The dark-skinned giant pantaur lay atop the thick branch, his paws folded beneath him, his chest resting on the soft bark, his hands folded under his chin. His fur was as dark as his skin, and in the shade of the leaves above, he was, at a glance, almost invisible, melting into shadow. His furry ears twitched lazily, taking in the ambient sounds of the forest, but none seemed to trouble him. He was in the heart of his little family’s territory, and there was no danger to him here.

Just as idly, in appearance at least, he watched the much younger pantaur busying himself on the mossy forest ground below. His son, Rory, had decided for some reason that he needed to improve his non-existent skill in throwing things, and was thus occupying himself tossing large treecones at another cone driven upright into the soft ground. The boy let out an occasional little cry of pride as his aim found its mark, and his father up above smiled in quiet, discreet pride as well.

It was mid-afternoon, and about as warm as the day was going to get – which was not very much. A rare cold spell had descended upon the forest several days earlier, and was showing no signs of lifting. In the grey, cold, cloudy sky, a distant sun cast a weak glow over the world, as best it could. Even some of the plants seemed to be cringing away from the chill in the air, while others were hungrily open to whatever sunlight they could absorb. The cold spell did not appear to have bothered the children much, though – except Amber, who had made it into a new ritual to complain about it every evening at bedtime. That was just to get more fuss and attention, though, and to make sure she could snuggle up warmly to one of her parents. If anything, the cold seemed to have made the cubs rather energetic and excitable – even more so than usual.

There was a sound in the branches above. Theo glanced up, without concern. His mate Hiral –brown-skinned, her lovely golden fur marked with swirling patterns of black, similar to her gorgeous long dark hair– bounded down from the higher branches, and came to rest, lying beside him. They kissed each other lightly, and Hiral looked down to where their son was tossing cones with an endearingly earnest sense of purpose.

“The girls are with Tara, then?”

Theo nodded.

“Why isn’t Rory with them?” Hiral asked, idly curious.

“Because, and I quote, they’re ‘being too girly’.” Theo smiled. “So he stayed with me, and we played tag like real men, until he decided the most important thing in the world is cone-tossing. He’s been at it for a while now.”

Hiral made a little cooing sound of affection in the back of her throat. She nestled closer against her mate, and began to scratch him tenderly behind his left ear. Theo twitched, then leaned into her and purred.

“Mmm… That’s nice. Why don’t you do it more often?”

Hiral let out a little gasp of mock-indignation. “I do it all the time, you… great big…!” Words seemed to fail her, and Theo chuckled. He half-closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling for a long moment.

“How’s Milly?” he asked, eventually.

Hiral’s voice turned more serious. “She’s sleeping. Which is the best thing for her right now.”

“In the middle of the afternoon?”

“She’s exhausted, Theo,” his mate told him softly. “She’s been through so much, and it’s just all been coming at her again and again. She’s been crying a lot.”

Theo winced. “But at least she knows those tomthumbs of hers are still alive, now.”

“She knows they *might* be. But they may have been eaten by now. And even if they haven’t, they’re completely beyond her reach. In *Negav*.” She shivered slightly. “We can’t get anywhere close.”

“So you’re helping her come to terms, and grieve,” Theo said, gravely. He turned a little, kissed his mate on the forehead softly, and put his arm round her. “How are *you* holding up?” he whispered. “Coping with a friend who’s in such a state…”

“Oh, I’m all right.” Hiral brushed his concerns aside. “But I don’t think Milly’s ‘coming to terms’ with what happened.”

Theo’s ears twitched a little. “Why? What’s she saying?”

Hiral looked into his eyes. “She wants to rescue them,” she said, gravely.

“But…” Theo frowned, puzzled, and was quiet for a moment, trying to make sense of those words. “She *knows* that she can’t get into Negav, right? Or anywhere near it? Those humans can be dangerous. You’ve *told* her?”

“Of *course* I’ve told her.” Hiral continued to rub him behind the ears. “But it’s Milly. She knows one or two littles.”

Theo nuzzled into her hand, enjoying her attention even as he continued to pay close notice to what she was saying. “I thought her pet human had gone away?”

“He has. But she knows one or two others. *Everyone* seems to keep littles as pets these days.” Her tone made it quite clear what she thought of such tendencies, and Theo smiled.

“As long as the cubs don’t start bringing some home and wanting to keep them.”

Hiral gave a mock shudder. “Amber wouldn’t. I don’t think the thought has ever occurred to her, thank goodness. And Rani is too sensible. She’d see the practical side, what it would mean to look after one. Rory…” She paused, considering, faintly troubled. “Rory worries me sometimes. When he starts feeling sorry for them.”

They both gazed down at their son, who remained absorbed in his own activities, oblivious to his parents’ conversation above.

“Compassion is a quality, and I’m glad to see it in him,” Theo said calmly. “As long as he doesn’t start being silly with it.”

“Agreed.” Hiral sighed, retrieved her hands, and stretched a little. “I’m not *too* worried. He likes the taste; I don’t think he’d want to stop eating them. There’s no harm in him being kind to his food, as long as he doesn’t try to domesticate it.”

Theo chuckled. “We’ll talk to him, if it comes to that.” He rubbed the back of his own ear, rearranging his hair and fur slightly. “In the meantime, what are you going to do about Milly?”

“I don’t know,” Hiral admitted softly. “Well, I do for now,” she amended. “I’m going to let her sleep.”

\* \* \*

Milly, however, was not asleep. She was lying on her back, in a small shaded clearing, on a thick natural bedding of moss. She had gazed for a while at the normally soothing, tranquil canopy of leaves, and the gentle patterns of sunlight filtering through it, until the largely static image had made her feel restless and anxious. She had closed her eyes, trying to will her mind into shutting down for a while, granting her temporary oblivion from her anguish.

But sleep would not come. Her mind was too active – stubbornly and pointlessly active. Again and again, it went over those moments where she had left the tomthumbs, only briefly and within her line of light. The blur of movement as the harpy had swooped in; Joanna’s scream… Milly shuddered, tears coming to her clenched eyelids, and squeezing out between them. *My fault*, she thought in a silent whimper. *My fault*…

Guilt was unproductive, and irrational, but it hounded her. She tried to refocus her thoughts on what she was actually going to *do* about it, to save them, but every time she tried, it all became muddled, and she found herself incapable of thinking straight. It was as though something within her froze, and instead of imagining solutions all she could do was picture humans eating up her tiny friends. She knew that some humans did eat tomthumbs; that was how she had found and saved Joanna in the first place. *And now I’ve lost her*… She tried very hard not to cry. She had cried so much already, her eyes felt raw and dry.

She had told Hiral she was going to rest, mainly so as to give the pantaur herself a break from staying so supportively by her side. Hiral was the type of person who, when a friend had a problem, would invest a considerable amount of time and energy into trying to solve it. The fact that in this case she *couldn’t* was, Milly knew, frustrating to her. Being unable to actually help the tomthumbs, Hiral had focused on trying to comfort her giantess friend, and take her mind off it all. But what Milly needed was a plan to *save* Tina, Joanna and Meringue, if it was still possible.

The harpy that Tara had caught had told them, it seemed, all that she knew. Which was not very much. Her human companion had sold the tomthumbs to a ‘middle-man’, who would almost certainly ensure they were sold on to someone else in a ‘pet shop’ in the city.

The words meant fairly little to her; they brought up no specific mental image. But their vagueness only added to the horror of what it *might* mean. *They must be terrified*, she thought miserably. Tina was smart and strong-willed and independent, but she was also so very, very small, and at this moment, if she was still alive, she was undoubtedly helpless. As for Joanna and Meringue…

There was a yell, startling her out of her thoughts. She opened her eyes, confused and alarmed, in time to see something drop down from the branch above her. It was small, and it was shouting, and it landed with a soft thud on the thick moss, before picking itself dizzily up. Milly sat up, and stared at it. It was a little elf – fair-haired, female, and entirely naked. The elf, still looking queasy and disoriented, stared up at her in turn, frightened.

“What…?” Milly muttered, puzzled.

There was another sound from the branch above her, and soon enough a giant pantaur child came bounding down, with that astonishing agility which seemed to come so naturally to them, and boundless youthful energy. Wavy black hair tied back into a ponytail, and light blue eyes; Rani, the eldest of the three cubs by a few minutes and –as she liked to claim– the ‘almost grown-up’ big sister of the family. Still, she was grinning with girlish eagerness as she landed smoothly on four well-balanced paws beside the giantess.

“Sorry the elf made so much noise. I didn’t want to wake you; I just wanted to leave it for you. For when you woke up.” Her tail swished enthusiastically, and her smile held, though she did look a little worried at having disturbed a sleeping *real* grown-up.

Milly put the girl’s concerns to rest, returning her smile, as best she could. “It’s all right; I wasn’t *quite* asleep.” She turned slightly, and picked up the elf, who was beginning to hobble away. The little creature tensed sharply between her fingers as she was plucked, then sighed deeply, and seemed almost to deflate, without a word. “You shouldn’t drop them from trees, though,” Milly cautioned gently. “They might get broken.”

“Sorry. But there’s lots of soft moss, and it doesn’t look broken at all.”

“No, I don’t think you’ve hurt it too much,” Milly agreed, glancing at the tasty thing. “You said it’s for me?”

“Yes!” Rani beamed, and her tail swished a little faster. “I heard Mum say you hadn’t been eating much. And Mum always says that when we’re feeling sad, elves are good for cheering us up.”

Somehow, Milly actually heard herself laugh, just slightly. “Yes. Well, I suppose they are. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” the pantaur cub said, pleased. She sat down, and looked at her. “Would you like to tell me why you’re sad?”

“Oh.” Milly looked away for a moment. “No, I… I’ve been burdening your mother more than enough, already. And it’s a grown-up thing.”

Rani pouted. “Mum says I’m growing up very quickly. So I’m not *completely* a child, any more. I’m sort of in-between.”

She had said it with such confidence and pride, Milly’s lips twitched, into a smile of genuine fondness, as well as amusement. Nonetheless, she hesitated. In her hand, meanwhile, the elf remained very still, and quiet.

“I’ve lost some friends,” Milly said at last, softly.

“Oh, I see,” Rani said, and pondered that. “I’m sorry,” she added, as an afterthought.

“Thank you,” Milly said, rather quietly.

“I don’t know about friends, of course,” Rani confided, pensive. “I haven’t got any.”

Milly was struck at that, and took a moment to absorb it. Hiral and Theo had indeed been raising their family by themselves, outside of any pack. She remembered Hiral telling her, quite recently, that she was looking forward to the cubs socialising with Jissy’s children, when they had hatched and were old enough.

“You’ve got Tara,” she said after a while.

Rani grimaced. “I *s’ppose*,” she conceded, with obvious reluctance.

Milly’s eyebrows rose at that, but she said nothing. She had been under the impression that all three of the cubs really liked the teenage pantaur. Although, casting her mind back, it was clear that both Rory and Amber had great fun with Tara, while Rani was perhaps a little more withdrawn.

“And your brother and sister,” she said, instead.

“That’s not the same, though,” the girl mused.

“No, perhaps not.” Milly paused. Then: “You met Joanna once.” She regretted saying so almost immediately. Rani was a child, despite her own claims to maturity, and the giantess did not want to upset her. But the need to talk about her friends churned within her. She needed to vocalise it, to hear herself speak their names. As though somehow, silence might cause them to fade away even deeper beyond her reach.

“The tomthumb?” Rani asked, interested.

“That’s right.”

“I remember. She’s really small!”

“Yes.” Milly smiled, faintly – her smile an attempt to force back the need to cry.

“What’s happened to her?”

“It’ll be all right. I’m going to go and find her.” There was a strain in her voice, and Rani looked at her, a curious and uncertain expression on her young face.

“Okay…”

“Don’t you worry about me. Is there a game you’d like to play?” She remembered the elf in her hand, and looked at her. A thought struck her. “Don’t they usually come clothed?”

“She took my clothes off,” the elf answered for her, dryly. “For the sake of flavour, no doubt.”

“Right,” Milly said, a little surprised. She held her up closer. “You’re very calm.”

“I assure you, I’m not,” was the sharp response. “I’m just not inclined to make a fuss.”

“Well… Thank you.”

“Though I have to ask: Are you susceptible at all to pleading, or to bargaining?”

Milly blinked. “Um… No. I don’t think so.” A thought crossed her mind. She needed a little to get into Negav. That much was clear. What about…? But no. It had to be someone she trusted. Which meant… The gears in her mind, formerly almost paralysed by overpowering emotion, clicked and spun slowly. She turned back to the pantaur cub. “What did you do with her clothes, actually?”

“I dunno. I just dropped them.”

“Could you show me where?” There was a strange pensive tone in Milly’s voice. “I may need them. For a fr– For someone.”

“Well I won’t say you’re welcome to them, but I don’t suppose I have much choice,” the elf remarked. “Could we *please* get this over with? If you’re going to eat me, just do it.”

“Right. Sorry.” Milly gave her a weak, apologetic little smile, and popped her into her mouth. The little creature’s taste seeped onto her tongue, rich and flavourful and tingly, although today Milly did not find herself enjoying it anywhere near as much as she normally would. It was only food, and her stomach was still clenched with anxiety. She sloshed the elf about long enough to wet her, then swallowed. “Thanks, Rani.”

“You’re welcome!” the girl said, pleased. “So…” She stood, moved a little closer, and pawed softly at Milly’s knee, with her claws safely retracted.

“Yes?”

“What’s it like to have a friend?”

“Well…” She thought about it. “Your mother’s my friend.”

“Is it a lot like being sisters?”

“In a way. Except that we don’t squabble,” she added, managing a little smile.

Rani grinned.

“We confide in each other. We… We trust and support each other. We know that if we need someone to talk to, we’re here for each other. That’s what it is to have a friend. Your mum has been very, very kind to me. And although I hope she never… Well, I would try to do the same, if ever… if ever she needed it.”

“Have you always been friends?”

“‘Always’ is a long time. I do remember you as a baby, though.” They exchanged a slight smile. “My oldest friend here in Felarya, though, is a tomthumb called Tina.”

Rani perked up with interest at that. “How did you become friends with a tomthumb? They’re so tiny!”

“It’s a long story. Well actually no, I suppose it isn’t, really… Although it does take us back quite a few years.”

Rani sat back down, expectantly, looking up at her.

“I’d built my hut,” Milly began, “and begun to settle in. You know where it is, not far from the lake and the beach, and in that quiet sunny patch of forest… This was a long time before I started my garden, though, and I lived there on my own. Anyway… One day I noticed three or four tinies running into a burrow just outside the side wall of my hut. I guessed they’d dug tunnels *underneath* it, while I wasn’t looking. I was a bit annoyed, but they were clearly harmless, so I didn’t think much of it.”

Rani listened with silent interest, without interrupting.

“Sometimes,” Milly went on, “I saw them again, around the hut, and I saw them looking at me. So one day I waved, just to be friendly, and some of them waved back. A few days later, there were some inside my hut. Now at first, *that* disturbed me. I was thinking, I don’t mind them living down there, underground, but… walking around inside my hut? Tiny little things, that I might tread on by accident? It squicked me out.”

Rani smiled. “What happened then?”

“Well, I tried to shoo them away. I couldn’t see the looks on their faces; they were much too small. But they began to run out of my way. Except… There was this one, a teenage girl, with short blond hair, a bit of a tomboy look. She began to move away a bit, then turned and talked to me. I was… I was surprised,” she admitted, with a soft, shaky laugh. “I had never imagined any of them trying to *talk* to me! I don’t remember what it is she actually said, but it struck me at the time…” She paused, a sad, faraway look in her brown eyes. “Anyway, her name turned out to be Tina, and we became very close friends.”

“And she wasn’t quite a grown-up?”

“No, not at the time. She is now, though.” *If she’s still alive*… “You can be friends with someone who’s younger or older than you, if you have enough in common.” She ruffled Rani’s hair gently, and stroked the fur on the cub’s back. Rani arced against her hand, pleased, and rubbed herself against her legs.

“How can you have enough in common with a tomthumb, though?”

“Oh, easily enough,” Milly whispered. “I wouldn’t have thought it, at first… And we do still have differences. We don’t think the same about *everything*. Far from it. She’s very sensible, is Tina, and sometimes when we disagree there’s a part of me that thinks she’s right… But we talk. We confide in each other. We tell each other… everything, really…”

“That must be nice… I think…” Rani said, thoughtful, her young mind weighing the pros and cons. “I go to Mum, usually. I can’t go to Amber; she’s my *little* sister, and she doesn’t take things seriously enough. And Rory’s a *boy*.” She looked at her. “Can we be friends?”

Milly smiled, gently. “Of course. We already are.”

“Oh, good.” Rani yawned, displaying sharp little teeth. “Are you going to go back to sleep?”

“I might.”

“Oh, did you like the elf?” she asked, eagerly, as though suddenly remembering.

“Yes. Thank you.” Milly smiled, despite herself. “Did you catch her yourself?”

“Yes!” Rani preened, clearly proud of herself.

“Well done; that’s quite a catch.” She lay back, and Rani instantly came to stretch out alongside her, resting her head and arms on Milly’s chest. Her back paws stretched out behind, while her front paws folded neatly beneath her.

“Will you be having cubs some day?” the young pantaur asked, as she made herself comfortable.

“Maybe,” Milly said, automatically. She gazed back up between the leaves of the trees.

It was too late to do anything useful today. She would make sure she was well-rested tonight, and she would set out in the morning. She had decided now, more or less, what she needed to do. But it would take a while, and she meant to get started as soon as possible.

\* \* \*

At first, when Tina had guessed what this place was, Joanna had been so terrified that she had hardly been able to breathe. She had sat down –fallen, rather– and felt herself choke, reality swimming into a dizzy haze before her eyes. She had tried to gulp in air, but had felt as though no breath was reaching her lungs. It had taken all of Tina and Meringue’s kindness and persuasion to calm her down, just a little, enough for her not to suffocate on her own fear.

She had been held in captivity and sold once before, to humans who had intended to eat her. Now she was being held captive by humans once again, and by the activities outside of their large glass container Tina had guessed that they were here to be sold. Items, on display, in a shop.

For a long while, Joanna’s sense of panic had remained, overwhelming, and so of course Meringue had panicked as well, shaking and whimpering in mute fear. They had held and hugged each other, in helpless mutual support. This until Tina had told them, surprisingly gentle, to stop it.

“They’re not necessarily going to eat us,” she had argued, firmly. “Remember that human who kidnapped us once so that she could study us? Some humans have an interest in us other than as food. We need to *watch*, and learn, and try to work out what’s going on. Come on, damn it! It may be the key to survival. Do you want to live? Get up, and help me work this out!”

They were enclosed on all sides within hard, straight transparent walls, rising up far taller than they were, and perfectly smooth, impossible to scale. Within this unusual prison, earth and vegetation had been planted, including tiny trees, providing the illusion of a miniature patch of jungle habitat. Almost disturbingly, they had also been provided with a form of entertainment: a smooth wooden slide, rings on ropes dangling from a branch, and an assemblage of wooden bars which was clearly designed to be climbed. These had been Tina’s first clue that they were *perhaps* not destined to be eaten.

A rapid exploration of their confined domain had revealed a toilet unit concealed behind vegetation, offering at least some privacy, and a shower – which, disturbingly, was *not* properly concealed from the potential lewd gazes of those outside their prison.

For outside, beyond the transparent walls, was a very disconcerting environment indeed. Shelves above and below them, and on other walls opposite and beside them. Other containers, in various shapes and materials and sizes, mainly containing animals – from birds to mammals to aquatic creatures. Some, however, appeared to contain tinies such as themselves – from their angle, and from a distance, it was difficult to be sure. This environment itself was enclosed in opaque walls, though windows to one side made it clear there was a wider world beyond.

At first, it had seemed there were no humans present. Then they had seen one, feeding some of the animals, and working in some incomprehensible manner behind a low shelf that separated him from the rest of the room. Then others had come, browsing around, carrying out transactions with the first man. Some had peered in at the three tomthumbs, with varying degrees of interest. One, seeing their fear, had tapped at the glass with his fingers, before chuckling and moving on.

Eventually, the first man had come round to feed them, pulling their prison slightly forward, and dropping a handful of small, compact purple balls and squares in among them. He had made no comment in so doing, his gesture almost mechanical.

Tina had been the first to pick up one of the little squares, bring it to her face, and sniff at it. Then she had extended her tongue to touch it.

“Tina!” Joanna had exclaimed, dismayed. “Careful!”

“They’re not going to poison us,” Tina had said, firmly. “Otherwise, there was no point in keeping us alive in the first place.” That said, she had bitten into it. The square was soft, though slightly crunchy, and she had chewed with a wary expression before swallowing. “Tastes fruity,” had been her comment.

Meringue had gestured in perplexity at that.

“Yes, I know it’s not fruit,” Tina had said. “But it *tastes* sort of like fruit. In a weird way.” She had eaten the rest of the small square quite calmly, and picked up another, whereupon the other two women had reluctantly followed suit. They had eaten fairly little, their appetites troubled by the fearful uncertainty of their situation.

That uncertainty had lingered around them, oppressive, throughout their first day. It had been difficult to do much other than watch anxiously through the glass wall, at what was going on inside the shop, and flinch back in fear whenever a human came too close. And though Tina looked outwardly calm, Joanna knew her well enough to know that inside, she was not. Tina did not mind difficulties if she could grapple with them, and confront them. But here, there was nothing to be done. There was quite obviously no means of escape. Nothing to do but wait - and fear what the end of that wait might bring.

