



Elanclose

Krystyna Faroe

*Out of the Apocalyptic dust grew new life
but was life free of the evil that caused it?*

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by

Krystyna Faroe

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Dedicated to:

All those that struggle to bring about awareness of:

Endangered animals

Climate changes

Destruction of nature

Maltreatment of people and animals

And most of all;

Thanks, to those that do something to change it.

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Biography

The invasive dust whirled and twirled amongst the rubble of stones.
With its movement it ejected grumbles and groans.
This was the angry residue of the Devastation.
A child wandered shading her eyes from the biting grains,
Thankful for her tears to dispense them upon her cheeks.
Her soul shattered, heartbroken into pieces, body shaken.
A small lone figure emerged with a dusty smile and an open hand,
Drawing her away from the death, despair and destruction,
He was her saviour in this bitter land.

Fern 2026

Chapter 1

Earth 2032

Watching from behind the large rock, Fern felt safe. She was small and felt invisible from their view. She recalled their eyesight was not very good or at least that was what she'd been told. She reflected that she shouldn't believe everything that the others said, it was easy to speculate when you didn't know, and how could they know anymore than she about these people? Still, she felt safe as she looked down at her clothes, shirt and pants that were a blotch of greens and blended well. Her clothes were form fitting so they did not catch on branches or bushes as she ran. They followed her lithe body and small curves like the bark around the trunk of a tree. Her shirt was long sleeved to protect her from the biting bugs. Bites that left more than marks that would fester to puss filled infections. The colours could fool the bugs most of the time as they were made from strong stretchy leaves, she could easily be mistaken for a long sinewy plant when she stood still.

With interested green eyes she watched them stumbling over tree roots and through bushes. They didn't normally come out this far. Why were they out here now? Although she knew she was safe and could escape silently and quickly, leaving them with no clue as to her ever having been there, she was uneasy about their presence. She could see they were uncomfortable and a few of them kicked in anger at the roots, and spat in disgust at the forest floor. They didn't want to be here, so why were they? She shifted to the other side of the rock and peeked around, following their movements as they trekked on.

Their leader was a large boy, she guessed around eighteen the same age as their leader Oak. His hair was dark and wild; he had a look of distrust and anger. His black eyebrows hooked together in a frown and his dark blue eyes were filled with concern as he led his troop along. He had the broadest shoulders she'd ever seen, covered with a black coat that touched the floor and dragged upon the undergrowth and twigs. It hung open and he pulled the collar back from his neck as if it were too hot to wear. Why did he wear it in this heat? She stealthily moved to a tree to get a closer look.

Now she saw why he wore the coat, she saw the glint off of something silver, shiny. He wore a rifle; it was strapped to his side, and hidden beneath the billowing coat. She leaned closer to get a better look. It had been a long time since anyone had had a rifle; this one must be very old. It shone as it reflected the sunshine that sprang through the trees. The wood had sheen to it, as did the metal receiver. He'd carefully restored this one.

Guns, rifles, revolvers had been confiscated by the Regime many years ago. No one had been allowed to have them, only the military, and to have one in your possession had meant immediate arrest to the interrogation camps. Some had hidden away antique relic rifles and guns because they thought as a part of history they shouldn't be destroyed. If they were discovered the guns were taken and the families removed to the camps and never seen again.

Gazing upon the boy she knew he must be carrying ammunition. She saw it now the bullets were pocketed into his belt, lots of them encircling his waist. She looked up again at his face; it looked grim by the set of his jaw and the tightness of his lips. He looked cautious. He was dangerous.

She left, nothing more than a whisper on the wind. Hastily she ran through the forest along the ground she loved so much, seeking out her own to warn them and prepare. Prepare for what? She didn't know. Her light feet touched the floor briefly as she ran. Her breathing remained regular, unchanged from her exertion. Most Woodlanders were athletic and could outrun almost anything. Branches lightly touched her as she went by and she breathed in the scent from the different trees.

