa said after she'd grown quiet. "It must be one of the few identities he could remember enough to imitate."

Despite the serious topics they'd just covered, Sua chuckled as a new thought crossed her mind. Po chirped, puzzled by her reaction. But he went back to lounging in her lap when he realized that nothing more rambunctious was amiss.

"If Sa Gin really dwells in the godly realm, what must he think of a fellow god imitating his features?" she voiced. "Do you think he'll be livid once he discovers how many Alolans have drooled over his physique?"

"Well, it's not like the man could walk into town in his other form," her mother replied. "And it would be foolish of him to don the figure of another living man. Imagine how confusing it would be for everyone else. To see the same person in different places at the same time, I mean."

Sua had been about to cut her fried lepori into bite-sized pieces, but her mother's statement made her pause.

"Another living... at the same time... that's it!" If her body didn't hurt from moving, Sua would have leapt out of her chair like an antula hopping around to catch a bug. "Mama, you're a genius!"

Sua struggled out of her seat then, leaving her lunch untouched and her antula too startled to

properly cling to her outfit. Poor Po had to jump down as she limped her way to the staircase. Instead of following her, the animal pawed Sarisa's foot and begged to be cradled in a new lap.

The woman lifted Po and laid him on top of her apron.

"Where are you going?" her mother asked.

"To talk to Gin," Sua answered. "I have an idea, but I have to ask him first if it's possible. We might be able to defeat Binasa if it is."

"But your lunch—"

"I'll come back for it," she said. "Oh! And I'll bring Gin along too, so he can eat with us."

Sua kept that task in mind when she found the man in one of the guest rooms, dusting off a candelabrum that hadn't been used in weeks.

"Sit down," Gin said after she stumbled into the room. "What in spirit's name are you doing walking around while you're in that condition? You're supposed to be resting, Sua."

"Actually, I was supposed to be eating lunch, but that's not the point." Still, she complied by lowering herself onto the chair by the writing desk. "I'm here to talk to you. It's about a way to defeat Binasa."

At the evil spirit's name, Gin stopped fussing over her and knelt on the floor, right in front of her knees.

"What? But—how?"

Sua didn't wait around for the confused man to guess what she meant. As soon as she opened her mouth, the idea flowed from her tongue. It was as if

she'd planned the whole thing for months, when in reality, it had only crossed her mind just minutes ago.

The moment her explanation concluded, Sa Gin's jaw dropped. He clutched the armrests, effectively enclosing her where she sat. Disbelief crossed his features, particularly his eyes.

"It's a wild idea, but it just might work," he said. "And it's also very dangerous if something goes wrong. Are you sure you want to do this, Sua?"

"I wouldn't have told you if I wasn't willing to do my part, silly." She couldn't help but reach for him to soothe him. Her palm made contact with his cheek, and it was as if the world stopped for them. "You saved my life twice, Gin. And you're willing to do it a third time. How can I not trust you?"

"It's just that," Gin gulped, "the idea of putting you in danger unsettles me. Gods aren't supposed to involve civilians in their battle."

"This was my battle first, Gin." Sua touched his other cheek and leaned forward. She smiled at him, hoping it would put him at ease. "*I'm* the one involving *you*. And I'm ever so grateful that you haven't backed out."

"How can I back out now?" he said, coming closer too. In fact, his face got so close that she was able to hear his breath—and feel its heat from his lips. "We're... friends... aren't we?"

"Not if it means you can't kiss me," she whispered.

Gin replied by closing the space between them

with a kiss. A sweet, soft, and long kiss away from prying eyes. A kiss that led to pink cheeks, pleased smiles, and shy glances afterwards.

And a knowing look from Sua's mother at lunch, of course.

CHAPTER XIV

She was glad that, after weeks of resting at the inn, most of her wounds had disappeared.

Her shoulder had miraculously regained most of its range of motion thanks to Batani's care. Her friend had warned her, though, that engaging in too much activity might make it start hurting again. And that's precisely why she didn't tell the woman about today.

