

Hi!

Thanks for taking a look at my sample manuscripts. All of these projects are work in progress, and reflect varying phases of development.

- *The Tea Witch's Traveling Coven* is a completed cozy fantasy romance currently being queried to literary agents.
- *Dragondancer* is a WIP adult fantasy about the long lost duchess of a dragon empire.
- *Untitled* is an early-stage science fantasy exploration of where technology meets magic on a planet in environmental crisis.

The Tea Witch's Traveling Coven

NJ Smith

PART ONE: AUTUMN

“The fifth year of her second life was of tantamount importance. ‘Only during that summer,’ she writes in her personal records, ‘did I realize I had finally begun to live again.’”

- from *A Treatise on the Life of the Witch-Physician*, by Senan Byrne

She'd had the *drislaocha* for patients before.

There was some good to be spoken of them—they always *wanted* to get better, which inclined them to listen to her recommendations. And like most soldiers, they were generally good at following instructions. They were typically respectful of her space and her things (though she always took extra care to lock her laboratory and bedroom in their presence) and usually less complaintive when it came to the experience of pain. They also tended to ask fewer unnecessary questions than their civilian counterparts.

Nevertheless, what good she had to say of them was far outweighed by the danger she knew they represented. They were witch killers, after all, hunting all manner of fae-touched creatures, and she had a great many things in this cottage that could earn her an expedited, no-questions-asked trip to the dungeons of Kil-Daer if discovered by the *dris*.

Roane poured another cup of tea and watched the regiment approach out her kitchen windows. She preferred stronger blends in the morning and this morning was no exception. This was a good blend for fall, with heavy notes of orange peel and cinnamon and accents of bergamot and vanilla. She had steeped it for exactly four minutes and forty-five seconds, and it was perfect.

Her vantage point, too, was perfect. The cottage had first been built on this very spot in County Faín, and even five years later she favored it whenever she returned to this part of the country, settling in the wilds on the edge of the black basalt cliffs hugging the shore of Lach Niamhreach, just north of the delta. South of the delta was Faoi-Rún, the place she had been for the entirety of her first life, and she was perhaps more sentimental about that than she would have cared to admit to herself. On clear mornings like this one, she could see the warmth of Faoi-Rún's fires and forges curling upward into the wide sky.

The *drislaocha* approached slowly. They made up a small detachment, only eight men and no horses. The soldiers were wet and muddy, two of them carrying a third on a handled litter between them. Someone in the village must have given them bad information, Roane surmised. The Og-Dorcha Crossing was a ways to the west of them, but it was still the fastest way to her cottage, boasting a small planked bridge that rarely washed out. She knew it was there still, because she had used it early that very morning.

But based on their sodden and sorry state, the *drislaocha* had taken the more direct route through the treacherous delta marsh instead. That likely explained the absence of horses and wagons, neither of which could pass safely on ground that gave way to the river with one unlucky step. She suspected the marsh might also explain why there were so few of the

soldiers. She rarely saw the *dris* in groups smaller than twenty to thirty, but bringing that many troops across the fen was a waste, not to mention a risk.

Roane finished her tea. She watched the strangers approach a moment longer before she stood and stretched, rolling her shoulders and then carrying her cup to the sink. She packed a small covered basket with water canteens and dried fruit before slinging her physician's satchel over one shoulder and going out to meet the late morning air. It was crisp and cold, characteristic of County Fain's late autumn.

Gravel crunched under her boots as she followed the path from her front door to the edge of her property, some thirty yards along the bluff. The *drislaocha* detachment had just crested the cliffline, and it was not an easy walk. The group was a mix of men and women, almost all Roane's age or even younger. The two carrying the litter were breathing hard, sending columns of steam up overhead.

"Are you the physician?" the lead soldier asked sharply. His blond hair glinted in the weak sun, and his eyes were keen and untrusting. "The one they call Roane?"

"I am not a physician," Roane answered carefully. Physicians were trained in Kil-Daer's Royal College and impersonating one was a dangerous lie in which she partook only out of dire necessity. "But I might be able to help your friend on the litter there, if you let me take a look."

"Are you Roane," the soldier repeated, "or *not*?"

