

GIFT OF CHANCE

by

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Chapter 1: The Memory Thief

A youth was running through the dark forest, amid the black and silver harlequin patterns of tree-shadow and moonlight. Branches whipped at him as he ran. Brambles caught at his clothing. He laughed aloud—a wild, exultant, manic laugh.

He was free! Finally free!

He felt as if he could run forever, reveling in the power of his pumping limbs, heedless of muscles on fire from exertion and lungs that burned with each indrawn breath. He slid down a bank, splashed through the stream that lay at the bottom, and flung himself up the slope on the other side, scrambling over rocks that rose before him in a pool of moonlight.

So far. . . so far already, but he must go farther still. . .

The change was so gradual that he was unaware of it, but more and more the tree trunks began to reel and waver as they passed. The shapes of rocks and bushes leaped weirdly out of the darkness and danced erratically around him until the world seemed to be turning like a wheel. He felt as if he were floating. The forest was becoming indistinct, shades of darker and lighter gray instead of black and silver. He staggered, his feet stumbling—and then he was falling—falling among ferns, where he lay gasping, his head spinning, too dizzy and spent to move.

. . . face down. . . damp fern leaves. . . finally able to breathe. . . the smell of musty

earth. . . the world turning, turning. . .

A wave of nausea swept over him. Sweat sprang from his already drenched body, and a chill came, racking him, rattling his teeth together in his head. He lay shivering and shuddering among the fern leaves.

Time passed and with it the chill. A delicious warmth stole over him, wrapping him in its blanket. Feebly, then, he tried to move, but his muscles were as weak as water and his head was full of warm fog so that at first he didn't notice his memories being tugged away.

Names were among the first things to be taken; his own was gone before he knew it. When he became aware that things were slipping away, he struggled against the loss.

"No. . ." he murmured, *"No. . . Don' do that. . ."* But the memory-thief paid him no heed.

Shapes floated in his vision—faces of shadowy figures, bending over him. There was a girl with honey-colored hair and an expression that was kind and sad and poignantly disappointed. There were men—four men—blond or red-haired, all nameless. And a final face—as nameless as the others—sallow, with short-cropped black hair and a nose like a hawk's beak. This face had hard black eyes that glittered coldly, chilling him, evoking an intense desire to escape. He struggled, twisting, uttering a wordless cry. . . Then he felt as if he were falling. . . falling into darkness. . . as if the ground had dissolved beneath him. . .

. . . hands were grasping him. . . turning him over. . . lifting him. . .

He struggled to open his eyes. . .

. . . too much light!

He closed them again—tried to speak, but all that came out was a moan. A hand was laid on his forehead and from somewhere, a very long way off, he seemed to hear someone say, *" . . . he's burning. . ."* But the words conveyed no meaning to his fevered brain.

Enveloped in darkness and warm, gentle fog, he was wandering in fevered dreams. The troubling faces came and went, intermingled with running and the sensation of falling.

Now and again the memory-thief came, slipping into his mind, taking away memories that troubled him, pulling them behind a curtain of forgetfulness.

. . . such a relief to let those things go. . .

But other things were being taken as well, things he wanted to keep. Weakly he sought again to resist the intangible hands of the unseen thief, but he didn't know how, and the memories kept slipping through his helpless mental fingers until all sense of the need for resistance slipped away, and he yielded.

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Chapter 2: Awakening

There was a room now, sometimes—emerging as if from a fog or mist. It was a small room with rough walls and a low ceiling of hewn timbers. He saw mostly the timbers because he was lying on a bed, looking up at them. There were faces, too—broad, brown faces with dark eyes, framed by dark hair. . . *safe faces*. . .

When he finally made his mind focus on one of the faces, he found it belonged to a woman. She was of middle years, with lines on her forehead and at the corners of her eyes, and her dark hair pulled back into a single long braid.

Then he saw that she was smiling and holding a cup of something for him to drink.

He sat up a little and took the cup in his hands. It was made of earthenware and it felt smooth and solid under his fingers. . . *easy to hold*. . . He frowned briefly, puzzled by the thought, but then he drank from the cup and the liquid it contained was warm and tasted good. The woman took the cup then and told him to rest, and he lay back down and slept.

After that he wandered less.