Night had fallen outside the shop, and the lights had been switched off inside as well, as the humans left. The only light was a weak glow from the street outside.

They had not been given any bedding, but the ground was soft enough. Tina had gone straight to sleep, advising them to do likewise, a good night’s sleep if they wanted to keep fit and keep their wits about them. Instead, Meringue and Joanna were sitting up, as far from the front of their prison as they could, concealing themselves amidst the vegetation even though there was no-one now to watch them. In the dark, animals snuffled, more or less distant, confined in their own cages or containers.

“At least we’re together,” Joanna whispered, holding her friend’s hands comfortingly. “Imagine how much worse this would be if it were just one of us on our own. Even Tina, I know she’s glad to have us here.” Meringue smiled a little, and Joanna paused. “Wait, that came out wrong…”

Meringue squeezed her had gently, and mouthed a silent ‘thank you’. Though she could not speak, she had learnt to move her lips in such a way as to clearly form certain basic words and expressions, conveying them visually, albeit in silence. For anything more complex, she made do with gestures, some of which she had developed into a rudimentary sign language, while others she improvised.

“I’d rather you *weren’t* here, of course,” Joanna clarified. “I’d rather you were safely back home. But… You know what I mean.”

Meringue was quiet for a moment, then made several gestures, repeatedly. There was so little light that Joanna could barely see them, and their meaning –in any case– escaped her.

“Sorry. I don’t know what you mean. Could you… try it differently?”

Meringue shifted a little closer to her, her face pale in the weak glow amidst the darkness, her dark hair almost invisible, her blue eyes troubled. She mouthed a single word, slowly, distinguishing the two syllables. ‘Mil-ly.’

Joanna looked away, just for a moment. The thought had been echoing round and round in her mind. Milly, lunging for them desperately as the harpy took them away… Her last sight of her. She could only imagine the anguish her gigantic friend had felt.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “She must think we’re dead.”

Tears pricked at Meringue’s blue eyes, and she nodded, sorrowfully.

“But she’s not alone!” Joanna added quickly. “Hiral will help her through this. She’ll… She’ll support her. Even if we–” She was not even certain, herself, how to finish the sentence. The future gaped wide open, a blank chasm before her, ready to engulf her. There was no knowing what it would be, and there was no escaping it. However fiercely she tried to cling, in her mind, to the present or to the past, to days of simple happiness that were still so recent and yet so far away, tomorrow would come, inexorably. And if nothing happened tomorrow, then the day after that, or after that… It was like being suspended, somehow, in mid-air, and waiting to fall. Or like a seemingly blank slate, on which her future had been written in some illegible form, which vanished when she tried to read it…

There was a rustling sound, close by, and both women gasped, looking up. Tina walked up to them, a dark figure partly blocking out their feeble source of light. She crouched down to face them, her face calm but serious. “Stop talking, and go to sleep,” she told them, firmly. “You need to let your minds rest, instead of getting them all agitated. Sleep; you won’t want to be tired in the morning.”

Meringue and Joanna looked at each other. They nodded, quietly, and helped each other up, padding silently back to where Tina had settled for the night.

Lying down with her friends, Joanna kept her clothes on, as did Meringue, despite the relative warmth in their confined environment. Her last human captors, before her arrival in Felarya, had stripped her naked, and keeping her clothes on now felt like protection, clinging to her dignity and personhood, a reaffirmation of who she was. Barefoot, her legs and arms mostly bare too, she clung physically to her simple shirt, clutching its edges in a tight grip.

She assumed sleep would not come for a long time. Had she been conscious to realise it, however, she would have surprised herself by falling asleep almost at once.

\* \* \*

Meringue woke early the next morning, and tried to go back to sleep. She did not want to be awake. Sleep was a comfort; somehow, her dreams remained untroubled. Or perhaps she simply did not remember them… But sleep would not return, and eventually she rose, to the alien and discomforting sight of the large glass wall.

She showered, keeping herself clean, then got back into the simple clothes she had slept in, the owner of the shop not having bothered to give them fresh ones. Breakfast, with Joanna and Tina, consisted in more of the strange soft mauve pellets, fruity but artificial. They were filling, at least, having been poured down into their prison in significant quantities.

After that, there was little to do but watch fearfully as humans began to wander round the shop, occasionally glancing in at them. Human children gawked at them, and called loudly for their parents to ‘come and see, come and see!’. Tina suggested ignoring them, pretending they weren’t there, and indeed the lack of response or apparent interest from the tiny women seemed to diminish the comparatively giant children’s own interest soon enough.

Back home among the Alsumi, there would have been plenty to keep the three tomthumbs busy. There was always work to be done – tending to the fields, preparing meals, making or repairing tools or furniture, or clothes, or helping to dig out new rooms amidst the network of burrows. Here, however, there was nothing. Meringue wandered around idly after breakfast. Many of the trees and bushes and flowers looked unfamiliar, heightening her sense of unease. It was an artificial environment, designed to mimic the wild jungle, for the benefit of customers rather than for the captives. She tried to keep her back turned to the shop, but looking in the other direction only led her to gaze at another glass wall, behind which lay the dark wooden surface of the furniture holding up the shelf they were on. Joanna ambled around with her, dispirited, uncommonly quiet.

Tina, for her part, had decided to pass the time by studying all that she could see in the shop. She herself had to admit, when Meringue made clear her doubts, that any knowledge they acquired of this strange and frightening world was likely to be of limited value, for now at least. But Tina had never believed in being passive.

Pacing, it occurred to Meringue that Isham, Milly’s erstwhile human friend, was now a resident of Negav. Wasn’t he? If so, perhaps he might– But no. The thought was absurd. Why would he enter a pet shop? No, there was no point in building up false hopes of rescue in that regard. She glanced at Joanna, wondering whether her friend had had the same thought. Joanna had been very fond of Isham; surely it must have crossed her mind. She remembered, too, that Remus had visited Negav at times. But now he was comfortably settled in Safe Harbour, so he would have no reason to come here either. For that matter, she was painfully aware that nobody knew where they were. Milly certainly assumed that the harpy who had taken them had simply eaten them. These thoughts flitted through her mind, digging deeper the ache of hopeless emptiness; and she kept them to herself.

She did not cry; she simply felt empty, and scared, and lost. She drew some comfort from Joanna’s presence beside her, but her friend looked exactly the way she herself felt, and they had run out of words or gestures of comfort to each other. Even those felt empty, after a while…

She turned in her pacing, and found herself looking at the odd wooden contraption of interconnected beams which had obviously been put there as a game for them, as entertainment. Joanna stopped too, standing beside her. They looked at each other.

Meringue tried to read her friend’s face. They had done nothing all morning, and sheer boredom was beginning to outweigh the fear of what might eventually come. She had not been drawn, so far, to these ‘games’ – the rings, the slide, the climbing… thing. They were, in essence, a humiliation, and she knew it. Yet with strictly nothing else to pass the time… She looked into Joanna’s green eyes, searching for any hint that she was thinking the same.

“Are you thinking…?” Joanna began, and glanced towards it. Meringue hesitated, then nodded, just a little. “Should we…?”

Tina, who had been sitting on a boulder watching the outside world –such as it was–, turned towards them at the sound of Joanna’s voice.

“Should you what?” she asked.

“That.” Joanna pointed. “We’re thinking of…”

Tina turned her head, followed her gaze, and looked back at her, frowning. “No!” she exclaimed. “Absolutely not!”

Joanna looked startled. “You don’t think we should play on it?”

“Are you *kidding*?” Tina stood, visibly upset. Meringue recoiled a little, taking a step back, and closer to her friend. “Joanna!”

“What?”

“We’re captives! They’ve put that there so they can watch us ‘play’. Do you want to *entertain* our captors?”

“No! I mean…” She frowned in turn, troubled. “I mean, no, but… Would they even watch? Would they care?”

Tina opened her mouth as though to reply, then stopped, apparently thinking better of it, and scowled. “Do what you want,” she said sharply, and sat back down, with her back to them.

Meringue gave Joanna a worried, confused look. Joanna gave her arm a gentle squeeze, reassuringly, and managed a weak smile.

“She’s just tense,” she whispered. “I know her. Let me talk to her.”

Meringue stayed still, shuffling awkwardly from one foot to the other, as she watched Joanna walk over to the other woman. Joanna, with her soft face and long blond hair, crouched down beside tomboyish, short-haired Tina, and began to talk to her quietly. Tina glanced at her, then looked away in what seemed like a huff. Joanna put her hand on her shoulder, and continued talking. Tina’s shoulders twitched, and she seemed to relax ever so slightly. She was listening, at least.

Meringue watched from a distance. She made no attempt to listen in. Not for the first time, she found herself wondering how those two had become such good friends. They differed in so many ways. Joanna was gentle, warm-hearted, full of care and compassion, a woman of feeling and principle. Tina was bluntly pragmatic, defining herself as a realist and trying to appear unsentimental, though Joanna had often told Meringue with quiet fondness and amusement that she was, in fact, nothing of the sort. One thing they did share was an adventurous spirit, which had led them to travel the forest with Milly. Joanna had wanted to see the world, in all its vastness and wonder, while Tina had simply enjoyed Milly’s close friendship and company.

After a short conversation, Joanna walked back towards her, an unexpected little smile on her gentle face.

“Race you to the top?” she said.

Meringue pointed towards Tina, uncertain.

“I’ve told her we need to keep our minds off things,” Joanna said softly. “And that this is our way of doing it. She understands.”

Meringue nodded, not entirely convinced, but reassured.

“Race you, then?” Joanna said. Another nod. Joanna flashed her a brief grin, still a little forced, and ran for the criss-crossing pile of smooth wooden beams. Meringue let out a little gasp, and dashed after her. Joanna reached it first, setting foot on a low beam, but by the time she had both feet off the ground Meringue was clambering after her. She felt a brief surge of surprisingly pleasant adrenaline, as she hurried after her friend. The atmosphere had been oppressive, ever since they had first woken up here the previous day. Now, it was as though just a little of the tension had broken, and although she was still frightened, a warm flow of relief washed through her from the inside.

The game was not particularly large or elaborate, and they had soon reached the top, Joanna getting there first. They clung to it, grinning at each other, just for a moment, before remembering where they were, and sobering. Watching Joanna’s face, Meringue saw the smile fade from it slowly, just as she felt her own smile slip away. She shivered.

“How much did you say they were?”

They both froze, as they became aware of a large presence looming outside the glass wall. They turned, wide-eyed, to see a human woman, with dark red hair, peering in at them, the shopkeeper standing beside her. Tina stood, slowly.

The shopkeeper named a figure, which meant nothing to the tomthumbs. The woman wrinkled her nose.

“And what do they actually *do*?”

“Well, you can train them, easily enough. Their similarity to us isn’t just superficial; they’re very intelligent, potentially. As intelligent as you want to make them. Of course, these are straight out of the wild, so they’ll need at least a bit of training. Which is why there’s a discount. But they keep themselves clean, we’ve made sure of–”

“There’s actually a discount? They still seem expensive to me.”

“Well you know, acquiring them isn’t *easy*,” the man simpered. “It’s not *technically* legal, as I’m sure you’re aware. We have our sources, of course–”

“That one’s glaring at me.” She pointed at Tina.

The shopkeeper glared right back at the defiant tomthumb, threateningly. “As I said, a bit of training…”

“How much upkeep do they need?”

“Oh, not very much! As long as you keep them fed; and they don’t eat very much. We sell toys and games if you want to keep them entertained, which I’d recommend. They have quite active minds, and it’s always a pleasure to watch them play.” He smiled ingratiatingly. “Of course, I wouldn’t recommend keeping them alongside a large carnivorous pet,” he added with a chuckle.

“Yes, they *are* a bit small,” the woman said absently. She straightened. “I’ll have to think about it.”

The two humans walked away, the shopkeeper still talking.

Numbly, carefully, their limbs trembling a little, Meringue and Joanna climbed back down from the game.

\* \* \*

Milly had set out early after breakfast. Hiral and Theo, to say nothing of the cubs, had been reluctant to see her go, clearly worried about her ability to look after herself in her current state. Hiral had been quietly explicit, facing her anxiously with those warm yellow eyes.

“What if you just break down again, emotionally, and you’re out there all on your own? At *least* let me come with you, part of the way!”

But Milly had been adamant. “You have the children to look after. And I’ve imposed on you long enough, moping around and getting everyone down. You’ve been very kind–”

“Don’t be silly! What are friends for, if you can’t stay with a friend when you’re not feeling well? Milly, I’d *really* rather you stayed here with us, rather than wandering off all by yourself.”

“Hiral…” Milly had softened. “You’ve been so kind. I don’t even know how to say, or show, how grateful I am. You’ve been… you’ve been the lifeline that’s kept me from sinking.” Tears had pricked at her eyes, and she’d blinked them away. “But I have to get them back.”

They had hugged, and she had promised to come back and visit as soon as she could, to show that she was all right. The cubs had bounded alongside her as she left, seeing her off, and perhaps hoping for one last game, until their mother had called them back. After that, Milly had been on her own.

It had been hard, deliberately walking *away* from the direction of Negav. Her rational mind knew that the only way into the city, so to speak, lay in the familiar lands to the north, but her instincts were to go south, scale the walls, into that strange and alien place, and –though she had no idea what the place was like– search frantically for her missing friends.

The fact that she was alone hit her with full force only a few minutes after she had left the pantaurs behind. She was still wearing her thin belt, with the little pouch the tomthumbs had been travelling in, and her hand went to it, feeling its emptiness. A wave of despair filled her then, at the true meaning of their absence, the enormity of what lay ahead, the sheer terrifying uncertainty, the niggling whisper that told her she was unlikely ever to see them again.

She walked steadily, partly to stay warm in the still cold air, and partly fuelled by a sense of urgency. *I should have left yesterday. I could have walked by night. I should have left* right away… The thought churned in her anxious mind for a while, before fading by itself. She was tired of feeling guilty, to the point that her guilt could no longer sustain itself on her tired, battered mind.

She swam across the river, shivering in the cold water. Her clothes were drenched, and clung uncomfortably to her skin, so she took them off and carried them as a wet miserable bundle. Her wet hair stuck to her shoulders, drying slowly and awkwardly. She ate little, picking at food she found along the way, her tense stomach clenching against the thought of a proper meal. She walked past Safe Harbour from a distance, hoping she would not run into Jade. She was in no mood for a conversation – all the more so since Jade had doubtless heard by now about Milly inadvertently eating a convoy that had been heading to the village. She knew she would not be able to cope with the inevitable confrontation; not now, of all times. Her luck held; she saw no sign of Jade.

She walked on as evening fell, until it was too dark to see where she was going. At that point, she lay down in the open, and tried to sleep. She had eaten too little, she now realised, and her empty stomach was rumbling and aching painfully. But it was too late, and much too dark, to go looking for food. She lay away a long time, wondering desperately what sort of night Tina and the others were having – if they were still alive. Sleep took her eventually, through sheer physical and emotional tiredness.

The next morning, she awoke ravenous, and chilled. She caught and ate a large snake, sighing with relief as it slid down her throat and weighed on her stomach, squirming inside her. Still hungry, she tore edible, watery plants from the soft earth, and ate them roots and all. As she munched on them, their juices sating only some of her morning thirst, she tried to go over her plan in her mind. Frustratingly, it did not take her far. It was impossible to plan much when she actually knew nothing about Negav. *Which is why I’ll need someone who does*. Someone who did not particularly like her, but who would surely be willing to help. *If I can bring myself to go there*… But there was, of course, no question about that. Which meant, in turn, that a confrontation with Jade was inevitable.

Her heart sank, as she gathered up her still damp clothes and set on her way again, walking north. Why couldn’t things be simple for once? She wanted to be able to focus on saving her friends. She did *not* want to have to face Jade, over what had been –after all– an innocent mistake. *But I must*.

Perhaps Jade didn’t know, though. That was surely possible. *Probable, even*, she thought, to reassure herself. After all, there had only been two humans left from the convoy. Perhaps they had headed back to Negav, rather than try to continue the expedition on their own. Of if they *had* continued, maybe they had been eaten before they could reach Safe Harbour. They would have had to cross the river, full of hungry predators… Yes, in all likelihood Jade had never received news about what had happened to the convoy.

Not that it made Milly feel any less bad about it.

She kept up a steady pace, rubbing at herself to keep warm, quietly wishing for dry and warm clothes. Lunch, eaten quickly, consisted in a couple of arboreal rodents and some more plants, which still left her feeling a little hungry; but she did not want to deviate from her path to look for more.

It was mid-afternoon by the time she came within sight of her hut. Her heart leapt with a sharp mingling of feelings at its familiar sight. It was home, and there was a profound comfort in that. But she was returning here without the three friends she had set out with, and the thought brought renewed despair crashing down upon her.

She paused, and took a deep, quiet steadying breath. Then walked over to it.

\* \* \*

Inside the hut, a few minutes earlier, a very dark-skinned neko woman, her furry ears and tail as black as her short-cropped hair, was in the midst of some rather intense and breathless love-making with her boyfriend, who –tall with light brown skin and short light-green hair, likewise matching his fur– was straddling her atop the vastness of Milly’s bed.

It had been Calina’s idea. Left in charge of watching over the tomthumbs, and of keeping away predators that might try to get at them, she had carried out her task dutifully, spending her days talking or playing with the tiny creatures, between brief forays out into the surrounding forest to hunt or gather food. But Milly had given no indication of how long she might be absent, and the unexpected appearance of an unknown giant naga in the area had led Calina to fear that the giantess might even have been eaten. Whatever the case might be, after a while the neko had grown bored of lingering around the hut, and had decided she wanted the company of her latest boyfriend, Rilt. She had made it very clear to him that he was not to eat *any* of the tomthumbs, as she led him by the hand to the awe-inspiringly gigantic wooden building. He had accepted that with some bemusement, pleased mainly that she was still showing an interest in him.

“You’re sure it’s safe?” he had asked.

“Of course it’s not safe,” Calina had told him cheerfully. “Milly told me very clearly, if I brought any neko other than myself anywhere near her hut, she would eat them.” She had grinned at him playfully. “Doesn’t the risk make it more exciting?”

He had had to admit that yes, it did. She had looked so beautiful and eager, grinning at him like that, that his hesitation had soon melted away. Clambering up onto the giantess’ bed had been easy enough. They had played around in the enormous bed sheets, before tumbling down onto each other for some very satisfying sex.

“It’s quite a cosy agreement you have with her,” he remarked, as they lay together afterwards, Calina snuggling up against him, his hand trailing through her hair and down her bare back. His fingers trailed gently along her spine, through the sheen of sweat after their lovemaking. Her body was warm against his, her chest rising and falling, pressing her breasts against his side, her breath matching his.

“If she’s okay,” Calina said. “I’m a bit worried that a naga might have got her.”

Rilt absorbed that quietly for a moment. “Well if it has, that’d be one less predator hunting us,” he said at last calmly. “I know she doesn’t hunt you, but she still sometimes eats the rest of us.”

“I know.” Calina trailed her own fingers softly over his bare chest. “I hope she never gobbles you up.”

“You’d miss me?” he asked, keeping his tone idle.

“I’d miss what you were doing a few moments ago.” She looked at him, and grinned, her dark face bright and warm, her teeth flashing prettily in her broad smile.

“Mmm.” He kissed her briefly. “If the giantess never comes back… Does that mean you’re allowed to eat the tomthumbs?”

“No!” Calina stiffened. The exclamation had burst out of her before she could even think. There was surprise in Rilt’s eyes, and she winced. “No; they’re not for eating.”

“But you still eat tomthumbs.”

“Yes, but not these. I’ve… become fond of them. They’re fun.”

“All right.” Rilt smiled lazily, accepting that without thinking too much into it, and kissed her again. She really was quite lovely, and he was willing to go along with whatever she said.

Mid-kiss, all of a sudden, they both froze. They parted slowly, worry in their eyes.

“Giant predator,” Rilt whispered.

“It’s her.” Calina sat up on the bed, and shifted smoothly into a crouching position, tensing. Rilt stood, turning his attention to the gigantic door.

It opened, and the giantess, Milly, stepped in. His heart missed a beat, then began pumping adrenaline, as he craned his neck to look up at her.

He had never seen her this close. He had only ever glimpsed her from afar, a towering presence, roaming a large section of the jungle, across the tribe’s hunting grounds, eating any nekos that she found. She was mind-blowingly tall, a huge presence looming in the doorway. She was also stark naked, and surprisingly beautiful. His gaze flicked from her face down to her belly, the bare tummy within which so many of his people had ended up. He stood as though frozen to the spot, struggling to get his mind back into gear, and say something.

“Calina.” The giantess sounded oddly relieved to see her. “Good; we need to talk.” Her eyes turned to Rilt, who grinned awkwardly and managed a little wave.

“Hi,” he said.

“My boyfriend,” Calina said quickly, and slipped her arm through his, holding onto him with a protective squeeze. “Please don’t eat him? I don’t really want to have to try and find another one just yet,” she quipped.

Milly smiled very faintly. “I need to talk to you on your own.”

“Right.” Calina kissed Rilt’s cheek, then released him and gave him a playful little shove. “Okay, off you go!”

“Um, right. I’ll see you around.” Quietly relieved that he was not going to be eaten, he scrambled quickly down off the bed, and hurried across the floorboards to the door. Milly stepped sideways to let him out, but he still had to pass close by her gigantic bare left foot. He glanced up at her as he did so, but already she seemed to be paying him no more attention. Seeing as she wasn’t looking, he could not help but steal a quick glance at the smooth, shapely curves of her bare bottom, before running off into the forest.