They only had one shot at their plan, so they needed to be on high alert at all times. One little slip could get both of them killed. Gin had warned her to be careful and to retreat if something went wrong.

But Sua didn't intend to back out. Binasa had abused her for so long that she knew what to expect from him. Gin might have his skills and powers, but he also needed her experience to win against the evil spirit.

"You never did explain how you managed to find me in the woods," Sua said.

It felt strange to start a light conversation while they were on their way to the dreaded clearing, but she couldn't think of anything else to do. And she hated the idea of not saying anything to him at all. Somehow, the god's presence set her at ease despite the danger they were walking into.

“It was the blade,” Gin replied, holding out the weapon he clutched in his hand. “I can sense when the magic that taints it starts to stir, even from afar. That’s when I know that someone other than myself is using it.”

Sua blushed.

“I hope you can forgive me for taking it away at the town square. And for using it without permission.” She looked at him, a little unsure. “Of course, you know the reason behind it.”

Gin sighed. Then he raised his hand toward her, expecting her to hold it. She eagerly accepted his request, blushing as she did so.

She still couldn’t believe that they’d kissed.

They hadn’t done anything else yet. They hadn’t even confessed their feelings to each other, not that there was time. They had to defeat Binasa first, and maybe then they could sort everything out.

Gin brushed his thumb over her knuckle.

“I understand how you felt at the time,” he said. “Honestly, if I were in your shoes, I think I would have done the same thing. I don’t have a mother, of course, but your father was probably the closest I came to having a family on this realm.”

“You have us now, though.” Sua squeezed his hand. The warmth against her palm and the timbre of his voice kept her calm despite the fact that they were getting close to their destination. “You have Tamisna Inn to return to. And the whole of Alola adores you already. You’ll always be welcome

whenever you need a place to rest between your adventures.”

“Let’s sort out this mess first,” he replied. “Once this is over, we’ll see what happens next.”

“Right.”

A cold, ominous breeze welcomed them when they arrived. Sua stood as close as possible to Gin and took a deep breath. The surrounding wall of darkness started to thicken just as she released it.

“I don’t seem to recall leaving a rose at your door today.” Binasa’s voice boomed throughout the clearing. Just hearing him almost made her knees shake. “Do you want to die that badly, human?”

The memory of nearly dying at the spirit’s hand gripped her hard, but she steeled her resolve. Gin, her mother, and Ubi needed her to be strong. To that end, she raised her blade and dared him to come out.

“I’m sure you can make an exception for a god.”

The last word must have caught Binasa’s ear, for he finally took form to see who had come with her.

He would be enraged, though, to see two versions of herself standing in the clearing.

“What is the meaning of this?!” The evil spirit roared, eyes darting from one ‘Sua’ to another. It didn’t help that she and her doppelganger were carrying the same golden blade, albeit one had simply been charmed to look like the genuine weapon.

“Do you think we’d just let you have all the advantage, Binasa?” the first Sua asked. “Don’t

forget that you're dealing with a god."

"And gods have just as much power and trickery up their sleeves. Maybe more than some puny spirit," the second Sua added.

Binasa bared his teeth as soon as his body had finished materializing.

"Ha!" he scoffed. "What does it matter if you're trying to trick me? I'm more than capable of killing you both."

"But you can't kill us at the same time," the first Sua pointed out. She spun the blade in her hand, not masterfully, but just well enough to show that she wasn't scared out of her mind. "And you can't kill the wrong person, or the other will simply revive her again."

"WHAT?!"

"That's right, Binasa." The second Sua arched her weapon too, making its metal body sing as it sailed through the air. "One of us is the god. The other is the familiar. And you have to choose which one to fight."

"So what will it be?" The first Sua narrowed her eyes. "You only have one soul in that body of yours. Use too much of it on the wrong challenger, and you'll have nothing left to spend on the second one."

"That ruse doesn't phase me at all!" The spirit said this, although he looked so cross that his scales bristled. "By sunset, you'll both be dead!"

Binasa charged at them, ready to take on whoever he could reach first.