Roane's eye fell to the twisted bracelets of iron and braided rowanberry that adorned his wrists. *Drislaocha* meant 'bramble soldier' in the old tongue. The bracelets were meant to protect the *dris* from the magics of the creatures they hunted, and the oddity had also earned the queen's favorite soldiers their name. His skin was bleeding under the bracelets, which she took to mean he had encountered some powerful magic—recently.

"I am," Roane answered. She wondered who in Faoi-Rún had given the soldiers her name. Most of the villagers referred to her only as 'the doctor,' or—if they were less fond of her—'the witch.'

"I brought fruit and water," she offered after a moment of tense silence, setting the basket down between them. "If you came through the marsh, I imagine you've been walking a long while."

"There was another way?" one of the *dris* carrying the litter muttered in annoyance.

Roane smiled and said nothing, watching their leader.

"Quiet," he reprimanded. He was looking down at the covered basket, which Roane had set just inside a line of mushrooms of varying height. She watched as the soldier's eyes followed the line of colorful caps up and around her property, until it vanished behind the cottage and came out the other side, making nearly a perfect circle. This was an unfortunate, though

not uncommon, side effect of her recent return to County Fáin. She smiled again.

The soldier was not amused, fixing her with an icy stare. “Do not eat or drink *anything*,” he said to his troops, who gave a murmur of unhappy assent.

“As you wish,” Roane said lightly, stooping to pick up the basket. “Follow me. And don’t step on any of the toadstools, please. They’re delicate.”

Roane’s cottage was made of stone, wood, and thatch. The stone was stacked and sealed at the corners. Weathered wood siding, which she had purchased down in the southwestern city of Bá Na-Caer and paid an exorbitant amount to have shipped all the way to County Fáin, made up the walls. Thick thatch roofing kept warmth in during the winter and sun out during the summer. The colorful glass that decorated the windows was a pittance she had taken from a glassmaker whose infant daughter she had treated for colic to the north in County Ulsinn.

Only the dark ivy that covered the front and western-facing walls had cost her nothing since appearing at the seam of the house and the earth, other than the hours she had invested watering and trimming it until it was stable enough to continue its slow crawl over the wooden walls unassisted.

The main structure of her house was arranged in a lowercase *t* shape, with her bedroom and her laboratory jutting out to the east and west, and the spacious patient bay continuing to extend back from the main living space. The green-gray corner of the small greenhouse situated on the end of the garden peeked over the sloping roof of the cottage as she led the *drislaocha* up the stoop to her front door.

“I have beds in the back,” Roane told the blond one at her shoulder. He was looking at the intricate juniper wreath nailed to her door, no doubt looking for signs of danger in its presence and pattern. Really it was there mostly because she liked the shape of the small blue berries that adorned the dark green needles, and the tart tea that could be made from the young twigs.

The blond said nothing about the wreath, leading his *dris* inside after her. It would be a lie to say the wreath had no value to her besides its aesthetic and herbal application, because she listened closely to it as the soldiers entered—but it remained silent to her. They meant her no harm, at least not yet.

The slow traipse of eight armed witch-killers seemed out of place in her small living room, with the cheery fire in the flagstone hearth and the hand-knit blankets from Orla thrown over her patchwork furniture, though it was not the first time her cottage had hosted such a visit.

“Tell me what happened,” Roane said, a command more than a question. “Tell me what you were hunting.”

She only ever saw the *dris* after they had been hunting something. They were dispatched to handle anything and everything the Royal or County infantry were loathe to touch: witches, the rare *daoine maithe*, and hungry *fear-goura*; from shape-shifting selkies to tiny joint-eaters and banshees, the lonely fetches—many left from the plague days—and even the Dullahan, when he deigned to haunt mortal cairns.

Whatever reservations she held about the *drislaocha* (and they were many), she did not envy them.

But knowing what this ragged regiment had tangled with was essential to undoing whatever damage had been done to the young soldier lying on the litter, his wounds obscured by the white sheet they had laid over him.

There was a pause of shuffling silence as the soldiers brought him through the living room and back into the patient bay, transferring him from the litter to the bed Roane indicated—one of six, closest to the western wall.

“A witch,” the blond said eventually.

“Were you successful?” Roane asked.

He hesitated. “Yes—she’s dead.”

“Are you absolutely sure about that—” Roane paused to inspect the blond’s collar, which bore a simple triskele. “—Lieutenant?”

If he was surprised at her knowledge of *dris* rank insignia, he did not show it.