As she sped past a large silver birch she erupted into a copse filled with a puissant of colour, small bell like flowers grew everywhere, their various scents strong and aromatic. The violence of the smell hit her nostrils in an almost blinding shock wave. Her senses reeled momentarily (she still had problems not succumbing to the nastramus poppies). The nastramus poppies were their first line of defence along the west of the camp and kept just about everything, if not away, asleep for a very long time. "Soften your eyes Fern, see all as a blur, listen but hear little, feel the air as nothing more than a caress, slow down your breathing." She softly chanted in her head. Only by reducing the rate of your breath could you pass through the fields, once you opened your mouth to the spores it would only be a matter of seconds before you lost consciousness, and probably never wake again.

Fern ran out from the poppies and through the tall grass. She was coming to the second line of defence. Taking a deep breath, she leaped into the air, reaching as high as any deer or gazelle. She didn't look down at what she was jumping over but concentrated on the safe landing she was aiming for. Had she looked down she would have seen what looked like giant mushrooms (these were the tariniums, a mutated fungus). Their smooth flat surfaces gave the impression of nothing more than a beige mushroom head but below, the stalks were seven feet long and contained a sticky substance that clung to whatever touched it. They had been placed into a seven foot ditch that was deceiving since only the head of the tariniums could be seen. The stems released a powerful chemical that caused paralysis within 10 seconds. Unless you were pulled out by another who hadn't touched the stalks, you wouldn't be able to move to escape and would slowly die. The decaying bodies were absorbed into the ground where they fed the monstrous fungus.

At the six foot mark the tariniums ended and Fern's feet lightly landed at six and a half feet. She paused momentarily and then ran on. She let the huge breath she had taken escape her and focused on her next obstacle.

The third line of defence was the most dangerous and her heart beat rapidly as she concentrated on what she had to do to get through it. Regulating her breathing into calm smooth breaths she softened her eyes so that her peripheral vision was enhanced and she could practically see behind her as well as in front. She let go of all her thoughts, filling herself with peace and tranquillity. You couldn't jump the burneam bushes. They rose up to seven feet high and were a mass of gnarling, twisted black branches, the thorns a shining dark navy blue, stretching to an inch in length. Their height was not the problem, if you tried to jump the bushes the thorns would release, shooting up into the air to impale you with poison. Your skin would turn deep purple as your blood rushed to the surface in enormous swollen bruises, the lack of blood to your organs would slow down the body system and you would go into cardiac arrest and die. Only if all the thorns could be taken out quickly enough could you survive. However, once hit by a thorn you were no longer able to do anything but succumb to your fate, which like the tariniums was to decay and feed the mutated bushes.

The branches grew outwards only three feet in their width and the separation to the next bush's branches was four and a half feet, giving only one and a half foot clearance between. Fern, like a fluttering feather weaved through the bushes careful not to touch the lethal thorns. She couldn't focus on the thorns because of her widened peripheral vision but even so she could sense them with her body. By keeping her body relaxed, she was less likely to cause a body reaction, a slight cough or hiccup would be deadly as the thorns would release. Fern had performed meditation many times to be able to release her mind and body, so as not to stimulate these bushes that responded to sudden vibrations and the movement of air above them, to release their thorns. Weaving in a dance with danger, Fern very slowly and gracefully passed through the bushes.

The defences hadn't been created by the Woodlanders. The nastramus poppies, tariniums and burneam bushes had been there long before they arrived. They'd decided to use them to protect the west side of their camp. The plants had been made by scientists many years before, employed by the government to produce biological protection or at least that is what they called it. Scientists, who had played with the genetics of seeds, adding from one plant to another, playing with more dangerous entities such as bacteria, tumours from plants and a product they had created from their studies of snake and spider venom, using these substances they had created these deadly, poisonous plants and fungi.

The whole ten kilometres had been surrounded by twenty foot high metal fences at one time but those had been destroyed in the explosion. The terrible products from their research should have been destroyed but they weren't, they had survived. They ran side by side from the south to the north. They separated the Woodlanders from what was left of the city and the Citans. The Woodlanders had turned evil into something that would provide them safety but at a cost; the defences destroyed not only the dangerous but the innocent.

Sequoia, their leader, the founder of the Woodlander clan had been the only one who dared to venture near the paradoxical, peculiar plants. He had sat at night, safe, high up within the realms of the branches of a tree and watched what happened to the creatures of the night that ventured into their depths. The cries from them had made him cringe and he had shut his eyes at first. Since he was twelve at the time, he had wondered at his bravery to seek out more knowledge on the plants and their lethality. He had forced himself to open his eyes to see what occurred and how the creatures died. Then he had become fascinated by how the plants managed to stop the creatures in their tracks and kill them.