He felt a little shaken, but thrilled, too. Now *that* was an encounter he was not likely to soon forget!

\* \* \*

“I could ask what you were doing on my bed, but I suppose the answer’s obvious,” Milly said flatly.

Calina offered an apologetic little grin. “What can I say? It was tempting. Sorry.”

“I’m going to get some food from the garden. I didn’t have much for lunch. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, please.”

She disappeared outside, and soon returned carrying fruit and vegetables, which she set down on the table. Wordlessly, she picked Calina up, and set her on the table too. For a moment, it felt disconcertingly to the neko as though she were being added to the menu – an item of food amid the others.

“How are the tomthumbs?” Milly asked, sitting on one of the simple wooden chairs. Her voice was still strangely flat, and Calina looked up at her with some concern.

“Everyone’s fine. Are you all right?” She had noticed the empty pouch at Milly’s belt. “Where are Joanna and the others? Where’s Yemic?”

And so it all came out. By the time Milly had finished telling her what had happened, the giantess was in tears, and Calina sat there, stunned, uncertain how to react. She had never seen Milly look so fragile before. This gigantic predator, capable of casually swallowing down half a dozen or more nekos in one meal, was crying, in anguish and afraid.

“Milly…” she said, a little awkwardly. “I’m so sorry…”

Milly sniffled, and wiped at her eyes. She gave her a weak but grateful little smile.

“The harpy told you they were still alive, though?”

“Yes,” Milly whispered.

“And you believe her?”

“I have to.”

“Where is she now?”

“We let her go.”

Calina bit her lip. “If she was working with other people, she may have warned them, then.” When Milly said nothing, she went on: “What are you going to do?”

“I need your help,” Milly said, in a small voice.

Calina gazed up at her. Slowly, the pieces fell into place. The tomthumbs were in Negav. Milly could not go there herself. She needed a human-sized person to go into the city for her. The neko felt her heart drop.

“You want me to find them.”

“Please,” Milly whispered, and there was such pain and pleading in her voice, on her face, that Calina’s heart clenched with sympathy. “You know Joanna. You like her. *Please* help her.”

She spread her arms in a helpless gesture. “All right. But… *how*? Negav is big, right? There must be… I don’t know how many hundreds of humans there! How do I find *three tomthumbs* in the middle of all that?”

“Xanthe knows Negav. She used to go there all the time.”

Calina was instantly wary. “The fairy who says it’s wrong to eat people?”

“She has friends there. She can find her way around.” There was a hint of desperation in Milly’s voice. “If it’s to save lives, surely she’ll help. And Remus, too.”

“You want to team me up with them.”

“Yes.”

“But you haven’t asked them yet?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I’m thinking of picking them up along the way.”

Calina sighed. She reached for a vegetable, bit out a chunk, and chewed, giving herself time to think. Eventually, she swallowed.

“I’ll need those things that humans wear. Clothes.”

Milly brightened. “You’ll do it?”

“Of course I’ll do it. Joanna’s too sweet for me to let any harm come to her.” She shrugged, and took another bite.

“*Thank* you!” An emotional Milly picked up the startled neko, brought her to her lips, and kissed her softly. “Thank you…”

“Mmmph!” Calina swallowed the food in her mouth, and coughed, half-choking. “Careful!”

“Sorry.” Milly smiled, grateful, and set her back down. “Here.” She reached into her belt pouch, and withdrew a set of clothes. “Already seen to.” She handed them to her.

“Where did you get these?” Calina asked, cautious.

“An elf I ate.”

“Mm-hm.” The neko looked them over. “They may be a bit tight.”

“Try them on?” Milly suggested, hopeful.

Calina did so, slipping into the short trousers and simple top, and winced. “Yep. Too tight. Your elf must have been ridiculously thin.”

Milly heard herself laugh softly. “Well, if I remember, she didn’t have *all* that much meat on her, no. Or maybe you need to go on a diet.”

“I do *not*,” Calina huffed, mock-indignantly, and took the clothes back off. “I’m slimmer than you are.”

“Of course you are. Your waist is about the width of my *finger*.”

“I meant proportionally,” Calina said, and smirked. And looked meaningfully at the slight, lingering hint of pudginess to Milly’s bare tummy, despite the little she had eaten over the past two or three days.

Milly tried not to smile. “I’ll get you some more clothes. If I find a little who’s more your size.”

“When did you intend for us to get going?”

“Today. Right now. After we’ve eaten.” She hesitated, then picked up a large vegetable, and took a bite.

Calina paused at that. “It’s fairly late in the day. And Negav’s a long way away.”

Milly chewed, her teeth crunching audibly through the crisp vegetable, and swallowed. “I don’t want to wait any longer,” she said quietly.

“We wouldn’t get very far before nightfall. And besides, do you really want to go off again before the Alsumi even know you’re back?”

Milly lowered her gaze. “I’m not sure I could face them. Tina, Joanna, Meringue… They were my responsibility. I was… I was careless. If that harpy had meant to eat them, they’d be…” A lump of tension in her throat cut her off. She swallowed against it, with some difficulty.

Calina was quiet for a while, while the giantess composed herself. When she spoke again, her tone was serious.

“While you were gone, a giant naga came in.”

Milly froze. Seconds ticked by.

“*Inside* the hut?”

“Yes. She looked around, then went away again.”

Milly shivered. “She didn’t try to eat you?”

“Of course she did. But she didn’t find me.”

“What did she look like?”

“Um… Very pale skin. Black hair. Black tail, I think, or maybe black and purple…”

“It’s her.” Milly had turned pale, too. She shivered again, violently. “The naga who tried to eat me.”

“Oh…”

“She came *here*, to the hut?”

“Yes. So I was thinking, maybe… Maybe it’s not a good idea to go out at night, and sleep outdoors nearby.”

“No…” Milly agreed, quietly. She was shaken. With all that had happened, she had almost forgotten about the naga. *So she’s still here… Stalking me? Or did she come across the hut by chance? Oh gods, she knows where my hut is… She can come back here at any time… It’s not safe to sleep here… It’s not safe to sleep* anywhere*! It’s not safe to* be *anywhere!* She felt a rising sense of panic, which was soon joined by a sense of increased despair. This, on top of everything else! Was she to have no reprieve? Every time she tried to stand up to the blows of fortune, there was another blow to bring her down. She felt stunned, dazed, battered. A whimper of sheer, helpless misery rose from her throat. “I can’t… I can’t…”

“Milly…” Startled, Calina adopted her gentlest voice. The giantess had one hand covering her eyes, the other resting on the table, and so the neko walked over to that accessible hand, placing hers on top of it. “What a state you’re in… You need rest.”

“No!”

“You’re in no state to go all the way down to Negav now!”

“I don’t want to stay here,” she said in a small voice. “If the tomthumbs come and ask me where–”

“Then let’s go out, just for a bit,” Calina said, firmly. “You need to take your mind off things, even if it’s just for one evening.” She paused. “How about the beach?”

Milly looked surprised, and uncertain. “I’m not going to the beach.”

“Why not?”

“Because… because Tina…”

“You can’t do anything for Tina, or the others, this evening,” the neko said, sensibly. “And staying cooped up here in the hut isn’t going to do you any good.” She took a quick breath. “We’re going to the beach, if you want me to come with you to Negav tomorrow.”

Milly stared at her. “You’re a little bit small to be my mother, Calina.”

“Did your mother use that tone with you when you were being silly?

“Sometimes.”

“Well, she was right.” Calina smiled, and Milly felt her own lips twitch ever so slightly in response. “Come on, eat up. And then we’ll go for a walk.”

\* \* \*

“You said they’re straight from the wild, but that one looks mild enough to me.”

Joanna stood, almost petrified, as the elf looked straight at her through the glass wall, his blue eyes calm and inquisitive. His voice was cultured, as was his manner, and he was elegantly dressed. His hair was short and ginger, his pointed ears quite visible. As usual, the shopkeeper was hanging around ingratiatingly beside him.

“Oh yes, they’ve all been very well behaved,” he said. “Quiet as mice, all three of them. No trouble at all.”

“We wouldn’t give you the satisfaction,” Tina said venomously, glaring.

“Though that one has some fire to her,” the shopkeeper conceded.

“Yes, I don’t think that’s what I really want,” the elf mused out loud, sparing Tina a brief glance before focusing once more on Joanna. “And the dark-haired one just looks too scared; that won’t do either. No, I’ll go for this one.”

The human smiled, pleased. “I’ll get you something to carry her in. Something *discreet*.”

“Thank you.” The elf barely shifted his gaze from the tomthumb. The one with shorter blond hair had now moved to her side, protectively, and after a moment or two the black-haired one did likewise.

“Leave her alone!” the tomboy one snapped defiantly.

He smiled. “I assure you, I’m not going to hurt her. Now…” He addressed Joanna. “Don’t be scared. I’m taking you to a good home. You’ll be well cared for.”

Joanna was trembling.

“Shhh…” the man soothed. “I know I must seem very big and scary. And I understand you’ve been snatched from the wild, from where you lived. But believe me, you’ll be safer in my home than in the jungle.” She shook her head, ever so slightly, as though she could barely bring herself to move. His tone softened further. “Do you have a name?”

She gulped, and took a trembling breath. “Joanna,” she whispered.

“Could you say that a little louder?”

“Joanna.”

“Joanna.” He smiled. “Good. That’s very nice. You don’t bite, do you, Joanna?”

She shook her head again, still visibly frightened.

“Put your hand in and see!” her friend with the shorter hair snarled. She was holding on to Joanna’s arm now.

“Tina, don’t,” Joanna whispered. “They’ll hurt you.”

“Well, I wouldn’t hurt you even if you did bite me, Tina,” the elf said mildly, “but your current owner is the shopkeeper, and if I were you I’d try not to upset or provoke him.”

Tina tensed. She was thinking, quickly. “Buy us all, then. Keep us together.”

The man smiled, gently amused. “You’re a bit too expensive for that. Besides, I don’t think a little firebrand like you would be a suitable gift for my daughter.”

Joanna and Meringue let out a little gasp. Tina’s expression turned graver.

“How old is your daughter?”

“If you must know, she’s fourteen,” he said calmly.

“And you’re putting her in charge of a small, fragile sapient being?”

At that, the dark-haired one hung on to Joanna with a little sob, hugging her.

“She’ll take good care of her,” the man said, nonplussed. “On that you have my word.”

The shopkeeper was back, and scowling. “Are they making trouble?”

“Not at all,” the elf assured him, straightening up. “I’m ready to complete this transaction.”

Tina gripped Joanna’s shoulders, and moved to face her. Meringue was still holding on to her, tears in her eyes, as though that might somehow prevent her from being taken.

“Jo, be firm,” she said quickly, the words tumbling out. “Make sure they treat you with respect. No wait, don’t say anything; I haven’t finished. If this were some sort of story, where everything has to have a happy ending, I’d say that as soon as I’m bought, I’ll escape and come and find you. But we both know there’s no way for me to find where you are. We’re not going to see each other again. You understand?”

Joanna’s eyes misted over in turn. “Tina…”

She got no further. The shopkeeper had pulled their prison out, and reached in. He picked up her up, roughly. When Meringue clung to her, he simply shook her, until Meringue, dizzy, let go and fell away.

Nauseous from having been shaken, Joanna struggled to focus. “Meringue, be strong!” she cried out, as she was lifted up. “Try to stay together! Tina…!”

But it was too late.

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic,” the shopkeeper snorted.

And dropped her into a dark little box.

\* \* \*

Milly was very quiet as they walked through the forest. It was still light and sunny, though that persistent chill lingered in the air. She was visibly wary, her eyes darting at shadows, and stopped and tensed at the slightest unusual sound. Riding in her belt pouch, Calina tried on several occasions to lighten her mood with casual chit-chat, but the giantess’ replies were brief and unenthusiastic. Her heart wasn’t in it, and eventually she told Calina to be quiet, lest they attract a large predator’s attention. Not wanting to worry her further, the neko complied.

It pained her to see Milly like this, though her own empathy towards the giantess surprised her somewhat. *When did I start caring like this?* The fact was, Milly was always nice to her, and despite her own initial reluctance a bond had formed. She would have liked to see her smile now. But, failing that, she had made sure Milly ate her fill of garden produce before they set out, and she hoped a walk to the beach would distract the giantess just a little, enough for her grief and fears not to weigh on her without respite.

Barefoot, Milly padded out of the forest, with its soft mossy ground, and onto the large beach. She was on its edge here, with the tranquil waters of Jadong lake ahead, and the darker treeline of Bulvon Wood to the left. Her toes sank into the smooth fine sand. It was often warm, but not today. Yet in the late afternoon light, the peaceful scene was bathed in a soft golden glow, reflecting with scintillating serenity from the water. On the opposite bank, far away, the light played with the shadows of the forest.

The beach was vast, deep as well as long, and she could only just make out the figures of three giant merfolk by the water’s edge, further away. They had not noticed her, and she had no intention of going to talk to them. There was another figure, alone, seemingly a giantess, seated on the sand with her legs held up to her chest, some distance from the water, gazing out at the lake. And beside her… were those the foundations of some sort of structure?

“Elli?” Milly whispered to herself, uncertain. From behind, it certainly looked like her, her vivid ginger ponytail discernable even in this unusual light.

“Go and talk to her, then,” Calina suggested.

Milly hesitated. But really, there was no reason not to. *Except perhaps not to burden her with my problems*. Particularly since Elli had never really liked to hear about other people’s troubles. She tended to be… well, ‘self-centred’ was the word that came to mind. But she was pleasant, too, and charming in her own way, and Milly liked her. *I’ll just not tell her about anything that’s happened*, she decided. The thought was strangely liberating. If Elli didn’t know, then Milly could pretend, at least for a short while, that none of the awful events of the past few days were real. *Except almost getting eaten by a naga. She was there when that happened*, she remembered, with a little shiver.

She walked over to her, her feet soundless on the dry sand. As she approached, the structure –such as it was– became more visible. It very much resembled the foundations of a stone house, giant-sized, with partly built walls made of layered bricks. Even more surprising were the humans at work on it – quite a few of them. As Elli had her back turned, they spotted Milly before she did, which caused something of a panic among the small creatures.

“*Giantess!*” one yelled, pointing.

Elli turned her head, a little worried, then relaxed, and smiled.

“It’s okay; it’s only Milly.”

“Hello to you too.” Milly managed a smile.

“Have a seat. Well, in a manner of speaking.” She patted the sand beside herself. Milly was not surprised to see that Elli, fully clothed, was sitting on some sort of mat, to avoid getting sand in her clothes. Her left hand rested palm upwards on her folded knee, and atop it was a male human Milly had already met – the distinctly odd Charles Starwind, with his unusual clothing, long blond hair in a ponytail, and disconcerting metal arm. She knew that Starwind was a ‘naturalist’, which apparently meant that he studied nature; and that he had somehow helped Elli survive and find food after her arrival here. She acknowledged him with a polite nod.

“Ah, our bodacious behemoth!” he enthused. “How has life been treating you?”

“How do you like my new house?” Elli cut in, before Milly could answer the human.

“House?” She glanced at the foundations, where the nervous humans were getting back to work.

“It’s a work in progress,” Elli said impatiently. “But once it’s done, it’ll be a proper home. Dry, and sheltered. *Civilised*. You’ll be invited, of course.”

“Thank you,” Milly said automatically, rather puzzled. Now that she looked closely, the humans appeared to be laying tiny bricks atop the giant ones already in place. It seemed to make no sense at all – an exercise in absurdity. But if she knew one thing about Elli, it was that she was pragmatic, and far from insane. If she said it was going to be a house, then it was. In the meantime, beside the foundations lay a familiar object, but disproportionately large: a giant tent. She looked at her. “There’s a story behind this, isn’t there?”

“Stroke of luck,” Elli said. “I came across these guys – builders, carpenters. In exchange for me not eating them, they’ve been happy to put their skill to good use.” She stretched a little. “Soon, no more sleeping in a tent! Of course, I’ll have to find a proper bed. And furniture, and all the fittings. But it’s going to make a big change.”

“Well… I’m glad for you,” Milly said, still not fully understanding the purpose, let alone the means. “But how…” She paused, choosing her words. “The humans are small. Those bricks are big.” She pointed. “*Those* bricks are small. How do they…? How do you…?”

“A most perspicacious query,” Starwind said. “I’ve been fascinated by that myself. The demonstration in size alteration is most–”

“Are you keeping that for dinner, by the way, or is it a friend?” Elli inquired, nodding down towards the neko in Milly’s beltpouch.

“This is Calina,” Milly told her, reproachfully.

“Right.” Elli nodded. “Hi.”

“Hello,” Calina said, calmly.

“You were talking about size-alteration?” Milly asked.

“Referred to around these parts as ‘magic’,” Starwind said. “I’ve yet to discover the precise physical process which brings it about. Most intriguing.”

“I don’t care how it’s done; it just works,” Elli said, impatiently. “And it means I can get a house built.”

“*Who* is using magic, though?”

Elli pointed. In the lake, a woman was bathing – naked, with (insofar as it was possible to tell from a distance) long blond hair. At first she looked like a giantess; then she turned, and her delicate, insect-like wings caught the sunlight. A fairy.

“I don’t think you’ve met Nikilli?” Elli asked.

Milly shook her head. “You’ve told me about her, though.”

“I’ll introduce you.” Casually, she put Starwind down on the sand, and got to her feet – legs unfolding in a fluid, graceful motion.

“Perhaps, while you ladies enjoy a bathe, or a stroll by the waterside, I might converse with the beauteous Calina?” Starwind asked, and bowed politely to the dark-skinned catgirl. “If I may be forgiven for saying so, it’s a while since I’ve had a conversation with an indigenous denizen of this world. Of my own size, that is. I would most like–”

“He’d probably like to dissect her,” Elli said with a smirk. “I do sometimes let him talk to nekos, if we can catch them, but then I have to eat them, and he gets frustrated. Let’s leave the littles together.”

“Calina, is that all right with you?” Milly asked.

“Fine. I’ve never seen anything like this one.” The neko was eyeing Starwind was obvious curiosity. And was that a hint of lust in her dark orange eyes, too? Milly smiled faintly. No doubt they would be able to handle each other. She placed the catgirl down beside the human naturalist, and stood, brushing sand from her bottom and thighs.

“We’ll keep an eye out for harpies,” she told Calina, who responded with a grateful little smile. “Yell if you’re in danger. Better still, get into the tent.”

“Can we have a break?” one of the human workers asked, wiping his brow from atop a wall.

“At sundown,” Elli said curtly. She began to walk towards the water, and Milly hurried to fall into step beside her.

\* \* \*

“And I’m helping Elli collect furniture, and it’s going to be *awesome*!” Nikilli said, excitedly, as they walked back towards the building site, obviously keen to share her enthusiasm over the project with a newcomer. “I’d never even *heard* of ‘houses’, but I can already picture what it’ll look like. I can’t wait!”

Milly smiled a little. The fairy’s enthusiasm was catching, and matched her appearance. She had a pretty, girlish face, dimpled and rosy-cheeked, and frizzy blond hair all a-tumble. Energy almost seemed to radiate out of her, her cheerfulness inevitably raising Milly’s spirits, if only a little.

“I have to say,” Milly remarked, “getting the humans to work with small materials, and *then* making them bigger with magic… That’s clever.”

Elli and Nikilli both beamed at that.

“You’ll let them go after they’ve finished, though? It looks like a lot of hard work.”

“Yes, yes.” Elli brushed the matter aside with an impatient gesture of the hand. “I made a promise.”

“Oh, do you like clothes?” Nikilli gripped Milly’s arm eagerly.

“I… I don’t know,” she said, surprised.

“Oh, but you *must*! I’ll show you. I’ve got lots. You can have some! They’re in the tent. I made the tent bigger, too! It was a humans’ tent, originally.”

“Thanks,” Milly said, a little disoriented. “Clothes?”

“Niki and I have a bit of trade going,” Elli explained. “We collect clothes we find, that we think the other might like, and when we meet up we compare, and swap. Our tastes aren’t… quite the same, so it works out well for both of us.”

“But where do you find…? Oh! Right; I see.”

Elli smirked. “I’ve got quite an assortment now. All I need is a wardrobe to hang them up in. And a house to put the wardrobe in. It’ll be one step closer to a civilised living standard.”

“Just be careful that nobody eats your humans,” Milly advised, in a low voice, so that they wouldn’t hear. “We’re not *too* close to the water, but someone like Anko might well drag herself up onto the beach.”

“Don’t worry,” Niki said breezily. “They sleep with us in the tent. On top of a little table, nice and safe.”

They reached the camp, where Calina was looking particularly pleased. She was wearing a new necklace, of dark shiny black pearls.

“Look what Charles gave me!” she purred. “He and I are going to get on *just* great!”

“The young lady has been providing me with some fascinating answers on the habits and physiology of nekos,” Starwind put in. “See, Elli, if you would refrain just sometimes from eating these beings, I would be able to have these conversations more often.” He did not sound annoyed in the slightest, however.

“You’re the one who keeps telling me to eat whatever I can find,” Elli shot back, amused. “Because I’m such a rubbish huntress. Don’t feel too special,” she added, addressing Calina. “The beach is littered with those pearls.”

“Speaking of dressing up, Calina, Nikilli may have some clothes for you,” Milly said.