“Yes,” he repeated. “She’s dead. I salted and burned the bone-eating bitch myself.”

“And the iron?”

“Yes,” he ground out. “We are not amateurs. Worry about your job, Doctor, and let me worry about mine.”

“Unfortunately, my job requires that I worry about how you’ve done yours. Lieutenant.”

Roane pulled back the sheet covering her patient. Sunlight poured into the patient bay from the series of tall and narrow windows she’d put above the beds, giving her the light she needed to decide that this was quickly becoming more complicated than she had expected. “Where are his bracelets?”

The skin where the soldier’s rowanberry and iron bracelets should have been was scabbed over, the bracelets themselves conspicuously absent.

“They... melted off,” the lieutenant answered, sounding as unnerved as Roane was surprised.

She frowned. “What is your name?”

“Quinlan,” he answered after a moment, giving her only the latter half of it—loathe, no doubt, to give her the rest.

“Send your men outside, Quinlan,” she ordered, “and shut the door. I have questions for you.”

“I hardly take orders from a—”

“A what?” she asked, eyes glittering. “This is my domain, *drislaocha*. You will listen to what I have to say or your captain will die.”

More than a few blades were bared as she finished that sentence.

“Lay an unkind hand on him,” Quinlan said shortly, “and lose it.”

Roane could sense that the blades were iron, even from this distance. These were *drislaocha*, after all. They knew how to kill her.

She smiled. “Then we’re done here.”

“Wait,” Quinlan protested as she turned to go. “Fine. *Wait*, please.”

He motioned with one hand, and his soldiers sheathed their weapons, slinking out of the room and closing the doors quietly behind them.

“I’m not interested in playing games with you,” Roane said shortly. “I am well aware that if there was a doctor who could help you in this half of Kil-Bain, you would not be here. But you *are* here. Do you know what that means, Lieutenant Quinlan? That means I have leverage, and you do not.”

“I have more than enough money—”

“Which I care little about,” Roane snapped. “I would imagine they don’t ask you to do much thinking, Lieutenant, but you had better do your best and rethink your position. Quickly.”

He was quiet. Doing as she said.

“What do you want to know?” he asked finally.

“Where is the rest of your regiment?” *Are they on their way here?* is what she really wanted to know, but she did not speak that question aloud.

“Dead.”

She swallowed this information with some surprise. “Tell me about the witch.”

“It was—a cave. A few day’s ride west, in County Glasach. She was a moldering, rotten creature, half-mad with magic—”

“Strong,” Roane surmised, sensing his anger and redirecting him to the details most relevant to her evaluation. “Hence the melted bracelets.”

Quinlan blew a short breath of frustration. “Very. Stronger than the rest of us had seen.”

“The rest of us being?”

“It’s a young detachment. Inexperienced, except for the captain.” He nodded at the soldier on the bed.

“And how long has he been like this?”

“Three days.”

“How long ago did the witch die?”

“Four.” He paused. “The captain was hurt, I think. When we killed her. I don’t know, exactly... he kept it from me. A day later...”

“It got past the point of keeping.” Roane concluded, feeling the slightest flare of pity.

He sighed. "Yes."

"I imagine you tried a doctor in Glasach first."

"A physician," Quinlan nodded. "Royally trained and *royally* useless. Frightened. Loved his leeches."

"They usually do," Roane nodded again and then fell silent, thinking.

"What is it?" Quinlan demanded impatiently.

"His name?" Roane asked, ignoring his question and indicating the captain.

"Corrigan," the lieutenant answered. Hesitating less now, sensing that she really did mean to help.

"He is dear to you," Roane observed.

"He's my captain." Quinlan paused, and then lowered his voice.

"H-He's like a brother to me. If there's anything you can—"

"What I can do remains to be seen." Roane jerked her head. "Thank you for the information, Lieutenant. I promise you that I will do all that I can. I can offer nothing more than that at this time. Please go outside with your men."

"But—"

"You will know what I know, as soon as *I* know it," she said. "What remains of your regiment is tired and hungry. There is a well and a garden. Nothing out there will harm you. You may eat and drink what you like."

Suspicion flashed over his features.

“Worry not,” she said with a smile. “I have no interest in keeping you here a moment longer than necessary.”

His expression softened, just barely. The first acknowledgment of the precarious footing on which they both stood. He nodded.