To the consternation of the clan, he spent many nights in one of the trees nearby, studying the plants, figuring out how they killed and what set off their weapons of destruction. The burneam bush had been the most difficult to understand, he'd seen creatures travel through and not touch the branches or stems and still be impaled with thorns. It was many nights of surveillance until he discerned the plants felt their vibrations; a grunt was enough to cause the changes that triggered the thorns to eject. Armed with this knowledge, he set out to find a way to be able to get through the terrible plants unharmed. He had succeeded and trained some of the clan members, thinking it would be useful for them to go through the plants if they required a quick route to the camp or to escape danger. Fern had been trained by one of those members.

The forest and grasses that had grown soon after the Devastation had been a surprise, especially because of their rate of growth and abnormally large size. Everything was different now. Everything had morphed into something else, mutated...no, not everything. They had brought with them the old seeds and they had grown normally and provided them with food. The mutated vegetation was only used for clothing or to make objects of use but they dared not eat it. The Woodlanders were normal, they had not mutated after the Devastation.

Only children had survived the Devastation. Older brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles had died before their eyes. They had survived because they were inoculated as babies with the SM2. No one knew for certain but the surviving children proved the reason to be right. The inoculations had started eighteen years ago. No one over the age of twelve had survived the Devastation, none of those older than the SM2 inoculation. They had lived their new life for six years, a very different life from what they had known.

It wasn't understood why but only babies could be inoculated with the SM2 and no one was really sure why it was enforced that babies have the shots. The scientists had tried to produce a safe strain for children and adults but no one survived them. They must have known what was coming to have developed the SM2. It was the only reason that humanity survived.

Still even those inoculated died under the falling buildings and destruction, including Fern's own brothers and sisters. Adults, who had escaped the collapsing concrete and stone or managed to scramble out after the shock waves, had dropped dead within seconds of walking into the open air, to the horror of the children.

She gathered her thoughts once more and went over the sight of the boys in the forest. She had no doubt they were Citans. Although, she'd never seen Citans, she'd heard many stories about them. They were survivors too but they were very different from the Woodlanders. Why were they so much larger? Were they evil? Mutated? They were all young so they must have all had the inoculation just as she had herself. That is why they'd survived but she wondered; did they use the chemicals left behind in the city? Did they follow in their forefathers footsteps? If they had, they were not to be trusted—ever.

The Citans never left the city, so, why would they now? She was passing through more of the long grasses, the tops with seeds and long strands of awns tickled under her chin like fingers. She considered the size of the Woodlanders as opposed to the Citans who were bigger and heavier and it crossed her mind that should the defenders from her clan need to fight them they would be dwarfed and out-weighted. Weight could make a difference but as long as you were quicker and more agile, your chances would increase. She hoped it wouldn't come to a battle between them.

Fern had no friends other than Abacus, her mutant snake. He would protect her from the Citans but who would protect Oak. He must be kept safe, he was their leader, her saviour, her...she pursed her lips and swept any further thought of him away.

The aroma from the camp was wafting toward her. It gently nudged her nostrils. She breathed in the smell of mint, parsley and cilantro, they swam through her senses. Herbs helped them, not just for food but for health, healing and aiding vitality. Although, they were all young, they still needed help with their bodies when they did something foolish and became injured, strains, cuts, sores or becoming ill from too much work required assistance. The Almist would make up a poultice of bread, oil and water for strains. He'd dress cuts or sores with devil's claw or turmeric and administer drops from oregano and other herbs to help the lungs clear from the clutches of sickness.

Herbs were a main part of their diet, not only did they protect them but they flavoured their food in special ways that even now made her mouth salivate at the thought. She hadn't tasted meat since she was eleven and now she couldn't even remember the taste. The creatures were not safe to eat. She wondered what the other survivors were eating from this new world.

"Why do you run Fern?" she heard from a voice above. "I saw you when you entered the fields. What's your hurry?" asked the sentinel at his post. He was high up in one of the gigantic pines. His voice resonated off the massive branches to the ground so easily that he barely had to raise his voice.

