

With  
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**Immortality must be purchased for a price.**

**Perhaps that price is too high.**

*The dream came again, once more full of greens and reds, and children's faces. There were hundreds of them! Some wore ugly, teasing, taunting, hating faces. Others were beautiful. Their peaches-and-cream complexions were split by broad smiles as the faces' tiny owners laughed and shouted with joy. Others were indistinct faces, while still others stared at her with sad, longing eyes...*

Fria opened her eyes with a start, frightened to discover that she had not been sleeping after all. She was lying in a large meadow of yellow wild flowers that had somehow escaped her goats and sheep. She had been staring up at the cloud-strewn sky when she had drifted off to ... where? She shivered at the thought. The doctors of so long ago had warned her about hallucinating. Hallucinations, they had told her, would be the first sign of the impending end. When she began to see things that were not there, that would be hard evidence that all human beings are mortal, even Fria and those like her.

Nothing, it seemed, is forever.

She sat up and then quickly got to her feet. For the first time in many minutes, she could again hear the faint hum of wild bees and the quiet whisper of the wind blowing across the hillside. Exasperated, she bent down to brush the yellow pollen from her long woolen skirt, before turning and starting up the trail that led toward the top of her mountain. As she left the meadow, a dark shape burst from the underbrush to trot beside her.

Her dog was a nameless mongrel of uncertain parentage, one of the periodic houseguests who drifted into her life, stayed awhile, and then drifted out again. She sighed, and spoke for the first time in several hours. The dog pricked up its ears at the sound.

"Hopefully it is too late for her to come tonight," Fria mused. "Help me gather in my sheep and I'll share my supper with you!"

By the time she had penned the sheep, milked her two goats, and shooed the chickens back into the old shed, there were three new dogs sitting in front of her stoop. They were thin and scraggly. One had half its ear gone and was marked by the diagonal line of a long healed scar across its muzzle. The scar gave the animal a mean look that the wagging of its tail belied.

Ever since the Destruction, dogs had not been kept much as pets. That unhappy time had apparently severed the age-old bond forever. Any stray canine that wandered into the village at the foot of her mountain was more likely than not to end up in the community stew pot. Save for the few relics like herself, no one now alive remembered the time when dogs had been "man's best friend."

Fria noted with a pang that the collie mix among the strays was a pregnant bitch. She shivered beneath her woolen shirt, hoping that they would be gone before the bitch's time came.

Inside the stone house, it was cold. It was *always* cold. She did not mind, for the cold was her

preservative. She could barely remember when being warm had been one of the natural conditions of life. The house was also dark as the light of day faded outside. She cured that problem by lighting an oil lamp. As usual, what few furnishings she had were well hidden by the clutter - tattered and yellowing books, scattered sheets of foolscap with scrawls of lumpy, homemade ink on them, her lounging cats. At the thought of her cats, her eyes sought out Pounce's customary position.

The cat's tail could be seen protruding from beneath an impromptu tent of old magazines. Pounce was the one constant in Fria's life, and she loved the animal dearly despite the cat's lazy, ungrateful attitude toward life. Pounce was also the last link she had to the long departed world of her youth.

"Here, Pounce!"

The tabby's head lifted slowly from the pile of magazines, as though to reproach Fria for disturbing her sleep. Pounce yawned, seemed to debate with herself on whether rising to her feet was worth the effort, and then arched her back as only a cat can. She walked to the edge of Fria's ancient desk and waited. Fria reached out to scratch behind the cat's ears. After a short pause, she was rewarded by the deep rumble of Pounce's purring.

"You're slowing down, cat. Can you finally be getting old after only 400 years?"

Fria chuckled at her feeble joke and wondered what the villagers would say if they had overheard it. At the thought of the village and its inhabitants, the smile faded from her lips.

Fria did not tolerate people and allowed herself very little contact with others. She deemed the villagers to be irritating fools, and had little reason to believe the rest of humanity was any better. Occasionally they would send pilgrims up the long trail to the top of the mountain. They would bring offerings that she would grudgingly bless. Once, long ago, she had tried to help them. However, the effort had been fruitless.

Like the houses of the village, her home was without electricity. This had not bothered her for a long time. One large room held a fireplace where she cooked and spent most of her time. A small bedroom in the rear was separated from the main room by a ragged woolen blanket hung from the ceiling. A sleeping loft completed her domicile.