“Send anyone with minor injuries to me in a quarter hour,” she instructed. “Including—” She jerked her head at his bleeding wrists. “—those.”

“Yes, Doctor,” he said softly. A note of relief had entered his voice, the tone of a soldier who was happy to be told what to do again after a period of overwhelming and unexpected responsibility. He left her alone with the *dris* captain.

Roane released a slow breath she had not realized she had been holding. To business, then, she told herself, drawing a wooden stool up to the *dris* captain’s bedside.

“Very well, Corrigan,” she murmured, inspecting the battered body that she already strongly suspected was hiding quite a potent curse, the sun-browned skin and the dark cloud of curls. The shallow, rhythmic rise and fall of the chest, the places where the protective bracelets had fallen away. “Let us see what we can salvage.”

DRAGONDANCER

Nicole Smith

“Hereby it is declared: for so long as a Ravenna rules this coast, dragons shall suffer no cages.”

- Article 5 of ‘Enumeration of the Rights of Dragonkind,’ *drafted by Lavinia Ravenna and ratified by First Empress Prisenkya in the third year D.E.*

ONE / LILIT

The sun was setting on Prisenkya, and the skies were empty, save a few scraps of gold-bellied clouds near the hills on the horizon. The city sat sheltered between gentle slopes, the wind making waves in the long verdant grasses as twilight spread its blue wings over the valley.

Night fell, curtains were drawn back, and doors were kicked open to waiting crowds in the jeweled crown of the city. Gas lamps sparked and then ignited.

Slowly, but surely, Prisenkya came alive.



In the eastern wing of a palace once home to an empress, nearly ten years after she had set down her brother's sword for the last time, Lilit picked up a paintbrush. It was one of dozens on the vanity, each handled with fine bone and bristled with silken horsehair.

She dipped her brush in a brass jar of crushed pearl, and then painted the liner just under her lower lashes, until it met the swirls of color tracing her cheeks.

Her dressing room was small, and not really hers. It was shared by dozens of men and women who performed at the magistrate's whim. Though it was true that

Lilit performed here more than most, often enough that the closet-sized room, with its tarnished mirror and sputtering lamp, *felt* like hers.

It was the last safe space before the stage. Before the lounge, where the magistrate and his friends waited.

She could hear the murmur of the crowd, smell the rolled *shisha* smoking softly in the hands of his coterie. She was doing her signature performance tonight. The curiosity the magistrate reserved for only his closest friends, or politicians he meant to impress. Oftentimes these groups were one and the same.

Lilit loathed this dance.

She set down her last brush, and ran her hands around her braided crown. She adjusted the sleeves that were perpetually slipping down her shoulders and smiled at herself in the mirror.

She slid her sticky tongue over her teeth.

Try *again*. The second smile was better, hiding the points of her canines beneath a full, painted bottom lip. This was passable. More feeling, less teeth. Never mind that the feeling was fake as any came these days. That the eyes in the mirror did not match her face. They were far too hungry.

And the magistrate did not want to see hunger. So she shuffled it away, slowly, blinking until her pupils widened, making her expression liquid. Vacant.

As for the smile, it would have to do.



Her body was an anchor, far, far out of sight. She could hardly see the darkened pits and couches that made up the magistrate's private lounge. In fact, she was many leagues from Prisenkya entirely, on a wild coast where islands floated amongst the clouds as she learned to dance for the first time.

Azure sea stretched away between the colonnades on her left. The wind carried the flavor of the ocean, playing in the gauzy curtains, chasing them across cold marble. Balanced perfectly on the ball of one foot, she watched them billow and fall. Her mother moved behind her, tutting, lifting one elbow, smoothing out fine braids that had gotten caught on the shoulder clasp of her long sleeves.

Lilit was the only daughter. Their family's future hinged upon her dance. And so mistakes could be fatal, for her and for the family's legacy. Mistakes needed to be corrected, each and every one.

Somewhere else, in a dark, smoky place, Lilit made seven mistakes. No one corrected her. This relieved the magic rising in her chest, each misstep sending the coil tumbling back into her stomach, dormant. *Shisha* curled up around her from the gathered crowd, clung to her hair. Blurred the light from the few low-burning lamps.

Lilit smiled into the glare. The crowd murmured as her feet drummed the dragon's spine into the stage. Her arms rode the wild sweep of its wings. She

misstepped on the cadence of the talons, stuttering—subtly, she was not sure why. It was not as if anyone in the audience knew or cared to notice.

