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THE YEAR OF THE BEAR

By Kristin Janz

Brennan did not see the woman until he looked up from the wreckage of the beehive. When he did see her, he froze, as if she were the bear that had caused the damage.

She pointed at the ground, where he still crouched on one knee. "Honey," she said. A smile curved her lips.

Brennan felt his shoulders relax. Her only weapon appeared to be a small knife, its handle and sheath of lacquered wood, rich with gold inlay.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. He had never met one of her race. But he had heard stories of them. All his life.

"Yes," he said. "Honey. Bees make honey." He gestured to where she had pointed, to where bees still buzzed over the ridges of ruined comb lining the upturned hive of woven straw, shredded by teeth and claws. "But bears like to eat it." He wondered how much she understood. He took a step toward her, surprising himself. "Where do you come from?" She was taller than he, but even more beautiful than he had imagined, her black hair glistening like silk, the curve of

her long neck cream-white as sun-bleached beeswax.

Instead of answering, she asked, "May I please have some honey?" She had only the slightest accent. He had always heard that her people scorned to learn the human languages.

He found a straw skep not glued to its wooden platform by beeswax and propolis, smoked the bees briefly to sedate them, then tipped the round hive up and used his knife to slice away a decent slab of comb. A handful of meadow grass served as a brush to knock off the bees that clung to it; he squashed three or four hangers-on between leather-gloved finger and thumb. One tried to sting through the long sleeve of his woolen shirt, but he caught it in time. Carefully, so as not to crush too much of the delicate wax, he cut the comb in two, offering the larger portion to the woman.

She took it eagerly, heedless of the honey that leaked from the cut edge and dribbled onto the sleeve of her crimson and ivory silk gown. She looked almost human. Her lips were thin and pale, her cheekbones too high, her tilted gray eyes too alien. He could not see the pointed tips of her ears, but knew he would, were her veil of hair to slip away. And yet, the inside of her mouth was as red as his, or his wife's.

He forgot his own honeycomb, watching her. She ate daintily and quietly. Brennan's wife Tira gulped down meals as if someone might steal her food, chewing loudly with her mouth open.

He tried to think of something to say in the woman's language, but she had finished her honey and turned back to the forest before he could remember a single word. She paused though, looking back, her mouth curved into a mysterious half smile.

"Thank you," she said. Then, "I shall kill the bear for you, if you like."

And she slipped between the trees, and was gone.

#

The youth Brennan hired to watch that meadow found the bear five nights later, stretched out under a beech tree, killed by the four arrows bristling from its neck.

No one in the village had seen the like of those arrows, black as night from head to fletching. Old man Nevis said they were of elven make. Of course, Nevis held elves responsible for everything from the mysterious death of the joiner's baby daughter to early frosts and poor harvests. And yet, he was the only person in the village who had ever seen an elf -- or a centaur, or any of the other old races; which made it difficult for others to argue with him.

Brennan did not mention his encounter in the meadow, or the woman's parting promise.

#

Sometimes elves took human children. No one knew why. Once, in town with his father, Brennan heard a man say that the elves were dying. Their women were barren, their race cursed by the god for murdering the last High King. And so they stole young humans -- always the tallest ones, with dark hair and gray eyes, the ones who looked most like elves -- to raise as their own. Elven sorcerers wrapped those children in ribbons of black magic, the man claimed, to smother their humanness bit by bit, and by the time they reached adulthood they were fully elven, with no memory of their human births.

Brennan's grandfather said that was nonsense. The only thing an elf ever wanted of a human child was to kill it, he said, and they'd all do well to remember that. Still, Brennan remembered running out every morning to check his reflection in the cracked bit of mirror they kept on an outside wall of the house, to see if his hair had gotten any darker, his blue eyes

lighter. They never did. Nor did the elves come for him, though he lay awake many nights in the one-room cottage, listening to his family's loud breathing, waiting.

#

Her name was Silvale. She told him not to call her an elf, a human word that meant nothing to her. "We are Alcalia," she said, "the god's first children."

When they first made love, it felt inevitable. She took him deep into the forest to her family's summer dwelling. She was a virgin, but as eager for him as Tira had been that first year of their marriage, before miscarriages and difficult pregnancies and dead children conspired to make her resent him.

Silvale's bed rocked gently with the wind in the boughs of the family tree, nestled in a fork between two branches, held up by cables arching gracefully overhead. The entire house was as cunningly constructed, with several levels of small platforms and shelves supported by branches or jutting out from the main trunk. Such a dwelling grew with the tree, she told him, over two hundred years or more, each room designed around the contours of the living branches.