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The brown faces had become people to him. There were three of them. There was the woman, and a man of about the same age with a weathered face and a close-trimmed beard, peppered with gray. He did not come often. The third was a youth of seventeen or eighteen years with a cheerful face and quick, bright eyes. He seemed to be trying to grow a beard like the older man's.

The room had become more real to him as well. Its walls were of wood above and stone below, rough but solid. There was one door and a single window that was covered with oiled skin. It allowed light to pass but no image of what lay beyond. Besides the bed in which

he lay, the only furniture was a small table, two stools, and three assorted chests.

There came a time when he awoke to find the woman there, smiling kindly at him. “Would ye like some more broth?” she asked.

He nodded, then found his voice and said, “Yes, please.”

“Rest then, while I fetch ye some,” she answered, and went out through the door, pulling it shut behind her.

His mind seemed fuzzy, as if his head were full of fog, but that didn't really bother him—at least not yet. He pulled himself up into a sitting position and noticed that he was quite naked under the sheets. Vaguely he wondered who had undressed him.

He noticed also that there was an object hanging around his neck. He examined it. It was a large bronze ring with no stone, but with a design cut into its square, flat top. The design depicted a half sun disk with rays—either setting or rising—encircled by leafy sprigs bearing trumpet-shaped flowers. The ring was threaded onto a silver chain with a clasp. Both the ring and the chain felt familiar in his hands. It was right they should be there.

He examined himself then. His skin was pale, not brown like that of the three people who seemed to inhabit this house. He found he had marks on the inner sides of both arms in lines running from his elbows down to his wrists. There were some bruises and tiny red spots that looked as if something sharp had been poked through the skin, and also faded scars of older marks. Looking at them made him feel uncomfortable. There was something wrong about them and he didn't want to think about it, so he turned his attention to the sounds of voices coming through the rough wooden door.

“Aye, he does seem t' be truly awake this time.” That was the woman.

Then the voice of the young man: “Can I go in with ye then, Mother?”

“Oh, aye, it won't do any harm I suppose.”

They both came in then, and he pulled the sheet hastily up around his waist. The

woman sat down on one of the stools and handed him the cup again.

“Here’s your broth then, dearie. Ye drink that right up, now.”

He was very glad to do so. When he handed the cup back to her, he said reflexively, “Thank you, Zirdyn.”

Immediately she shook her head at him. “What’s that ye’re calling me? Zirdyn? I don’t need any such title.”

“But it’s not a title,” he objected. “It’s just being polite. I was taught to speak that way.” Somehow he knew that.

She made a dismissive gesture. “Well, ye can just call me Olomi,” she said. “That’s quite good enough for me. And my husband’s name is Jomo. If ye go calling him Zirda, he’ll likely choke.”

The other youth had seated himself on the second stool and was leaning forward, studying him with great interest. “I’m Taru,” he interjected. “What’s your name?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned, and the frown deepened. The fog in his head was getting in the way, but still it seemed he ought to know. He felt confusion and the first note of alarm was sounding weakly in his head. “Why can’t I remember my name?”

His two visitors exchanged glances. “Ye’ve had a fever,” the woman said gently. “A very bad one. It’s been three days and nights. I’ve heard that sometimes a fever can affect the mind. Most likely it’ll pass in a day or two,” she added reassuringly.

“Father was afraid ye were going t’ die,” put in Taru. “He was afraid we’d catch a net-full o’ trouble then, when someone came lookin’ for ye. Instead of a reward—”

“Taru!” Olomi gave her son a stern glance, then turned back to her patient. “Perhaps ye should rest now.”

But he didn’t feel like resting. A half-formed fear was fluttering in the back of his mind. “How did I come to be here?” he asked. In fact, he realized he had no idea where ‘here’

was.

Taru answered. “I found ye lying in the forest up there behind the house.” He gestured in the direction of the wall that held the window. “Father and I carried ye down here. Ye were already in a fever, so we put ye to bed. Where do ye come from? How did ye come to be in Lord Bron’s forest?”

He frowned again, trying to remember. But there was nothing. Trying to think made his head hurt, so he stopped. “I only remember this place,” he said. “And you, and Olomi, and the other man.” Even as fuzzy as his mind was, he found this disturbing. But he wasn’t ready yet for the uncomfortable thoughts beginning to surface in his mind, so he pushed them away and said, “Thank you for being so kind to me.”