"I must seek an audience with Oak." She replied. "I've seen Citans in the forest; everyone must be warned of the danger." She was slowing her pace as she approached the base of the tree.

"How would you know they are Citans?" He was staring down at her. "You've never seen a Citan!" Throwing his head back he gave a short laugh.

Fern pursed her lips and kept herself calm. "I've heard enough about them to know. Excuse me, I must leave, we have little time."

"Little time for what?" he questioned but she was already running at a sprint.

Chapter 2

When she approached the outer edge of the camp she slowed a little. Her sprint became a languid lope as she travelled through the narrow roads, passed the short one storey dwellings that were their homes. They were made from the giant papyrus grasses that grew to a height of twelve feet. They were thick in their stems but flexible enough to weave into walls and roofs that were resistant to sun and rain. The tan from the shell-like stem was shiny and glinted from the sunlight giving it the appearance of a huge baked, woven pie.

She noticed the doors in one home were open from one side through to the other side to let the breeze blow straight through. The rush windows were tied up and she could see woven bilobous rushes that were the colour of bright green emeralds upon the floor. She knew they were the colour of emeralds because she'd seen an emerald once. She thought it to be the most beautiful thing to exist, it was encased in gold metal, a ring, and it had belonged to Oak's family for generations. He said it had belonged to his grandfather who gave it to his father.

One day as they sat cross legged in the village he had told her the story, she'd listened with eager ears. Oak explained that not only guns but precious metals and gems had been confiscated by the military. They were taken to be used for the government surplus, to be sold or traded for goods from other countries. Trade between countries was only performed under military control, since little trust existed between them and all transactions were negotiated under heavy guard, armed with artillery.

Anyone caught with gold, platinum, silver or jewels in their possession were taken by the military. No one knew what happened to them. They were enemies of the Regime and punished as such. Some were brave enough to keep a piece of jewelry of sentimental value but they told no one. They dared not, for the military had eyes and ears everywhere. Rewards were given to their spies.

Oak's grandmother died when Oak was six years old, his grandfather had loved her greatly. He found her diamond engagement ring the day after she died and told Oak's father that he'd smiled at the knowledge of her bravery to disobey the law and keep it. He knew how much the ring had meant to her. Just as much as the emerald ring she'd given to him meant to him and so he'd kept her diamond ring and passed his emerald ring on to his son.

Unfortunately, three years later he was found out. Oak's father thought it was the neighbour who'd told because she saw the diamond ring fall out of Oak's grandfather's shirt. It hung around his neck on a piece of shoelace he had it tied to. He'd been tending the front yard at the time, weeding and bending over. She'd said nothing to him as he hastily pushed it back inside but she'd slunk into her house like a cat that had stolen a piece of chicken from a dinner plate.

The soldiers arrived within five minutes as Oak's grandfather had warned his son and grandchild they would. He'd pulled the shoelace from his neck, pulling the ring off just as they came through the door. The soldiers didn't get a chance to take the ring. As soon as they were upon him Oak's grandfather threw it out of the window. With two soldiers pushing his face into the floor on his old bent knees the other two had run outside where they'd searched but never found it. No one ever found it.

Oak's father said a crow had probably taken it since they liked shiny objects. It must have swooped down soon after it had been thrown through the window and flown away with it to drop it into its nest. His father was glad it ended up with the bird rather than a corrupt, cruel, controlling Regime. Neither his grandfather, nor himself would not have liked the fact that it would have helped them to continue to enforce their unlimited restrictions.

The soldiers had been angry with his grandfather and struck the weak old man. His cries had reverberated out through the open door and down the street as they dragged him away on his arthritic knees, not caring at the pain it caused him. Oak's father had rushed to his aid but his grandfather had yelled "No!" to stop him. So he'd watched instead with tear filled eyes as Oak clung to him, his small body shaking barely understanding what was happening. With arms clamped around his father tightly they watched as the soldiers hauled away the man who'd raised and loved them both, throwing him into the mouth of the cold metal armoured vehicle. Their eyes had followed it as it slowly moved away, its stomach filled only to spew its contents into the bounds of hell at the interrogation camp. Neither Oak nor his father ever heard of or saw him again.