When the dance was finished, they clapped, none louder than the magistrate himself. He was seated in the back of the room on his dais, a smudge of a pale face, the glint of a smile. His upper face was masked, which was not unusual; masquerades were his favorite flavor of gathering. A few people Lilit did not know gathered around him. She bowed deeply to him, grasping her sleeves to keep the front of her dress from falling open as she did.

A man in a red mask leaned over and murmured into the magistrate's ear. The magistrate grinned in response, beckoning Lilit's attention despite the fact that he already had it.

"Darling," he called, affection rotten-sweet in his voice. "Won't you dance for us again?"

Still smiling, she nodded. She made the same mistakes. It was the only claim she had. The only way the dance remained sacred. Magic rose and fell, rose and fell, a silent tide within her body.

After all, there was nowhere for it to go. There were no dragons left to dance with.

Now she danced for the men who had killed them.

That night, as most of the nights before it, passed in a blue haze of light and smoke. She sat on the magistrate's lap, and then the laps of his friends, some of whom she knew. Most of whom she did not.

She let them slide *shisha* against her gums, under her tongue, desperate to be anywhere but where she was anchored in the painted, shimmering, smiling body.

There were other girls, but they paid her hardly as much mind as she paid them. They were New Empire girls, after all, born and bred for a life like this—even if they hated it as much as she did. She suspected most regarded her with jealousy that they knew better than to act on. No matter if she was an odd antiquity of a defeated regime, she was still the magistrate's favorite. So she and the others passed each other in silence, dancers in the smoke.

By the time the magistrate's bacchanal had concluded, her face ached from smiling. She hardly remembered the long walk back to her rooms, barefoot on the plush carpet that ran the length of the halls, sleeves pooling around her elbows. She fumbled a key from the corset that gathered the gauzy dress to her waist, struggling for a moment with the lock before the heavy door swung open to admit her.

Her quarters were rich in a way that had never suited her, a bedroom and private bathroom that dripped with crystal and gold leafing meant to impress the men and women she entertained.

Slowly, she made her way around the quarters, turning down every lamp to the faintest glow. Then she went to her nightstand for her tin of *shisha*. A monthly allowance from the magistrate. Just a little bit more would carry her through what remained of the night. If she woke with a splitting headache, she thought, as the blue petals settled under her tongue like they always did, so be it.

Pleasantly numbed, she padded to her bath. The water was lukewarm, which she took to mean she had come back even later than usual, likely on account of the second performance.

She drew the pin from her hair, letting her braids fall around her shoulders before she gathered them up into a silk wrap. She set the pin on the edge of the tub, its point glinting, and shed her gossamer-thin dress and corset before sinking down into the water.

Edged with lavender, the water did some of ease the ache in her tired legs. The *shisha* did the rest. She exhaled, long and slow, and then remained still for a long time.



Her next move was more instinct than intention.

She wasn't even entirely certain what had stirred her from her uneasy doze in the tub. A closing door down the hall. An errant gust of wind through the circular window above the tub, just slightly cracked to the night.

In the end, it did not matter.

Her fingers curled around the pin. She had not even opened her eyes before—with a savage twist of her shoulders—the point of it thunked into the wood of the linen wardrobe beside the bathroom doorway. Water sloshed over the edges of the tub, and then settled slowly within it. The gilded rose at the end of the pin quivered with the force of the impact.

It was quiet. A man cleared his throat, straightening from a crouch to pull the pin a hair's breadth from where his eye had been. His mask shone a dull red in the gloom. Hazily, she recognized him.

The man who had asked the magistrate to make her dance again.

Lilit sank down in the tub, turning her back on him once more. "Apologies, my lord, but I'm not entertaining tonight."

"It's nearly dawn," he said.

She glanced at the window to find it was true. A pink blush crept into the sky. Her bathwater was cold, and so was she. She squinted, and then pushed up, more water meeting the tile as she straightened, ignoring the protest of a spine curled into the shape of the tub as she stood. The effects of the *shisha* now long worn off. "I am not entertaining anyone today, either."

The man was still standing in the doorway, looking pointedly away from her as she went to the armoire behind him and retrieved her robe. She passed him without comment, hoping he would take it upon himself to leave her chambers. And

if he didn't, well, there was the thick braided gold tassel hanging beside her ornate headboard. One thing to be said for the magistrate was he did not allow his performers to be mistreated by hands other than his own.