She offered to teach him how to build his own treetop dwelling, forgetting, perhaps, that in two hundred years he would be long dead. She grew silent then, recognizing her error. Later, when she reached for him a second time, she seemed to be trying to sear the memory of him upon her heart, knowing that it would fade long before she grew any older.

#

There was no pattern to her visits. She would come to one of his scattered bee fields every afternoon for four days; then he would scan the forest fringe in vain every day for two weeks. Sometimes she appeared at midday, bringing white wine in clear glass bottles, unusual

fruits, strange elven dishes unlike anything he had ever tasted.

One day, she asked how old his daughters were.

He stared. She was still only half-dressed after their lovemaking, and was combing her hair.

"How did you know I have children? I've never told you about them."

She brought the comb to rest in her lap. A smile played on her lips. "I have seen them. In your village."

He frowned, confused. "You've been to my village?"

"The houses are close to the forest. When I watch from there, no one sees me."

"Aleine is four and Irina is two. Both girls." He could not keep the bitterness from his voice.

"It is important to you, to have a boy?" His expression must have shown how obvious he thought the answer; she shrugged, taking her comb up again. "We do not mind bearing female children. We do not have them often, boys or girls, and so we are happy whenever one of us gives birth."

Brennan remembered what that man in town had said, years ago. "Because so many elven -- I mean Alcalia -- women are barren?"

She wrinkled her forehead at him. "Barren? What do you mean?"

He knew his face would be turning red. "I -- I heard once that Alcalia women are barren, and that's why Alcalia steal human children. To turn them into Alcalia. Because they can't have any of their own, since the war." Halfway through, he could tell by the expression on her face that he should stop. But somehow, the words kept spilling out.

"Who says this?" she demanded. "That Alcalia steal children?"

"Everyone says it." That was what upset her? He did not want to say more, but her expression compelled him. "No one in my village has had a child disappear, but all the old folk tell us that we have to hide any who look like your people. Or they might be taken."

He had never seen her angry, but the way she started attacking her hair with the comb made him wish he was elsewhere. She did not speak to him again until she had finished combing and braiding it, and fastened it at the nape of her neck with golden ornaments.

"It is not possible to change humans into Alcalia," she said at last. "And our women are not barren. If we bore a child every two or three years, as your women do, we would fill the earth, and there would be no space for your kind."

He realized that she had not disputed his assertion that elves stole children.

As if reading his mind, she said, her voice a little more gentle, "Maybe you should not wonder why the children disappear, but why their mothers do not."

#

Three weeks later, he found one of her decorative combs. It had been placed beside a straw skep, the one from which he had first cut honey for her. Of lacquered wood, it was heavily inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl, and the silver held three tiny emeralds.

He did not see her again that summer. He hid the comb in a corner of the drafty storage shed behind his house, wrapped in two handkerchiefs. Many nights that winter, he would retreat there to drink his cup of mead and sit for an hour or more, turning the comb over and over in his cold fingers.

#

Spring, and he was watching the rain pour down, staring through the open window beside the front door. He and his wife Tira had hardly spoken to one another since that morning.

Brennan wished he could unsay a few of the words he had hurled at her. He wished he could forget the way their daughter Aleine had stared at him, as if he were a stranger.

Tira had been the stranger when they were wed, her distant village as scarce of young folk as his own. At first, he had cherished a hope that this would bring them closer together; he might as well have been from far away, for all the affinity he felt with others in the village. But she had never enjoyed long walks through forest and meadow, or hunting through thickets for ruined railway carriages and other traces of the old days. She hated bees, and cared little for the heroic tales of warriors and wizards and elves that Brennan so loved.

It had not mattered, once. When Tira was still the loveliest girl Brennan had ever seen, golden-haired and dimple-cheeked, with a ready laugh as warm as spring sunshine, kisses as sweet as raspberry honey. But now, when he looked at her, he searched her face in vain for traces of the beauty that had left him breathless. She had never lost the weight gained during her first pregnancy. And when she laughed, which was not often, it was always at his expense.

"Will you close that window already? You're letting the rain in."

Brennan had been just about to draw the shutters. The wind had shifted, and the front of his shirt was catching enough stray drops to feel uncomfortably chilly against his chest. But the nagging tone in her voice made him scowl, and he decided that he felt like watching the storm a little longer.