“If you’d like to come with me into the tent?” the fairy smiled at the neko. “You’ll love what I’ve got! Humans bring *all sorts* of things into Felarya. So many colours!”

“I should warn you, Niki’s taste in clothes is eccentric,” Elli said drily.

“Something sensible, then!” Milly called after Calina, as the catgirl followed the eager fairy into the tent.

\* \* \*

After several long minutes, during which the later afternoon light began gradually to fade, and the tired humans allowed themselves to slow in their work, Nikilli stepped first out of the tent. She had dried herself, but her hair remained frizzy and free-flowing. She had put on, rather incongruously, a man’s creamy-white shirt, faintly shiny, together with a short apple-green skirt. Her feet were clad in long, horizontally striped white and pink socks, which rose well above her ankles. Most notable of all, however, was her white thick woolly bonnet, topped with a string ending in a ball of white fluff. She was grinning, happily, and twirled round for them to see from all angles, the pompom on her bonnet twirling with her.

“Niki, you look ridiculous,” Elli groaned.

“You’re just jealous.” The fairy stuck out her tongue at her playfully.

“I assure you, I am *not*.”

“You gave me this skirt, anyway.”

“Yes, but you’re not supposed to wear it with *that*! That’s for men. Take it off; throw it away! It’s awful! And the socks! And the *bonnet*! I’ve *told* you to get rid of that!”

Nikilli laughed, cheerfully. “It’s my style. I like it.”

“You look very cute,” Milly assured her, with a light smile.

“*Thank* you!” She laughed again, and bowed. She looked over her shoulder. “Calina, you can come out!”

The neko, usually so bold, peeked almost timidly out of the tent, before stepping out with a more characteristic flourish. Milly was relieved to see that she was dressed in a much simpler and more conventional manner: a light white and green top, definitely feminine, and a skirt to match, with simple functional shoes.

“I feel constrained,” the neko complained.

“Too tight?” Milly asked.

“No… It’s just… I can *feel* it, all rubbing against my skin.” She squirmed a little. “It’s weird.”

“You know,” Elli put in, “clothes can make you much more attractive. If you hide what you’ve got, or simply suggest it, instead of flaunting it… Well, let’s just say men want what they can’t immediately have.”

Calina looked struck by that idea, and cocked her head as she considered it, visibly intrigued.

Elli laughed. “Milly, are you staying for dinner?” When her friend hesitated, she decided for her. “Yes, you are. That way, you can help me find food.” She took her arm. “Come on.”

\* \* \*

“Have you got her? Have you got her? Let me see her!” With a squeal of excitement, the elf girl took the box her father handed her, and tore it open. Inside, she found a tiny woman, human by all appearance except her size, clad in the simplest of clothes, her long blond hair lovely and smooth. The tiny thing was looking scared, or at the very least uncertain, while the elf’s face took on an immediate air of fascination. “Oh, daddy, she’s so *sweet*! Just *look* at her! Thank you, *thank* you!”

She put the box down on her bed to fling her arms round her father and hug him. Of average height for her age, in her early teens, she was elegantly dressed, her reddish-golden hair impeccably combed and neatly arranged.

“Be nice to her, Delayil,” her father cautioned, smiling with tender affection as she embraced him. “She was raised in the wild, so it’ll take her some time to adjust. Be patient if she doesn’t warm to you straight away.”

“Oh, we’ll be *great* friends! I know we will!” his daughter enthused. “Her and Lisha and Yrein. She’s just what I wanted!” She released him, still grinning, and skipped a step backwards. “Does she have a name, or can I give her one? Did you ask her?”

“She’s called Joanna,” he smiled. “Let her keep it, I think.”

“Oh, of course. Joanna. I like it. Hey, Joanna!” She leaned suddenly over the box, gazing into it excitedly. “Hi! I’m Delayil. We’re going to be pals! I am *so* glad to have you here!” And, turning again to her father: “Seriously, dad, *thank* you!”

“Just take good care of her. I’ve bought some pet food from the shop, and spare sets of clothes. And a big glass bowl you can put her in, complete with all she needs. It’s downstairs; I’ll bring it up. So you can get her settled in.”

“You’re the *best* dad ever!” she gushed. “You, and mum too.”

From within the box, Joanna had so far seen very little. She tensed, her breath accelerating into pants of fear, as the elf girl reached in gently and picked her out. Being lifted up brought the room into view. It was quite large, proportionally much larger than her own little dug-out dwelling amidst the Alsumi’s subterranean tunnels. In absolute terms, of course, it was enormous. Warm colours predominated – oranges and light yellows and soft pinks. There was a softness to much of the decoration, too; this was very much a girl’s room. The desk was cluttered with belongings, some of which she could not even identify. Through the window, she glimpsed greenery, an elegant terrace of some sort, and rooftops. Though she did not know it, she was now within the elf district of Negav, an enclosed garden-city within the city, where elves could be among themselves and manage their own affairs.

In addition to her soft, comfortable-looking bed and her desk, Delayil had a surprising amount of furniture, some of it stacked with books, some brimming with beautiful clothes. Though Joanna had only a very dim understanding of wealth and social classes, it was clear this elf family was substantially well-off. Most striking of all, when her gaze finally came across it, was a very large rectangular aquarium, complete with a number of aquatic plants, within which swam about half a dozen fish… and one tiny mermaid, the same size as the fish, and as Joanna. The little fish-woman had swum to the glass wall, and was pressing herself against it, looking out with great curiosity. Beside the large heavy chest of drawers upon which lay the aquarium was a dryad, noticeably shorter than a human or an elf, in an ornate brown and orange pot on the floor. The tree-woman had yellow-brown skin, bark which was just a little darker, and rich luxuriant chocolate-brown hair. Joanna stared at her, astonished, and the dryad waved, with a little smile.

*A dryad*… *In a pot*… And a tiny mermaid in a fish tank. Somehow, just for a moment, it made Joanna feel something that she rarely felt: anger. Then the emotion was gone, startling itself out of existence, and she was merely disoriented, and lost, and scared.

“Joanna, this is Yrein,” the elf girl said, indicating the dryad – shorter than she was. “And this is Lisha.” She indicated the mermaid. “They’re going to be your friends! The fish have names too, but you can learn those later.” Lisha gave her a shy but friendly little smile, and blew some bubbles. She had sky-blue skin, a pretty silver-and-blue tail, and short lavender hair. It occurred to Joanna, uncomfortably, that with the aquarium right next to the pot, the dryad could quite easily reach in and eat the bite-sized mermaid, if she wanted.

Delayil held her up, looking at her. “Do you talk at all?” she inquired, curious.

“Yes,” Joanna whispered, eyes wide.

“Aww, you’re still scared,” the elf said gently. “It’s okay. I realise this must all be strange and new for you. And I s’pose for you, I’m very big. One day, you’ll have to tell me what it was like, living in the wild. I’ve read stories, but you actually lived there! Anyway, don’t worry, you’ll be much safer here! And much more comfy. It’ll be the best life you could *ever* imagine, and I’ll look after you.” She smiled, happily.

Into the silence that followed, Joanna nodded, quietly, simply because Delayil seemed to be awaiting a response.

“Great! Oh, and, can you swim?”

Joanna’s eyes turned back to the large aquarium, full of deep water. “*Don’t put me in the water!*” she squeaked, shrilly, trying instinctively to back-pedal in empty air.

“Okay, okay!” Delayil soothed her. “I wasn’t going to just drop you in it. Especially with your clothes on.”

“Go gently with her, Dee,” the dryad spoke up, in a soft warm voice. “Let her settle in.” She smiled kindly. “Hello, Joanna.”

Joanna eyed her warily. Her usual instinct was to give people the benefit of implicit trust, but everything around her at this moment was so utterly alien and disconcerting, she had no idea what to think, what to feel, what to do. “Hello,” she whispered back.

“What Delayil said was true. You’ll be fine here. Well cared for. And much safer than out in the jungle.”

Joanna merely nodded again, knowing she was wrong but too dazed to think by her own initiative. It seemed to her the dryad was skinnier than she should be.

“But if you can swim,” Delayil said eagerly, “at some point you can go swimming with Lisha! She’d like that! Wouldn’t you?”

Fully immersed in the water, with her face still pressed to the glass, the tiny mermaid nodded, gazing out at Joanna with sustained fascination.

There was a sound of footsteps, and the door to the bedroom opened. Delayil’s father walked back in, carrying a large ovoid glass bowl, which he set down on another chest of drawers, to the dryad’s right.

“There! Home for our new little guest.”

Joanna looked inside, dreading what she might see. It was similar to the glass container which had held her and the others in the shop. There was soil, and plants growing in it. Toys, including a smooth wooden slide, and blankets laid out over a patch of grass, complete with little pillows. A shower and a toilet were half-concealed in a corner.

“Let’s get you settled in!” Delayil exclaimed, excitedly. With care, she lowered Joanna inside, and set her down gently on the soft earth. “There!” She stepped back, beaming. “Your new home!”

Joanna’s legs felt weak, trembling. They gave way beneath her, and she sat down, hard, on the grass. She turned away, trying desperately to look at nothing, her head throbbing, while the sound of her tense, panicked breathing seemed to pound in her ears.

\* \* \*

Calina had suggested spending the night on the beach, making the most of Elli’s hospitality, but Milly had pointed out it would only lengthen their journey the following day. So they had left shortly after nightfall, with Calina saying her clearly regretful goodbyes to Starwind, and found their way home in the glow of moon- and starlight. Fortunately, it had been a cloudless night.

There had been no tomthumbs up and about when they had reached the hut, for which Milly had been silently grateful. She knew it was wrong of her not to inform them that three members of their tribe were missing. At the very least, she should talk to the Alsumi’s informal governing council. They would also need to know that Calina would be away with her for a while. But she could not bring herself to do it. She could not face them. *I’m a coward*, she thought, unhappily, but even her sense of shame and duty could not lead her to tell them.

She sank down gratefully onto her bed, comforted a little by its familiarity, while Calina settled on a blanket on the floor. Sleep did not come easily, however. Within the next few days, she might all too easily find out that Tina and the others were in fact dead. Or she might find out nothing at all; it might be impossible to find them, and she would be left with that ghastly uncertainty for the rest of her life. The certain knowledge only that she had failed them, and that it was all her fault.

Keeping her awake also was the much more immediate threat posed by the giant-eating naga. *Somewhere out there*, she thought, shivering a little on her bed, gazing nervously out through the window, or at the dark closed door. *And she knows where to find me*. She could almost hear and see Tina urging her sensibly to learn to defend herself. To set traps; to have a knife ready to plunge into any attacker. To accept the logical conclusions of her newfound status as prey, and *adapt*. All true, of course. Tina, as ever, had been the voice of reason, firm and uncompromising, concerned about her friend’s safety. But Tina was gone now, and–

Milly turned on her bed, away from the window and the door, facing the wall, curling up a little, bringing her knees closer to her chest. She could not bear to pursue that line of thought. But as she tried to empty her mind, it simply would not switch itself off, or remain passive. Tired and hazy, it swirled through and into dark places, dragging her with it. Until at last, just like the previous nights, sheer exhaustion provided her with the merciful relief of sleep.

The following morning she woke early, and woke Calina too, slinking out quickly before any tomthumbs ventured up out of their burrows. They ate as they walked, plucking fruit along the way rather than lingering to gather any from the garden.

Though she tried to walk at a brisk pace, and had little appetite come lunchtime even though her stomach was rumbling hungrily, she had to stop to let Calina go hunting. The neko returned with a full tummy, and settled comfortably back into her belt pouch. Milly found herself slowing as she approached Safe Harbour, her mostly empty insides knotting with tension. This was one moment she had been putting off, but could put off no longer.

Jade came thundering out to meet her. The giantess’ face was hard-set, her green eyes darkened by her scowl.

“Stop where you are!” the protectress snapped. “You’re not welcome here.”

Milly’s heart sank. *So she knows*. Her guts churned into liquid ice.

“Jade…”

Jade’s eyes flicked to her waist, noticing Calina. “What’s that neko?” she demanded, harshly. She stood facing Milly, her powerful muscles tense. There was a four metres size difference between them, in Jade’s favour, and never had it felt more apparent, as Safe Harbour’s guardian seemed to tower before her.

“A friend…”

“Put her down. On the ground.”

Milly blinked, uncertain. “I said she’s a friend. I’m not going to eat–”

“I’m going to hit you, and you’re going to fall over. I don’t want the neko to get hurt when you fall. Put her down.”

“Oh,” Milly said, very quietly. “You’re…” She tried to steady her breath, calm herself. “You’re not… You’re not actually serious, you?”

“Deadly serious.” Jade’s flat harsh tone left no doubt as to that. She reached in, and plucked Calina from the pouch. “My apologies for picking you up without asking,” she said, almost mechanically.

“No problem. But could you please not… hit her…?”

Jade ignored her completely, setting her down safely some distance away before turning back to face Milly.

“I’m not even going to ask you whether what I’ve been told is true,” she said coldly. “Your reaction makes that clear enough. Now hold your arms up and try to parry.”

“Jade…” Milly whispered. She felt sick, at the unreality of the situation, at the knowledge that someone she had half-considered a friend was about to strike her; guilt gnawed at her insides.

“Raise your arms,” Jade insisted, her voice lashing out, whip-like. “Like this.” She showed her. “When I hit, try to parry. Hold your arms *steady*! Steadier than that! Good. Now *hold*. Block me, and then try to hit me first, if you can.”

“Jade, *please*…”

The giantess lashed out at her. Milly barely saw her fist swinging into her face, a blur of motion. Pain exploded in her jaw, a white-hot lance piercing her skull. She heard herself cry out, dimly, and felt herself collapse. All sense of balance fled her, and the ground slammed into her backside, into her shoulders, bruising her coccyx. She lay on her back, dazed and hurt, staring up at the other woman. Her jaw felt as though it were burning.

“That’s going to hurt for quite a while, and it’ll leave a nasty bruise,” Jade said, seething. “Get up.”

Milly crawled back, instinctively, or at least tried to. She felt dizzy, unable to coordinate her movement. She felt sick; she wanted to throw up, though there was almost nothing in her stomach. Bile rose to her throat, as tears formed hotly in her eyes. “Are you going to hit me again?” she asked, in a choked voice.

“No. Get up.” There was absolutely no sympathy in Jade’s tone.

“Are you *crazy*?” That was Calina, a dark and small presence, furious. “You *hit* her!”

“She knows why. Are you going to get up now?”

“No,” Milly said, in a small voice thick with tears. She did not want to get up. She couldn’t. Her legs felt too weak, trembling even as she lay there. She could not face Jade, any more than she had been able to face the Alsumi.

Calina was incensed. “Are you completely heartless?” she yelled, from down on the ground – so small, far below the towering giantess. “Do you have *any* idea what she’s been through? The pain she’s been through, these past days? Are you *insane*? Help her up!”

“The pain you’ve been through?” Jade’s hard green eyes were fixed on Milly’s face. “How does that compare with the people you digested alive?”

“I’m sorry!” Milly gasped, chokingly. “I didn’t know!”

“Liar!” There was anger in the word, hot and sharp as steel, hardened further by Jade’s furious glare. “There were people from the village in that convoy! They must have told you! You ate people from Safe Harbour!”

“No!” Milly yelped, tearfully. “I swear, no! Nobody said! *I didn’t know!*”

“*How is that possible?*” Jade thundered. “You’re lying!”

“I didn’t know! I’m sorry! It’s true! I didn’t! They must have… they must have… they must…” Tears blurred her sight. Her breath came in choking gasps, making it difficult to force the words out. “They must have been eaten before I got there! *I didn’t know!*”

Jade glared down at her with disgust. “Even if that’s true, you ate half a convoy of people who were heading for the village.”

“I didn’t know!” Milly sobbed, the tears pouring from her eyes. “I didn’t! I’m sorry!”

“Leave her alone!” Calina shouted. “You have no idea what–”

“Whatever you came here for,” Jade interrupted, standing over Milly, “you’re not welcome. Go away, and don’t come back.” She turned away, while Milly lay weeping.

“She’s come to see Xanthe!” Calina said angrily. “And Remus.”

Jade stopped, stood still for a moment, then looked down at the neko.

“Explain,” she demanded.

Calina glanced towards Milly, hoping for permission to do exactly that. But Milly, crying, was in no state to reply. “Three of the tomthumbs have been kidnapped and taken to Negav. Sold. Xanthe knows Negav. We need her.”

Jade was very quiet, for several long seconds. Calina glared up at her, unintimidated.

“This is about a rescue mission?” she said at last, her tone still harsh and demanding, but with a touch of uncertainty now.

“Yes, damn it!” Calina seethed. “This is about rescuing the tomthumbs! Milly’s *friends*! Now are you going to let us talk to Xanthe, or are you going to beat her up for asking?”

“Watch it,” Jade growled. “Milly deserved that.”

“No she *didn’t*!” Though she was in no fit state to fully take it in, Milly was witnessing a side to the usually casual, fun-loving neko that she had never seen before. “How could she *possibly* have deserved it? *Look at her*!”

Milly had turned onto her side, curling into an almost foetal position. One hand was clenching her jaw, from which the pain still blazed. Her other arm was wrapped, trembling, round her chest. She was crying uncontrollably. Jade looked – and went on looking, silently, for a long moment. At last, she stepped over to her, and knelt down.

“Here.” Her tone remained gruff but had softened, at least a little. “Sit yourself up. Take my hand.”

It took several seconds before Milly was even able to process and understand what she had said, let alone comply. When she did, she held out a shivering hand, gingerly, almost cringing. Jade gripped it, and held it firmly, pulling her up. She put her other hand to the small of Milly’s back, holding her up in a sitting position, steadying her.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“Yes,” Milly whimpered.

“Well you *did* deserve it,” Jade said calmly. “You ate a whole group of people who were just on their way here to trade, or for a better life. Don’t think I’ll forgive you. But I didn’t mean to turn you into a shivering wreck. Now calm down. It’s all right. Take slow, deep breaths. Dry your tears. I’ll hold you steady, until you can sit by yourself. Gods, you *are* a mess.”

Milly nodded, weakly, and did as she was told. She gulped, against the tight tension in her throat, and wiped her eyes dry as best she could with a trembling hand. She tried to inhale a deep, slow breath, but could only shudder, panting.

“Take it slow,” Jade advised. “You’ll be all right. Slow breaths. Lean into me if you want; I’m holding you. Slow breaths. There; that’s better.”

Ever so slowly, Milly began to calm. She wiped at her eyes again, and sniffled, trying to contain more tears. She felt wretched.

“Can you sit by yourself?” Jade asked, still calmly. When Milly nodded, she let go of her, carefully, making sure she would not simply fall. “I’m going to take… What’s the neko’s name?”

“Calina,” Milly whispered, and swallowed once more against the persisting lump of tension within her. The pain was still piercing, reaching out from her jaw and slicing through her skull, sharp and throbbing.

“I’m going to take Calina into the village to see Xanthe,” Jade said. “You stay here. Not *everyone* has heard what you’ve done, but you’re not exactly popular right now. There were villagers saying I should snap your neck.” She stood, leaving a dazed and distraught Milly sitting on the ground. She turned to Calina. “Can I pick you up?”

“If you must.” She was bristling.

“You can walk if you prefer.”

“No. Just pick me up.” As the giantess did so, she added bitterly: “Are you proud of what you’ve just done? Milly’s been very fragile for days now. She was scared of coming here, but she came anyway, for her friends. And you’ve made it all worse.”

Jade was unfazed. “If she’s going to come asking for my help, or for the help of villagers, she shouldn’t *eat* people coming to the village. She’ll live. Now if you’ve quite done lecturing me, I believe you have someone to see.”

\* \* \*

Calina knew very little about Xanthe and Remus. Only what little Milly had been able to tell her. She knew it was they who had first brought Meringue to the Alsumi, and that the dark-haired little tomthumb loved them for it. And she knew that they disliked predators. The neko, who was quietly proud of her own skill in tracking tasty tinies, decided she would tactfully stay off the subject.

She did not even know much about Meringue. The minuscule woman was shy, her muteness creating an additional barrier to communication. But Joanna had found a way to understand her, and befriend her, and Calina liked Joanna. Perhaps that would give her some tenuous common ground with Meringue’s initial saviours.

The homes in Safe Harbour were relatively cosy, in a simple sort of way. Many of its inhabitants had first arrived here with few or no possessions, other than the clothes on their backs and the contents of their pockets, if they had any. They had made together, as a community, whatever each of them might need. Xanthe and Remus’ home was no different, fitted with sturdy furniture and hand-woven blankets, mats and curtains. In the main room, where they welcomed her in, was a crib, in which a sky blue-haired baby lay tucked up and fast asleep.

Xanthe had short red hair, still a little wild, the burnt stumps of four green wings extending from her back, and long sharp ears reminiscent of an elf’s. Her green eyes were warm, pleasant and curious as she led the neko inside. Remus was almost a head taller, with a hint of light stubble, and a mop of fiery orange hair. They made quite a vivid, striking pair, dressed though they were in simple hand-made clothes. They settled her into a comfy chair and sat opposite her, as she explained to them why she had come.

The look of anxiety and grief on their faces as she spoke of Meringue’s kidnap made her feel instantly sorry for them, and sorry that she had had to break the news. It also left her in little doubt, however, that they would be willing to help.

“We’d invited her to stay here with us,” Remus said, his expression twisted with worry. “If she’d listened! She’s so small. . . How is Milly even supposed to look after people that size, and so many of them?”