Her head felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. With the masked man securely in her peripheral vision, Lilit rummaged in her nightstand.

"Is that how they've done it?" the man asked as she pressed blue under her tongue.

"Done what?"

"Kept you."

"With *shisha*?" She chuckled, amused. She was used to men looking at her with pity. "Hardly."

"Then what?" he asked.

What could she say? Her leash was long enough now that she might have slipped from the magistrate's grasp. Might have made it all the way to the eastern border, and from there to the sea, to freedom. Would she tell him that freedom had not ever been worth much to her, and that it was worth even less now?

"I serve the magistrate by choice," she answered curtly, lying back on the pillows. Her fingers brushed the bottom of the tassel. "I'm afraid I'm going to ask you to leave, my lord."

“Please—” He started forward, reaching out as if he wanted to clasp her hand before abandoning the movement. His gloved hand flexed restlessly by his side. “I came to apologize.”

She raised her brows at him. “For?”

“Asking you to dance again,” he said.

This surprised her in a way she did not like.

“I just—” He hesitated. “I was looking for someone. A girl I knew a long time ago.”

“And did you find her?” Lilit whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly.

“This girl,” she asked, heart stuttering in her chest, “does she have a name?”

“Yes, her—” His gloved hand flexed open and then closed again. “Her name was Lilit.”

She pulled the tassel.

Untitled

Nicole Smith

01

The planet had liked his blood for as long as he could remember.

The understanding of the truth at the core of his existence came in surprisingly small snatches of memory: a bunch of bright blue *baale* flowers bursting from a bed of shale, where he had slipped and sliced an elbow. Slender green tendrils growing up in the cracks of the floorboard beneath the kitchen counter, where he had nicked a finger helping his mother peel vegetables for dinner. In fact, it had started so small that for a long time, he hadn't noticed it.

Shade drew a knife from his belt. He could hear Varona's quiet breath from over his shoulder. It was rare that Varona's boots touched Ne'ahn soil. Very rare. The old man was fragile from so many deep cryos, his skin wrinkled and paper thin, spotted with solar damage. Not much could draw him from his satellite palace, with its cleanliness and climate control.

But this could. This, after all, was the difference between making a home here or moving on. Always moving on. Shade drew the edge of his knife along the outside of his forearm. Violet blood spilled over his wrist and laced his fingers. Mikael Varona's breath hitched—at the sight of his blood, or the anticipation, Shade wasn't sure. He flexed his fingers. The pain was faint, his neuranet already stimulating endorphin production to suppress it.

The hills were quiet, expectant. The tree in front of him was protected by thick black bark. Beneath, revealed by the ragged pry of an ax, was a sliver of multicolored wood. The colors seemed to rise and whorl before his eyes. He blinked and said nothing. The men gathered behind him could not see that. They saw a tree with black bark and a plain interior, leaking sap the color of lifeblood.

The men gathered behind him, after all, were human. And this was an asha tree. It was the first one Shade had ever seen, but he felt quite sure that was true. This is what he had spent his entire life helping Mikael Varona find.

Shade realized he was holding his breath. He released it, slowly. He curled his hand into a fist and held it up, so that blood ran down his forearm and collected on the point of his elbow before dripping into the scar carved into the tree.

Nothing happened. After a long moment, Shade reluctantly lowered his bleeding arm.

"Well?" Mikael Varona demanded.

"I'm not sure, sir," Shade answered.

“Does this one look different, or not?”

Colors welled from the rent in the bark, beckoning him. Shade opened his mouth to respond. A small voice in the back of his mind interrupted.

Lie, it said—so suddenly that he was not sure at first if someone behind him had spoken it. He shook his head slightly and ignored the thought.

Why should he lie? He would not go so far as to say that Mikael Varona loved him, but the old man had provided for Shade. Taught him, paid for his training. He had treated Shade with respect, even though Shade was not—

All the way human.

“Yes, sir,” he said finally. “It does.”

“Then try again.” Varona’s voice was even. Unaccommodating. Things came into sharp focus as Shade’s pupils dilated. The colors of the asha tree swirled.

Show me, he begged, reaching forward with blood-laced fingers. This time, he placed his fingers directly against the flesh of the tree, and closed his eyes reluctantly. He did not like to have Mikael Varona at his back with his eyes closed.