"I suppose you don't care if the girls catch a chill. You ought to come over here and feel Aleine's feet, they might as well be made of ice."

Brennan sighed. As far as he knew, no four-year old had yet died of cold feet. But he went out into the storm to unhook the outer shutters from against the siding. He left the door open behind him, and was rewarded upon his return by Tira's frostiest stare.

He wondered if she knew about his infidelity. She had hinted as much that morning. The entire village suspected something. Once, last fall, he had walked into the public house to find one of the hamlet's most useless young men entertaining those assembled with a rousing rendition of "A Maid from the Town Downriver" -- a performance that had halted abruptly the moment its singer realized who had just entered the room. He supposed, too late, that walking out again without having his drink had not been the best way to allay suspicion. But what did it matter if everyone in the village believed he had a woman in town? Everyone in the village knew why Brennan's mother had occasionally gone about with a blackened eye, and no one had ever interfered in that.

Not that Brennan had been unfaithful at all in recent months. He crossed the room to the mead barrel, still in his boots, rain streaming from his cloak to trail him across the floor. One tankard of mead was rarely enough these days. He needed two, sometimes three, or he'd lie awake in misery half the night, tormented by the memory of Silvale's long, white arms and small, perfect breasts, the cedar and leaf mould scent of her skin, the delicate touch of her slender fingers in his hair and beard.

"You shouldn't be drinking so much," Tira complained. "I didn't leave my village and come all this way to live with a drunkard."

Exasperated, finally, he turned on her, the empty tankard in one hand, the ladle in his other. "Why don't you go back to your village then?" he demanded, his voice rising. "You're not

much good to me here."

She stared at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

He hadn't meant to say that. He watched her from across the room, his stomach tying itself in knots.

A fresh gust of wind caught the house in its embrace, rattling the shutters, making the fire dance on the hearth. The door shook, straining out against the hinges and bar, then slamming back into its frame. It was so loud, it sounded as if someone were pounding on it. Then Brennan realized that someone was pounding on it, desperately, as though the storm were a relentless enemy in pursuit.

"There's someone at the door," Tira said.

Cursing, Brennan slammed the tankard and ladle down on the table, and went to open the door.

An enormous figure, swathed in billowing dark garments, stood outside. Brennan cried out, alarmed, stepping back without thinking. The figure followed him.

Tira shrieked, clutching the girls to her side. Brennan reached for his knife. It wasn't there; he'd taken it off his belt earlier. He snatched the ladle off the table.

The dark stranger pushed back the hood and pulled down the muffler to reveal a long white face, black hair, gray eyes. Brennan cried out again, but for a different reason.

"Silvale!"

He had never seen her so haggard. Her cheeks were wind-burned red, her lips cracked and bleeding, her nails broken and dirty. But she was as beautiful as ever.

Solemnly, she regarded him. "I am sorry. I need your help." She turned to Tira. "I

would not come to your house if I were not in such great danger."

Tira's face was as pale as Brennan had ever seen it. "She's an elf!" she gasped. She pulled the girls even closer, ignoring Aleine's cry of "Mama, you're hurting me!"

"I mean you no harm," Silvale promised. "You or your children."

Tira stared at Silvale as if she had not heard her speak. "She's pregnant, Brennan."

The world turned upside down, then righted itself. Brennan found himself clutching at the edge of the table.

He wondered that he had not noticed at once. She was within weeks of her time.

"I would have borne this shame alone," Silvale told him. "But my brother was suspicious, and jealous of our family's honor. He followed my tracks to where I had hidden, and confronted me. He would have killed me, but I lied to him, and when he left to discover the truth of my claim, I fled." She shrugged. "He will pursue me again once he knows that I tried to deceive him. I would not steal you from your own family, but will you go with me until the child is born? I do not want him to kill our child."

Brennan was aware of Tira's horrified voice saying, "Your other woman is an elf?" But she seemed very far away.

"How could you doubt that I'd go with you?" he exclaimed. "You should have told me before. I would have looked after you."

A faint smile crossed her lips, then vanished. "We must leave at once. My brother cannot find me here."

If he took the mule, they should be able to carry enough food, bedding and extra clothing. Silvale could ride, if she tired of walking. Brennan threw open the trunk against the wall and

began to take out socks, smallclothes, a spare shirt. He spied a simple shapeless garment that both girls had worn as infants, and added that to the pile.

"What do you think you're doing, Brennan?" Tira's hand was on his shoulder. He shook it off. She grabbed a fold of his shirt and tried to force him to turn around and face her. This time, he swatted her hand away.