Olomi was shaking her head at Taru. The youth had looked as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind. “How old are ye?” Taru asked after a moment. “Ye look about my age.”

Without stopping to think, he answered. “Seventeen. I’ll be eighteen in. . . in. . .” He struggled to grasp the thought that had been there, but it fled as soon as he pursued it. “Very soon,” he finished weakly.

“See! I knew it!” Taru exclaimed. “I’ll be eighteen in Evrel.”

“Yes. That’s it. . . Evrel.” It sounded right somehow when Taru said it.

“Taru! Are ye coming, boy? The mist’s almost gone.” It was the voice of the older man—Jomo—calling from somewhere outside.

Taru leaped up. “Coming, Father!” he cried. Then he turned back and said, “I have t’ go. It’s past time we set sail.”

He looked at Taru, puzzled. “Sail? Why? Where are you going?”

Taru looked surprised. “Why, out t’ sea with our nets, and then to Wotana t’ sell our catch and back home again. That’s what we do. We’re fishermen, ye know.” And with that,

the young man hurried out leaving Olomi shaking her head.

“Please excuse my son,” she said. “He asks too many questions.” Do try to rest now. I’m sure it’ll all come back t’ ye.”

He did as she asked then, and he did sleep for a time.

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When he next awoke it was about midday judging by the brightness of the square of oiled skin that covered the window. He was feeling hungry. His mind was clearer but no less empty, and he now found this truly disturbing. Still, he reminded himself of Olomi’s reassurances and tried not to think about it. He called for her then, a little hesitantly. When she came, he asked her still more hesitantly about his clothes because he had no idea what he had been wearing.

“Oh, aye, I’ll get them for ye,” she said and bustled out.

She soon came back with a bundle that she laid upon the bed. He examined the things with a gathering frown. The undergarments were plain and there was a pair of black boots made of soft, supple leather. These things pleased him well enough, but the shirt was of purple silk and the britches were white satin.

“I washed them as best I could,” Olomi ventured apologetically, seeing his frown. “And I mended them where they were torn.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “This is wrong. These can’t be mine.”

“Well, they’re what ye were wearing,” she replied, frowning at him in her turn.

“Why would anyone wear such things?” he wondered aloud, holding up the white britches. “They’d be no use for anything but sitting in the parlor. They’d be spoiled in a minute if there was any work to be done. What would I do around here wearing these?”

Olomi’s frown dissolved and she laughed. “Well, as t’ that, I guess ye have a point,” she said. “We don’t even have a . . . *parlor*. . .” She waved her hand vaguely. “I tell ye what

I'll do. I'll go and fetch ye some spare things o' Taru's. They'll be a bit short in the leg, though. I fancy ye're a bit taller."

She came back quickly with a set of garments made of gray homespun cloth which she left for him. There was a tirkyl-style tunic meant to be belted at the waist and laced at the throat, with long, loose, cuff-less sleeves that could be easily rolled up. There was also a pair of pants, looser fitting than the britches. He got up, feeling weak and shaky but determined not to be deterred. The pants were a little short, but the black boots solved the problem. They were taller than the sort worn by fishermen, coming up to the knee. He was able to tuck the pants into the tops of them. The ring on the chain around his neck he left under the tirkyl next to his skin, because that felt right.

He emerged from the bedroom into the main room of the house. This room seemed to be kitchen and living room in one. It had few furnishings—a table and three chairs, two stools by the fireplace, a pair of chests, and a low bench by the door. Some shelves on one wall held dishes and cooking utensils. There were two windows in opposite walls, to the left and right. Both were open, the wooden frames that held the stretched, oiled skin having been swung wide.

Sunlight brightened the room.

Under one of the windows there was a piece of canvas laid out on the floor with some folded blankets. He realized with a sudden pang of guilt that the house had no spare beds and he had displaced someone—probably both Olomi and Jomo, judging by the size of the bed he had been lying in. The fireplace was immediately to his left, set into the wall that separated the two rooms. Olomi was kneeling there, and he saw that she was just putting a flat, round loaf of bread to bake on a large slab of stone placed among the embers.