Sua braced herself for the impact. Like they'd practiced, they both guarded their injured shoulders to make it harder for Binasa to guess the real human. She pressed the hilt of Gin's blade, making it spin at a speed she could manage.

He'd coached her on how to better handle his weapon, too. So when Binasa launched himself at her, claws ready to slash her hand off, she managed to block his attack. She twisted the blade around so the spirit's sharp nails merely grazed the metal surface.

She followed that up by sliding the weapon through its hilt. It appeared on the other side just in time to catch the spirit's second set of claws. Binasa pulled away with a hiss after the blade almost skinned his fingers.

Sua stumbled from the weapon's weight, but she regained her balance. She braced herself as another attack came at her. The whirring blade warded off Binasa's third attempt from the side.

That's when Gin came in to help her.

He rushed at the evil spirit from behind, his weapon low to the ground. He swung it upward, under Binasa's arms, with just enough force to make his enemy believe that he couldn't handle the hefty blade all that well. But the weapon didn't catch anything.

Binasa jumped before the sharp edge could touch him. He swerved in the air and landed behind Gin. The two Suas collided when the spirit kicked him

from behind. Sua hissed when her back hit the ground.

Luckily, Gin landed on his hands and knees above her, making sure she wasn't crushed under his disguised body. When he looked down, she nodded at him to let him know that she was fine. He was on his feet in an instant, and so was she.

Binasa took them on at the same time, not letting up on his punches, scratches, and kicks. But as they fought, he never consumed more of her mother's soul than was necessary to defeat two humans. Sua realized that the spirit was scared.

He couldn't make full use of his resources until he was sure that he had killed the human familiar first. Once she was dead, he could go all out on the god. He needed to make sure that nobody was reviving anyone during the fight.

Sua and Gin worked in tandem.

They blocked the spirit's strikes and countered with some decent but ineffective maneuvers. They gritted their teeth when their blades connected with Binasa's claws. Their breaths seized when he managed to find an opening and punch or kick them there.

The longer their fight went on, the more tired Sua became. She knew she had to make her move before Binasa caught on to them. She cast a pointed look toward Gin, letting him know that she was ready.

The god backed away, and soon she was squaring off with the evil spirit by herself.

Sua twirled the blade and slid it through the hilt once more. It came out on the other side, between her thumb and pointer finger. She intended to close in on Binasa and slash him across the chest.

She made a run for it, and with a mighty swing—

“CAUGHT!” the spirit yelled as he thrust his arm out and grabbed the front of her bodice. He flung her to the dirt and pinned her down with his palm.

“N-no...” Sua struggled to escape Binasa, but she was still partly injured, and he was too strong. She turned her head, only to see her own horrified face staring at her.

The evil spirit cackled.

“You’re mine to kill, human! And your god is mine to destroy!” Binasa raised his other hand, ready to slit her throat open with just one swipe. He leaned toward her, eyeing the pulse on her exposed neck.

His hand retreated.

“You make this too easy,” he said.

Then he released her and chased after the other Sua.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as the spirit dove for her doppelganger, wrestled her into the grass, pried the golden blade away from her grip, and pierced her through the chest.

“NO!” Sua yelled when she saw how much blood was pouring from her companion’s chest.

“Yes!” Binasa laughed as he came to his feet. He staggered away from the dying body. The fold of skin over his ribs opened, revealing his glowing heart.

“Your familiar is dead, fallen one. “Now I can use the rest of this human’s soul and hers to defeat you. And once you’re gone, I’ll use your magic to take more souls. I’ll be the most powerful spirit to walk the realm!”

The evil spirit approached, his intent to kill laid bare on his hideous face.

She didn’t think anything could top the waves of anger, greed, and thirst for power that rolled off Binasa. He looked ready to strip the world of its magic and use it for his selfish desires once he’d taken it all. And he was just a few steps, plus one bloody strike, from starting.

Or so he thought.