"Leave me alone!" he growled. He had everything he needed from the trunk; he took up the garments and carried them over to the wall, where the saddlebags hung, shouldering past Tira on his way.

"Brennan!" she wailed. "You can at least look at me, you coward!"

She was crying, her round face blotched with red, her nose streaming. She rubbed at it with the back of one hand. "What about the girls?" she demanded. "You can't just leave us like this!"

His girls. Aleine and Irina were watching him and Tira with wide eyes, quiet as rabbits. Suddenly Brennan felt sick to his stomach at the thought of leaving them behind.

He had to look away from them. "I have to go." Tira had the house, and the cow, and all the bees and beekeeping equipment. And Brennan's sister and brother-in-law lived in the village. What did Silvale have? The clothes she was wearing, and her brother trying to kill her.

He looked back from the threshold of the cottage to meet Tira's gaze, her eyes still not quite believing that he was leaving her. He could not help remembering how bright those eyes had been on their wedding day. Or the hundred small hurts she had inflicted on him since.

"I don't belong here," he told her. "I never did."

They went deeper into the Great Forest than Brennan had ever dared. Humans were not safe beyond its fringes, any more than the other races were welcome in human cities and towns.

Six long days' riding brought Silvale to her time earlier than she had expected. Just before noon on the seventh day, a trail she had chosen brought them to a low rise where the trees thinned, four crude shelters of rough-hewn logs, sheep and goats grazing. A tall man on horseback was waiting for them.

The man was naked from the waist up. He started to approach Brennan and Silvale, and suddenly Brennan froze in his tracks, tugging on the mule's halter to hold her back. It was not a man on horseback at all, but a centaur.

Silvale squeezed his wrist. She didn't seem alarmed. And she had chosen this trail. But Brennan could not help remembering stories his grandfather had told him from the Great War, hordes of centaurs thundering across the western plains, slaughtering every human in their path.

Silvale and the centaur spoke in the elven language, while others began to gather. Brennan inferred from the tone of the centaur's replies that he was not pleased to see them, but eventually he motioned for Silvale to dismount. Three females hustled her away into the minimal shelter afforded by their open-fronted huts, murmuring and scolding in much the same way Brennan had seen among human women.

The babe was born a day later, as night was falling. Two males in their middle years with whom Brennan had held an awkward vigil outside took him to her, falling away as he entered the shelter.

Her smile as he crouched beside her nest of bedding was as secretive and mischievous as ever. "Your son," she announced.

He was a little, wrinkled red thing, sleeping nestled against her breast in the crook of her arm, his fine black hair a shadow over the back of his head. Like his mother's, the tips of his tiny ears were pointed. Silvale let Brennan hold him, and he did not wake, making only small noises as he was handed over.

"His name is Imranar," she told him, "after the last Alcalia King, the father of he who now reigns. His namesake fought to preserve the union between the Eight Races when many of my people would have abandoned it."

Imranar stirred at the sound of Silvale's voice, as if he could sense the burden of expectation laid upon his small head.

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Greatheart, the centaur who had first greeted them, told them they had to go.

"Your brother Tevrinan will follow you here. What then? Your people and mine have always lived in peace. This --" he jerked his chin in Brennan's direction, scraping one of his front hooves along the ground, "-- this they will not accept."

Silvale's head shot up, and anger darkened her gray eyes to black. "You know what my brother has done!"

Greatheart was silent for a moment. At last he said, "It is not my place to sit in judgment over the houses of the Alcalia."

#

Many nights, Silvale hardly spoke. She would fall asleep within moments of finishing their evening meal, suckling Imranar. Or she would sit very still, her back against a tree trunk, staring at nothing. Once she said, her voice distant, "In the valley below the western slope of

Halcan Alcalia, where the king and queen dwell, the air is thick now with the petals of fallen cherry blossom, a blizzard of palest pink. Violets carpet the meadow at the forest's edge, and the grass is green, and although the wind descends cold each night, a sweet fragrance hangs in the air."

The sadness in her voice sent a pang of longing through Brennan, for this world of hers that he had never known. "I wish I could see it," he said. "Will you tell me more?" But she seemed to neither hear nor see him.

She spoke of life among her kindred only one other time. Brennan had been telling her how he had learned about bees by following his father and grandfather, watching what they did. He ventured to ask what her father's profession was, not really expecting an answer.