When Oak saw the emerald ring hanging from his father's wrist one day, he'd looked at him with curiosity as his father had smiled down at him. "Your grandfather gave this to me and whenever I look at it I think of him and his dislike of the Regime that rules us. They will not have it; it is ours and will always be ours. It will be yours when I am gone and you will pass it to your son, who will pass it down to his son. That way the memory to fight for freedom, faith and a future of honesty and truth will always be with us." He laid his hand on Oak's shoulder. "It belongs to our family and will stay with us forever. It's our bond to one another, even after we are gone."

After the Devastation, Oak had taken the ring from his father's dead body. Weeping he kissed his cheek and said goodbye to the last member of his family. He placed the same leather strap and dangling emerald ring upon his left wrist and tied it, where it had never been removed.

She was approaching the central meeting area. The houses had now become the long buildings and meal gathering areas. The Culineers were already preparing the meal for the evening and the big gathering. She gave a sigh at the thought that they would miss the delicious dishes that they were now creating. No time could be lost; they would have to leave immediately to track the Citans.

She fingered a soft woven bag that was draped across her hip and felt inside to see if she had any melini tablets left. No, she had eaten the last of them earlier before she saw the Citans; she would have to get more. The melini tablets were of great importance for travelling; they were high in nutrition and also provided liquid refreshment in the moist jelly like substance. Eating one tablet was equal to a small meal and a glass of water. Sequoia had made the discovery in one of the laboratories when one of his group had eaten it without thinking. They'd watched him for days nervously wondering what he would turn into but when no change occurred and he'd told them of how it gave him energy and stopped his thirst, Sequoia had succumbed and gone back to the laboratory returning with the plants. The special plants were grown along-side the fruit and vegetables, its origin purposefully overlooked.

As she slipped past the last long building she came into the open meeting area. It was surrounded by buildings which formed a circle around it. The ground was covered with bilubous rushes for them to sit upon when they attended meetings at the central speaking area. Quickly, she made for the raised centre. Upon it, in the middle was a huge round drum made out of burneam bush trunks tightly woven together and covered on the top with a tight white renicus leaf. It was very old, no one knew who had managed to cut the bush down and make it or even who brought it into the camp. It had appeared one day like a gift placed on the podium in its centre. It soon became their symbol of hope. Looking upon its twisted form of evil they hoped they would remember to never make the same mistakes as their forefathers.

She picked up the gnarly burneam bush branch beside it and with the end wrapped in white renicus leaf, she hit the drum with all the force she had three times and listened to its echo through the camp.

Woodlanders approached from all angles running as quickly and safely as they could. A few of the girls that had babies ran with their children perched upon their hips, the younger children holding hands with their appointed foster parents. The defenders ran faster and the others divided to let them through, Oak was amongst them his angular face was rigid with anticipation.

All faces were tight with fear of the unknown as they gathered around the podium. To use the burneam drum could only mean one thing—danger. She could see Oak's blond head amongst his defenders, he stood slightly taller and the sun sparked off the lighter streaks in his hair. Most Woodlanders had blond or light brown hair from the sun bleaching it. She was the only red haired person in the clan. She could see Oak better now for the defenders gave him a respectful distance. His pectoral muscles were pushing through the leather shirt that he wore (made from the terakian beast he had killed years before). He'd been thinner then but the leather had stretched to accommodate his developing muscles. She gave an external sigh at the sight of him.

He was everything to her and yet she was nothing more than a friend (a sister he'd once called her) to him. It made her angry, she was not his sister, he'd been her saviour not her brother.

Her whole family had died in the Devastation. She'd stood alone, afraid and crying amongst the swirling debris. Oak had appeared out of the dust and taken her hand in his. A little taller than her she'd felt as though he towered above her. His face dirty with blood stains upon it, his teeth pure white when he smiled down at her. Holding her hand in a gentle squeeze he'd told her he would take her somewhere safe. Told her that she needn't be afraid anymore that he'd find food to fill her hungry stomach. She'd believed him and he'd fulfilled his promises.