“By the realm in the heavens, of the land, by the sea,” Sua intoned, hands shaking as she gripped Gin’s blade and walked backwards to a tree. “From the realm of the dead, *bring my master to me!*”

“You’re lying!” The spirit raged as he went after her, his hands ready to tear her into pieces. “*You’re the god! I killed your familiar! I’d never make a careless mistake!*”

Sua dove to the side before Binasa could stab her. She winced when her knees scraped against some scattered pebbles, but she didn’t slow her escape. When she looked over her shoulder, she saw the evil spirit struggling to take his stuck claws out of the tree’s bark.

In his anger, Binasa must have forgotten his own strength. His momentum got his curved nails

embedded in the sturdy trunk. The way he huffed and puffed was at odds with his frightening, muscular frame.

She would have laughed at him if she weren't reeling from the success of their efforts.

That success reminded her to address her disguised companion's well-being. She got up, determined to check on Gin, and prepared to speak the summoning chant again if it hadn't worked before. Sua was sure that she'd said the right words, for the god had drilled them into her head not long after her shoulder began to heal.

As she approached the prone replica of her body, she noticed multiple green lights skittering across the grass. They were heading in the same direction as she, at different speeds and intensities according to their size. As the lights passed her feet, she felt short waves of magic brush against her ankles.

"Po," Sua called once she was just a few feet from Gin. "Come."

Something chirped from under her doppelganger's splayed hair. Then her antula peeked out of the dark tangles before bouncing over to her. Meanwhile, little green lights circled the prone body.

The magical blobs spun in a circle until the wind immediately surrounding their formation picked up speed. The dark shadows above the area parted, revealing the orange-tinted sky overhead. Sua braced herself for what would come next.

Lightning zapped from the sky and struck the

magic circle, nearly blinding her. Even Po yipped when the bolt turned everything white for a second. He calmed down, though, once a different kind of magic—one with a powerful protective air to it—grew within the clearing.

Gin's otherworldly form stepped out of the circle as the lights dissipated. And when he spotted the evil spirit trying to gnaw his hands free with his teeth, the god charged at him immediately. He grabbed Binasa's head and pried it off the bark, spraying wood chips and debris everywhere.

"Impossible!" The evil spirit bared his teeth. "I can't be bested by a puny human! It's impossible!"

"Don't underestimate my familiar, monster," Gin hissed at him. "When humans put their lives on the line for the people they love, nothing is impossible. It's why they're blessed by the gods and protected from evil like you."

The god pried Binasa's skin open then, and he snapped some of the spirit's ribs to get to the glowing heart beneath. As soon as he touched Sarisa's soul, it escaped from its prison in a flowing ribbon of light. Only after it drifted away, back to its owner's body, did Gin clench the remaining organ in his hand.

"NO!" Binasa screamed as vines and moss covered his heart, then spread over his ribs and the rest of his body. After that, tongues of green flame appeared here and there, consuming his very being. "I CAN'T DIE! IT CAN'T END LIKE THIS! NO!"

But for all his protestations, the evil spirit eventually succumbed to the powers of a restored god. In mere moments, Binasa was nothing but the ashes and embers of a green flame. Only then did Gin take his eyes off his enemy and move them to his familiar.

Sua sighed in relief when the god smiled at her. And despite his intimidating figure, she raced toward him when he opened his arms. She embraced him as he lifted her up to his level.

“We did it!” Her eyes watered with happy tears. “We did it, Gin! We tricked Binasa! We won my mother’s soul back!”

The god chuckled. Then, while Po chirped and crowed near his ear, he tilted his head as if hearing something. A different joy appeared on his face when his gaze returned to her.

“They’re calling me,” he said. “My brothers and sisters in the godly realm know that I’ve been revived, and they want to talk to me.”

Sua hesitated, but only for a moment. She would have liked to celebrate their victory together, but she also didn’t want to keep him away from his true home. She was happy that, at long last, he could go back to where he belonged.

“Go,” she said after releasing him. Po nuzzled against Gin’s cheek one last time before jumping onto her head. “It’s been so long. I’m sure the gods miss you.”

She watched as Gin started to fade from her view

like a morning mist giving way to the warm sun. She smiled with all the joy and relief she felt, knowing that this would be the image Gin took with him when he met with his fellow gods. She wanted to reassure him that everything would be well while he was away.