Fria ate her meal sparingly and gave most of it to the dogs that waited patiently outside. After the collie mix had gulped down a bowl of curdled goat's milk, Fria found herself scratching the base of the bitch's ears. She could not figure out why she cared. Maybe it was because she remembered what dogs had been like before...

She brought her thoughts back to the present with a start. She'd let her grasp on reality slip again. She knelt over the bitch, running her hand over its distended belly. A tiny lump moved beneath her fingers. She pulled her hand away as though it had rested on a hot stove. The sudden movement caused the collie to yelp and run for its companions.

"Sorry," Fria said, sighing. She turned to go inside and then glanced back at the dogs, tears welling in her eyes. "At least you have each other."

#

Fria's evenings were long and restless and sleep was hard to find. Sometimes at night, she would sit by the fire and stir the coals, staring at the burning brightness until her eyes hurt. Fria's need for sleep had declined over the years and what little rest she did get was increasingly filled with nightmares. She would often toss and struggle on her small straw bed until she was covered in cold, clammy perspiration.

Tonight she lay half-asleep on her bed. The long dead faces were just beginning to form as the cold fear began to build inside. A dull thudding seemed to burst inside her head. She forced herself awake, then bolted into a sitting position. The sudden movement made her dizzy. Fria sat at the edge of the bed, her hands pressed tightly to her head. The pounding noise refused to end. The barking of the dogs was undercut by a muffled voice that floated to her above the din.

Fria found the candle by her bed with trembling hands. She stumbled to the fireplace where a red glow of dying embers still lingered. She doubled over, touched the candle tip to the embers, and was rewarded by a pale, yellow flame. The pounding at the door had become more insistent. Her heart thumped almost as loudly as the noise. She could feel her pulse in her throat as she pulled the door open. In the faint light, she saw a frail little creature pushing awkwardly at the surrounding dogs.

"Get these animals away from me!" The wraith screamed as it kicked at the dogs.

Fria hesitated. Before she could respond, the figure pushed past her and deposited itself in front of the fireplace. Fria fought the wind and forced the door closed before turning. The figure removed its wet cloak, revealing a young girl with wet blond curls, a pale pinched face, and fair coloring. The girl dropped her cloak in a heap at her feet, turned, and returned Fria's stare. The girl took a step closer, disbelief on her face, as she lifted her hand to touch Fria's face.

"You're not old at all," she said before emitting a short, sharp bark of a laugh. "Why you aren't even as old as my mother!"

Fria pulled away and brushed quickly past the girl. She placed the candle on the table and threw a log on the fire. In seconds, it had burst into yellow flame. She turned to the girl and pointed toward the fire.

"Stand in front of the hearth and remove your clothes."

The girl hesitated, her eyes wide with fear.

"Now!"

The girl walked across the room, past the clutter, moving in concert with the emerald cats' eyes that stared unblinking from the shadows. "This is where you live?"

Fria ignored the question and watched intently as the girl, her fingers numb with cold, struggled with her laces.

"What is your name, girl?"

"Amber," the girl said as she halted the struggle with her wet clothes and smiled shyly at Fria. "I've come a long way. I am cold and hungry. Do you have anything to eat?"

"Later!"

"I'm awfully hungry. I stopped in the village. When I told them I was looking for you, they turned away." She hesitated as she noticed the flare of anger in Fria's eyes. She gulped loudly before continuing. "You were expecting me, weren't you? I mean, you knew I was coming? The elders said you knew!"

Fria nodded angrily. "I knew all about it. Stop dawdling and disrobe!"

Amber had removed her sodden dress and stood before Fria in a loose fitting camisole. Her lower lip quivered and she shook her head in a curt negative. Fria lifted the candle to where it was even with Amber's eyes and leaned forward until their noses were mere inches apart.

"Now that you are here there can be no refusals. I must be sure. Your life depends on it."

The girl whimpered as she lifted the soaked camisole over her head. The firelight reflected off her body in flickering shadows. Fria grabbed the girl by the shoulders and spun her around. The tattoo was precisely where it should have been. The number bore the crisp, machine-produced look of an Examiner. No human hand could have forged it. And if that wasn't sufficient, the number tallied with the simple, unbreakable code that Fria had used when she gave out the chrome and steel Examiner boxes a dozen years earlier.

The girl had been rightfully chosen, rightfully marked.

After the verification was over, Fria stepped back and let her eyes rove over the rest of Amber's body. What she saw was a young girl on the verge of womanhood. The signs of incipient puberty were everywhere, from the slight swelling of the hips, to a hint of breasts to be. Fria let her eyes drop to the bare triangle between Amber's legs. She was reminded of another girl four centuries earlier who had shyly covered herself as other hard eyes had surveyed her.