“Milly has always kept the Alsumi safe,” Calina said, bristling a little once more. “Accidents happen.”

“What will they do to her?” Remus had turned to Xanthe. “Why do tinies get… sold, in Negav?” He almost spat the word ‘sold’, disgusted.

“I’m not sure,” Xanthe admitted. “In principle, tinies have rights within Negav. It’s illegal to harm them. But they’re supposed to stay confined to one area, where they can be protected, and from what I gather nobody cares much what happens to those outside.”

“They wouldn’t eat them, would they?” he asked anxiously.

“They might,” Xanthe said darkly. “The predator instinct is strong in most Felaryans, even in some humans. And there aren’t only humans in Negav.”

“Do you know how we can find them?” Calina pressed. “Where would they be?”

Remus gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Negav is huge! They could be anywhere. We wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“The harpy said *nothing* useful, before you let her go?” Xanthe asked, her frustration evident.

“She mentioned…” She tried to remember the alien-sounding word which Milly had conveyed to her. “…a ‘pet shop’. I think. But that was all.”

Instantly, Xanthe looked cautiously relieved. “In that case, they’ll probably have been kept alive. And it gives us somewhere to start.”

“Milly was thinking, maybe Isham can help. He lives in Negav.”

Xanthe was dubious. “Does she know *where*?”

“No…”

“Then we’ll have no way of finding him. And we shouldn’t waste time trying,” the fairy said firmly. “We’ll focus on going round the pet shops.”

“Do you know where *those* are?”

“No, but we can ask,” Remus said. He stood. “We’ll need to get someone to babysit Ciel. How long do you think we’ll be gone?”

“Remus, sit down,” Xanthe said gently. “It’s too late to go today. And we need to think this through. I have contacts in the city; I’ll try to think who might be able to give us a list of shops. Though since trading in tinies is illegal, that might not be of much help… It’ll be either a backroom trade, or in the seedier parts of the city, or someone who’s paid off the local law enforcement not to notice.”

All of this was flying right over Calina’s head. City life was, to her, utterly mysterious. “What do humans do with ‘pets’?” she asked, though not entirely certain she wanted to hear the answer.

“Pretty much what Milly did with Isham,” Remus said pointedly. “Stick them in a cage, feed them from time to time, and expect to be entertained.”

Calina bit her lip, and said nothing.

\* \* \*

Milly was still sitting in the clearing where she had been punched, as night softly began to fall, pastel colours filling the horizon and then gradually fading. There was an almost imperceptible footfall. She looked up, and cringed visibly as Jade stepped into view.

She didn’t move, as Jade came and crouched opposite her.

“Let me feel your jaw. I’ll be gentle.”

Milly stiffened, but did not resist as Jade’s fingers moved over the lower part of her face, pressing and probing. She hissed sharply, a couple of times, from the pain. The site of the injury was swollen, hot and throbbing.

“It’s not broken, I think,” Jade said at last. “I didn’t hit you *that* hard. Any teeth feeling loose?”

“I don’t think so,” Milly whispered.

“Good. Chew on this.” She picked up Milly’s right hand, and pressed a handful of strong-scented herbs into it. “It’ll numb the pain. To some extent.”

The scent was pleasant, and Milly’s aching stomach rumbled hungrily, but she did not immediately put them in her mouth. She half looked away. Jade sat down, instead of crouching.

“Help yourself to animals in the pen for your dinner,” Jade said, her tone calm and even, but nowhere near warm. “Except the ones that are obviously pregnant, or with young, of course.”

“I’m not hungry,” Milly muttered.

“Yes you are. Your tummy’s rumbling. I’m not going to bring you your food, but you can eat as much as you want. They reproduce quickly.”

Milly did not look at her. “Has Xanthe agreed to help?”

“Yes, of course she has. You knew she would. Calina’s spending the night in their home. She’ll be out to see you soon – Calina, I mean. But I wanted to talk to you first.” She paused, and, when Milly said nothing, went on: “I’ve seen no trace of that naga who tried to eat you. I’ve increased my patrols, but she’s come nowhere near the village. I also check on Jora and Tanny as often as I can. They’re fine.”

Milly nodded, quietly.

“What about Elli?” Jade asked.

“I saw her yesterday. She’s fine too.”

“Good.”

“The naga came to my hut.”

“What?” Jade looked at her sharply.

“She went into my hut. While I was out.” Milly’s voice remained barely above a whisper, and she still did not look at her.

“Milly…” Jade was worried. “She knows where you are, then.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t go back there.”

Milly swallowed tensely. “I have to. Once we’ve rescued the tomthumbs.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Jade snapped. “The naga will come and eat you. Stay here. Or stay with Jora.”

Milly glanced at her, surprised, then shook her head. “I don’t want to leave the Alsumi too long without my protection. *You* should understand that. You wouldn’t leave your humans.” There was a touch of bitterness in her voice.

Jade’s lips thinned, her expression tightening gravely. “Then I’ll have to train you. I’ll teach you to defend yourself.”

Her fellow giantess simply shrugged, despondently.

Jade stood. “Pull yourself together, Milly. And have something to eat. You can sleep here for tonight. We’ll talk again when you get back from Negav.”

With that, she was gone. Milly sighed, quietly, and lowered her head onto her folded knees. Alone in the darkening air, amidst the quiet rustling trees, she chewed tensely at her softly trembling lower lip.

\* \* \*

Delayil watched gleefully as Joanna explored the large glass bowl which now constituted her home. She was enchanted by the tiny woman. Though she already had two pets, this one would be more mobile, more able to *do* things, and therefore the most interesting. She cared about Yrein and Lisha very much, but they were necessarily confined to their pot and their aquarium, here in her bedroom. Whereas she would be able to take Joanna with her to other parts of the house, and even outdoors. She could show her off to her friends. They could dress her up together, imagine games to play with her… The possibilities seemed almost endless.

She would be careful, of course, not to make the other two jealous. If she spent a lot of time playing with Joanna, she would have to make up for it by giving all the more attention to her dryad and her mermaid. She wanted to keep them all happy, and did not want them to feel left out.

“Do you like it?” she asked eagerly. “Dad’s bought some clothes for you too. We can try them on you together! See which ones you like best.” That would be a novelty in itself. It was impossible to put clothes on Lisha, of course, and her mother had always insisted that she was not to clothe Yrein. Delayil did not see why not, and therefore secretly shared some of her old clothes with the dryad when her parents were not looking. But with Joanna, there would be no such restrictions. “Oh, and the games! Let me tell you what they’re all for. That way, when I have to go out, you’ll never be bored!”

“Don’t overwhelm her,” Yrein cautioned gently. But Delayil’s focus was all on her new pet, until her mother called her downstairs for dinner. She considered bringing Joanna with her, then decided reluctantly it might indeed be a good idea to let the tiny woman settle in. She glanced back at her as she left, though, delighted. *A real tomthumb, all of my own!*

Her friends would be *so* jealous.

Left alone with her fellow ‘pets’, Joanna tried to steady herself. She was glad at least that she was allowed to wear clothes, and simple sensible ones at that. Forced nakedness brought back dark memories that she did not want to dwell on. She looked up at Yrein through the curved glass wall – and, past her, to the fish tank, as best she could.

“You must be feeling a bit overwhelmed,” Yrein said kindly.

“That’s one way of putting it.” She rubbed at her mostly bare arms, nervously. At least it was warmer here than outdoors.

“Don’t worry, you’ll settle in,” the dryad said confidently. “Delayil is very nice.” Joanna wondered how old the tree-girl was. Judging by her build, she was an adult, or in her late teens at the youngest. Though much smaller than she surely should have been at that age.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” she asked softly. “We’re three grown women, yet we’re told we b-belong” –she stuttered over the word– “to a teenage girl.”

Yrein looked at her solemnly, gently. “Does it bother *you*? Clearly it does.”

“Yes!” Joanna exclaimed, flustered. “How can it not?” She did not usually allow herself to appear so agitated.

“ ’Rein, pick me out?” Lisha called. “I want to see her.”

Helpfully, the dryad dipped her fingers into the fish tank, and plucked out the tiny little mermaid, no bigger than Joanna – other than her long, silvery-blue tail and delicate, gossamer fins. She placed her on the upturned palm of her other hand, and held her close to Joanna’s large glass bowl. The fish-girl’s short mauve hair, soaking wet, was plastered to her light blue face. The water dripping from her little body pooled on the palm of Yrein’s hand. Her blue eyes were wide and curious and friendly.

“What was it like, where you were?” the mermaid asked. “Isn’t it better, here?”

“No.” Joanna shook her head, vehemently. “No. No, it’s not.” *I want to go back!* she screamed silently, inside her mind. *I want to go home!*

“You lived in the wild?” Lisha asked.

“I was part of a tribe. I had… I have friends. We lived together, in burrows.”

“Family?” Yrein asked kindly.

“No.” *Not any more*. The memory was like a searing thrust through her heart.

“What happened?” Lisha asked, softly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Joanna said, very quickly. She couldn’t. She had grieved, and locked those memories away where they could no longer hurt her. She would not forget, but… that had been a different life. It almost felt unreal now. *Real* life was with the Alsumi. But that had been taken from her now too. A throbbing ache pulsed around her heart, squeezing.

“All right, we won’t ask,” Yrein said, gently.

“But you weren’t safe?” Lisha pressed.

“We were protected,” Joanna said, quietly – so quietly that they did not hear, and she had to say it again. “We were protected.”

“By whom?” the mermaid asked, curious.

“By a giantess.”

Her two new companions looked at each other, surprised and a little incredulous.

“Why did a giantess protect you?” Lisha asked.

“Because she was kind,” Joanna said simply. “Because she *is* kind. Because she cares.” While the other two were clearly trying to think of something to say to that, she looked up at them. “What about you?”

They looked at each other again. “You first,” Yrein suggested to the mermaid.

“I lived in the river,” Lisha explained. As though there were only one.

“You were caught? Like me? And sold?”

“Yes.” It did not seem to bother her, though.

“How old were you?”

“I was… a little bit younger than Delayil is now. I think.” She paused, trying to recall. “Or maybe quite a bit younger. Yes, she was younger than me when I arrived here. We… Well, we grew up together.”

“So you were… caught, in the river?”

“I was caught in a net,” Lisha said calmly. “I was terrified. But then Dee’s parents bought me, and I ended up here.”

“And…?” Joanna pressed, troubled.

“And, it’s *so* much better than where I was!” the mermaid enthused. “I’m safe here. I don’t have to keep looking out for predators, and trying to get away from them. I don’t even need to look for food any more! I’ve got everything I need, and I’m *safe*.”

Joanna stared up at her. Lisha’s blue eyes met hers, unwavering. She actually looked as though she meant what she said.

“So if you had a chance to go back to the river?” she asked, feebly.

“*No!*” The mermaid recoiled at the thought. “I’d get eaten!” She shivered.

Momentarily stunned, Joanna processed that thought. Though it made her uncomfortable, she soon realised that she could understand the mermaid’s perspective. It was, in a way, entirely sensible. *I had a protectress as soon as I arrived in Felarya. I didn’t have to face what Lisha faced. Growing up with predators constantly trying to eat her*…

“I understand,” she said, with great reluctance. Lisha looked relieved, and smiled, relaxing.

“See? Life is *good* here!”

Joanna made no comment as to that. Her gaze travelled higher, up to Yrein’s face. “What about you, Yrein?” she asked gently.

“Oh, me?” She shrugged a little – though only slightly, so as not to unsettle Lisha on her palm. “I was born in an enclosure where they cultivated dryads. I was never in the wild, thank goodness.”

\* \* \*

When Delayil returned to her bedroom, she scooted straight over to her new pet’s bowl, eagerly. “I’ve brought you some food!” Smiling, she placed a small bowl in beside Joanna, brimming with cooked vegetables coated in some sort of thick creamy sauce. “Mom said I could give you some of our dinner. Eat up!”

A little taken aback, Joanna looked up at her. “This is… Well, thanks! But this is much too much.”

The elf girl laughed. “Yes, I suppose for you that’s quite a lot. You must have a very little tummy!” She smiled at her fondly. “Just eat as much as you want. I’m sorry there’s no cutlery, though. I wanted to give you a knife and fork from the doll house I had when I was little, but they’d be too big for you. Do you mind eating with your hands? Just until I figure something out. I’ll try to think of something tomorrow.”

“What… about Yrein and Lesha?” she asked, carefully.

“Oh, I can’t put this kind of food in the fish tank. Lesha has special food we get from the pet shop. And you like it, don’t you?” She looked at the mermaid, who nodded pleasantly, fully immersed in the water. “And we can’t feed Yrein, or else she’d grow,” she added, regretfully.

Joanna, who had already picked out a piece of vegetable, froze at that, confused. “Wait, what?”

“If I eat, it makes me grow,” Yrein clarified. “And if I grow too much, there’d be no room for me in this pot, or even in the bedroom. I’d have to stay outside.”

“She’s an indoor dryad,” Delayil added. “We don’t want to put her out in the cold. Especially with the weather we’ve been having!” She gave her pet tree-woman a look of deep sympathy, then spontaneously embraced her in a hug. “I’m sorry; I *wish* you could eat! You don’t mind *too* much, do you?”

Yrein put her arms round the elf girl, who was several years younger than she, yet already taller. “Don’t be silly,” she said warmly. “I’m fine! You look after me fine.” They parted, smiling at each other.

“So… You *never* eat?” Joanna said, aghast. “*Ever*?”

“We give her treats on special occasions!” Delayil said, somewhat defensively. “In fact when the weather changes, when we have a warmer sun and this horrid cold air finally goes away, we’ll have a celebration in town, and at home, and a big feast, and you’ll all have lots to eat too.”

“That sounds great,” Yrein said, still smiling.

Joanna shook her head, but decided to say nothing. Despite her discomfort, she *was* hungry, and she had always had a good appetite, so she ate her fill of the curiously baked but surprisingly tasty food, until her tummy felt quite tight and stuffed. Delayil fed Lisha a generous sprinkling of dry pellets into the fish tank, and watered the dryad’s roots from a tin can. She then watched Joanna with great affection for a while, before going to sit at her desk, for what she called ‘homework’. After eating, Joanna watched and listened, trying to follow what it was all about. There were questions to solve in what the elf called ‘mathematics’, and both Yrein and Lisha joined in eagerly enough, trying to work the solutions out. It all left Joanna feeling rather baffled, but one thing was clear. *They like it here,* she thought. *They’re actually happy. Doing these ‘maths’ exercises with her… They’re enjoying it.* Confined forever to this one room, with only each other and their young owner for company, they did not appear to long for any other life.

At nightfall, Delayil left the room briefly, and there was the sound of running water from another room close by. She returned and changed into yellow and white nightwear, telling her three pets firmly but warmly to “go to bed, now”. She had provided Joanna with something to wear (“These will be your night clothes”), and the tomthumb was too tired to do much more thinking, or indeed anything other than what she was told. She showered quickly, dried herself, and changed into her night clothes, while the elf lay in bed reading. She said her goodnights –Yrein had closed her eyes and looked drowsy, while Lisha had settled down in a patch of soft weeds at the bottom of the fish tank– then lay down on her soft thick blankets.

Her tired mind was clouded in a haze of disturbing, conflicting impressions, which she could neither lay to rest nor extricate herself from. She closed her eyes, against the unfamiliar surroundings – the glass bowl, the small and artificial ‘forest’ environment, the stunted dryad potted outside it, and the giant girlish bedroom all around them. Squeezing her eyelids shut, she thought of Tina and Meringue. Had they too been bought yet? Together, or separately? What was their life going to be like now? Or were they still in the pet shop? She would never know… She thought, too, of Milly, and the sadness gripped her heart even stronger. At least Meringue and Tina could be reasonably confident that she was still alive. *But Milly thinks we’re all dead*…

That distressing thought clung to her, as she tossed and turned on her blankets, until sleep finally took her.

\* \* \*

“We’re really sorry about what’s happened to your friends,” Xanthe had said. “If it’s at all possible to find them, we’ll get them back.”

After that, however, neither Xanthe nor Remus had been very talkative towards Millyr, as they travelled with Calina in her belt pouch. Their conversation with the neko, too, was detached, little more than formally polite. Remus had asked rather bluntly whether Calina ate tinies, and why these three mattered to her if others didn’t.

“Because they’re my friends and others aren’t,” the neko had retorted, not one to be intimidated. “You can choose not to eat tinies if you want, but I just think it’s silly.”

That had rather set an uncomfortable atmosphere for the rest of the journey, and Milly had been quietly thankful that it was only a short walk to Jora’s cave.

“Auntie Milly!” A giant young girl, with orange-red hair, came running out to meet her, grinning.

“Tanny!” Milly smiled broadly. She crouched down to embrace her. “Careful; careful, don’t press against me. I’ve got people travelling in my belt pouch.” She hugged her. “You’re looking well!”

“Have you come to visit?” the girl asked hopefully, stepping back.

“No, I won’t be staying. I just wanted to see how you and Jora are doing.”

“We’re okay,” Tanny said breezily. Her gaze turned to the three littles in the pouch, and a gleam of hunger entered her brown eyes. “Is one of those for me? Is that a neko? Can I have the neko?”

“Ah, no,” Milly told her, with an awkward little laugh. She straightened up. “They’re friends, not food.”

Tanny looked disappointed, but accepted it easily enough. “Okay. Are you coming inside?”

Jora appeared in the mouth of the cave, and smiled. “Milly. What brings you here?”

For a moment, Milly was startled. Unlike Tanny, who was brimming with youthful health and energy, Jora looked tired, and thin – thinner than she could ever remember seeing her. Milly’s surprise must have shown, for Jora’s smile turned wan. “Come on in,” she invited her.

“What happened to your face?” Tanny asked, looking up at her curiously, walking beside her. The swollen bruise on Milly’s jaw had turned a nasty shade of yellow. It had already begun to fade, the result of Felarya’s ambient healing magic, but it still ached.

“I fell,” Milly lied. “I tripped.” She managed a smile. “I’m getting as clumsy as your mommy is.”

Tanny giggled. They sat on the rugs just inside the cave, where they could take in what little warmth and sunlight were available. Ever since the temperature had dropped, Jora and Tanny had avoided the darker interior of their shelter, which had become even colder.

“Calina, Xanthe, Remus, this is Jora,” Milly said, as she sat down carefully, mindful not to unsettle her passengers. “And the little girl is Tanny.”

“We’ve met,” Jora said, eyeing them with a curious expression on her face. “At least, I’ve met Remus. And Xanthe, briefly. Hi, there!”

“Hello.” Remus waved, just a little cautious.

“So that’s what you look like without your mask. What are you still doing on Felarya? Did you ever find that special someone?”

“Yes,” he said quietly, but did not elaborate further. “Now I’m just… hanging around for a while, I guess. We’ll probably move on at some point.”

“So you and Xanthe…” The giantess’ eyes flicked from one to the other, warmly.

“That’s right.” Xanthe put her arm round him, and smiled.

“Good.” Jora grinned. “Well done. I’m glad for you. Why are you travelling with Milly?”

“Long story,” Remus said. “Maybe not suited for the kid, though?” He nodded towards Tanny.

“Milly said I can’t eat the neko,” the giantess child said, looking at her adoptive mother, as though in the hope that Jora might change her friend’s mind.

“You’ve had enough nekos for one day,” Jora said fondly, and kissed her forehead. “Go outside and play for a while? We grown-ups need to talk.”

“Okay!” Tanny scampered out, willingly enough.

“Don’t go too far! I want to be able to see you from here,” Jora called after her, watching her go. She turned back to Milly. “I actually caught three nekos this morning,” she said, and the pride was evident in her voice. “They gave me a hell of a time of it, but I got them in the end.”

“Well done.” Milly smiled a little. “I hope you ate at least one of them yourself.”

Jora winced. “Tanny was hungry. It was a late enough breakfast as it was.”

“Jora–” Milly began, gently.

Her friend held up a hand to quiet her. “Don’t say it. Tell me instead what this little expedition is about?”

They told her. Jora’s face turned increasingly grave. “Milly, I’m *so* sorry. I know how much those tomthumbs mean to you.”

“Thank you,” Milly said softly.

“But you think they’re still alive?”

“I certainly hope so,” she said, in a tight voice.

“I think they’re likely to be,” Xanthe said. “Negav is mostly human, and humans don’t often eat tinies. Though what exactly they’ve been ‘bought’ for, I shudder to think.”

“So you three are a rescue team,” Jora said, with a touch of admiration. “Well, I wish you luck.”

“Thanks,” Remus said, simply.

“Jora, we need to talk,” Milly blurted in, concerned. “I’m worried about you.”

Jora frowned a little. “I’m fine.”

“No you’re not. You’re getting really thin. You’re clearly not eating enough.”

Jora half-opened her mouth, as though to disagree, then closed it again. Her lips thinned. “Well, two mouths to feed,” she said simply. “And I’ve never been very good at finding food.”

“Tanny is looking fine,” Milly said, softly. “She seems to be in perfect health. You’re sacrificing yourself for her.”

“I’m not *starving*, Milly.”

“No, but you’re clearly going hungry. How many meals do you skip?”

“Have you asked Jade for help?” Xanthe interjected, when Jora did not immediately answer.

“Yes. She’s given me some tips. And I’ve gone with her on her hunts sometimes, but I can’t leave Tanny on her own for long, and it’s not easy to go hunting with her, so…” She trailed off.

“Have you considered a vegetable garden?” Remus asked.