“Remember the words,” the god’s fading voice reminded her. “The words, Sua, so we can meet again.”

“I will,” she replied. “I promise.”

CHAPTER XV

The two moons rose above the Alolan landscape, one leading the other along the usual path they took.

Legend has it that a god created these moons in memory of a familiar who passed away. The first orb stood for their familiar, while the second represented themselves. In other words, where one would go, the other would follow.

Sua sighed as she looked at the celestial sight outside her window. She played with the fake scale-shaped pendant hanging around her neck. A gift from Batani as a token of their friendship—and to symbolize her friend's blessing over her and Gin's growing relationship.

It had been a few days since they'd defeated Binasa. A few days since she arrived back at Tamisna Inn, to the sight of her rejuvenated and tearful mother. And forever since she'd bid goodbye to Gin.

She wished more than ever that she could go to where the god was, but it was impossible. She was a human familiar whose soul would always be tied to the mortal realm. The best she could hope for was to spend as many moments as possible with Sa Gin before her time ran out.

She moved away from the window she was wiping down. She took a seat at the guest bedroom's writing

desk and thought hard about what she wanted to do. Unbeknownst to her, Ubi had spotted her through the open doorway.

“Sua, are you still up?” Her younger sister peeked into the room. “Are you done cleaning?”

As soon as she returned to the inn, Pina fetched Ubi from Guyaba’s house. Although her younger sister loved her friend, the child was excited to return home. With a bunch of presents and borrowed storybooks from her minder, of course.

“Mhm. Everything’s all sparkly clean in here,” she said.

“Then why are you still inside?” Ubi asked. “It’s almost bedtime. Aren’t you sleepy?”

“I don’t feel like sleeping just yet, Ubi.” Her heart and mind were too busy yearning for Gin to feel tired. “You go ahead and get ready for bed, though.”

“Do you miss Mister Gin?”

Sua blinked.

“H-how did you—”

“You look like Mama when she talks about Papa,” her younger sister said. Apparently, Ubi was more perceptive than she thought.

“I do miss him,” Sua replied, realizing that this was one of the truths she could safely divulge to her younger sister.

“Then why don’t you talk to him?” Ubi tilted her head, as if puzzling over why someone usually so straightforward and sensible hadn’t thought of the idea before. “He’s your friend, right? I don’t think

he'll mind if you're friends."

She blushed as she listened to her sister. At the moment, she felt like she was the child, whereas Ubi was a wizened old woman in the body of a little girl. She realized that she was simply dallying because she could hardly deal with the fact that the man she liked was a god.

But she had to deal with it at some point, and there was no better time to do that than now.

"I'll consider it. Thank you, Ubi."

"You're welcome." Her sister yawned after replying. That's when their mother called from the other end of the hall to let them know that it was bedtime.

Ubi went ahead, her sleepy, shuffling steps making light brush-like sounds against the hardwood floor.

"In a minute, Mama," Sua responded. As per her sister's advice, she had to talk to someone first. "You go too, Po. I know you've been trying to stay awake for my sake."

The antula, who'd been curled up on the desk while she was cleaning, twittered merrily before jumping down and scuttling after her sister.

Once she was alone, Sua closed the door and took a deep breath. Then she lit a second candelabrum to make sure that she could see Sa Gin clearly once they started talking. As much as she loved her family, this was an exchange she wished to keep between herself and her god.

Her mother and sister had just accepted the fact that she'd become a god's familiar. She didn't know how they would react once she told them that she might have to go where Gin does. Sua didn't want to leave, of course, but she also didn't want to lose her only connection to the god.

Simply put, she was torn.

And only with Gin's help could she decide what she must do.

“By the realm of immortals, through their magic, through words, from the realm of the heavens, bring my god to this world.”

Fortunately, instead of a flashy lightning strike and glowing orbs, Gin made a calm entrance that night. She wouldn't have to explain any strange sights and sounds on the grounds of Tamisna Inn to the nearest neighboring establishments. A gentle wind simply pushed the curtains aside and seeped into the room, bringing with it some freshly fallen leaves.