She greeted him and he answered politely, then sat on a stool near the fire while the wonderful, warm, yeasty smell of baking bread filled the room. As Olomi moved about

tending to things, he found himself listening to something. He realized the sound had been there ever since he had awakened. He had probably also heard it in his sleep. It was so constant that he hadn't been aware of it, but it seemed louder here in this room with the open windows.

"What is that sound?" he asked. "Like a rushing of wind that rises and falls, and rises and falls?"

Olomi frowned for a moment, then suddenly laughed. "Why 'tis the sea, o' course," she said. "I've heard it so long that I take no notice."

"The sea!"

He rose excitedly and went to the door, which was in the wall opposite the fireplace. He opened it, and stood on the threshold and stared.

The sand began perhaps fifty yards from where he stood, at the bottom of a rock-strewn slope clad with grasses and small flowering plants. Half a dozen yards beyond that, small waves were breaking. Off to his left there was a rocky point of land jutting out into the water, and away off in the opposite direction a longer, lower spit of land was visible. The stretch of water in between was thus a kind of very broad bay, sheltered a little from the full force of the ocean's surge. Between the tips of those two points of land, the gray and silver immensity of the ocean stretched to the horizon, broken only by the low shapes of some distant islands and the tiny sails of fishing boats. In the air over the bay, sea birds wheeled and soared.

"Have ye never seen the sea before, then?" Olomi had come up behind him.

"No. . . I mean, not like this. . . so *close*. . ." He blinked as a fleeting image flickered in his mind. "I've seen it from a window, a long way off. . ." He frowned again as he tried to grasp the details of the image that had come into his mind, but it faded before he could place it. With a sigh, he abandoned the effort.

He stood for some time gazing at the scene spread out before him, feeling the sea wind on his face and smelling the salty tang in it. What brought him back at last was hunger. The bread was done and Olomi offered him some. He ate so much of the loaf that Olomi shook her head at him and declared that she would have to bake another. "Still, I suppose ye needed it," she added kindly. "Ye've not had anything solid in days."

After that he went exploring.

The inside of the house didn't take long. There were only three rooms and he had already seen two of them. The third was another small bedroom, entered through a door on the other side of the fireplace. It was as sparsely furnished as the rest of the house. Against one wall was a low frame formed of planks and filled with dried fern leaves, covered by a blanket. He guessed this was where Taru slept.

One other thing caught his eye as he turned to leave. It was a bow and quiver of arrows hanging on a hook beside the door. Carefully he lifted the bow from the hook and held it in his hand. The bowstring was unstrung. Without stopping to think, he put his right foot through between bow and string, pinned the lower limb of the bow against the outer edge of his left boot, and flexed the bow against the outside of his right thigh. Deftly he slid the small loop at the end of the string along the upper limb of the bow and slipped it into the notches at the tip. Then he lifted the strung bow with his left hand, hooked the string with three fingers of his right, and drew it back to his ear. Yes, he thought. This was something he knew how to do.

Carefully he eased the tension back out of the bow, unstrung it, and returned it to its hook.

Next he went outside again. Everything he could see there was as new to him as if he had wakened to life but an hour before, rather than merely waking from a fever. Looking along the shore to his right, he noticed there was a small inlet where a stream flowed into the

ocean. There was a kind of narrow pier there within the inlet's shelter. It consisted of a row of three crude tripods made of logs lashed together and connected by planks laid from one tripod to the next. He supposed this must be where the family's fishing boat would be tied up if it were not out at sea.

Standing there, he drew a long breath. This place was so peaceful. It felt *safe*, and that was good, though he had no awareness of any specific danger.

And it was all so *big*. . . so *open*. . . There were no walls or boundaries, nor any. . . He frowned. What had he been thinking? *Guards? Why would there be guards?* He shook his head as if to shake the thought away.

He sighed. It felt good to be free to *move*, to choose what he wished to do and simply do it. He supposed this must be because he had been confined to bed for several days.

He walked down the slope to the beach and stepped out onto the sand. He stood for a long time watching in fascination the way the waves arched up, translucent green with the sunlight shining through them, and tumbled forward into white foam that rushed across the sand towards his feet. Wave after wave broke and dissolved itself into that tracery of foam that came to him and slipped away again to be devoured by the next cascading breaker. The beach was strewn with polished pebbles, bits of driftwood, seaweed, and small shells. He stooped to pick up an object that lay like a little dish in his hand. The inside shone a beautiful rainbow-tinged pink, while the outside was dull black.