She could see the square shape of his jaw line, it was tight with concern. Why was that jaw always so stern when he looked at her? Why did she feel she was a thorn from the burneam bush, a poison to him? She knew he loved and cared about her but she wanted more from their relationship. It seemed that he was always serious when he was with her now, although his voice would be soft and soothing, but it was soothing like when she was eleven and had cried at night for her parents. Although, only twelve himself he'd hugged her tightly telling her that they were not gone, that they were always with her. She hadn't understood what he meant so he'd explained to her that even though she couldn't see them, if she believed they were there she would feel them. He said she had to learn to feel to be something more than just a body to be her senses, all of them.

She'd learnt to heighten all her senses beyond almost anyone else in the camp, except Willow she was strong with her sight. Willow could see auras clearly especially around the members of the clan. She advised Oak on whom he should pick as defenders. It was Willow who'd said that Oak should be their leader after Spruce had died. Spruce was killed by a terakian beast whilst out on patrol, saving one of his own but losing his own life. Spruce had only been seventeen years old, young, strong with so many years left to live, his loss caused great sadness. They'd been lucky to retrieve his body from the large vicious animal. He was buried in the sacred ground.

Fern was jealous of Willow. She was pretty, small with almost white blond hair and seventeen the same age as Fern. Her eyes were such a clear sky blue that Fern wanted to spit in them to leave clouds and make them imperfect. She often had less than endearing thoughts toward Willow. Willow's hair infuriated Fern; it was straight and long almost to her waist and never became unruly waves or stuck up like Fern's did. Willow's hair was never out of place, it glistened in a glow of light, like the moonlight. When light fell upon it it glowed like an aura. Fern couldn't see auras but she would sometimes pretend when she saw Willow's hair reflected like an aura, that it was Willow's head

exploding. Of course, it wouldn't be a pretty sight, as after the explosion it would be a very sticky red. Then Fern would regret thinking such a bad thing because Willow was so sweet and kind.

She was kind especially to Fern because the other girls shunned her. That just made Fern even more angry with Willow (she didn't need her sympathy) she really wanted to dislike her (which became more difficult when she was so nice). But then how could she *not* dislike her? Oak relied on Willow's aura skills and worse he admired her! He spent *too* much time being with her. He would converse with her whilst wearing a smoldering sexy smile that would melt any girl's heart and when Fern told him he saw Willow too often; he would just laugh and ruffle her hair as if she were a toddler. On those days she just wanted to plough her fist into the bridge of his nose and watch him keel over.

Fern hated how he looked at Willow these days; his eyes would soften when they rested upon her. His face melted and set into a sickly smile which made her want to vomit or beat him to get rid of his expression. Was he in love with Willow? When had she become so obsessed with Oak? She didn't remember when it started, she just knew that it bothered her and she wished with all her heart that it would stop.

She could see him approaching her now as the clan parted to let him through. His arms were glistening with sweat, the leather he wore attached to his body like a second skin. He made her feel hot; perspiration was already pricking its way to the surface at the sight of him. The sun spiked down its rays in silent competition.

He approached her looking at her with questioning eyes as the defenders stopped to let him onto the podium first. His eyebrows were raised, his light blue eyes fastened upon her widened green eyes, watching him, welcoming him. Lightly, but with a leaping stride he covered the ground toward her. He pushed back a flat hand palm behind him toward the defenders following, indicating for them to stay back a little.

His face was quizzical making her realize he was thinking she was just causing another ruckus to get his attention. For once, she had the upper hand; she knew something of great importance that he had no knowledge of. She smiled at the thought and saw his head give a little movement downwards and sideways in question. She smiled even more.

Chapter 3

Oak stared at the smug face before him. What was Fern up to now? She was always thinking of something to get his attention. What new ploy did she have today? Why the satisfied smile? His lips curled up at one end in a brief smile to himself and then vanished just as quickly as he realized she was yet again disarming him of his senses. She was way too much of a distraction to have around him all the time. She'd always been like his sister but the way she had changed lately. Well, it didn't leave him with brotherly thoughts anymore and the fact that she wasn't his sister made her presence more unnerving.