She was reminded of what she had lost.

"Don't get dressed. Lay your clothing on the hearth to dry. You will find a blanket to wrap yourself up in the loft. After that, I'll give you food."

With that, she turned her back as the girl followed her instructions. It was not until she heard the soft scrabbling of bare feet on straw in the loft that Fria began to shake.

#

Fria recognized that her mood would allow her no further sleep. She waited silently for Amber to eat her fill, and then saw her bedded down. She waited until a quiet, regular breathing could be heard from the loft before wrapping a wool blanket tightly around her shoulders and stepping out into the moonlit night. The mountain air was cold - uncomfortably so, even for her - yet the tiny stabbing pain that accompanied each inhalation seemed to clear her head and calm her emotions.

She did not walk far. Four centuries of residence among the high crags had taught her feet the path to the outcropping of granite that overlooked her meadow of flowers. She was barely conscious of her progress, or of the dark shadows of the dogs that followed closely behind.

Fria found her perch and pulled her knees to her chest, drawing the blanket about her. Below, the field of flowers rippled eerily in the moonlight, as though it was some far sea whipped by storm winds. She lifted her eyes to the sky. The stars seemed steel hard points of radiance, as chilly as the wind around her. She was filled with sadness as she caught sight of a star that moved slowly from west to east in violation of nature's order.

There had been a time long ago when fathers held their children aloft and pointed out the moving lights that were the great space stations, the jumping off places for the far planets. No longer. Now the sight of the sky derelicts only served to remind people of The Destruction. Few stargazed as a result.

Fria was different. She had long ago ceased to fear the sky. Now it held only a pleasant sadness for her, a wistfulness for that which might have been. The old memories spilled forth in abundance. In many ways, they were clearer than those of the year just past. She shuddered at the thought. The ability to recall your childhood (but not your morning) was one of the first symptoms of creeping senility.

Her clearest early memories were of her father telling her stories of the time before The Troubles; the

time when man's future had seemed unlimited, the time before the aliens came. In those days, it had seemed as though humans had finally tamed their warlike nature as they spread throughout the solar system. Their settlements dotted the surface of Mars, the Asteroid Belt, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Their mines scarred the surfaces of fiery Mercury and frigid Pluto. Their orbital cities grew rich and prosperous. Only the far stars were left for conquest and humanity was thinking about mounting the effort.

Then the aliens came.

Their interstellar ships were wolves among Earth's interplanetary sheep. Only when they came up against fixed planetary defenses did they show any vulnerability. Even then, however, humanity was able to achieve little better than a standoff. The best computers Earth possessed gave space-going civilization less than two centuries to live if nothing were done to change the odds.

Something *was* done. Human weapons research was easily on a par with that of the aliens. Only in the development of interstellar craft was humanity behind its tormentors. The solar system's leaders decreed a punitive expedition be launched to carry the battle to the aliens' home star. The expedition would take nearly a century to cross the black gulf of space, far too long for anyone then alive to survive the voyage. To provide the expedition with crewmembers, a crash program of research into drastically extending human life span was begun.

The scientists worked for twenty years while *Starship Vengeance* was slowly assembled in orbit. A decade after Fria's birth, they found their answer. It was not a perfect answer by any means - more than a million laboratory animals had died in the experiments - but it was an answer, of sorts

If the subject was female and on the verge of sexual maturity ... if she possessed a rare factor in her blood ... if these and a hundred other parameters were exactly right, then it was sometimes possible to extend the human life span to half a thousand years or more. The first success had been Pounce, the cat, for a few years the most famous "person" on Earth.

Then had come the human volunteers. Grisly experiments established that the chances of success were less than one in a hundred. In the end, however, fifty little girls emerged from the treatment tanks after more than two years of therapy, each ready to take the war to the enemy.

The enemy never gave them that chance.

Fria fidgeted uncomfortably on the rocky ground. The dogs had wandered off to scavenge food for their hungry bellies. A dim light in the east hinted at dawn. She would have to face the girl soon. She shut her eyes and tried to keep the memories from washing over her. The mere thought of Amber triggered a mental picture of herself at the same age. She had been so happy, so blissfully ignorant of the consequences of The Treatment. She had long since forgiven her parents. After all, how could they have known what immortality would be like? She could not very well blame the twelve year old Fria, either. That little girl had been far too young to have any real opinion in the matter. If only...