He carried it back to the house with him and gave it to Olomi. She smiled and told him its name and thanked him for the gift, though she surely had seen a hundred abalone shells before.

He soon ventured back outside, for he was curious about the forest where they had found him. He made his way around towards the back of the house. It was spring and there were flowers among the dune grass. The ones growing beside the house were white, deep

blue, lavender, and yellow. He admired them, though he didn't know their names. Behind the house, sheltered in its lee, there were several plots of ground that he imagined would be used for growing vegetables later in the season when it came time to plant, though he couldn't have said how he knew about vegetable gardens.

About thirty yards beyond that, was a road, and twenty yards farther still lay the edge of the forest. He only got as far as the road. The ground sloped more steeply upward as he approached it, and the exertion of the climb made him acutely aware of how weak he was. He stood in the road waiting for his legs to stop shaking.

The forest covered a range of hills that rose before him, and it went on as far as he could see along the shore in either direction. It was dense and shadowy, but it was just a forest. He knew somehow that he had seen a forest before, but this one did not look specifically familiar.

The road was narrow and unpaved and ran along between forest and sea. He could see a few other houses scattered along it in both directions and a few folk passing along it, this way and that. The nearest house was about a quarter mile to his left, beside a small river that flowed into the bay. He could make out a bridge where the road crossed the river. A few miles farther on in that same direction, at the base of the long, sandy spit, he could see a cluster of roofs that must be a town.

As he stood there, a woman stepped out of the forest almost directly across from him and descended towards the road. She resembled Olomi in coloring and in the way she wore her hair, drawn back into a braid. She differed in that her hair had a little less gray than Olomi's, and she wore a tiny gold earring in her left ear. She smiled at him in a knowing sort of way as she drew near, and greeted him.

“Good morning t' ye, lad.”

She was carrying a basket and when she got close enough he saw that it was full of

mushrooms.

“Good morning, Zirdyn.” His response was reflexive.

She cocked her head at him, though she didn’t comment as Olomi had done on being so addressed. “Ye’re not lost, are ye, lad?” she inquired.

“N-no.” He frowned. *Did he look lost?* “I came from that house, right down there.”

He pointed to the small fisherman’s cottage where he had awakened.

“Did ye, now?” She tilted her head a little and studied him through half-hooded eyes.

“That’s a very good house t’ be coming from. And an even better one t’ be going back to. Ye do plan on going back?”

“Yes. . . of course.” In fact, he had nowhere else to go, but he didn’t feel he needed to tell her that.

“That’s good.” She smiled as if bestowing a blessing. “See that ye do. Very good folk they are in that house.”

“They certainly seem so.” He was thinking of how Olomi and her family had taken him in and cared for him.

She smiled again, a satisfied smile this time. “Good day t’ ye then, lad,” she said.

Turning away, she moved off along the road in the direction of the river and the town.

For a moment he watched her go, uncertain what to make of her apparent interest in him. Soon, however, his own interest returned to the broader scene that lay in the direction she had taken.

That’s north, he thought, because I know the sea is in the west. But he wasn’t sure how he knew it. He tried to bring a map into his mind, and failed. The effort made his head begin to hurt again so he gave it up. His mind still felt a little fuzzy, as if the fog had not entirely left him. As little as he could recall of geography, he realized he had no memory of history at all. And that felt simply *wrong*.

Every place must have a story, mustn't it?

He shook his head, trying to clear the fuzziness away, but the action had no noticeable effect and he was beginning to know better than to try to force memories to come.

He took a few steps along the road and became aware again of the weakness of his legs. Realizing he wasn't ready yet for more extensive exploration, he decided to return to the house by following the stream that emptied into the inlet. It emerged from the forest a short distance north of where he stood and flowed across the road in a simple ford.

He joined it at the ford and followed its course as it gurgled and splashed over rocks on its way down the slope. Coming to a deep, quiet pool near the house, he stooped for a drink, cupping the water in his hands. When the ripples cleared, he studied his reflection in the water.