Show me. Please. Beneath his touch, the asha was sticky wet, but cold. *Anything.*

This planet liked his blood. It always had. And so, when Shade offered his blood, the asha tree drank.

He wasn't sure at what point he had stopped standing in his body before the asha tree.

In fact, he wasn't sure he knew what an asha tree was. Knowledge like that seemed very far away. He was young and the day was warm, the breeze honeyed with the scents of the creeping vines that flowered in the late summer. The vines liked the window of Shade's bedroom especially, and gathered tightly around it, so that he could lie in the woven reed cocoon that made up his bed and feel as though he were staring through a portal into another place.

The window with the flowering vines was an unanchored place, a point at which anyone could fall by accident from one life to the next.

It *had* been late summer when everything ended—he remembered that now. He stood at the edge of the village, in the dappled shadows cast by the silvery-barked trees that hemmed in the round buildings with their roofs of thatch and emerald *bayran* leaf.

Late summer and smoke. For the silver trees, this place had once been called *saayara'ti*, or the silver glade. And after it was gone, there was no name. *Saayara'ti* had been his home, his everything, but just a home and not everything after all—or anything at all, to the people who mattered.

Smoke wafted, and finally Shade saw that it was not the orange of Ne'ah's little sister sunset but that of flames licking and crackling along thatch and *bayran* leaf. His eyes watered as he stood rooted to the spot beneath the silver-barked *yara* trees.

The human men wore black. That was the strangest thing about them. Shade had seen weapons before—knives and plasma cannons that came from off-world. From the humans. There *were* humans on Ne'ah. But not many like these.

On a lazy summer afternoon in his tenth year, Shade learned that humans who wore black intended nothing but violence. As twilight fell, the flowers underfoot unfurled their blossoms. Plasma carved white-hot trails through the heady air. The evening was sickly sweet.

There never was much blood. Plasma was so hot leaving the barrel of the gun that it cauterized, and these off-worlders were neat in their violence. But neat as they were, they could not make *Saayara'ti* die quietly. People Shade had known all his life screamed as their home fell to ash around them. Plasma cannons split the sound of burning. As smoke plumed, Shade's leaden legs began to move. His feet fell heavy against the earth which did nothing to save them. He was only another body, a boy small and harmless, thrust suddenly into a scene he could not comprehend.

His mind was empty as he stepped from the shelter of the silver trees. Not far, his bedroom with its armor of vines beckoned. Safety lay on the other side of it; he was convinced. On the other side of that window was the life he belonged in.

He stepped over the still form of someone whose face he could not see. And then there was the window, with its leaves and worn ledge. He pulled himself up and over, tumbling silently into the mesh of his bed.

Past the gauzy screen that obscured his room, he could hear men. Human men. When he leaned forward he could see the fire silhouetting them, making them paper flat and stretched out, with long limbs and claws. Then his father's voice, sounding a way Shade had never heard it before. Pleading.

Shade threaded his fingers through the mesh netting of his bed and dragged himself forward, sliding quietly to the floor and pushing back underneath the sling of cloth, safe, safe, safe.

His father's voice rose to a pitch and then broke. The men in black laughed and answered shortly in their sharp tongue. Shade's eyes found his mother's across the hall. She was tucked into the closet across the hall, her eyes glistening wet. The sheet hanging from the ceiling almost entirely obscured her. She was huddled and silent. Shade did not think she could see what was happening in the kitchen.

"Mom?" He began to crawl forward towards her. He thought to explain to her what was happening. Because she could fix this. She was human, like these men, and had once spoken like these men. She could make this all go away.

He froze when his mother's eyes widened in horror at his approach. In the doorway, there was a shout and the whirl of a plasma gun charging. Crunch, sizzle, thud. When Shade looked up, orange light silhouetted his father's body slumped over the kitchen floor, haloing the light fur on his slender ears and his dark hair spilling across the floor. Shade could see fire

through the smoking hole in his father's chest. But surely that could not be his father. That had to be someone else's father, someone else's tragedy. The men in black looked up. One of the barrels of the plasma rifles still glowed white hot.

Shade's mother made a choked noise but did not move from her hiding place. Did not move—not when the men in black came down the hall with their heavy boots and dragged Shade upright by his arm. Fastened a collar around his neck, and pulled him away.