"No!" screamed aloud as she forced herself to her feet. What was done was done, and wishing would not change it. She turned in the first, gray light of dawn and started back up the hill to her house. Amber would be waking shortly, and if her appetite of the previous evening were any indication, she would want breakfast.

#

Fria stirred a boiling pot of corn meal and listened to the sounds of the various animal inhabitants of her mountain greeting the new day. Two blue jays fluttered through the trees in front of her house, chirping

and scolding each other while an irrepressible rooster crowed from the roof of the shed out back. The porridge bubbled slowly in its kettle while flames crackled upwards against its black bottom. Beside the kettle, an old, dirty teapot simmered with scalding brew.

Behind her, Fria heard the sounds of stirring from the loft.

She straightened from her cooking and looked around for Pounce. Lately, the cat spent more time than usual sleeping and she had taken to curling up in unusual places. She hadn't eaten well the previous evening either, which was unlike her. In nearly forty decades of living together, Fria had never known Pounce to willingly miss a meal.

Fria heard a creaking behind her. She turned and met Amber's gaze as the girl descended the ladder from the loft. Her pale bare feet descended each rung quickly. The corners of the girl's mouth curled upward in an eager smile framed in tight blonde ringlets where her hair was disheveled by the rain. Fria looked quickly away.

"Good morning," said Amber.

Fria lifted the kettle from its hook over the fire, using a heavy rag to protect her hand. She placed it on the table and handed the girl a wooden bowl and spoon. "Eat your fill and feed the rest to the dogs." She did not wait for an answer, but turned and walked brusquely outside. She stood for a moment and breathed deeply of the clear mountain air. The warmth of the sun's rays started to displace the chill from her body. She wondered what it would take to melt the chill in her heart.

She started walking slowly toward the goats' pens and was joined almost simultaneously by Amber and the dogs. Amber did not speak and Fria was surprised by the girl's frightened expression as the dogs leaped and whined in joy around her. Fria bent and picked up a small rock, throwing it into a clump of bushes. The dogs ran like puppies to investigate. Fria turned to Amber, who was walking a step behind her. "The dogs are nothing to fear."

The girl shook her head. "I'm not afraid. However, we never kept dogs. In fact I didn't think anybody kept them anymore, except maybe to eat."

"There will be no eating of my dogs while I am alive. But enough of this foolishness. If you are not going to finish breakfast, you can begin your work. The goats need milking, and after that, there are other chores to do."

The two of them worked side-by-side until late morning. The sun showed it to be after ten o'clock when Fria gave Amber a basket and explained how to find the blueberry patch higher up the mountain. Two hours later, she was just finishing up her noon meal of reheated corn meal porridge, bread and cheese, when she heard the girl returning.

"What kept you?"

"I went for a walk after finishing with the berries."

"Don't make a habit of running off without telling me. You could be hurt and I would not know where to look. Are you hungry?"

"I would rather talk. I have many questions."

"The elders told you all you need know."

"Please, there is so much more."

"There is, indeed," Fria said. "But what can I tell you that you are capable of understanding? Can one who has lived a mere dozen years truly understand what it is like to live centuries? Perhaps you think yourself able to comprehend the feelings of someone who has outlived everyone they ever loved?"

"I can try!"

"You will fail. Look at yourself! You have the capacity within you to attain near immortality and the prospect excites you more than you can say. You hunger for The Treatment, not even caring that it will subject you to nearly two years of torment."

"There will be pain?"

"Considerable. However, the pain is transitory. You have something of far greater significance to fear."

"What could be worse than pain?"

"I suggest you spend the rest of the day thinking on that very question. If you wish to speak to me, I will be with my sheep."

#

The sky was a dull smoky color, full of heavy dark clouds. This and the cold stinging wind convinced Fria she could delay her return no longer. She had spent most of the afternoon trying not to think about Amber at all. Sometimes she had succeeded, but more often, she had not.

Fria was barely conscious of walking the path to her home, or penning the goats and sheep, or closing the chickens into their coop. She moved through her nightly routine as though in a daze. She was roused from her stupor as a violent gust of wind pushed the door from her grasp and slammed it loudly against the wall. The fire in the fireplace shuddered and threatened to go out. A startled Amber dropped the spoon she had been using to stir the kettle. Ignoring the girl's fright, Fria pushed the door closed, and secured it with a wooden bar. She lingered by the latch for a few moments before turning to face the still frightened girl.

Amber had returned to stirring the pot, and was avoiding Fria's gaze.