He was fair-skinned, with very regular features. He had a high brow, a narrow straight nose, and wide gray eyes. The hair that framed his face was nearly black and fell almost to his shoulders. His chin must have been shaved some days ago, though he had no recollection of it. The beginning growth of a youthful mustache and beard shadowed his upper lip and chin, and when he put his hand to it, he felt a little fine, soft stubble. He recalled that Taru and Jomo wore their hair tied at the nape of the neck. On impulse he tore a little strip of cloth from a ragged place in the hem of his tirkyl and tied his own hair in the same fashion. Studying his image in the water he decided he liked the effect, so he left it that way when he rose and made his way back to the house.

Olomi's reaction to the change surprised him.

"Now why have ye gone an' tied your hair like a Turo?" She frowned at him. "Ye're Kelorin, or don't ye know that?"

The look on his face answered her.

"Poor dear," she said then, gently, "Ye really don't remember anything, do ye?"

He shook his head, frowning in frustration. “I know I’ve seen a forest before, and that I hadn’t seen the sea. But I can’t say what forest this is, or what lies beyond it. I have no names for anything. No map. No history. The worst of it,” he added, “Is that I don’t even know how much is missing—how much I *ought* to know. Maybe you could teach me?”

She readily agreed.

So they sat at the table under the window and talked while Olomi did her sewing. He was hungry for information and asked questions whenever she paused. She could only tell him what she knew, of course. She couldn’t help him much with geography for she had never traveled beyond the town he had seen, and she had no formal schooling. The town was called Wotana. So was the river, and the bay. The country they were dwelling in, on the other hand, was called Edrovir.

“The capital of Edrovir is Lankura,” she told him. “It’s south o’ here, fifteen miles or so, at the mouth o’ the River Edro. There’s other cities up an’ down the coast. There’s Galenor t’ the north, and Kel Tiyna and Harmoth t’ the south—beyond Lankura. If ye go much farther’n that, I guess ye’d come t’ the land o’ Jinara. Every other year it seems there’s a truce with the Jinari, and the years in between we’re fightin’ them again.”

Some of the things she told him seemed to fall into place in his mind as if he had known them before, and that reassured him. He was relieved, for example, to learn that he was right in thinking the sea lay to the west. The coastline of Edrovir, and also of the other lands to the south, ran roughly north and south.

“What forest is this?” he asked, hoping he might recognize the name. In this he was disappointed, however.

“It’s called Sobring Wood, because it belongs t’ Lord Bron Sobring,” she explained. “All this land south of the Wotana River is part o’ Sobring Hold, for that matter, so we’re subjects o’ Lord Bron since we moved here. But the town o’ Wotana is in Galenor Wared.

That's another lord's territory."

"A '*hold*' . . . and a '*ward*' . . . ?" He frowned.

"The Leithian folk call their lands '*holds*' and the Kelorin call 'em '*wareds*.'"

"Oh. Yes." Once she had said it, it sounded so right that he was embarrassed for asking, but the word '*Leithian*' had seemingly not been in his head a moment before. "You said I was Kelorin, not Turo. How many different kinds of folk *are* there in Edrovir?"

She laughed, not unkindly. "There's only three, so ye know them all now. The Leithians are fair-skinned and blue-eyed, with hair that's yellow like straw, or reddish-colored. The Kelorin are fair-skinned too, but they've hair that's dark brown or black and eyes that are gray like yours, mostly—or sometimes as dark as mine, but blue. And the Turo, o' course, have coloring like me, or Taru, or Jomo."

He nodded. This all seemed right, but he felt more than ever the lack of a history. "How did it come to be this way? All these different folk living in one country?"

"Oh, now *that's* a bit of a tale," she said, shaking her head. "And I'm not very good at story-telling."

"I've nothing else to do but listen," he pointed out. "And I won't complain, no matter how you tell it."

She smiled at him then. "Oh well," she said. "If ye'll be as kind t' me as that, perhaps I *will* try."

So she re-threaded her needle, got her line of stitches fairly started, and began: "The Leithians and the Kelorin came t' Edrovir in the days o' my mother's mother—when she was a girl. They came from out o' the east. It was just after the Time o' Fire and Water..."