He woke on a metal table. A shrill keening echoed in his head. He groaned, pressing both hands to his ears. The noise did not stop.

After a long, loud moment, he dropped his hands from his ears and lay quietly. His eyelids were heavy, crusted shut. When he opened them, a large fluorescent light dangling above him seared his vision white. He blinked, curled on one side. The stainless steel was frigid. The room was cold enough that he could see his breath.

He wished briefly that the noise would stop. But he hadn't the faintest idea how to go about accomplishing that. He sat up gingerly and then slid off the table. His right leg gave beneath him, and would have sent him to his knees if not for the support of the table. The left was little better. This was odd, he thought, because he felt no pain. His limbs were heavy, his mind numb.

But he managed to get his feet under him, leaning back against the table. A crisp white bandage wound over his ribs. Another wrapped his left forearm. Scars latticed his skin, some fresher but some obviously quite old: raised scars, slightly purple, some neat and straight where others were ragged and splotchy. He ran his fingers over the straight line bisecting his stomach, and then felt a little bit like throwing up.

Tentatively, he pushed off the table, holding both arms around himself for warmth. The room was small and bare, with the steel table he had woken up on, a sink, and a toilet. On one wall, the room was enclosed with plexi, and a hydraulic door. Every bit of metal was bolted securely down or flush with the stark white walls, even the door handle. This bothered him, and then he realized it was because he was searching for a weapon and could see none. He searched his brain for a reason to have a weapon.

Nothing presented. He hobbled to the toilet. A pile of black clothing sat on its lid—a nondescript pair of black slacks and a close-fitting undershirt. A black canvas windbreaker. He dressed gingerly. He had the sense that pain was hovering over his shoulder, but it never came.

Now considerably warmer in his clothes, he went stiffly to the sink. A warped mirror was mounted above it. He did not look long, meeting piercing dark eyes in an angular face and then looking down so he could start the flow of water and gulp greedily from the faucet.

He flinched when the hydraulic door slid open with a hiss. An old man stood in the doorway, dressed in a sharp black suit. He leaned on a metal-tipped cane. Beside him was a

white-coated young woman—*doctor*, his mind supplied—clutching a clipboard to her chest. The old man waved a hand dismissively in Shade’s direction.

“Go on, Maija.”

The woman came forward. She had a thin c-tablet in one hand, the screen plastered with numbers and rapidly evolving graphs. Shade tensed as she approached, but she only held out a hand.

Tentatively, he took it.

“Welcome back, Shade. My name’s Maija, and that’s Mr. Varona. Everything seems to be functioning normally. You’ll feel more like your old self soon.”

Shade was not entirely sure what feeling like his old self would entail. The woman—Maija—pushed her thick glasses up on her nose.

“Are you a doctor?” Shade asked, voice rasping. He stifled a cough.

“Of sorts,” Maija answered. She was preoccupied with the tablet. “I’m a cybernetics systems engineer, which is about as good as a neurologist if your brain is mostly hardware. Unfortunately we’ve had to do a full reset, but you can be assured that everything is now functioning just fine.”

“Is that why I can’t—”

“Remember? Yes. But don’t worry, the important bits will be back shortly. Do you mind if I do a quick injection?” She delved into her pocket and produced a capped syringe of clear fluid.

“What is that?” Shade asked warily, taking half a step back.

“Nothing you haven’t had a dozen times before,” the engineer answered. She tucked the tablet under one arm and uncapped the syringe, flicking it gently. “This is NTM 0.05%. A nano-suppression fluid. Helps keep the cybernet running smoothly, without interference. Would you mind sitting down?”

Shade reluctantly obeyed. The engineer leaned over him and moved to slide the needle into his skin. He flinched.

“Hold still, please,” she said.

“Don’t you need to—clean it, or something?”

She raised an eyebrow. “It would be a waste of time and alcohol swabs. Your immune system is military-grade. You’ll feel a pinch in three, two...”

The needle pierced his skin. He looked away and exhaled slowly through his nose. The ringing in his ears faded slowly to silence.

“Wasn’t that easy?” the engineer asked. She moved away and set the empty syringe on the side of the sink. “You need one of these every two weeks.”

Shade nodded mutely.

“Very good, Shade,” the old man in the doorway said. “Now, if you’ll come with me. I have someone that I’d like you to meet.”