Irritated at the smell emanating from the pot, Fria spoke sharply. "What is it you're cooking?"

Amber's voice was barely audible when she answered: "Chicken stew."

Fria froze in place and did not speak. For some reason, Amber's trembling angered her.

"Are you upset about the chicken?" Amber asked.

"No, not about the chicken. But from now on I'll decide the menu."

Amber laid the spoon down and turned with trembling lips to face Fria. In spite of her fear, her eyes held a spark of defiance in them. "You don't expect me to live on vegetables and cheese all the rest of my life, do you? I must have meat if I'm to receive The Treatment."

Fria turned her back on Amber, and grasped her hands tightly together to control their shaking. *Treatment*. God, how she hated that word! She was frightened now. She was afraid that if she turned around, she would not see Amber standing before the crackling fire; but rather that poor, sad little girl of four centuries earlier.

She fought to conquer the terrifying images that raced through her mind. Finally, when the old ghosts had

receded a bit, she turned back to the sobbing girl. Fria gasped as she caught sight of Amber. The girl was seated on the hearthstone with Pounce's fur protruding from her enveloping arms. She was rocking back and forth, stroking the cat beneath its whiskery chin.

Amber glanced up, misinterpreted Fria's look, and smiled. "We made friends this afternoon when I was alone and frightened."

In that instant, the pent-up anger of decades exploded within Fria. She found herself jealously grabbing Pounce. Not used to such mauling, the cat squalled, clawed and twisted frantically in Fria's arms. Unmindful of Pounce's struggles, Fria clung to the animal tightly. "Pounce is my cat! You are never to touch her again. Do you understand me?"

"You are the meanest person in the world!" Amber screamed. "They must have cut out your heart in order for you to live so long."

Fria took a step backward, surprised at the girl's outburst. Then she blinked, and as the words began to sink in, she laughed. It started as a deep-down, quiet chuckle and then built to a harsh cackle. Even to Fria, the laugh seemed to contain more than a touch of insanity. Finally, she collapsed onto a chair with tears streaming down her cheeks and got control of herself.

"Cut out my heart? Why, little girl, you will find that is the least of what will happen to you when The Treatment begins. When I get through with you, you will be just like me. You'll be an empty, barren, embittered old mule."

No!" Amber screamed. She held her hands over her ears and bent her head almost to her lap. "I'll never be like you!"

Fria's hysteria stopped as quickly as it had come. She wiped the laugh-tears from her eyes and sat straight in her chair, regarding Amber with a new compassion. When she spoke, it was so softly that she was not even sure that Amber could hear her:

"Then you'd better leave now, before it's too late."

In one single motion, Amber was up and at the door. She tugged at the latch bar, pulled the door open, and ran sobbing out into the cold drizzle of the storm. After the girl had gone, Fria stood and walked to the open doorway. She stood and gently rocked the protesting cat in her arms for several minutes while she gazed out into the blackness of the night.

#

Slowly Fria became aware of her surroundings.

She shook herself to come fully awake; suddenly realizing that she had never truly been asleep. Even so, she did not remember descending the winding stairs that led from the trap door in her bedroom to the cavern buried deep inside her mountain. Nor did she remember seating herself at the main control console and energizing her ever-faithful machines.

The room was dimly lighted by blue electric lamps. The walls around her were lined with blinking, humming machines that talked to the giant computers buried deeper in the mountain. Directly in front of her, neatly displayed on her console, were a dozen tiny lights representing the Earth, the Moon, and the giant defense batteries that waited patiently for the command that would hurl destructive energies a million kilometers out into space.

Fria looked around at Command Center, truly seeing it in a way she had not in a long time. She



remembered how it had been at first. In the first few decades of her stewardship, she had enjoyed coming down to look at the lights, the counterparts of which had gone out in the rest of the world. And, of course, she had come down frequently to check the screens for any sign that the aliens had returned. Not that it was truly necessary. The computers had suitable means for alerting her in the house above should they make new contact with humanity's foes.

Then as the empty years passed, as mankind sank ever farther into the abyss of superstition and savagery; Command Center had become merely another harsh reminder of the past and Fria had stopped coming.

She ran her hands absently over the cool surface of the screen before her, resting the tips of her fingers over the blinking, blue symbol that represented the Earth. She sat there for a few moments, her mind numb. Strangely, she began to feel that this tiny pulsating light represented the beating hearts of all the people on the planet. She felt her face twist into a bitter smile as she realized how easy it would be to turn that pulsing light off forever.