She saw his blank look and stopped. "Now, ye see?" she said. "I don't know properly where t' begin. There was a time, ye see, when fire fell out o' the sky and the sea rose up and washed over the land, and many things were smashed, or burned, or washed away. We Turo

call that the Time o' Fire and Water. The Leithian and the Kelorin folk came right after that, fleeing out o' their own land, away t' the east beyond the mountains."

"Fleeing? From what?"

She bent over her needle. "From the fire falling out o' *their* sky, I expect."

"Oh. Where did the Turo come from?"

She sighed. "The Turo have always been here. Since the beginning. We were all fisher folk then, dwelling here on the shore o' the sea and in the islands. Most of us are fishermen still, but there's some have learned other things—farming, and such. The Leithians and the Kelorin knew how t' farm, ye see, and how t' build towns an' cities, an' make all manner o' things the Turo had never seen before. And," she added, after a little frowning pause while she focused on her needle, "Some o' them called themselves lords. They divided the land up into holds an' wareds. The lands t' the east o' these hills were empty afore they came, so it wouldn't ha' mattered if they'd all just stayed *there*. But they came *here* too, and made themselves lords over the Turo."

"You mean the Turo didn't choose to have them as lords?"

"Most o' them didn't."

"That doesn't seem right," he said, because it bothered him. Was it because a Turowan family had taken him, a Kelorin, into their home and cared for him during his fever? "What did the Turo do about it?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. Turowan folk don't like trouble. And Kelorin and Leithian common folk are decent enough. It's the Leithian and Kelorin lords that made all the trouble. They came here and settled, as I told ye, but it wasn't long afore the lords took t' fighting among themselves. It seems the Leithians an' Kelorin didn't trust each other—or they wanted more land. Then it was that one o' the lords—a man named Darion—put a stop to all the fighting. Partly by bein' good with a sword, and partly by bein' good with words."

She became intent upon a difficult part of her sewing, letting her thoughts trail.

“What happened after that?”

“Oh.” She frowned. “Darion made all the lords meet in Lankura. They called it the Council of Lords. And the Council of Lords chose him t’ be the first king of Edrovir. ‘Darion the Great,’ they called him. He made the capital city at Lankura, and built a great palace there, an’ all. He was a good man and he made a good king.” She sighed a little wistfully.

“So the Turo liked him too?”

“Everyone liked him. Well, almost everyone.” She was making a knot and she stopped speaking to bite the thread with her teeth.

“Was he Kelorin?” He asked, hoping the answer would be yes.

“Half,” she said, pulling a new length of thread from her spool. “Darion had a Turowan mother, a chief’s daughter—Princess Minowei she was t’ our people. But he married a Kelorin lady.”

“You’re speaking of him in the past. Who was king after Darion?”

“The Council o’ Lords chose his son, Tevren, but he was only king for two years, afore some o’ the Leithians killed him. There was nearly a very bad war after that, but some o’ the lords signed a paper—the Pact of Lankura—and they chose a new king—Elgurn.”

“So Elgurn is king now?”

“Aye. He’s a Leithian but he has a Kelorin queen—Semorel. They’ve been king and queen for sixteen years. I know that ‘cause that’s how old their daughter is, and she was born the very year Elgurn was crowned.” Olomi sighed and the needle stopped moving as she raised her eyes to gaze dreamily across the bay. “That’s Princess Nevien, their only child, and a sweet girl they say, like her mother.” Olomi smiled fondly as she returned her attention to her sewing. “Everyone was wondering who she’d wed. And then last summer, out o’ nowhere, King Elgurn brought in a young man and marred her to him. He was no more ’n a

boy, really—named Leye Virden.”

“Why would the king do that?”

Olomi waved a hand in the air. “Oh, it seems the marriage had been *arranged* years ago. When they were children. Noble folk do that sort o’ thing, I guess. They say he’s a handsome lad, but not right in the head.”

“What do you mean. . . not right in the head?” He hadn’t liked the sound of that phrase. *He* didn’t feel ‘right in the head,’ himself.