“Well yes, but it would take time to–” Jora’s stomach rumbled hungrily. She blushed.

“All right, that does it,” Milly said firmly. “I’m going to help you find food.” She plucked the three littles carefully from her pouch, and set them down on the rug. “Come on.” She stood, and held out her hand, helping Jora to her feet.

“What, now?”

“From the sounds of it, you haven’t even had a proper breakfast. Have you eaten anything at all today?”

“A little bit,” Jora said awkwardly.

“Not enough. We’re going to find you some food.” She led her out of the cave.

“Um, okay.” Outside, Tanny was building what looked like a miniature hut with twigs and moss. “Tanny, stay here,” Jora told her, as Milly all but dragged her along. “We’ve left the littles in the cave; don’t eat them!”

“Are you sure she won’t?” Remus called after them worriedly.

“She’s grounded *forever* with no dessert if she does!” Jora replied firmly, and Tanny winced.

“Can I put them in my new hut?” Tanny asked.

“Yes. I mean no, not unless they agree!”

By this point, Milly had hurried her past the treeline.

\* \* \*

“You know, I’d take Tanny with me for a while, if I could,” Milly said, a little awkwardly, once they were out of earshot.

“I know you would.” Jora gave her a grateful little smile. “And I understand you being worried that she might accidentally step on some of your tomthumbs. Don’t worry about it; I’ll manage.”

“If things do get too difficult, come and stay *near* my hut, at least. I can help you build one of your own, and we can go hunting together. It could make things easier for you. Seriously, Jora. You’re not quite skin and bones yet, but…”

The blond giantess laughed slightly. “Thanks.” She gave her friend’s arm a little squeeze. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Or…” A thought came to her, and a little smile tugged at her lips. “You could ask Elli to help. She’s having herself a house built. I’m sure she’d have room for Tanny, at least from time to time.”

“I’ve already asked her if she can look after her sometimes. She said no.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Milly promised. “Friendship is about helping out, and we all have to have responsibilities. We can all find a way to help.”

“By the way…” They walked through the forest at a slightly brisker pace than usual, side by side; it helped prevent the cold from seeping in. “How *did* you get that bruise on your jaw? You said you tripped. While hunting?”

Milly hesitated. There was little point in lying; Jora might well hear the truth from Jade herself. “Jade hit me,” she said simply, looking ahead rather than at her.

Jora stopped, abruptly, and stared. Milly stopped too, facing her. “*Jade* hit you?” she echoed, after several seconds of stunned silence. Milly nodded. “But… *why*? Did you…” Jora paused. “Did you eat one of her humans?” she asked, cautiously.

“*No!*” Milly exclaimed, the utterance bursting out of her. “No, of *course* not! Do you think I would ever…?”

“All right,” Jora soothed. “Sorry. But then, why…?” She frowned.

“We had a misunderstanding,” Milly said uncomfortably. She looked away, and began walking again.

Jora hurried after her. “Have you resolved it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh. That’s going to be awkward. So you’re not talking to each other?”

“I don’t know, Jora,” Milly said, irritably. “I don’t know.” There was an uncomfortable silence. “Let’s hunt, and quietly,” she suggested. “That naga who attacked us is still out here somewhere. We shouldn’t leave Tanny alone for too long.”

\* \* \*

It was not until the end of the second day that Joanna dared ask.

The day itself had felt strange, a little unreal, but not particularly traumatic, except for moments when the realisation of all she had lost (again!) crashed down upon her, and she was left fighting off a panic attack. Yrein and Lisha were sympathetic and supportive. Lisha in particular understood what it was to be torn away from the life, friends and family one had known, though she clearly expected Joanna to soon embrace her new existence with happiness and relief.

Delayil was not in her room all day long, of course, but much of her attention was still focused on her new pet. She seemed to delight in everything that the tomthumb did, particularly when she tried out some of the games in her bowl. Delayil had wanted to dress her herself in the morning, but had relented with a look of surprised hurt when Joanna had yelp out a frantic “No!”. She had allowed the tiny woman to dress and undress herself after that, with as much privacy as she could find in her glass bowl environment.

The elf fed her well, three meals a day, the remnants of what her parents had cooked. At first, in fact, she presented her with far too much food, until she learned to assess how much Joanna could actually eat.

It was evening when Joanna worked up the courage to voice the question that had been centre-most in her thoughts. Though it was dark outside, there was an odd type of lighting within the room, which was clearly not a fire, nor a form of luminescent plant, spreading a comfortable and even glow. Though curious, she put it down for now as one more of the mysteries of this human city. It was not the main issue on her mind.

“Delayil,” she said, nervously, while the elf girl lay reading on her bed. The teenager put down her book and looked towards her.

“Yes?” she asked, pleased her little tomthumb was talking to her.

“In the shop, there were three of us,” Joanna began, nervously, her voice trembling a little. “The other two are my friends. I was wondering…” She gulped. “I was wondering… Could you…? Could your father…?”

Delayil stood, and moved over to her. “Your friends?” she asked gently.

“Yes.” Joanna looked up at her, the emotion palpable in her voice, in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” the elf said kindly, and sounded as though she meant it. “Dad said I can only have one. Because tinies are so expensive.”

Joanna bit her lip, hard. “Could you ask?” she whispered.

“Aww…” Delayil’s face was sympathetic. “Do you miss them? I’m really sorry…” The tomthumb nodded. “I’ll ask,” she promised. “In fact, I can ask him right now. But I know what he’ll say.”

“Thank you,” Joanna said in a small voice, and meant it too.

*Tina would hate it here*, she thought miserably, as Delayil left the room to find her parents. *She would hate everything about it, and she would despise Delayil and be rude to her*. She felt almost bad asking the teenage girl to bring her into her home. But it was safe here, and she and Meringue would not be ill-treated. It was better than the dreadful uncertainty of leaving them in the shop, where anyone might buy them, where anything awful might happen…

*Tina will get used to it*, she thought, trying to persuade herself. *We’ll all get used to it. We’ll have to. At least we’ll be together. It’ll be all right*…

It did not take Delayil long to return, apologetic and just a little embarrassed, and tell her that her parents had said no. That “the other tomthumbs will be fine. They’ll go to good homes. There’s nothing to be worried about”. But Joanna was worried sick, and it was impossible for it not to show.

Delayil spent the remainder of the evening anxiously trying to brighten the tiny woman’s mood, and take her mind off it. She showed her a little distorting mirror, which stretched or condensed her figure, and which Joanna at any other time would have found genuine amusement in. She told her stories, and tried playing games with her three pets. If only so as not to make the elf feel guilty, Joanna played along, managing the occasional smile.

It was Delayil’s attempts to cheer her up that led to her first dip in the fish tank. She had admitted that she knew how to swim – a remnant from another life, before even her arrival in Felarya. An excessively enthusiastic Delayil then suggested that she go for a swim with Lisha.

It had seemed, instantly, like a bad idea. From a tiny’s perspective, the water was frighteningly deep, and there was no shore; only smooth glass walls. Nothing to hold onto; no way to climb out. Even more disturbingly, it implied taking her clothes off. She was used to bathing naked in the communal bathrooms in the Alsumi burrows, but the association between captivity and nudity was still a deeply uncomfortable one. Seeing her discomfort, Delayil had said she could keep her clothes on, and Joanna had, somewhat to her own surprise, heard herself relent. She did not want to make the elf feel worse about this evening than she already did. And so, feeling *very* wary, she had found herself being lowered into the tank, while Lisha looked up at her with unconcealed excitement.

“Welcome to my world!” the tiny fish-girl had beamed, as the unexpectedly warm, pleasant water rose around the tomthumb, soaking her clothes. Joanna bobbed in place, treading water. Beneath her bare feet, the liquid went on a long way down, deep and clear. She cringed a little as one of the fish approached her, yellow and green and with large unblinking eyes. It tasted the water beside her, its mouth opening and closing, then lost interest in her and swam on.

“Are you okay?” Lisha asked, smiling softly, while Delayil and Yrein watched on with a mixture of interest and slight concern.

“I’m all right,” Joanna said, nervously.

“Good.” The mermaid grinned at her. “Then swim!” She flicked her tail, dived, and swam beneath her, a smooth fluid form gliding through the water. She surfaced to the tomthumb’s side, with a little splash of water. “Come on!” She flicked water at her playfully with her fingers.

Joanna extended her arms, hesitantly, then kicked her legs out, and began to swim. Her soaked clothes clung uncomfortably to her skin. But, somewhat to her surprise, the feel of the water moving about her was pleasant, almost comforting. She took a quiet breath, half-closing her eyes.

When she opened them again properly, Lisha was swimming beside her, beaming.

\* \* \*

Milly had been feeling increasingly ill at ease as she approached Negav, and not only because of the outermost effects of the Isolon Eye. The city’s strange towering walls were visible to her in the distance, above the treelines. There was an aura of mystery to them. She would never experience, or truly know, what lay beyond them, and to her now they looked profoundly alien. Something about its very presence felt *wrong*, on an emotional level. This was a place from which people could come out, harm those whom she loved, and then retreat behind their walls where she could not pursue them. It was the place which had brought safety to Isham, for which she was grateful, but in a sense it had taken him from her – and now it had taken the tomthumbs, too. Among whom her closest and oldest friend.

“You should stop here,” Xanthe said. “There are humans who patrol the city’s surroundings. Humans who are quite capable of harming you. Lie low, and wait for us.”

Milly stopped, crouched down, and picked the three littles from her belt pouch, setting them on her palm and lifting them up to her face.

“Will you be safe getting the rest of the way there?” she whispered.

“Safe enough,” Xanthe assured her.

“How long will you be?”

“I don’t know. Several days, certainly. We don’t really have much to start on.” She looked up into the giantess’ eyes. “Milly, you *do* realise we may not find them?” she said gently.

Milly bit her lip, and nodded, quietly. “Thank you for trying,” she said, in a small whisper.

“Just try not to eat anyone who comes wandering round while we’ll gone,” Remus said, as she put the three of them down.

“I’m too nervous to eat anything.”

“Yes, but we’ll be gone several days. Stay out of sight, or they’ll come and hunt you down.”

She nodded.

“Hold in there, Milly,” Calina said, warmly. “We’ll bring them back.”

She had found nothing to respond to that, other than a weak grateful smile. She had watched them leave, making their way silently off between the trees. The fairy, the human, and the neko. She wished desperately that she could go with them, somehow; that she could do *something*. But the road ahead was forbidden to her, by powerful magic that she could not even comprehend. Magic shielding the people who had taken her friends.

She sat down, slowly, on the grass, the city’s walls disappearing from view as she did so, beneath the treeline. The bruise on her face was fading, but it still ached at times, and she rubbed at it. Her brown eyes were vacant, faraway, troubled.

She gazed out at nothing and prepared for a long, long wait.

\* \* \*

“*Damn* them all! Damn cowards!” Tina kicked at the smooth solid glass wall, frustration welling up inside her. Another day had ended, agonisingly empty and pointless, with nothing to do except pace around this maddening prison, waiting for one of those fearful moments when humans stopped to peer in… and walked on. So far, none of those browsing the shop had decided to buy her, or Meringue. Perhaps her withering glare told them she would be trouble, too difficult to tame.

*Good*, she thought fiercely. *I can make it so that none of them want me*. *And then*… Her train of thought faltered. And then…?

It was not as though waiting would somehow miraculously provide them with a way out of here. Worse, if they proved not to be sellable, she dreaded to imagine what the shopkeeper might do with them. She was not surprised that Joanna had been the first to be bought. Sweet, lovely Joanna; she had charmed that buyer without even meaning too. And had left behind one tomthumb filled with palpable angry frustration… and a frightened, fragile mute.

She turned to Meringue, who was disconsolately sitting on her blanket, nibbling with no appetite on one of those sickeningly artificial purple pellets. Tina watched her quietly for a moment. She had never interacted much with Meringue. They had very little in common, and a part of her had always found it difficult to have much patience with the dark-haired woman’s lingering timidity and insecurities – much exacerbated of course by their current captivity. Joanna had been the bond between them – the person they both cared for, and who loved them both in turn. Joanna had done more than anyone to welcome and integrate Meringue into the tribe – of which she herself, of course, was an adopted member. Joanna had learnt, patiently, how to communicate with the mute woman, and embrace her in the constant warmth of her simple, genuine friendship.

Now Joanna was gone, and for the past two days Tina had had absolutely no idea what to say to her remaining fellow captive. Meringue had made some attempts to communicate, but had sensed Tina’s impatience at the slowness and difficulties of the whole process, and had soon given up. It was not that Tina had *wanted* to discourage her from trying. But struggling and failing to make sense of Meringue’s hand gestures and lip movements and nervous hopeful looks had all added to her already mounting frustration with their situation, and it had showed. She had intimidated the woman despite herself.

“Aren’t you going to wash before sleeping?” she asked, mildly.

Meringue looked up, startled, then got to her feet, looking guilty. She clutched at the food she had been trying to force herself to eat, and gazed at Tina, apologetic.

Tina sighed. “It wasn’t a reproach. I’m not saying that you smell, or anything. It’s just that the previous nights you’ve wanted to wash before settling down.”

Meringue nodded, quickly. She dropped the food on her blanket, and began to retreat towards the shower.

“Wait,” Tina said. She walked after her, as Meringue stopped and turned back, uncertain. Tina’s steady green-brown eyes met Meringue’s striking but anxious blue ones, in the weak nightlights of the shop, which left them mostly enveloped in darkness. “What’s been on your mind?” The other woman frowned a little, puzzled. “Your mind,” Tina repeated, trying to sound encouraging rather than impatient. “We’ve had nothing to do here for days except think. Think and brood, and we’ve both been doing it. If Joanna were here she’d be your outlet. You’d confide in her. I’m not much of a substitute, but if you’re anything like me your thoughts have been eating away at you inside.” She held her gaze. “So you can tell me about them, if you want.”

Meringue hesitated. She was obviously surprised, and just as obviously tempted. After a moment or two, though, she shrugged, smiled a weak grateful smile, and gestured towards the shower.

“No you’re *not* actually in any hurry to take a shower,” Tina told her, “since you weren’t on your way there until I said something. Sit down. Please,” she added, as she sat and tugged at her arm a little. Meringue resisted only a moment, before sitting down. “Now talk to me. If you want. And you *do* want, so… do it.”

Meringue twitched, awkwardly. She had been caught off-guard, and now did not even know what to begin with – or how. But if she did not try to say *something*, Tina would only become impatient with her again. She moistened her lips nervously, tasting again –despite herself– the odd taste of that artificial food they had to eat every day. She raised her hands, glanced at them, and began to gesture, as slowly and precisely as she could.

Tina followed the motions of the mute woman’s hands, looking from time to time at her face for any additional clue as to their meaning. She generally thought of herself as reasonably smart, but almost all of what Meringue was trying to communicate eluded her.

“All right, this isn’t going to work,” she interrupted at last, annoyed. Meringue stopped, uncertain again. “Give me a moment to think,” Tina said, rather more sharply than she had intended. She rubbed at the side of her head, attempting to focus.

It was difficult to think past the frustration and anger that filled her. All her life, or at any rate since those young teenage years when she had decided to be pragmatic about the realities of life, she had avoided railing against the inevitable, against things that would necessarily happen, or had already happened and could not be undone. She had tried to ready herself for whatever life could throw at her, determined to resist it and avoid it for as long as it made sense to try, but no further. That had been her simple philosophy – in principle at least. But now, here, being trapped between these glass walls, unable to do *anything* about her confinement other than wait… Despite all her attempts to remind herself to be sensible, it was maddening.

*But not Meringue’s fault*, she thought.

“Let’s go about this a different way,” she said at last, as patiently as she could. “I’ll say things, and you just nod or shake your head. All right?”

Meringue nodded.

“Right. So.” Tina paused. “I imagine you’re missing Joanna.”

A nod. Anxiety in those blue eyes.

“You’re wondering how she’s doing right now.”

Another nod. Meringue began to raise her hands to communicate in more detail – then remembered, and let them drop back into her lap, with a downcast expression.

“Well, I suppose she’s…” Tina stopped again. *She’s what?* There was nothing she could actually say with anything approaching a reasonable degree of certainty. The truth was, they had no idea how Joanna might be at this moment, and they never would. “Well, that man who… who took her, he looked kind enough,” she said at last. “I don’t see any reason to think he’ll hurt her.”

Meringue nodded, cautiously. The deep worry in her eyes was tinged with hope. Hope that, Tina realised, she expected her to fuel.

*But I can’t*, she thought, before saying anyway: “For all we know, she’s being pampered right now. Lying on thick cushions and dressed in warm comfy clothes and eating much better than the stuff they give us here.”

Meringue’s lips twitched slightly. She looked relieved – though only a little. She barely nodded, clearly waiting for more. Tina held back a sigh.

“She’ll be missing us. But if she’s treated kindly, if she’s well looked after… There are worse fates than that.” She had to force the words out. But they were what Meringue had wanted to hear, as the quiet gratitude in her troubled blue eyes showed.

Tina took a moment to think of her next question. She looked at her as she spoke it. “Do you miss Milly, too?”

Meringue considered it, then nodded, cautiously. The giantess had obviously not been as present in her mind as her fellow tomthumb. She moistened her lips again, then pointed at Tina, quite simply, her face questioning.

“Do *I* miss her?” Tina interpreted. When Meringue nodded, Tina’s voice dropped a little. “Yes, of course I do. I miss them both.” She paused. “We go back a long way, Milly and I. Back to when I was… barely more than a kid. This great big woman, living above us, who could go anywhere she wanted and do all sorts of things, and live a life that was… that was something I wanted to try and imagine, and then I wanted to try and experience it, with her, and understand it through her eyes, and understand what it was like being her… She wasn’t what I expected. I remember that. I didn’t know *what* to expect, but she constantly surprised me. And just the fact that she was interested, that she talked to me, when I was so tiny, that she wanted to know what it was like to be *me*…” She paused, only for a second or two. “Joanna often surprised me, too,” she added, rather softly.

There was a question in Meringue’s gaze, so she tried to answer it. “Her way of seeing things. Joanna’s, I mean. I often thought she was naïve, even silly, and sometimes it annoyed me. And often she was. But not always. And she made me think, even while I was trying to make *her* think. She wanted to make me *feel*, too. She sometimes said to me, everyone matters. And I would say, don’t be silly, you can’t care about everyone. It’s just not… It’s not practical. It doesn’t make sense. You just let it hurt you, for no reason. But Joanna was… Joanna *is*– kind. She’s kind. All that caring. Like Milly, in a way. Milly cares about people. They don’t always realise. Too much caring, I used to tell her sometimes. It doesn’t work; it just…” She trailed off again, her throat tight, her gaze turned into the darkness.

Beside her, Meringue made an odd hugging gesture with her arms. Tina looked at her, briefly, and nodded.

“Yes. That,” she whispered.

There was a long moment’s silence.

“Go and have your shower,” she said at last, through that tight lump in her throat.

Meringue looked at her, gently, then stood and walked away. Sitting on the grass in the dark, Tina listened to the trickling water of the shower.

When Meringue returned, several minutes later, she found Tina crying, softly, her face in her hands, with quiet little sobs.

Meringue sat beside her, and took her in her arms, and held her close, gently. Tina leaned into her embrace, crying silently, and did not resist.

\* \* \*

Walking into Negav, Calina felt just a little intimidated. They approached the large entrance gate across a bridge, under the watchful gaze of guards seen and unseen. The wall, mind-numbingly tall and thick, gleaming in a substance she could not hope to recognise, framed the gate on either side and above.

Mostly, however, she felt curious, and even a little eager. This was a strange and foreign world to her. The large avenue which they entered, with tall stone homes and shops on either side, was full of people, a bustling crowd, and full of strange scents. She smelt humans, of course – more in one place than she had ever seen before. And the smell of cooking, as well as raw food. Simple market stalls were set up near the gate, their owners calling out to new arrivals in the city, selling anything from meals to maps, local clothes to advice, and trinkets. Calina eyed the stalls with some interest, but the coins Xanthe carried safely tucked away inside her clothes were few in number, and the fairy had warned her they were to spend their money only on essentials.

As she walked with them down the large avenue, in her strange light shoes which felt so constraining to her usually bare feet, it dawned upon the neko how vast this place was. She had known, in an abstract sense, that Negav housed hundreds upon hundred of people – numbers so large that they held no connection with the world she had always experienced, and had meant little more to her than a vague impression. Now, she was able to see first-hand a small glimpse of how immense and crowded the city was. She felt a sharp twinge of unease. *How are we going to find them, in all this?*

She turned to Xanthe, whose face was set and serious, yet rather calm. “Where do we start? Is there any meaning to this place, or is it just endless…” She trailed off, gesturing at the buildings, not even certain what to call them.

“We’re in the Lower Tier,” Xanthe explained. “This is where you have most of the inns, and a lot of shops too. This is where we’ll be staying. I know people who can put us up for a few nights, if we chip in with their shopping.”

“People whose lives she saved by bringing them to Negav,” Remus said proudly, and put his arm round the fairy, with a loving little squeeze. They smiled at each other. “Oh, and off to our left somewhere is the Adventurers’ guild. If you’ve ever wondered, Calina, where all those adventurers out in the jungle come from, a lot of them leave from here.”

Calina shook her head, amused. “Idiots. But at least it keeps Milly happy.”

Remus frowned slightly, but said nothing.