She hesitated, but only just. "He is a sculptor. My mother is a gardener." He was about to ask more when she said, "I am studying the art of healing. I used to study human language and literature, but the war was the end of that." The Great War had ended almost eighty years ago.

He did not know when she would next be willing to speak of her family. "What did your brother do, that Greatheart knows about?"

Her mouth tightened, and she averted her eyes from his. But after a moment, she began to speak.

"There was a human woman. In your village. Normally these affairs are kept quiet, but somehow, everyone knew. It has been a terrible scandal. My father's sculptures were removed from the Hall of Virtues. He was told that the space was needed for the work of younger artists, but we knew the truth."

Brennan had not gotten past the beginning of that. "A woman in my village?"

Silvale seemed not to have heard. "What few outside our family know is that he had gotten her with child, and then refused to do what would have saved us from worse disgrace. He said he could not, until our father threatened to make him Houseless, and even then he needed his friend Audrinal to do it for him."

"What?" Brennan was lost.

"He did not harm the child's mother, but she died soon after. I did not tell Tevrinan."

Everything fell into place, suddenly. A small child dying mysteriously one or two months after her birth, and then the mother died a month later, accident or suicide, he didn't know. Old Man Nevis kept saying elves were responsible, but no one had listened. "The joiner's baby daughter. Nine years ago." Brennan didn't think he had ever gotten a close look at the child. Her mother had always kept her well-wrapped, supposedly fearing that she'd catch a chill. "Wait a minute. Your brother had his own child murdered?"

Silvale did not answer.

Brennan felt a chill, himself. Part of him had wanted to dismiss Silvale's insistence on the danger she and Imranar faced. Surely her brother could not be so cold-hearted as to harm his own sister and nephew! But if he had allowed his daughter to be killed to avoid disgrace....

"How common is this?"

Silvale's laugh was hollow. "If you asked our king, he would say that it does not happen. He would deny all knowledge of what my brother did, even as he and his House shun my father and mother at court. I do not know how often it happens, Brennan. There is my brother Tevrinan, and I. Audrinal strangled two human girls he got with child, as soon as their bellies

began to swell. Before the war, a human sorceress bragged of taking Alcalia lovers, but she was too powerful to be silenced, and at least she did not shame the men by naming them, or bearing their children."

"It was considered shameful while our people were allies?"

"Much is considered shameful by my people." He thought he could hear bitterness in her voice, the same sort that surfaced in his when he spoke of his village. "Consider. We do not age much more slowly than you for our first twenty years, though we might live a thousand. And yet, we are considered children until our hundredth birthday, and are not permitted to marry until we are at least one hundred and fifty, perhaps two hundred." She shrugged. "If a young Alcalia man, old enough to be out in the world on his own affairs but not old enough to marry, if he meets a pretty human girl in the meadows and charms her with gifts and songs and sweets, who is to know?"

He remembered what she had said that lazy summer afternoon, almost a year ago now.

"So when our children are taken, the children with elven features, it's their fathers taking them, to kill them."

"Their fathers, or other Alcalia. If men like Audrinal saw a human child with pointed ears and gray eyes, they would consider it their duty to destroy it while it was still young, before it could grow to adulthood and further pollute our blood."

"Why? What does it matter? It's not their sister or daughter who had the half-breed baby. Maybe it's my people who should be upset about elven men treating our women like whores."

Her eyes darkened at that, but only briefly. Anger was replaced by sadness. Brennan felt

his face redden.

"Last summer, you spoke of the barrenness of Alcalia women," Silvale said. "We are not barren, no more than we ever were. But we dwindle. All the races dwindle. All but yours."

"Mine?"

"Alcalia walked upon the earth at the dawn of history. We were the first to till the soil, to adopt four-legged beasts as companions and helpers, to make music with harp and flute and drum, to weave cloth, to form clay into pots and drinking vessels, to brew mead and beer, to record our stories on clay tablets and later on scrolls of paper. The towers of Alcalia cities rose into the sky while your ancestors wallowed in savagery. We lifted you out of savagery. We clothed you in linen and silk, and fed you bread and rice, and taught you the ways of the god. Now, humans rule the earth. They say that over one hundred thousand humans live in each of the great southern cities. But there are fewer than ten thousand Alcalia left anywhere in the world, and no place that we may walk openly without disguise, except the peaks and valleys of the Tethial range, and this great forest. Think on that, if you are able. Imagine that your dogs rose up in packs and tried to make you their servants."

He wondered if she knew how her words hurt. "We're like dogs to you?"