“Oh, well, it seems that years ago, when he was a boy, the poor lad was taken sick with a fever so bad that he was never right afterwards. He has fits and he’s simple-minded and sickly. They say he’s not likely t’ live long, and maybe that’s a mercy—”

“*Simple-minded?*” Now he was feeling a powerful surge of alarm. “And he has fits! From a fever that was *years* ago? *He never got better?*”

Now she looked worried. “*No-o*. . . I’m afraid he didn’t,” she faltered. “But don’t ye fret,” she added quickly. “Your trouble’s nothing like his. Your mind is as quick as anyone’s. See how much ye’ve learned already? Even if ye never get back all the memories ye’ve lost, ye can learn most everything over again.”

What about my name and my own history, he wondered. *Who is going to teach me those things?* But he didn’t say it aloud because she meant well and he didn’t want to upset her any more on his account. He tried to look reassured.

By this time Olomi was finished with her sewing. She put the needle and thread away in her sewing box and went to get a fishing net that needed mending. The sun was already westering, so they took the bench outside to work where the light was better. They sat, each at one end of the bench, with the net spread out between them.

“What can I do?” he asked.

She gave him an odd look, but she showed him how to hold the net stretched out for

her, so it was easier for her to tie the knots, and how to cut the cord with a small hooked knife.

After he had gotten a feel for the task, he asked, “Are there any Turowan lords?”

“Ah, well, there’s three,” she replied. “One somewhere t’ the south, an’ two more way up t’ the north where the winters are so cold no one else wants t’ live there. They were chiefs in Darion’s time, and he named them lords. No one’s had the courage t’ take it away from them—though I dare say there’s some would like to. But most o’ the Turo live like we do, under a Leithian or a Kelorin lord. Do ye understand now,” she added, “Why it doesn’t do for ye to be tying your hair like that? Taking Turowan ways?”

He met her gaze earnestly. “No,” he said, “I don’t. What does it matter whether a custom is Turowan or Kelorin, if it is a good custom? See how the wind can’t blow my hair into my face when it’s tied?”

“Most Kelorin wear their hair shorter.”

“If it pleases me to wear mine long and tie it, why should I not?”

Olomi stared at him. Clearly she didn’t know what to make of this. “It’s just not the way o’ things,” she said at last, shaking her head. “What if your father or mother were t’ see ye lookin’ like a Turowan fisherman?”

“I’d tell them what I just told you, because it seems right to me.”

Olomi frowned. “What if they didn’t see it that way? They’d surely be angry.”

“Maybe it was my parents who taught me to think this way, and that’s why it feels right,” he said, but he stopped then because it felt strange to talk about parents when his memory held not so much as a shadow of a father or a mother.

She only shook her head again. “Ye’re as stubborn as Taru,” she said, but she didn’t try to argue with him anymore.

They turned their attention to their task after that, and so it was that Jomo and Taru

found them when they came up the slope from the beach.

Taru got there first. “Hullo,” he said. “Ye’ve tied your hair. I like it.”

Taru was grinning at him and he smiled back and glanced significantly at Olomi. She threw up her hands.

“I’ve a name for ye,” Taru went on. “Until ye remember yours. I’m going to call ye ‘Nagaro’—if ye don’t mind, o’ course.”

“Taru! That is *not* suitable.” This came from Jomo, who had come up behind his son. “It’s not right t’ give him a Turowan name.”

“But I don’t know how to give him a Kelorin one,” the youth protested. “And what would ye call him? ‘Dearie,’ as Mother does? Or ‘the boy,’ as I’ve heard ye do? He’s no more a ‘boy’ than I am!”

Jomo frowned darkly. “A name is a good thing, but not *that* name. Not ‘Nagaro.’ Ye should have more respect.”

As the would-be recipient of the name, he felt he ought to have some say in the matter. “Why?” he asked. “What’s wrong with ‘Nagaro?’”

It was Olomi who answered. “Nagaro means ‘one who has no name’ in the ancient tongue o’ the Turo,” she said quietly.

“Well it fits then, doesn’t it?” He glanced defiantly at Jomo, then looked at Taru, who was grinning. “Besides, I like the sound of it.”

Jomo looked as if he were going to say something, but Olomi spoke first.

“Nay, Jomo. This one knows his mind. See how he’s decided t’ tie his hair and I couldn’t talk him out of it? If it pleases him t’ be called Nagaro, then let him be so. Perhaps ‘tis only for a little time.”

And so it was decided.

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