

"You know, litlun, I was nearly this pregnant with your sister when I last came here, too."

Her voice seemed small, soft, in the vastness of the poison jungle. It remembered, very well, and it will wait. *They* had been here much, much longer than the marble and glass of the resort, the old or the new. Longer than the people, and certainly longer than the burns or scars or nightmares. Longer than most of the grains of sand currently composing the beaches. *They* had come before the waves and wind had worn those grains from rock into dust, washed up to build out the shore, larger and longer than it had once been. *They* had been here when this island was little more than the tiniest of atolls. They and its name were then only surviving things from that time, besides the earth itself. And the earth, it remembered. The trees growing from it, watered with *Their* blood, upholding *Them* in their branches, they remembered.

The jungle was poisoned.

But that was just one perspective. Healers knew that so many things seen as poison were just as much cure, were neither evil nor good. They merely were.

Her stomach cramped. Her bladder quivered fiercely. Every single muscle fiber from her anus to her navel to her abdominals to her diaphragm quaked and twisted with tension. She shushed, and willed stillness.

"Now now, litlun. Hush, *hush*. Your father missed Kirra's birth, he won't be missing yours. You and I are just having a nice little secret, quiet as meeces and mouses and mices, and then we'll be back in a biscuit crumb! You'll see."

Her steps were soft as her voice. They carried her, bare of foot, through the trees. Over rocks, and stones. Up stairs. The blood was old. Dried as close to dust as ever anything would, with Selen's humidity. It stuck to her soles, *sthitk, sthitk*.

She kept walking.

The shadows followed.

"Marry dear doesn't see everyone as family, quite the way I do, you see," she explained to her belly, swollen and ripe. Hands of all shapes and kinds cradled it. Whispered, *skrkkrkcreed*. Everyone wanted to touch as she passed. And why not? They were all so eager for their newest child. Who wouldn't want to see the baby? "So we *have* to be seekrit squirrels. But! That's alright. He doesn't need to understand to love us. And he loves us both very, very much. More than the whole wide world. You'll see. He'll be just the best papa to you, just like to Kirra. Much better than me, really."

Hallways meant little to her. They never had, much. Just shapes for walking through. She walked them then, a steady procession. Wings and snouts and fingers and spines tucked jungle

flowers into her hair, brushed her arms and legs, trailed the shell of one ear to make her shiver. That one told her a secret too.

*Here. Here,* it said.

So she went. They'd called. And she answered. She always would.

"I don't mean that badly of myself, goodness noses, no! But I am a mother...to all. To anyone. I love *all of them*. And sometimes...sometimes, not everyone understands that. You might not either, Weyne. But I love you too. Always and forever, my litlun."

*Here, here.*

The Miraluka stopped. Turned through a hollow doorway on hallowed stones and entered a chamber.

The beaks of tropical birds clacked and chattered with wildcat purrs. Tresses of headtails and lekku and smooth, eyeless faces greeted her. Six heads there, two tails here, a shell there. *Oh*, she thought, taken aback as a forehead with rows of shark Zabraki teeth and a fluted Ryn nose, slick with scales from some ocean fish or another, butted into hers. *You have my freckles!*

A keen of happiness answered.

"Hello, lovelies," Atyiru murmured, and smiled. From her pack, she drew out a box, using a tricky bit of twisting that her belly *did not appreciate* to get to it off her back. She willed patience and stillness again as the contraction rocked through her to her toes and her teeth sliced through her bottom lip with the agony of it.

A cacophony of concerned cries erupted around her. Filling the chamber. The halls. The forest. This place was thought dead, but it was *alive*, and she intended to keep it that way. At least until she could get all her family to their fellows, safe and sound where they were hidden off world. It would hurt to abandon their home, where the earth remembered them. But as long as they were together, that was home too.

And besides, this time, their Mother would not abandon them.

It was a dark, mean sort of violence that filtered through her mind in Alla'su's direction. She hushed it too. Not everyone could be a mother. Not really. Not true.

She took the lid off her basket. The concern for her swiftly changed to curiosity, then jubilation. Atyiru laughed, her head titling back and ears wiggling.

"Yes, yes, I brought cookies this time! Hello, yes, haha, hi. Now now, manners! One for everyone...no, you do not get more because you've got more mouths! Or more stomachs! One each!"

Miles away, resort-goers wined and dined and danced. But here, in the house called a temple, their family laughed and snacked and caught up on stories missed.

For a few hours, it was lovely. But alas, the morning would come, and more importantly, a patrol.

So it was the Miraluka said her goodbyes, cupcakes and tales of the newborn next time, and took her leave with her back spasming something awfully.

*Hush, hush. Here, here.*

From her pack came a second box. She wielded it with all the grace of her saberstaff as she approached the DDF troopers that crossed her path exactly when she meant them to, and waved with a smile.

"My Lady Arconae!"

"Hello, Jariiqq'a! Lukko, Menuu, Son Hof, Karl! I brought cookies!"

"What...are you talking about? What are you doing here?"

"Radio this in—"

"Tut tut tut, eat your cookie, dear."

The corpsman ate his cookie, dropping his comm back to his belt.

"Now, you all know how this goes. You had a quiet night, and you've never seen anything in the jungle worth reporting. **Not now, not ever.**"

"Not now, not ever," they repeated, and Lukko said, "are these raisins?"

"Raisins are good for you, sweetie. Eat up."

They ate. Atyiru would have skipped away, but skipping was for ladies who were not space whales.

So instead, she walked, bare of foot, and sang a lullaby the whole while. Ol'Val wasn't far, but it was far enough for her impatient son, and she was going to make sure Marick got to have this time.

She smiled through the pain, as mothers did.

"We can't wait to meet you, litlun. All of us."