She faltered then, dropped her eyes from his. "Not to me." Her voice was barely audible.

After that, he did not trust himself to speak. She left him to his silence.

#

The deeper they traveled into human territory, the more withdrawn Silvale became. Brennan tried to solicit her opinion each time they reached a crossroads. Should they go north, where the closest settlements might be fifty miles apart? Or south, rumored to be bustling with

thriving human cities, rebuilt since the war? But Silvale did not seem to care, often not even acknowledging that he had asked a question.

He struggled not to be angry with her. He could tell that she was still in pain from the birth, and exhausted from tending the baby. But he wondered where the old Silvale had gone, the woman who had killed a bear with only her bow, who had chosen him as her lover despite the risk.

Tira had infuriated him in much the same way. After miscarrying her first pregnancy, she stayed in bed for two months. It was almost a year before she would let him touch her again.

Brennan decided to head for the new walled town on the western edge of the Highlands. If Silvale's brother still pursued them, surely those walls would keep him out. And Brennan thought they could explain Silvale's unusual appearance. Everyone knew that occasionally children were born with elven features, and surely some had guessed the truth of their parentage. Silvale would be half-elven, and if she did not deny half her blood, who would insist on burdening her with the other half?

So Brennan convinced himself, and Silvale offered no objection. At a farmstead where Brennan exchanged an afternoon of work for food and lodging, they did not even have to explain. The woman of the house cast suspicious looks in Silvale's direction when she thought Brennan wouldn't notice, but she was not unkind, and when her small daughter curled up next to Silvale to watch the baby, she did not call her back. She even gave Silvale a bundle of ragged diapers to take with her.

Brennan began to think that everything might be all right after all. Though the sight of the couple's little girl, the same age as his own daughter Aleine, brought a resurfacing of the

painful lump in his throat that he'd thought Imranar's birth had quelled.

The next day of traveling was easy, and the next. Brennan chose roads that headed east or north, toward the large town, and he felt they were making good progress. But then one day everything seemed to go wrong. It was raining when they woke, and then just as the rain was clearing enough for them to saddle the mule and start moving, Imranar started to cry. And cry, and cry. Silvale couldn't soothe him, and when Brennan tried to take the baby from her for a moment -- he had some experience with infants, after all, as she did not -- she snapped at him. And she refused to leave their campsite while the baby was fussing, claiming that the rocking of the mule's gait would upset him. Brennan bit back a retort that if they sat around waiting for Silvale's brother to catch up, Imranar would have more than the mule to upset him.

He didn't say it, though. He was not going to make the mistakes he had made with Tira, saying the first angry words that jumped to the end of his tongue, not when they were both so tired and anxious. If he had learned nothing else....

The day had passed well into afternoon by the time Imranar subsided into sleep, but Brennan felt they should try to make some progress before halting for the night, so they took to the road once more. There were only a few muddy places, despite the morning rain, and they made better time than Brennan had expected.

Towards evening, Imranar woke again, but this time he only cried until Silvale started nursing him. Brennan relaxed. It was a beautiful afternoon, perhaps more beautiful for the morning's rain. Fields spread out on either side of the road, cut by low walls of undressed stone, edged in the distance by low scrub willow. Shadows were lengthening, and a chill was rising in the air as evening approached. Three crows launched themselves from one of the stone walls,

cawing, the beat of their wings loud in the empty land.

Behind him, on the mule, Silvale drew in her breath sharply. "Brennan!"

He turned, a smile on his face. "What is it --?" And he felt his smile wither and die.

At their backs, still distant but closing quickly, two men on horses, tall gray horses like the one Silvale had ridden the day she took him to the treehouse in the forest.

Silvale slipped out of the saddle. She thrust Imranar into Brennan's arms, and began walking toward the approaching horsemen before he could collect his thoughts enough to speak.

The two men stopped and dismounted. Brennan could not tell which was Silvale's brother. They looked too much alike: dark-haired, both over seven feet tall.

The taller of the two strode to meet Silvale, his lips curled as if an unpleasant smell offended him. Silvale stood still and proud, her chin jutting out.

The elf drew his hand back and slapped her hard across her left cheek.

Brennan took a step forward, then stopped. Both elves carried swords, and the second had a bow and quiver of arrows slung over his back.

The first spoke to Silvale in their own language, the contempt in his voice surpassing that on his face.

"Speak of your honor to the Mincalia girls you murdered for carrying your seed, Audrinal," she retorted, in the human language. Mincalia was the elven word for human: slightly derisive, but the most polite term their language offered.