She was so different from the others with her long copper hair that was always sticking out in the oddest of shapes. Sometimes, she looked like she had dragged her head through a bush backwards. On one occasion he'd asked her if she'd had a difficult entanglement with a beast for her hair and almost lost. Her face had flashed with anger and she'd sneered at him, turning from pretty to a nasty wrinkled up creature. Somehow, it just made her all the more endearing to him.

Fern had learnt to rope in her emotions but the fire still burned, even if the flame burned subdued. He'd seen that fire often, usually when she didn't know he was around. It embarrassed her if she knew he saw her lose control. A thrill ran through him at the thought, she affected him that way. There were times when he almost lost direction of what he was doing because of her and the feelings she stirred in him. That was not good in a leader, distractions led to mistakes and mistakes could lead to injury and death. He'd seen mistakes and the biggest mistake of all the Devastation would never be forgotten, no one would ever forget. It had been burned into his young mind just as it had burned the cities it took.

He took in the expression on her face, the straight nose perhaps a little too large but it added to that air of insubordination she held and wore now. She never listened to orders she was a law unto herself. He looked away to hide a small smirk that stretched his mouth. Composing himself he looked down at her and stopped less than a foot away. He hoped to intimidate her by getting into her space but she didn't back up or so much as lean back an inch as he almost dropped his head level with hers.

"What goes on here?" he asked, his eyes slowly slipping away her defences as she tried to keep control. He watched her wet her lips (he really wished she wouldn't do that his resolve was fading). Her chest rose as she took in a breath and as precisely and quickly as possible told of everything she'd seen in the forest. Oak watched her intently, watching the way her eyes widened when she talked of the large Citan leader. How they glittered at her description of him and his long black coat. How a small smile curved her lips when she talked of his rifle and bullet lined belt. She described everything in such detail that he could well have been there with her. He could even feel her own emotions that the Citans had caused within her.

How could he be so in tune with her when they could not be any further apart in character? The *sublime to the ridiculous* his father used to say about the Regime. That was the two of them when they were together. He understood her less than he did anyone else within the camp and it scared him. How could he control her if he did not know what went on in her mind? He used to know what went on inside her head but that seemed long ago. The walls had risen and now he only knew that he was loved by her and that fact made her angry.

He knew she wanted to have more responsibility and sometimes he really did think she should. He had no doubt she would be useful but how could you use someone that would argue against whatever orders you gave them? That was Fern always questioning why this had to be done or why it had to be done that way, or even why it had to be done at all. Sometimes he just wanted to grab her by the

shoulders and shake her saying “because that is what I’ve asked of you now do it!” Eventually she would do what she was asked snarling as she left but that was all it ever was, Fern just being obliging curling up in disapproval inside. With Fern it was always more of a request and a hope that she would carry out what you asked. Giving her an order was more likely to be ignored.

The way she loved him was a concern too. He knew how passionate she was about everything and her feelings toward him would put them both at risk. If she thought he was in the slightest bit of danger she would most likely do something foolish and he’d have to save her probably placing himself in jeopardy of death.

Something else he found disconcerting was when she was close beside him his skin tingled. Would he feel the electrical currents run through him every time she brushed past him? The chemical reaction between the two of them was overwhelming and it took all his discipline to remain aloof and a leader in her presence. Those pouting lips of hers dominated his mind too much when he talked to her; they looked soft like a beacon guiding his own perilously close. All thoughts he shouldn’t have.

When Spruce died and Oak was made leader of the clan everything had changed between them. He was soon busy choosing and training his defenders and proving himself worthy. He worked on expanding the camp, making improvements. So his days were always busy with plans. He was constantly drawing up new ones until late into the night and finally flopping into his bed in exhaustion. Fern had faded from his thoughts and it was then that he had become more aware of Willow.

He'd needed to converse with Willow many times about his choice of defenders and about the harmony within the camp. She was very helpful to him. Soon she began to occupy his thoughts a great deal. He admired her softness and the gentle kindness that enveloped her. Willow was everything perfect. He looked upon her as a delightful flower. She was the magnolia within the clan, a beautiful bloom that was resilient and strong despite its loveliness. Willow and Fern fought in his mind. Fern was everything imperfect, the encroaching weed, a scotch thistle pretty to look at but prickly and irritating. Two very different beings and he realized he loved them both.

