

Chapter 2

I

As Geeula led Keary to the attic, faded, peach blobs on the wall paper merged to yellow, swirly lines. A dark brown, metal trimmed door with a brass handle stood partly open. Inside, lay a tall room with slants and angles matching the roof's shape. It seemed Venanty's awareness fell short on the upper portion of his home, which appeared stagnant and full of dust, and if he were to explore it, as he did with many other things, he'd see it hadn't been cared for in ages. The footprints in the dust matched the size of Geeula's feet, suggesting she'd been alone on the top level. They passed between mounds of forgotten household objects, mostly covered in white sheets, and six full length mirrors, at the far end, gave the illusion of additional passages.

As messy as it was, it was no more disarrayed than Venanty's office, although it was surprising, since the man had an assistant and kept a sorted mind. The Darrag family butler had helped Keary's mother raise him for many years, so, initially, the *Darrag Standard of Cleanliness* was a lens he used to surmise Geeula's lack. But then he concluded the aildon had their ways, and perhaps the attic was of a low order for them.

Between two of the mirrors a navy-blue velvet curtain hung from a silver rod; Geeula flung it aside and revealed a dark hall. She continued while Keary followed, until an odd glowing light filling the corridor diminished.

A chill ran up Keary's spine. "Okay, where're we heading?" he asked.

"Patience," said Geeula. "You see the carry-cart?"

"It's pitch-black. I can't see a thing."

Geeula lit a lamp, and they were in a small enclosure, where there stood a large tub. "Yep," Keary said. "My father sold that bather when I was a child."

"Let's get inside."

"That's it? That's why we're up here?"

"Of course not, silly. You see a tub, but to me the carry-cart's a large oyster shell. The cart listens and turns to what we think."

They both climbed in, and Keary felt uncomfortable on the cold metal and wondered how the aildon woman's oyster shell might be.

Geeula hummed, then sang: "I fall at your feet, my sweet, my sweet. Much time has passed, yet I still think of youuuu." She tapped him. "Join in, if you'd like."

"No."

As Keary's doubt crept forward and loudly presented itself, there came a wobbling drum, then a heartbeat, and with each beat, flashing spots appeared. He found himself ordering a drink in a café, and the place had a rug and furniture, as though in someone's foyer. He knew that two different things, the house and the store, could be in the same place, and all of it still worked. He explained this to a gray-haired woman, the shopkeeper, who stood behind the counter, to which she offered him a golden elixir in a glass. Upon drinking what tasted like honey, he returned to the cold metal of the tub, to bright pulsing swirls, which looped and spun and passed overhead like electric silk. A track of wooden boards appeared, similar to an endless trough, and the tub jolted ahead and descended along a curve, where it wove among interconnecting paths. It saw and knew where to go. Arriving at one of the intersections, it

chose a rail, lurched forward, and abruptly halted before a dark, wooden brass trimmed door, much like the one from the attic.

It grew dark again. Geeula relit her lamp, and they made for the entrance.

An aildon man in a conductor's uniform, with violet cat-like eyes, greeted them inside. "Tickets please."

Geeula retrieved two small, crumpled papers from her sleeve and handed them to the man, who gave her a piece of broken pottery with symbols on it and stepped aside to let them pass.

Hundreds of aildon sat on benches in an amphitheater, surrounding an oval, dirt filled platform. High above was a ceiling of tree roots, and light emanated from lampposts dotting the arena's edge. Many wore black suits and dresses with angular, plaster red, blue, green, and orange head masks: the entire mass appeared as a flower garden. A woman happened by, and as her mask pivoted, Keary saw it was both oval and angle shaped. Then more passed, staring, for although they knew of humans, it was odd seeing one in such an elf-place, let alone within the walls of onlyworld; however Keary found some comfort, since the place was dimly lit, and unlike most childhood stories, the only distinguishing feature between humans and elves were the eyes.

A silver-haired aildon man approached and presented a squirming, purple mound on a platter.

Fishing a coin from her sleeve, Geeula gave it to the man, and he ladled out a portion, which she popped happily into her mouth.

Keary cringed.

The attendant scowled at him. "Are you sure you're in the right place?"

Geeula wrapped her arm around Keary's, and the aildon man huffed and walked off.

"Let's go back," said Keary, but Geeula pulled him forward. "Look—our seats!"

"Wonderful. Up front. Now the whole place can see. Maybe I should wear a head mask?"

"It's a pity they don't have one for his brain," said an aildon woman sitting behind them.

Before Keary could respond (and he very much wanted to), the lights dimmed; a spotlight shone; and an orange bear strode to the center of the arena. This puzzled Keary, but then he realized it was someone in a costume. A woman ran out and gave the bear a large tin cone, which it held up to its mouth. "We did this before the wars," said a man's low voice. "Long before our memory. Before the great fires. Before the great flood. They were the old times that our elders forgot, and so we gather again, as though the before time were still now."

The crowd roared.

The bear waved to both ends of the field, and horse drawn wagons, with large, bound, white robed creatures appeared. Only their heads showed; they were gray, dark eyed, small mouthed, elongated, with a series of ridges on the back. Before each creature, at the front of each wagon, sat a straw man and a straw woman; both wore overlapping strips of iron, a helmet, and carried a shield.

The bear signaled again.

Two aildon girls, white robed and crowned with vines, approached: each carried a small wooden chest, and they curtsied to the bear. The bear nodded. Each made for a wagon, where some adults helped the children climb. They approached their respective creature, who struggled and writhed in their binds. Grabbing their folds, each opened them and placed their box inside.

"Fellow aildon", said the bear. "Before the great fire. Before the great flood. Welcome the old times. Take them in your heart. Fellow ailden, I give you Shalaaaa and Baltizeer!"

More lamps were lit, and the colosseum grew still.

Both straw warriors shifted in their seats, then lowered from their wagon.

Baltizeer looked out at the crowd, examined his hands, and shuffled a few steps.

Shala jolted and nearly fell, but then caught herself and stood, all the while watching the bear.

As the wagons, the bear, and the others cleared out, two spears were left, stuck into the middle of the arena, which the scarecrows retrieved.

“Begin!” cried the bear.

The assembly cheered wildly.

The two opponents moved, weapons before them, armor clanking.

Baltizeer lunged, swung, and tore through Shala’s arm, and holding her wound, she stumbled back.

Trembling, Shala crashed her shield against Baltizeer’s, and he dropped his spear. As he made for it, Shala jabbed him in the hip, causing him to lose balance, but he gouged Shala’s leg as he fell. Both regrouped, charged, and impaled each other in the stomach. There came a loud groan from the gray creatures from their stations at either end of the field. Their heads faced upwards; their mouths opened; and each of the boxes partially emerged from their folds.

Baltizeer and Shala collapsed as one and lay still.

The lights dimmed, and the spotlight fell on the bear with the cone. “Both fought well! There is no victor!”

The audience grumbled at first, but then applauded.

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