“Further into the city is the Middle Tier,” Xanthe went on. “There are shops there too, of course, but I’d expect the one we’re looking for to be more in the Lower Tier. Parts of the Lower Tier are, shall we say, rather more lawless. Plus in the Middle Tier it’s more large, open-air markets. If the harpy said there was an actual shop, we should start in this area.”

“So where do we start?” Calina asked, her tail swishing, anxious to begin.

“First, we settle in. Then we’ll go to the tourism guild and ask for a list of pet shops. Or rather, Remus will go; they’re more likely to trust a human than a fairy or a neko. He’ll say he’s a visitor from offworld–”

“True enough,” Remus commented.

“–looking for an exotic pet to bring home. I’m rather worried they might only tell us about the legitimate shops, but it’ll give us somewhere to start.” She looked at Calina. “By the way, tinies here are citizens. They have rights.”

“Got it,” Calina said casually. She stuck her hands in her pockets –a novelty– and followed them through the busy streets.

\* \* \*

Lisha had been so pleased to have Joanna playing in her aquarium with her, she asked to do so again every time Delayil had a little time to spend in her room. Overcoming her initial nervousness at the deep water, which she could not climb out of by herself, Joanna accepted readily enough, and spent a part of almost every day splashing about in the fish tank. Soon enough, Delayil found a pot which she placed in Joanna’s glass bowl, and which they were able to use as a small swimming pool. They would swim around, and then laze in it together.

It did not take Joanna long to realise that the tiny mermaid was besotted with her. Nor did it take Lisha all that much longer to admit it.

The pretty little mermaid, with her sky blue skin and short mauve hair, and her silvery-blue tail, glided smoothly over to her one evening after they had been lounging idly in the pool. She was of course stark naked, while Joanna was wearing simple, soaking wet undergarments. The fish girl slid up against her, facing her, the wet skin of their torsos touching, and looked her longingly in the eyes.

Joanna tensed. “Lisha…” she cautioned gently.

The mermaid smiled prettily, and batted her eyelids. She pouted her lips, looking at that moment indescribably cute, and slid her slick hand up over the smooth wet skin of Joanna’s tummy. Up above, Yrein glanced down, then pretended –unconvincingly– not to look. Delayil was at her desk, doing homework, with her back half-turned to them.

“Don’t you want me?” the mermaid breathed, in a warm hopeful whisper.

“I’m not attracted to women,” Joanna said, very gently.

Lisha frowned, hurt, her mouth putting on a pout of a different sort now. She wriggled back a bit, removing her hand from the tomthumb’s torso.

“Well that’s a *silly* reason,” she said.

“How is it a silly reason?” Joanna asked, a little stung. “I *like* you, but I’m just not physically attracted to you.” She kept her voice fairly low. Though their young elf owner was old enough to know and hear about such things, and regularly told them about her own attraction to boys she knew, the tomthumb did not particularly want to draw her attention on this matter.

“But…” Lisha scowled, processing that. “Did you have a boyfriend, in your old life?”

*Your old life*… Words spoken innocently, but they were piercing. She winced. “I… There was someone who liked me. And I liked him too. We just… We were beginning to spend a lot of time together, and just… talk.”

Lisha simply looked at her, for several long uncomfortable seconds, pained. Then she turned her head upwards to Yrein.

“I think I want to go back in my tank now,” she said, sulkily.

Joanna said nothing, as the mermaid was lifted out and away by the dryad’s giant hand. She sat alone in the pool for a while, looking at nothing, then shivered a little, got out, and dried herself.

She had simply spoken the truth. She was not attracted to women in that way. But as she rubbed the towel over herself, it dawned on her that Lisha had doubtless spent years in that tank, with no other tiny for company; only Delayil and Yrein, both countless times bigger than she was. It was perhaps no surprise that she had wanted to bond physically and emotionally with the only other tiny likely to share her existence for the foreseeable years ahead.

The more Joanna dwelt on it, the more crushing the thought was. Not only would she never see her friends again; she might never see *any* other tomthumb again. She was cut off from anything resembling a normal life.

“Are you all right?” Yrein asked kindly.

Lost in those numbing thoughts, Joanna barely even heard her.

\* \* \*

The humans who opened their home to Xanthe, Remus and Calina turned out to be three middle-aged people, a couple and a single woman. Their home was small, slightly cramped, the walls covered with shelves upon which they had crammed together their fairly meagre belongings. They were delighted to see the fairy again, though dismayed to see the damage to her wings, and fussed over her for a long time, as they sat their guests down on an old sofa and brought out drinks. There seemed little room for them to sleep, but the humans insisted they were only too pleased for them to stay.

Remus and Xanthe headed out almost straight away, while Calina took the opportunity to rest her legs a little. The humans questioned her curiously about her life in the forest, expressing genuine sympathy over “how hard it must be”. Their point of view surprised her. She had never particularly felt that fate had dealt her a hard hand. She had the whole forest to roam in, while these humans were cooped together in their cramped home. When she reciprocated their curiosity, they showed her round, explaining some of the more unusual items.

“I still don’t completely understand this whole ‘buying’ thing,” she admitted, slouching back down comfortably onto the sofa. (She admitted to herself quietly that *this* was something she could have liked, in her tree hut for example.) “People with shops exchange what they’ve got for ‘money’, which is… coins, little bits of hard stuff. Right? And then they use these coins to ‘buy’ things that they need from other shops.”

“In essence, yes,” one of the humans told her, with a little smile.

“What about people who *don’t* have a shop? I imagine they need money to buy from shops. But if they don’t have a shop themselves, where do they get the coins? Or does everyone have a shop? From what I’ve seen so far, there seem to be far more homes than shops around here.”

“There are other ways to earn money than by being a shopkeeper.” They attempted to convey to her the notion of being a salaried employee, which she took in readily enough, albeit somewhat perplexed.

“And who decides who does what?”

“It depends on your skills. What you’re able to do.”

“I still don’t get it. If a shopkeeper has an ‘employee’, and he has to pay him, how does he get enough coins for himself to be able to then buy what he needs? Surely he wouldn’t have enough.” Another thought struck her. “What happens to people who *don’t* have enough coins to buy what they need?”

The humans looked at one another, gravely.

“Well, that’s where it becomes difficult…”

Eventually, having absorbed all the rudimentary economics that she could take in one sitting, Calina announced she was going out for some fresh air, and to look around. Though part of the explanation had gone over her head, she had grasped enough to become convinced that she would not like to live here. Cities seemed to make things *complicated*. There were rules, which then required other rules to respond to them, and other rules in turn. And in the end, you had absurdities like people not having food because they had no ‘coins’, and no other way to obtain food than through these coins! She had tried asking why there couldn’t just be somewhere people could come and forage or hunt by themselves, but even her very brief experience of the city made it clear such things would not be practical. With so many people living in close proximity, they would exhaust the natural resources that hunting or foraging could provide.

*Not for me*, she thought firmly. She would be glad to be back in the ‘wild’, as they called it.

This was clearly what Xanthe called a ‘poorer’ part of the city. Homes were stacked upon one another. The outer walls were not as clean as they had been in the main avenue by the gate. Clothing was hung out to dry on poles from windows. There were none of the ornamental draperies or friezes that they had glimpsed a few blocks away. A poor area, where people had fewer coins (for whatever reason), and therefore could buy less than in other parts of Negav. That still puzzled her. *Why don’t they just share?*

On that note, she was beginning to feel a little hungry, but Xanthe had all their coins. The fairy had said she would buy them all a meal later. She would just have to be patient. She strolled between barefoot children playing with a large ball, made –like so much here– from a material she did not recognise. *How did they invent all of these things?* The children paid her little attention, but some adults stared as she passed. Some of their gazes were distinctly unfriendly. She realised they were all humans; there were no nekos here. She wondered why, and decided to be a little more on her guard.

A strange bird with a long neck and a long beak cawed at her, perched atop a windowsill. She glanced up at it, but it was too large to be eaten in one mouthful, and out of reach. Besides, she had never much liked the taste of feathers. She walked on.

She reached an open square with a fountain, topped with a rather grimy little statue. Children were floating toy boats on the water, under the watchful glance of their parents seated on benches by the buildings. Calina drew curious attention as she passed, but few or no hostile glares here.

The artificial environment, this world of stone, was beginning to weigh on her. There was very little greenery here. And as she continued, the neighbourhood seemed to get visibly poorer, in the shade of the looming wall. There were fewer people out and about now.

It became dirtier, too. One or two buildings looked dilapidated, and there were occasional stacks of refuse against walls. As she passed one of them, she heard a scrabbling sound. She stopped still, alert, her ears pricking, sniffing at the air. The strange artificial scents of the city dulled her sense of smell, but perhaps there was a small rodent, or some other edible creature, amidst the rubbish.

She turned to it quietly, poising to react. As she waited, she was delighted to see a neera pop up from amidst the pile, simply dressed, his ears twitching. They locked gazes, and he scrambled backwards. Unfortunately for him, in his haste he fell backwards into a pot, as Calina darted towards him. While he tried to scramble out, she had only to pluck him up. She moistened her lips, pleased.

“Don’t you dare!” the little creature squeaked.

She opened her mouth, tilted her head back, and lifted him up to it. He had fairly light skin, suggesting he had led a discreet life in whatever shadows or burrows he could find. His hair was short and dark, matching his furry ears.

“You can’t!” he cried out, struggling.

She dropped him into her mouth, and clamped her moist lips shut. His protests were muffled from inside her. Only his tail dangled from between her lips. She looked round, warily, in case his shouts had drawn any unwanted attention. But if anyone in the nearby buildings had heard him, they seemed to be making no move to intervene.

She shifted him about on her wet tongue, enjoying his flavour, which his frantic wriggles imprinted all the more pleasantly into her taste buds. It had been quite a few days since she had eaten a tiny, and she had been starting to develop a slight craving. Her mouth had watered rapidly, and she felt him slip and slide on her tongue. She slurped up his wriggling tail, happily, and swallowed. The wet lump slid down her throat. She breathed out a little sigh of pleasure.

Other than this tasty surprise, there was little of interest in this part of the city, and she did not like the feel of these soulless buildings pressing round her. She turned, and began to make her way back. She would pause to drink at the fountain along the way, she decided; she was getting thirsty.

“Pretty kitty,” a gruff voice said behind her.

She spun round. A single male human stood leaning against a wall. He was tall, with a sparse light beard, his pose relaxed. Her eyes, however, flicked to the knife at his belt; the fingers of his right hand were playing idly with its pommel.

“What’s the pretty kitty doing all the way out here?”

“Passing through,” she said tensely. He had made her instantly ill at ease.

“We don’t like the kitties, round here.” His hand clenched round the knife.

“Leave the woman alone,” another male voice said, low but firm. This one too came from behind her, and she turned again, trying to watch both men at the same time. Shorter, but similarly fair-haired, the newcomer stood with a confident bearing, fixing the first man with his gaze. “She’s not doing any harm.”

The first man held the newcomer’s gaze for several long, tense seconds. Finally, he shrugged, as though it were of no great importance.

“Better not see you around, kitty,” he grunted, and turned to leave.

Calina faced the second man. “Thank you,” she said simply, trying not to look too relieved.

“Yeah. We don’t get too many outsiders here, though.” His gaze moved over her quickly, appreciatively, but he made no comment. “I’ll walk you out of the area. See you out safe.”

\* \* \*

Remus had obtained a list of pet shops from the man at the tourist information desk, who had however told him it was almost certainly incomplete. It was, in addition, written in Mexhyli, the local language, in an alphabet he could not read. The man had helpfully read it to him out loud, enabling him to transcribe the names and locations into his own language – a product of Negav’s oral translation magic. Calina, who only vaguely understood the concept of writing, accepted these explanations without too much question. Remus had also obtained three maps, one of which he gave her. She looked it over, trying to make sense of it.

“Two of the shops are fairly close by,” Xanthe said. “We’ll start with those, together. Then tomorrow, we’ll split up. Remus, you and Calina will go separately to some of the shops further out, while I go round and visit the people I know, and spread the word that we’re looking for those tomthumbs. It’s a very slim chance, but… Calina, I don’t suppose you can read a map?”

The neko shook her head.

“I’ll talk you through it,” Xanthe said. “And you, remind us what exactly Joanna and Tina look like. Anything that can help us identify them.”

“After that, can we have something to eat?” Calina asked hopefully. Her tummy let out a hungry little rumble.

Xanthe smiled. “We’ll eat before we do anything else. Then we’ll check out those two shops. Now… How do I recognise Tina?”

\* \* \*

“No nekos! Get out! We don’t sell to nekos!”

Tina, who had been sitting on the grass in her glass prison, nibbling at one of the increasingly unappetising purple pellets, turned her attention to the shop’s entrance as the shopkeeper’s angry shout rang out. Standing in the doorway, she saw a neko woman – young, seeming barely into adulthood, with sun-kissed skin, dark-brown hair and nice clothes, and a startled expression on her pretty face. The catgirl’s face reddened, as she found herself the sudden and unexpected object of rebuke. She stood as though frozen to the spot. The few other customers in the shop were all looking at her.

“Out!” the shopkeeper bellowed, advancing towards her. “We sell pets here, not food! It’s not for your kind! It says right by the door, no nekos! Can’t you savages read? Get out!”

Face dark with embarrassment, the young neko turned and fled, her brown tail swishing, almost getting caught in the door as the man slammed it shut behind her.

Tina heard a sleepy yawn, ending with a little squeak, as Meringue sat up on her blanket, rubbing at her eyes. The dark-haired woman rose, and walked over to her barefoot, sitting beside her.

“Guess what’s for breakfast?” Tina said wryly, handing her a pellet.

Meringue’s face bore a questioning look, in addition to her residual sleepiness, so Tina gestured towards the door. “A neko came in, and was chased away,” she explained. “At least it seems we’re not here to be sold as food.”

Meringue nodded, relieved. She looked at the food in her hand, grimaced a little, and put it down. She stood, and headed towards the shower.

Tina finished eating, eyeing the customers who strolled idly about the shop, then stood and stretched. She began to exercise, stretching each of her limbs out and flexing it. When a teenage human boy came up to watch her, she stopped, and glared at him fixedly until he moved on. She resumed her exercising.

Although at present she was trapped, she had decided she needed to keep herself fit. An opportunity to escape might present itself after she had been ‘bought’. There was no way of knowing what type of confinement her next captors would keep her in, but they *might* just be careless, which would enable her to recover her freedom.

She had always prided herself on being a realist. She knew that if she escaped, she would have to face a hostile unknown world, full of unpredictable dangers. There was a high likelihood that she would die, and she had been trying to weigh that pragmatically against the prospect of eternal confinement, subjected to the degrading status of being a ‘pet’. Would it be better to accept that new condition, or to almost certainly die in an attempt to get away, and home? She had not yet made up her mind. Much would depend on where she found herself after being purchased, and how she was treated. The elf had said that tomthumbs were expensive, so it was unlikely that her next owners would simply feed her to their pet reptile, for instance. But anything was possible. She would not be able to devise a plan of action until she knew what she was up against.

Meringue walked up to her once more, washed and dried and dressed, trying to rearrange her dark hair without the benefit of a mirror.

“When you’ve eaten, would you like to exercise?” Tina asked her. “With me. I can show you how.”

Meringue looked at her curiously. ‘Why’? she mouthed.

“To keep fit. We may need it, at some point. If we need to run, for ex…” She trailed off, warily, as a male human, in his late teens or early adulthood, approached them, followed by the shopkeeper wearing his trademark ingratiating smile. The young human looked a little awkward, but was not unattractive, with light brown hair, sun-tanned features and a slightly skinny yet healthy build.

Rather tall, he crouched down a little to look at the two tinies. Tina got to her feet, standing beside Meringue.

“They really are very small,” he mused. “Where do they come from?”

“The forest,” the shopkeeper said.

“You have people who go out and capture them?”

The query was met with a strained, oily smile. “You must allow me my trade secrets.”

“So they’re still wild at heart.”

“Well, the wild is all they’ve ever known. So they’re cautious creatures, as you can see. But the black-haired one is tame as can be. Very shy, if that’s the type you want. She doesn’t speak, either, which some of our buyers would see as an asset.”

“She doesn’t speak?” the young man echoed sharply. “Why not? What’s been done to her?”

“Nothing,” the shopkeeper said quickly. “I looked her over myself, and she hasn’t been harmed in any way. She’s got a tongue; she just doesn’t talk.”

“And the other one?” He peered at Tina.

“Oh, this one’s a little firecracker,” the shopkeeper said. “If that’s what you prefer? You’ll need to domesticate her. I can give you some tips.”

The young human observed the two of them for several seconds longer, and Tina thought she saw a glimmer of sympathy in his green eyes.

“I’ll take them both,” he said at last.

The shopkeeper beamed, pleased. “Very good, sir. If you’d like to come with me? I’ll get you a box to carry them in. Best not be seen with them out in the open, you know.”

They walked away. Tina turned to Meringue, gravely. The dark-haired woman looked close to petrified.

“Be brave,” Tina said in a whisper, and put her hands on Meringue’s shoulders. “Once he’s taken us to wherever he’s going, we can try to escape. All right?”

Meringue nodded, numbly.

“I can’t be sure, but he didn’t look the type to harm us,” Tina added, as reassuringly as she could. “And you won’t be on your own. He’s buying us *both*. I’ll look after you.”

Meringue nodded again, anxiously, and turned to look to where the man was finalising his transaction with the shopkeeper. After that came the stressful experience of being plucked up, one after the other, and deposited in a smallish box, with air vents. The box closed in on them, plunging them in almost complete darkness. Feeling about, Tina found her way to Meringue and put her arms round her, hugging her. She could hear Meringue’s stressed breathing in the dark, along with her own.

They were jostled, helplessly, as the box was handed from one man to another, then again as the man, having exchanged final pleasantries with the shopkeeper, walked to the door. They gripped each other, and Tina closed her eyes, trying to fight off the beginning of motion sickness. She was used to being carried – but by Milly. Not like this. The little food she had eaten was churning in her stomach. In her arms, pressing against her, she felt and heard Meringue whimper, quietly.

Footsteps, and more jostling. Other sounds, too – those of passers-by, in the street. They were outside the shop.

“Meringue, if I throw up all over you, please forgive me,” Tina whispered, as her belly clenched and seemed to flip over itself.

Mercifully, the walking lasted no more than two or three minutes. Then the man stopped. Inside the box, Tina took a deep steadying breath. She gave Meringue a comforting little squeeze.

The lid opened. They were in a small side-street. She looked up, and straight into the face of the brown-haired neko who had been chased out of the shop.

“Look what I’ve brought you!” the human said, holding out the box to her.

Tina’s heart clenched with fear and shock, as the neko’s face brightened with a broad toothy smile.

\* \* \*

Nekos were not welcome in pet shops, generally, and Calina found herself ordered sharply out of several of them too. On one occasion, a human customer had looked as though he might physically assault her, screaming abuse for what he clearly assumed was her desire to eat some of the animals. When she was not allowed to enter, she looked in through the windows, as best she could. After three days of tramping round shops in the Lower Tier, almost getting herself lost in the process, she had caught not a single glimpse of the missing tomthumbs, nor of any other tiny on sale.

She thought of Milly, out waiting in the cold forest, alone and fearful for the fate of her friends, and her heart tightened. *We have to find them*.

Xanthe and Remus had had no luck either, she discovered that evening as the three of them rested their weary legs in the small home of Xanthe’s human acquaintances.

“We’ve covered most of the Lower Tier,” Xanthe said gloomily. “Except the Pit and Cremona Maze. And those are places I don’t know well enough to dare enter. We can’t go into them unprepared.”

“At a guess, an illegal trade in tinies is more likely to be taking place there than anywhere else,” Remus said.

“Yes, but if tinies are on sale in the Pit, you can bet they won’t be kept as charming little pets with bows in their hair,” Xanthe pointed out, looking rather nauseous. “They’ll have been eaten.”

Calina felt her heart clench again with anxiety. “What’s the Pit?”

“It’s *underneath* the Lower Tier,” Remus explained. “A huge cavern, in the dark. It’s a slum, basically. There’s virtually no law and order down there.”

Calina stared at him, and shuddered.

“We’ll try the Middle Tier tomorrow,” Xanthe decided. “We’ll only go into the slums as a last resort.”

That evening, Calina found she had very little appetite. She finished what little of her meal she could eat, and went outside, leaning against the outer wall of the building, breathing as calmly as she could and gazing up at the night sky – the only familiar sight, strangely comforting amidst this chaotic jungle of humans and stone. She turned, slightly, as Remus came out to join her.

“Can I ask you a question?” the human asked her. “I shouldn’t really; it’s a bad habit of mine, but I like to understand things. So, may I?”

She nodded, a little confused.

“You clearly care about us finding the tomthumbs safe and sound. And it’s not just for Milly. You care about the tinies themselves.”

“Yes,” she said, still not grasping what he might be getting at.

“See, I find that fascinating. You eat tinies. Your normal instinct is to see them as food. But these three… You bonded with them, in some way? They became special to you?”

Calina frowned a little. “If you want to put it that way. Joanna, at least. She’s so sweet, it’s impossible not to wish her well. I’ve never been close to Tina, and, well, it’s not easy to establish much of a bond with…” She had to pause to remember the name. “Meringue.”

“So if we find out that someone ate them, or at least ate Joanna, you’d not just be upset? You’d see it as wrong?”

Calina cringed, recoiling from the thought. “Of *course* it would be wrong! Why are you asking this? Stop it! What’s wrong with you?”