He was staring into Fern's glorious glowing green eyes, the excitement shooting from them into his heart and tearing at him. A terakian beast would rip him apart less than Fern could. She could pull out each organ in his body with her eyes and leave him an inert mass of nothing. He wouldn’t succumb to her though, he wouldn’t let her dominate and manipulate him. Even though he knew she did it unintentionally it was in her make-up, what she was. Fern was out of bounds, she had to stay out of bounds and he had to accept that and move on.

Oak didn’t so much as flinch at Fern's story. He kept his eyes shadowed hiding under cliff brows as he stared blankly back into hers, chewing over what she’d said.

“Aren't you concerned?” she asked incredulously.

Still he gave no reply only watched her scan his face frantically.

“You know already don't you?” she whispered, stepping back slightly in surprise. Their voices had been low and he could now hear the crowd growing restless. They were shuffling their feet some giving grunts of impatience. It was time to tell them what was happening.

“Yes, I know and so will the whole camp now because of you.” He retorted through clamped teeth. He watched her shoulders droop.

“I’d hoped to keep peace within the camp until I could learn more. They’re not within range of us and as yet show no change of course. I wanted to find out where they were going and what they were looking for with as little disruption to the clan as possible. However, you have changed that now.” He gave her an annoyed glance and saw her visibly slump even more. Her lower lip trembled a little, until

she grabbed down on it with her top teeth. A pout came to her lips and she gave him a sidelong rebellious glance.

Oak stopped a laugh from erupting from him as he looked at her elfish face scowl at him. How could he be angry with her when all she ever wanted to do was protect and care for the camp members. As hard hearted as she made herself out to be, her heart was softer than the melini tablets they carried with them on their patrols of the forest. Her warmth was more than any bonfire they built. He knew he'd been wrapped in it many times in the past when she'd thrown her arms around him and hugged him affectionately; planting a soft kiss upon his cheek whilst telling him how much she loved him. That no longer happened.

As time passed the distance between them had grown and he regretted his loss of the Fern he'd loved so much. He was to blame he knew, he held her at bay. He'd visibly cooled his affections toward her (to hide his real feelings) she'd withdrawn her own from the cold iron wall that he had erected. He'd hated the hurt he caused in her eyes but he reasoned that it had to be, he was leader of the clan and he had to show resolute authority.

He kept being her friend and often talked with her, sometimes well into the night. They would sit in her sparse home and converse. Then realizing just how late it was he would abruptly push back his chair and watch her pretty face turn from a smile to disappointment. It was then, with the onset of sleepiness and unguarded thoughts that he would want to pull her to him. Staring into the welcoming eyes, he would rock back on his feet in regret at his feelings, and quickly stagger away from the emotions to rush out the door with a hasty goodnight.

How many times had he done that to her now and how many times had she looked at him the next day with anger and derision? He could see the damage he'd done, how their friendship had changed, it left a pain within him.

Swiftly turning on his heel, he faced the other members of the clan. He scanned all their frightened faces and smiled benevolently at them.

"What is this?" he cried viewing everyone around him with a slow turn of his head. "There is nothing to fear! We are in no danger at present. All is under control."

The sigh of relief from the crowd was heard by Oak, Fern and the defenders as it vibrated through the podium. "We're watching a group that are passing through the forest. They're not heading toward the camp. They travel parallel to it. We have our defenders keeping track of where they are and what they do. If their course should change we will know very quickly." Again he repeated, "There is nothing to fear!" He swept his hand out in front of his chest from one side to the other; toward everyone as if by doing so he would immediately dispel any worries they carried.

He gave them a slow encouraging smile and saw the crowd relax. His defenders stood beside him resolute and valiant, giving the clan strength to believe what had been said, belief that there truly was nothing to fear. Oak looked at everyone, he was so proud of them all. His heart filled as he stared, he saw the trust and love in their faces. Everything his father had taught him of importance; faith, hope, honesty and belief he saw in them. His clan believed in him, they placed their faith in him and he would be true to them, proving himself the person they deemed him to be.

Surprisingly to Fern, the crowd visibly relaxed, she looked at them and wondered what magic Oak possessed to have so many believe in him so fully. She looked at the back of his head as he stood tall and upright, she knew his face would be kind but determined as he spoke. He held so much

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