Audrinal raised his hand to strike her again. But at a sharp word from the other elf, he lowered it.

Silvale's brother Tevrinan had not been the one to hit her. Brennan dared to hope that

that meant something. He hugged Imranar tightly against his chest with both arms. Please, he thought, wishing elves really could read men's minds. Please, they're your family. Your own sister and nephew.

Tevrinan moved to join Audrinal. He seemed unhappy and embarrassed more than angry. Brennan reminded himself that Tevrinan had fathered a half-human daughter. That he had not been able to murder her himself.

Imranar's fussing, which had begun the moment Silvale handed him over, turned into a full-throated squall.

A sudden, fierce light shone on Tevrinan's face, subsuming the signs of every other emotion. His eyes lit on the bundle in Brennan's arms, and he made to dart around Silvale, his right hand gripping his sword hilt.

"Dalo!" Silvale screamed, her spell of statuesque scorn broken. She tried to grab his sword arm.

In one liquid movement, Tevrinan stepped back, drew the sword, and cleaved through his sister's neck in a single blow.

Brennan was rooted to the spot, watching her body crumple to the road. Imranar kept screaming, his tiny face red and wrinkled as the day he was born.

Tevrinan approached Brennan next, stepping off the road briefly to avoid Silvale's body. Red glinted wetly on the naked blade in his hand. Brennan took one step backwards. Only one. What good would running have done? His lips felt cold and numb. He could not look at Silvale.

"Filthy sarsamantan!" Tevrinan spat. "I will speak so you can understand, though your foul language burns my tongue." His accent was heavier than Silvale's was. Had been. His eyes

and hers were the same shape. "Shall I tell you what my worthless sister has done? When I confronted her and demanded to know the cause of her disgrace, she blamed Audrinal. She told me that she loved my friend, but that she had run away so as not to shame him for lying with a maiden too young to wed."

"I'm sorry." Brennan could not think clearly. Imranar was still crying. How had this happened, that Silvale's brother had killed her? Brennan had been so certain, only a moment before, that Tevrinan would remember his own child, and show mercy to Silvale and hers.

"Your kind is never sorry," Tevrinan snarled. "We should have burned you off the face of the earth."

Audrinal interjected a few elven words. Tevrinan scowled, raising his sword.

"Don't I get to defend myself?" Brennan demanded. "Or do you elves think it's more honorable to strike down unarmed men?"

To Brennan's surprise, Tevrinan lowered his sword. The elf laughed. "Very well, sarsamantan. We will fight like men." He spoke to Audrinal. Audrinal made a face, but laid his sword on the ground at his feet, then backed away.

Tevrinan jerked his chin toward Audrinal's sword. Brennan went to take it up, first switching Imranar to his left arm. He was afraid that if he put the baby down, one of the elves would kill the child at once.

His eyes widened when he lifted the sword. He had not expected it to be so heavy. Both elves laughed at his distress.

"I am afraid we do not make them for infants," Tevrinan mocked. He swung at Brennan.

Brennan got the tip of his sword up just in time to parry. He felt the blow all the way up

to his shoulder, and grimaced. Tevrinan chuckled.

Tevrinan struck a second time. Once again, Brennan managed to knock the blade aside with his own sword, only this time Imranar squirmed so hard that Brennan almost dropped him.

Brennan swore, stumbling backwards. Again, Tevrinan laughed.

Brennan braced himself for the third blow. Suddenly, Audrinal, watching the road behind them, called out. He sounded worried.

Tevrinan lowered his blade. His eyes narrowed. "Wait for me, swordsman," he commanded, and went to rejoin his friend.

At first, Brennan thought that two new horsemen were thundering along the road toward them in a swirl of dust. Then he realized what he was actually seeing. A relief so intense it made his knees buckle surged through him; until he remembered that it was too late. Silvale was already dead.

Greatheart slowed as he approached Brennan and the elves. One of the two other males from his tiny settlement accompanied him. Greatheart's face darkened when he saw Silvale's headless body, sprawled on the road in a pool of spreading blood.

Tevrinan addressed Greatheart in the centaur's own language. His tone was respectful, but Brennan was certain he heard a note of fear underneath.

"We will speak in the human's language," Greatheart said. "Since that is the only one that we all understand."

Audrinal answered in the elven tongue, his voice scornful.

Tevrinan turned and muttered at him, urgently.

At that very moment, Imranar stopped crying.