The leaves swirled before the stove, momentarily blocking it from her view. They exited as quietly as they came—with just a mere rustle—leaving her handsome guest-turned-god in their place. The gentle candlelight exposed his warm smile to her eyes.

“Gin?” Sua asked, a little scared to approach him. She didn't even know if it was still all right for her to call him that since she technically served him now.

Thankfully, she didn't have to move anywhere

because the god came to her.

“Actually,” he started, “I learned something a few days ago. From the real Sa Gin, in fact.”

Sua gulped.

“What’s that?”

“He said that my real name was Ma Bolo,” he replied after finally standing close enough to reach for her hands. And reach for them he did, once he realized that she was trembling. “And yes, your father really was my familiar. According to the real Sa Gin, I had a habit of trying to piss him off by pretending to be another god. But San Diya would always know right away that I was disguised.”

“My father had always been astute,” she said, taking comfort in the tender squeeze of Gin’s—Ma Bolo’s—hand. “He’d know when I was trying to play tricks on him too.”

“I learned lots of other things too, Sua.” The god pulled her closer to the window. And captivated by the man before her, Sua followed.

“Such as?” she asked.

“The other gods brought forth my soul from the forest. The joy and contentment of the animals, the green blades of grass and leaves, the golden rays of the sun. I was to take the place of an older god who’d chosen to become mortal,” he explained.

That part about the animals and his power’s particular use of leaves and foliage made more sense.

“So when we were at the lake, back when that codilia tried to attack me,” she said, “had your

powers been tuned to the forest?”

Surprisingly, Ma Bolo blushed and looked everywhere except for her eyes.

“That was all me, I’m afraid.” The god took a deep breath. They were standing in front of the window now, letting the twin moons’ soft light cascade over their still bodies. “I was talking to Guyaba, of course, but half my attention had stayed with you. I saw the unnatural rustling of the hyacinths, and I realized that something big was stalking you from under the water. My godly reflexes simply came in handy at the time.”

Now, it was her turn to blush. Sua realized that even then, the god had kept an eye on her.

“Those same reflexes allowed us to defeat Binasa too,” she added. “He would have pried himself out of the tree if you hadn’t been fast enough.”

“I still can’t believe he fell for such a simple trick.”

Sua smiled.

“That’s because he’s used to seeing Po cling to my neck. When he saw that the antula wasn’t on my person, protecting a vulnerable part of my body, he assumed that he must have downed the god. Not the familiar.”

“Your pet really is a rare find,” he said. “All other creatures would have scrambled at the sight of that evil spirit. But your little hero followed you into the fray, guarding you as best he could. He’s as brave as any other god that walked this continent.”

“Speaking of walks and continents,” she cleared

her throat, “I think it’s time we talk about our plans. Now that Binasa’s out of the way and all that. I mean, you must miss going on those grand adventures you might have shared with Papa.”

“Do you want to go on those grand adventures with me, Sua?”

She’d expected him to ask her what she wanted. But not this soon or this bluntly. The way he inquired barely mattered, though, because she’d vowed to be honest with him regardless.

“I think I would be very happy to share lots of memories and adventures with you, M-ma B-Bolo.” She stuttered over his name as she ducked her head. Calling him by those syllables would take some getting used to. “But... There’s the inn to run, and my mother can’t do it alone. Ubi has lots of growing to do. Pina, who postponed her wedding for my sake, is getting married in a week. And except for maybe a festive tour of Karokal during the Suntime Festival, I don’t have any other destinations in mind.”

“I see.”

“S-so if you allow it, since it seems like you’re bent on traveling and we’re going to part ways, I won’t mind giving back my ability to summon you.” Which was a lie because she wanted to be able to see him whenever they both wished. She pushed down the sleeve of her dress, revealing the leaf-shaped mark that had appeared on her shoulder after she ate Ma Bolo’s scale. “You’re free to take it from me once we find my replacement.”

“I’m sorry, Sua,” the god replied, “but I don’t think anyone will be able to replace you.”