Long ago, when the aliens had beaten humanity back from the depths of space, the great defense network in which she now sat had been all that stood between her people and destruction. The alien starships had massed for the last battle and thrown themselves against the ring of iron that surrounded the Earth. They had broken against that ring. Later, when the world began to come apart at the seams, a few remaining defenders recognized that the threat was not over. Nowhere was it written that the aliens might not return someday.

To guard against such a possibility, the world's last rulers decreed that fifty young girls would become the Earth's guardians. They who would never go into space would stand guard from hidden control centers buried deeply within and scattered widely across the face of the planet. Should the aliens return, the defense network would again be used to repel them. However, should the battle go badly, if it looked as though mankind would lose at last, the planners provided that the aliens' victory would be a Pyrrhic one.

Any Guardian had the capability to destroy the prize in order to deny it to humanity's enemies.

"So you thought of everything, did you?" Fria asked aloud, speaking to those long dead men who had built the machines around her. As always, she was struck by the fact that Command Center allowed no echoes, but instead swallowed up her words. "You forgot that your immortals are only human, too. If only you knew how it feels to yearn for something you can never have, *and continue yearning for four hundred years!*"

When she volunteered for the Treatment, they had explained to her that there would be a minor side effect, a mere inconvenience. It would affect her glands, and consequently, would render her infertile. Really, it was a minor consequence when one considered that she was exchanging motherhood for "immortality." And she had accepted their words without a second thought. However, as the long empty years passed, she found her desire for a child grew until it devoured her. She wanted to feel the rush of life within, to undergo the glorious pain of childbirth. She wanted to wash, and powder, and diaper a baby that came from her own loins. She wished to feel that small child's hand trustingly encircled by her own, to watch it grow year by year.

She had made good progress in conquering the obsession over the last thirty or forty decades. Yet, the girl's arrival had stirred up the old urges stronger than ever.

"*Damn!*" She spoke aloud once more, slamming her hand hard against the monitor screen. "If only Amber had never come."

She buried her head in her arms, and felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks. Slowly she became aware

that the little blinking light she had been monitoring all these centuries was no longer there. For a moment, she sat and stared at the dark space where Earth should be.

Panic gripped her and she raced across the room to the small back-up system behind the main console. Suddenly she was laughing and crying at the same time. She fell to her knees and did something she had not done in nearly three hundred years. She found herself mouthing a long forgotten prayer of thanksgiving. The tears continued to roll freely down her cheeks.

For the blinking blue symbol with the tiny "E" inside it was still there. Now that her conscious mind was in control again, she realized that it could not have been otherwise. After all, if the Doomsday Device had been set off, she would have had considerably more indication of that fact than the lack of the Earth symbol on the monitoring screen. Its absence had been the result of a minor malfunction brought about by her blow to the screen. The repair circuits were already working on it. There had never been any need for concern.

Yet, it was her sudden concern that surprised her. She really did care! What happened to this muddied ball of squabbling savages *did* matter to her. She felt an exhilarating feeling of relief. After all these empty years, she had a reminder that there was purpose to her life. Humanity was down, but not out. They would rise again. True, not in her lifetime. Perhaps in Amber's.

The stars were still out there, waiting. They would not have to wait forever.

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Fria did not know how long she stayed down below after her revelation, but when she finally pushed back the trap door and climbed into her own bedroom, she was surprised to see daylight softly shining in the window. For the first time in a long time she felt refreshed, as if she had finally achieved a long needed sleep. She pulled the blanket partition aside and stood quietly. She was pleased to see Amber had returned and was apparently no worse for having spent the night in the storm. The girl was sitting in the middle of the main room with her back to Fria, holding something in her arms.

Fria hesitated, unsure of how to approach the girl. Finally, she walked forward and sank to her knees.

Amber had been crying. Her face was puffy and red. She looked up from the wet ball of fur that she cradled in her arms and began to sob again.

"When I came back this morning, I found Pounce lying all stiff in the doorway ... I'm so sorry."

Fria gently took the cat from the girl's arms and placed it lovingly on the floor.

"It's all right. Don't cry. Please don't cry."

Amber sniffed back her tears and stared up at Fria with uncertainty and fear in her eyes. After a moment of hesitation, Fria reached out and took Amber's small hand in her own. She smiled reassuringly. Amber leaned forward and rested her head against Fria's shoulder. She felt the child's hand squeeze her own and she gently stroked the girl's soft curls. A smile played across her lips. Maybe her prayers had been finally answered.

Maybe, after all these years, she had a child of her own.

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