Greatheart's face was terrible. He swung his huge, spiked mace in a two-handed blow, landing it on the crown of Audrinal's head. The elf uttered a strangled, grunting cry as the centaur yanked the club free again, the two spikes that had sunk home in his skull pulling free with a rasping, sucking sound. Audrinal dropped to his hands and knees, then fell over sideways. Greatheart kicked the fallen elf's face in with his sharp hooves. Brennan heard the bones splinter.

Tevrinan was shaking now. He backed away. "I killed her, Greatheart. Audrinal is innocent."

"Of that, perhaps," Greatheart retorted. "Look at you!" he roared. "Your people are dying out, and yet you murder your own sister for a crime you yourself have committed. You think this will rejuvenate your race? That the blood of dead Alcalia women and half-breed babies will bring your war dead to life?"

"There will not be any Alcalia if this continues!" Tevrinan cried. He flung an accusatory arm toward Brennan. "That creature stole my sister. She could have joined our House to one of the highest, and brought forth children to carry us back from the edge of extinction. But no. She wasted the bloodline my father and mother handed down to her."

"It need not have been wasted. Not until you killed her."

Tevrinan gave a short, sharp laugh. "Who would have her, knowing she had borne a human child?"

Greatheart sighed. "Your people do not know what it is to be alone in the world. If there were a second race with which mine could bear young, I would find it a great comfort. I would think that, so long as a handful survived who carried our blood in their veins, no matter how

dilute, a memory of us would survive. Better that than the slow dwindling away that faces us."

Tevrinan's laugh was one of utter disbelief. "I would rather we all died, than see our race carried forward by wretched hybrids with dwindling Alcalia blood."

Sadness broke Greatheart's face. "May you have your wish," he said.

Brennan closed his eyes as the blow fell.

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He remembered little of the weeks that followed. Greatheart and the other centaur took him back to their huts, and a centaur woman nursed Imranar until he could be weaned. Brennan wandered about the encampment and its surroundings in a daze, as if sleepwalking. Once, he deliberately sliced open the palm of his hand, and watched his blood well to the surface and trickle down his wrist, then to the mossy forest floor below. Somewhere, in the part of him that could still notice such things, he registered surprise at how little it hurt.

Midsummer had passed when Brennan returned to his village, and to the small house at the forest's edge. Aleine and Irina were playing outside, and when they saw him trudging up the path with Imranar on his back they shrieked with joy and ran to fling their arms around him. Brennan hugged them back hard, and kissed them, but he didn't speak. He didn't know what to say to them.

Tira had no trouble deciding what to say to Brennan. She told him that "the elf woman's brat" had no place under her roof. She even hinted that Brennan might come home one night and find Imranar dead in his sleep. Brennan hit her, sending her flying halfway across the room, rage finally smashing through the unfeeling fog that had clouded his emotions for so long.

Anger fled at the approach of shame. Brennan fled too, and found himself sitting on a

boulder overlooking the stream that his girls liked to wade in. Later, Tira came and sat near him. She didn't speak.

It took him a long time to find the words. "My father used to hit my mother when he lost his temper." He tossed a couple of pebbles into the stream. "I thought I was different. From him. From all the people in the village who knew how he treated her but never spoke up."

Tira was silent for a long time. He heard only the rustle of her skirts as she shifted position on her rock.

Finally, she spoke. "My father didn't hit my mother. But he had other women." Tira had never mentioned this in the eight years they had been married. "He didn't deny it, either. He said it was her fault for getting fat and ugly. Everyone in our village knew, and they all just laughed at her. Said she couldn't be much of a wife, if she couldn't keep her man from straying."

Her voice sounded hoarse, suddenly. "I laughed at her too. With my friends. I didn't know why she put up with it. Why didn't she just leave? I told myself that's what I would have done. I thought leaving would have been the easiest thing in the world."

Brennan remembered the day Silvale had compared humans to dogs. He wondered if she ever realized how much it had hurt him. He dared to wonder, for the first time, how long it would have been before she hurt him that way again.

He heard Tira clear her throat. "Your baby's beautiful," she said. "Like his Mama and Daddy."

Brennan felt the tearing, choking cry well up in him like illness after a bad night's drinking. He buried his face in his knees, sobbing uncontrollably, his shoulders shaking.

After a moment, Tira's hand touched his forearm. First briefly, hesitantly. Then it

returned. He felt her warm fingers close around his wrist. She sat beside him until he had no tears left.