Of all the things Sua expected him to say, she hadn’t thought of that.

“What?”

“You heard me, missy. I’m not replacing you.”

“But—” she shook her head and tried to make sense of his decree. It was so unlike him to proclaim something without considering anyone else’s say in the matter. “Does that mean you’re forcing me to remain your familiar? You know I can’t, Gin. I’ve already explained everything. As much as I love the idea, I can’t stay with you.”

Her voice had begun to wobble by the end of her reply. He was making it so much harder for her to say goodbye. Which felt endearing and frightening all at once.

A tear escaped her eye, then another, and yet another. Sua brought her hands to her face and brushed them away. She didn’t want the god to feel bad or blame himself for causing her distress.

“Sua.” Ma Bolo drew her closer still. Then he circled her with one arm and used the other’s hand to help dry her tears. “My sweet, sweet Sua. You don’t have to worry about staying with me because *I’ve* decided to stay with *you*.”

She must be hearing things. He couldn’t have told her that he had decided to remain in Alola. He couldn’t have more or less decided to give up his immortality.

To, after years of trying to become the god he once was, become a human.

“You... you have?”

“Yes,” he said. And to prove his point, he tipped her chin and lowered his head.

Their lips met, and hope sprouted like a fertile seed in Sua’s heart. Their mouths fit together with little to no hesitation, making Sua realize that the god had picked her. Or, to be precise, he’d chosen the chance to spend a mortal life with her, for however long that may be.

They kissed like it was the first, last, and only kiss they would share. And yet, they now had all the time in the living world and beyond to be together. Ma Bolo’s tight but painless embrace around her body assured her of that.

“There’s one last thing you must know,” the god said after releasing her lips.

“And that is...” Sua whispered, still breathless from their encounter. She couldn’t help but lay her hands on his chest.

“I met your father in that brief time I was dead,” he confessed.

Sua’s eyes widened.

“How is he? Does he miss Mama? Did he have anything he wanted to tell Ubi or myself?”

“He wishes to hold his wife in his arms, but only after she’s lived a long and happy life,” Ma Bolo supplied. “And he wants Ubi to know that she’s his precious little girl. That she must obey whatever her

older sister tells her to do. He also said that he approves.”

“Of what?”

“Well...” Ma Bolo rubbed her back as he looked deeply into her eyes. “I grabbed the chance to ask him for your hand in marriage. He said that as long as his wife approves, we can wed whenever.”

“Ma Bolo!”

“Call me Bo, dearest.”

“B-bo,” she stuttered, much to the god’s delight, “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Are you complaining?”

“N-no, but this is such a big step.” Despite her verbal protest, Sua leaned against him when he invited her to. His gentle way with her was too soothing and inviting to pass up. “Are you really sure that you want to stay with me?”

In response, Bo dipped his chin to her exposed shoulder. He kissed her mark there, and it slowly faded. As it disappeared, Bo’s face started to change.

He still looked handsome, but there was none of the unnatural, magical pull that tended to draw other people to his presence. His face got leaner, his lashes got shorter, and his hair grew somewhat lighter with strands of brown. And the gold in his eyes dulled just a little, replaced here and there by green streaks that paid homage to his origins as a god.

A shade of green that Sua secretly hoped would pass on to their children a few years down the line.

“There’s no backing out now, dearest,” he said after completing his transformation. He beamed at her, and she couldn’t help but grin back. “So what do you think? Not exactly like Sa Gin anymore, but not so different that other people will get suspicious. Is this all right?”

“It’s perfect.” This time, Sua kissed him first. While they explored each other with all the longing they’d been feeling since being parted, she couldn’t help but realize that they had this guest room all to themselves. “I love you, Ma Bolo.”

“Thank you for loving me, dearest.” As if coming to the same thought, her lover picked her up and carried her to the soft, cozy bed. She sighed once she felt the mattress and fluffy pillows give way to their combined weight. “I love you too. And I can’t wait to begin our new life together. Starting right now.”

“There’s no better time or place to start than tonight,” she whispered against his eager lips, “here in Alola.”

END

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