“Sorry,” he said mildly. “As I told you, it’s a habit. I’m still trying to make sense of how Felaryans see things. I’ve been here a while, but it still baffles me.” He leaned back against the wall too, and paused, while she eyed him warily. “Take Milly. You see her as a friend too?”

“Sort of. I suppose.”

“Did she ever try to eat you?”

“Yes.”

“And she didn’t, because…?”

“It’s complicated. We came to an agreement.”

Remus laughed, briefly. “You know, there’s a certain practicality to all you people. I didn’t see that, at first. It would be funny, if it didn’t end up with so many people being digested alive. You realise that if you’d just met Joanna one day out in the forest, without knowing her, you’d have eaten her without a second thought?”

Calina scowled, hurt, and turned away. “I told you to stop it.”

“Yes. Right. Okay.” He scratched the stubble on his cheek, pensive.

“I don’t think I’m going to like you very much,” Calina said, without looking at him.

“Ah, gee, now I’ve upset you.” He sounded genuinely contrite. “I’m sorry. I really am. It’s just, there are some things–”

“Please leave me alone.” She was still not looking at him.

“Yeah. Okay.” He paused, and stood there in silence for a moment, before heading indoors.

\* \* \*

“Don’t be scared. No really, don’t be scared. I know what this looks like, but I’m not going to hurt you.”

Tina exchanged a glance with Meringue, who like her was still in the grip of shock at being so casually handed to a neko, down a discreet dark alley.

“You just want a pet?” Tina asked finally, sarcastically. “So you sent your human friend in to buy us for you?”

“Yes to your second question, but no to your first.” The neko, remarkably pretty with her smooth young face and chocolate brown hair, looked around cautiously, and lowered her voice. “I’m going to set you free.”

“You’re *what*?” Tina was even more stunned now than she had been a moment ago. And she could almost sense the surprise radiating from Meringue beside her. But while her black-haired companion looked immediately relieved, and grateful, Tina was supremely wary. “Explain, please.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“My name is Reniyn,” the catgirl said, keeping her voice low. “This is Arbun.” She indicated the human. “And this” –she tapped lightly at a bulge in the chest pocket over her left breast– “is my friend Yummy.”

To Tina’s rising astonishment, the bulge squirmed, move, rose, and a female neera’s head popped up from the pocket’s rim. She had short, perfectly white tousled hair, and ears of the same colour, though she looked as young as any other adult Felaryan. Holding onto the rim with one hand, she waved cheerily with the other.

“Hey, there! Did Renny scare you? She’s right; there’s no reason to be afraid. Not any more, now that you’re out of that shop.”

Meringue was gaping, and gestured clumsily, no doubt in the vague hope of being understood, and conveying her puzzlement. Tina ignored her, for now, and voiced her own question.

“Did she just call you ‘Yummy’?” she said, incredulous.

Behind her, Arbun chuckled. “That always gets to people, at first.”

Reniyn picked the neera gently out of her pocket, and cradled her in her free hand. “Yummy has always been a Negavian. I didn’t get her from a shop, though; she was homeless. Destitute. Living rough. And she had no name. Or if she did, she never knew it.”

Tina’s face twisted with distaste. “So you called her… *that*?”

“Well yes. She’s delicious.” Reniyn smiled, and brought the bare little neera to her mouth. To Tina’s disgust, the neko proceeded to give the mouse-girl’s back a long, slow lick with her damp tongue. She then licked her lips with obvious satisfaction.

“Don’t worry; she won’t do that to you,” Yummy said, calmly, as the tomthumbs stared at her with a mixture of revulsion, dismay and sheer bafflement. “I don’t mind her doing it, though. She just likes my taste – and before you ask, she’s never eaten a tiny. Nor am I her ‘pet’; I stay with her by choice.”

“We’re partners,” Reniyn said, and licked her again.

“All right, stop it now,” Yummy giggled. “It tickles, and I’m going to get your shirt wet.”

“Ren, we should get indoors,” Arbun urged, quietly. “Before anyone sees us and starts paying attention.”

“Wait,” Tina said quickly, and held up a hand. “Before you take us anywhere, I want to know where we’re going. And why.”

Arbun smiled. “For someone who’s technically our property, you’re being rather bold.”

The smile faded a little from Reniyn’s face. “Don’t joke about that”, she reproached gently. She looked at the tomthumbs. “You’re not our property. We don’t do that. We bought you so that we could free you. We’re part of a little group; we pool our resources, our savings, now and then, to buy tinies who’ve been enslaved, and set them free.”

Meringue and Tina exchanged another look. “Why?” Tina asked.

“Because slavery is wrong”, Arbun said, firmly. “The trade in tinies is illegal, or supposed to be, but there aren’t many people who care.”

“We’ll let you loose right now, if you want,” Reniyn said. “You’re free, so it’s your choice. But you might not last very long on the streets of Negav. We’d like to take you to my place, for now, and then in a few days I’ll take you out to the forest’s edge and let you go. And you can go home, to wherever it is you came from.”

“Right.” Tina’s head was swimming, a little, but she had processed it all quite quickly. It could of course all be a lie, but if so she could not immediately fathom to what purpose. And in any case, the neko was big and strong enough to do with them whatever she wanted. “In that case, yes, please, take us to your home. For now. And thank you,” she added as an afterthought.

Reniyn smiled. “Do you have a name?”

“I’m Tina. And this is Meringue.”

“Tina. Thank you for trusting us. Meringue… Do you agree with me taking you home? I won’t take you anywhere without your permission.” Her voice was gentle. Meringue nodded, rapidly. “Good.” The neko smiled again, and handed the little box back to her human companion. “Carry them, please?”

With her hands freed, she brought Yummy back to her lips, and this time inserted the mouse-girl into her mouth, feet first, all the way to her shoulders. She sucked on her, rather hard, while the neera squirmed and giggled at the tickly suction. Reniyn pulled her out with a little popping sound, and swallowed the neera-flavoured saliva which had accumulated in her mouth. “Mmmm…” She grinned, and placed her tiny friend back into her breast pocket. “Let’s get going, then.”

\* \* \*

Although she did not look particularly poor, it turned out Reniyn lived in a small flat on the fourth floor of a rather ramshackle building. There were only two rooms, other than a tiny bathroom and a kitchenette, and those rooms were crowded with belongings stacked against the walls. The floor was covered in a thick carpet, with occasional stains. Reniyn pulled the door of the bedroom shut before they could get more than a glimpse inside it, and set them down on a low table in the main room. She and Arbun took padded chairs facing them.

“Right, first things first,” the neko said, amiably. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

“I have; she hasn’t,” Tina said promptly, indicating Meringue. Then: “But given what it was, I wouldn’t mind seconds. Once my tummy had settled from the journey.”

Reniyn smiled gently, while Arbun stood. “I’ll see to it,” he said, and made his way to the kitchen. Yummy, meanwhile, had walked over to a saucer filled with water atop the table, complete with a tiny sponge, and was washing herself clean of Reniyn’s saliva. By the looks of it, she had done this many times before, and thought nothing of it.

“You can stay here as long as you want, of course,” the neko told the two tomthumbs. “Or I can take you out into the forest as early as this afternoon. It’s really up to you. As I said, you’re free. We’ll help you in whatever way you like.”

Meringue’s eyes misted over, and she reached up with her arms. A little surprised, Reniyn smiled softly, thought for a moment, then reached down her index finger, which Meringue hugged tightly.

“Thank you,” Tina said simply. “Really, thank you. Very much.”

“Oh, you’re quite welcome,” the neko said gently, while her human companion pottered about in the kitchen. “What was done to you was wrong.”

“So what’ll it be?” Yummy asked, rubbing her hair dry. “Do you want to stay a while, or d’you want to get out of the city as soon as you can?”

Meringue let go of the neko’s finger, and turned back to Tina, urgently. She ran her hands through her long hair, and mouthed a single word. ‘Joanna’.

Tina nodded. “There’s a complication. There were three of us initially. Our friend Joanna was bought by an elf, a few days ago. We don’t know where she’s been taken.”

Reniyn’s face turned sombre. “I’m sorry.”

“Is there any way for us to find her?” Tina asked. Meringue made frantic gestures, no doubt insisting that they *had* to find her. The neko and the neera exchanged a look.

“I don’t see how,” Yummy said, reluctantly. “We wouldn’t know where to start. Unless you’ve got the man’s name?”

Tina shook her head. “He told us he has a daughter. A teenage daughter. And that Joanna would be a gift for her. But nothing else. Are there many elves in Negav? Maybe, if there aren’t all that many…”

“There are, in the elf district,” Yummy said. “Which is right nearby. It’s enclosed in a wall; the elves keep to themselves.”

“We hardly ever see them,” Reniyn confirmed. “And we’re not allowed into their area without a permit.”

“I’m small, though,” Tina said, with some hesitation. “I can go in there and have a look round.”

The neko gave an incredulous little laugh, though her look was sympathetic. “It would take you forever! There are thousands of elves living there. And maybe this particular elf doesn’t even live there! Do you have any idea of the size of Negav?”

“No,” Tina admitted, thin-lipped and defensive. “No, I don’t. I know nothing of this place. All I know is that my friend has been taken, and she’s probably very frightened, and for all I know they might be mistreating her. If there’s any chance of us finding and rescuing her, we have to take it.” Meringue nodded emphatically.

Reniyn looked uncomfortable. “Listen… I’m sorry about your friend. I’ll contact some friends and ask them to keep a look out. But if she’s been taken into the elf district… We can’t get in. We’d need a permit. And I bet the people who bought her are keeping her hidden, anyway. We’d need to check *inside* everyone’s home. It’s not doable. I’m really sorry.”

Tina was quiet for a long moment, processing that. Usually, she was the one telling her friends –such as Joanna– to be realistic, and to accept the world as it was. Reniyn’s logic was inescapable. Within her, Tina felt a powerful urge to rebel against being told that nothing could be done. It wasn’t true; it couldn’t be true; it wasn’t *fair*! But it *was* true, of course. She struggled with it, trying to find a way around these impossibilities, a loophole, something that she hadn’t thought of… Nothing.

“I’d like to be able to talk privately with Meringue about what we want to do,” she said at last, her voice tight.

Arbun served them a hot breakfast, the first they had had in what seemed like ages, though neither of them had much appetite, and they ate only to stave off hunger. Their hosts left them, retiring into the other room to give them some privacy. For a long moment, they ate in silence. Meringue clearly wanted to communicate something, but didn’t, watching the dark look on Tina’s face, and fidgeting.

“She’s right,” Tina said at last, sombrely. “There’s no way we can find Joanna.”

Meringue gasped, dismayed. She reached over and clutched Tina’s arms, her blue eyes wide and begging. Her lips quivered, as though trying to mouth words, which Tina could not possibly read.

“She’s gone,” Tina said, bluntly. “We’ve lost her.” She needed to hear herself say it, though the sound of her own words made her want to scream in defiance at herself. That, or break down in tears. She hardened herself, and took a deep breath. “If this were one of those stories that Milly so loves to hear, there’d be some sort of miracle that would help us find her. But it’s not, and there won’t.”

Meringue gripped her arm tight, and shook her head, frantically, shock and denial etched onto her face.

“You’re reacting with your heart, not your head,” Tina told her, with a mixture of gruffness and gentleness. “I don’t *want* it to be true either.” She put her hand on top of Meringue’s, which was so tight, her knuckles trembled. “We’ll stay here for a while, if you want. Just a few days. Just in case the neko’s friends hear something, or see something, or come up with something. But don’t get your hopes up.”

Meringue bit her shivering lip. There were tears in her eyes. When she had first arrived among the Alsumi, Joanna had in many ways been the kindest to her. The one who had reached out and really connected with her.

“After that,” Tina said, as gently as she could, “we’ll have to decide what to do. The neko can’t take us back to Milly’s hut. At best, she can take us outside the city and just dump us at the forest’s edge.” She paused. “We can try to reach Milly on foot, but it’s a long, long way. To be honest, we probably won’t survive. Not to mention” –she realised suddenly– “that there’s the river to cross, and no way for us to cross it.” She stopped, absorbing that while Meringue took it in too.

Meringue gestured, with a questioning, helpless look.

“I don’t know,” Tina said, quietly. “We need to prepare ourselves for the fact that we’ll probably never get home.” Anger rose within her, anger at the people who had snatched them from Milly and brought them to this. She thought, once more, of how Milly must be feeling. *Knowing her, she must have thought it was her fault. This must have hurt her, so much*… The anger welled up, and she struggled to battle it down. “As I see it,” she went on through gritted teeth, “we have three choices.” Meringue listened intently, holding her breath. “The first is to try and cross the forest. That would be suicide, but it would also be our only hope, a very *slim* hope, of getting home. Our second is to stay here, if the neko will have us, and rely on her for… everything.” She paused, and grimaced. “I’ll admit that’s not what I would choose, but I’m willing to hear your view. We have to decide this together. And the third possibility, of course, is for us to try and survive by ourselves in Negav. In the streets, wherever we can. Or perhaps,” she added as the thought came to her, “in that garden district of the elves, where we might at least find food. For a while, until something eats us.” She looked her in the eyes, gravely. “Which do you prefer?”

Meringue held her gaze with anxious, fearful eyes, full of uncertainty.

“No, it’s not an easy decision to make, is it?” Tina admitted. *And* damn *those who put us in this mess!* “We can take a few days to think about it.”

Nervously, Meringue placed the palm of her hand against the surface of the table, then patted it, twice, tensely. Tina watched her.

“You want to stay here?” she interpreted after a moment’s thought. “Your preference would be to stay here, with the neko?”

Meringue nodded, visibly worried at what her reaction might be.

Tina remained calm. “Well, remember she hasn’t actually invited us to stay. From what she said, she and her friends rescue tinies from shops, and then just… put them outside. She might not want us here permanently.” She looked at her, trying to appear at least a little bit reassuring. “But we can ask. In a few days, if we’re sure that’s what we want to do.”

*And live as pets after all*, she thought, grimacing, while Meringue’s face softened with a quiet look of relief.

\* \* \*

“I think my legs are going to fall off,” Calina moaned, as they trudged their way back to the Lower Tier. They had just spent another fruitless day checking entirely innocent (or apparently innocent) shops in the Middle Tier, before catching their breath on a stone plaza opposite a massive gleaming grey structure, guarded by two tall fierce statues. A ‘theatre’, Xanthe had said – whatever that meant. To Calina, it had simply been another disconcertingly alien structure, enhancing her unease. Nothing here felt natural, and many humans still gave them downright hostile looks. Most of them were clearly wary of Xanthe, despite her burnt-off wings, but one woman had spat at Remus in disgust for associating with ‘predators’.

“How is it that walking in this ‘city’ is so much more tiring than walking in the forest?” she complained. “And it’s not even as if I felt safer. Nothing is going to eat me, but I wouldn’t put it past some of those humans to try and stick a knife in me.” She paused, as they ignored her, then added sullenly: “I’m hungry”.

“Our neko friend is getting restless,” Remus remarked, without glancing back at her, walking ahead with Xanthe. Truth be told, Calina was feeling more than just ‘restless’. When they had first set out and entered Negav, she had still been imagining, somehow, vaguely, that it would not be all that hard. That it was simply a matter of checking various possible locations, until they found the right one. The risk of failure had not seriously occurred to her – or perhaps she had not wanted to consider it. Now, however, she felt profoundly demoralised. Day after day, they were finding *nothing*. Not even the beginning of a clue, or anything remotely suspicious.

“We’ll stop somewhere to eat,” Xanthe said, kindly, looking back at her. The fairy offered a supportive little smile, and Calina managed a faint smile back, grateful.

“If we continue to have no luck, we should perhaps consider asking directly where we can buy tinies,” Remus grumbled, albeit keeping his voice low so that fellow pedestrians would not hear him. Given that he was walking with a fairy and a neko, his words could all too easily be misinterpreted.

“No,” Xanthe said simply. “What we can do, though, is try to find out whether the authorities have any leads on current trafficking in tinies. Our money is getting low; we can’t stay here much longer, even if we severely ration ourselves. We’re going to need help.”

The meal they ate that evening, bought with a handful of coins, was anything but satisfying. Calina’s stomach rumbled uncomfortably as they walked the rest of way afterwards, back to the home of the humans who had offered them hospitality. She thought longingly of fresh juicy citroise fruit plucked from the trees, and crisp vegetables straight from the soil; of crunchy flavourful insects fresh from the earth, and frolicking energetic tinies wiggling down her throat. The thought only made her more hungry, and she sighed.

“There’s a letter for you,” one of their hosts said as they entered the cramped flat wearily. “Goodness, you look tired! Have you eaten? Come and sit down!”

They found themselves bundled inside and onto the sofas, and given drinks, while Xanthe opened the letter with a stirring of hope. It had to have come from one of her acquaintances within the city, whom she had visited to explain what she was looking for. None of them had seen or heard anything useful… at the time. But perhaps now…?

Her eyes skimmed over the paper, and she frowned with frustration. Although it was only a few lines long, it was utterly incomprehensible.

“I don’t know the language,” she said, annoyed. Remus glanced at it, and shook his head.

“Neither do I. Do we know who sent it?”

“Can I see?” Their host took the envelope and letter that Xanthe handed to him. “Hm. I don’t know the language of the letter itself, but the information on the envelope must have been filled in at the post office. It’s in Mexhyli. It says the sender is a Mrs Steh…ryun Dom…mar.” He struggled somewhat with the pronunciation.

“Sterri?” Xanthe brightened.

“Know her?” Remus asked.

The fairy nodded. “I found her in the forest, a long time ago, and brought her to Negav. With several others. Long before I met you. I went round to her place the other day, but she wasn’t in. Only her son. I asked him to tell her I’d called round, and why. He must have done so… and now she’s written to me.” She paused, thinking it over.

“Maybe she’s asking to see you?” Remus suggested.

Calina sat up straighter, excited, her tiredness momentarily forgotten. “Do you think she knows something? She must do, or she wouldn’t have written to you! Has she found them?”

Xanthe smiled a little. “I’ll ask her. But let’s not get our hopes up. Maybe she just wants to get in touch while I’m in town.”

“Shall we find out?” Remus was already standing.

“In the morning,” Xanthe said gently.

“But why?” Calina blurted. “If she knows… All this time, we’ve found nothing. What if they–”

“It’s late. I don’t want to intrude on her. And I’m not even sure I could find my way there in the dark.” She looked from one to the other. “First thing in the morning.”

\* \* \*

It took Calina a while to get to sleep, despite her weariness; her mind was far too active, and full of questions. When she finally did drift into slumber, however, she slept soundly. Awaking the next morning, she was surprised and dismayed to find that her travelling companions had already gone out.

Their hosts were unable to tell her the address they had gone to, and of course she would not have dared try to find it by herself. After a quick breakfast, she was thus left pacing around nervously, her tail swishing, waiting for them to return.

When the fairy and the human finally came back, she almost leapt at them, with a bubbling pent-up mixture of hope and anxiety, trying to decipher their faces before they spoke. The look she saw there left her more uncertain than ever.

“It turns out Sterri is part of an informal group who buy tinies from these illegal pet shops, and release them,” Xanthe explained, after getting the worried neko to sit down. “If she’d been in when I first went round, we’d have saved a lot of time…” She sighed. “When her son gave her the message, she started getting in touch with the people she knows.”

“And?” Calina interrupted, clutching her arm. “Are they all right?”

Xanthe’s expression tightened. “A woman from the group had already found and bought Tina and Meringue. She still has them with her. In the south of the city. We’ll go and fetch them after lunch.”

“And Joanna?” Calina asked, tensely. “What about Joanna?”

The fairy looked her in the eyes, gravely. “Joanna had already been bought. Nobody knows who’s got her.”

The neko’s heart clenched. Her memories of Joanna –tiny, smiling, so full of warmth, the sunlight playing in her fair hair– drifted into her mind and lingered, ethereal.

“So how do we find her?” she pressed.

Xanthe’s look conveyed the words before she even spoke them. Calina had never seen those green eyes tinged with sadness before, nor indeed with resignation.

“We can’t,” she said, quietly.

\* \* \*

After that, Calina felt a little dazed as she followed her temporary companions across town. The woman who had rescued the tomthumbs turned out to be a neko, somewhat to her surprise, and a very friendly one at that. The tinies’ relief and gratitude at their arrival was palpable, but subdued by Joanna’s absence. Still, Calina felt her insides clench with emotion when Meringue made little whimpering sounds of happiness, holding up her tiny arms to Remus, and cried with an overflow of contradictory emotions as he picked her gently up. She nestled against him for a long while, holding on to him as though she never wanted to let go.

Calina herself was quietly relieved when they made their way out of the city, crossing the bridge to the sight of the forest ahead, leaving the alien bustle of the humans’ crowded streets behind them. But somewhere within those streets, alive or dead, hidden away where they could never find her, was Joanna, and she felt sick at heart at having to leave the tiny woman behind.

*That’s what comes of getting so attached*, she berated herself, and wiped discreetly at the tears which stung in her eyes. Joanna had always trusted her, and opened up to her, and befriended her. And now she really was lost to them.

She steadied herself, as best she could, with a quiet breath. Tina, riding in Xanthe’s pocket, was asking again where exactly they had left Milly, and Calina tried not to think of how Milly was going to feel.

But of course, she knew already. She could feel it herself, and could picture the emotions on the giantess’ face as though she could already see them.

Which, very soon, now, walking on over the soft grass into the forest, in these strange human shoes that she had not yet taken off, she would.

END