

A Bitch in Time
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Shiba sat on the bare wood planks of the cabin porch, wiggling her bottom away from a persistent splinter. Mail hung heavily on her shoulders and across her back, and the leather-lined helmet chafed her ears despite its custom contours. Hot in the sun, it was. Across the tunic on her broad chest hung a short row of service pins and one smooth, polished medal. Shiba would have ripped it off if she'd been given the choice. What good was valor when it wasn't enough?

Good for a thorough rolling-on, that's what.

Beside her stood the Line Mate, the man in charge of the border cabins that represented the first line of defense against illegal magics. He wore his only everyday work clothes. Well, he wasn't waiting for his new partner.

"Patience," he said, resting his hand on the skirt of mail that hung over her long ears. "He'll be here. Naught for you to worry."

Shiba made a grumping noise and lifted her nose to the air, expertly sorting it for any trace of stranger-odor. There! Was that...? She whined, licked her lips, and tried again. Definitely not.

"Coming, is he?" the Line Mate asked, expectantly eyeing the path that led from the woods. His other name was Eldon, though Shiba thought he ought to pick one name or the other and stick with it. "All right. Just you keep in mind that he's only recently lost his own partner. That does things to a lineman, you know."

Shiba's tail quivered, and her forehead furrowed into furry wrinkles. The scent of her new partner was strong in her nose, stronger than any words Eldon might say. People talked all the time anyway, whether they had something to say or not. She strained her eyes-not the strength of her senses-and yes, there he was! Just visible through the trees at the edge of the cabin's small clearing, a tall walking stick in one hand and a full satchel slung over the other shoulder. Shiba whined as he emerged from the woods, and licked away the drool gathering on her lip.

"Easy," said Eldon, as Shiba's new partner approached. The man's easy stride seemed a little too casual.

"Tallon," Eldon said. "Welcome. You made good time."

"Good enough," the man said. Shiba liked his voice. It had a roughly furry texture not unlike

her own. He nodded at her. "See you musta spent some time getting ready for me. Wasn't necessary."

"I didn't do it for you," Eldon said. "I did it for her. She was strongly attached to the old man. It's good for her to have a little ceremony, something to mark your arrival as out of the ordinary. I can't help but worry about the way you two are going to mesh."

Tallon dropped the satchel and looked thoughtfully at his new linehound.

Shiba gave him her Noble Beauty pose. After all, she was of the best bloodlines and strikingly marked. The black of her back was glossy beneath her chain mail, and her chest, belly, and legs were white, so heavily ticked with black that from any distance they looked blue silver. The black of her head and ears was divided by a neat ticked blaze that spread to take over her muzzle, and her eyebrows were punctuated by deep brown. Her body was sturdy, her tail strong and graceful, and her ears fell long and soft, the perfect complement to her hanging flews. Best of all, her legs-long, heavy-boned and angular-were up to the task of following her incomparable nose.

She knew all this because Jehn, her former partner, had told her so. She believed him utterly, just as she believed everything he said.

Tallon just shrugged. "We'll get along fine," he said. "Jehn'll have trained her right, and beyond that, a dog's a dog."

Shiba couldn't believe her ears. She looked at Eldon, who appeared to be speechless. A dog's a dog, ey? Her ears, previously cocked forward like big floppy wings at the side of her head, flattened. She rose and circled the man, eyeing him with cold brown eyes. A dog's a dog. Well, this dog was a bitch. Tallon would not only do well to keep that in mind, he was about to find out exactly what it could mean.

Shiba gave his satchel a sideways look. It did mean she couldn't lift her leg on the thing. There were other ways... Shiba dropped shoulder-first on the satchel and rolled with the dramatic wiggles and flourishes commonly reserved for the rankest carrion.

Tallon seemed to have missed the point, for he never made the necessary apologies and overtures to earn Shiba's forgiveness. Of all the linemen on the border, why give her this one break in? No matter how long he'd been a lineman elsewhere, Tallon was the green one here for this was her territory. A lifetime-all three years of it-of protecting this section of the border from spellrunners meant that she knew all its hiding places, and all the tricky runners in the area.

For a while there, spellrunners had taken to disguising the smell of magic with the much

stronger scent of critter. It'd worked, too, because Shiba, like any other linehound, had a passionate hate for the oily-furred, long-bodied, toothy-jawed, witless-and here she had to pause in her thoughts to get hold of herself-critters. Why, their true name was such an abomination that a proper bitch never even said it, not even to herself. Critter, that's all they were ever called by a linehound, all of whom were thoroughly trained from their natural inclination to hunt down and shred every critter whose scent trail they crossed.

But the spellrunner ploy only worked for a while, until Shiba caught the faint scent of magic beneath the critter/human trail, and learned that critter plus human smell was as good as smelling magic. Jehn had been so proud of her the day she'd treed those first two spell-runners. And how silly they'd looked, perched up in that small trembling tree. One limp, tubular critter body, tied to lay scent in their footsteps, dangled from each heel and spun slow lazy circles at the height of Jehn's head.

Shiba's tongue lolled out in a laugh just thinking about it. For once, a memory of Jehn that didn't bring pain or guilt along with it. She'd done a good job that day, and Jehn had bragged it amongst the linemen many a time.

Tallon's voice interrupted her morning bask in the sun. "Let's go," he said. "Time for rounds."

Shiba's jaw snapped shut as he moved out before her, his stupid walking stick at his side where he should have left space for her. He took to the woods, heading for the worn path that followed the line of the border. She followed in his footsteps, but clogged her nose with his dust and the scent of his old boots for only a few moments before breaking out ahead of him.

"With me!" he said sharply, letting her know she wasn't to stray far from him, that he didn't trust her. His pleasing voice had long since lost its charm. Shiba, moving right along in her leggy trot, was tempted to not hear him. But no, for the sake of Jehn's memory, she couldn't do that. She snorted a little sneeze of impatience and let him catch up. And then, when she glanced back, she saw he was fumbling at his waist for the leash he carried, like most linemen, simply wrapped around his body.

The leash! She stared at him in horror. She hadn't been on a leash since she was a yearling. How could he even think of-oh, the shame of it! Her body folded in on itself in mortification until she was all but cringing at his feet. Oh, what would Jehn say? Tallon must have seen her so close she'd come to not hearing him, and now he didn't trust-

Sniffle. Even in her mortification, Shiba had to breathe, and her nose was something she could never ignore. Tallon's hand hesitated over her neck. Smmmmfle!

Crittersmell Tallon's smell old old Jehn's smell deer's smell summerbells in bloom's smell critter critter critter's smell and beneath it all, magic's smell. No magic made it past her border! Shiba barked, the short, choppy bark that signaled a magic trail, and looked up at Tallon,

waiting his decision.

He didn't make one. He hovered over her, his hand clearly thinking leash while his mouth hesitated on the command to find it. Shiba's nose told her crittersmell magic smell and she hunted the air, eyes on Tallon, until the odors resolved themselves. Crittersmell magic smell crittermagic smell!. No hesitation this time, Shiba bawled full trail cry right in his face.

Tallon, so startled he tumbled back on his bottom, yelled, "Son of a bitch!" as Shiba surmounted to her feet, mastered by the smell of magic and no more by any lineman. Not even Jehn could have stopped her as she lunged into the trees and latched on to the trail. "Son of a bitch!"

Well, Shiba thought, at least he was getting closer than plain old dog. She ran the trail full out, until the crittersmell overwhelmed the magic smell altogether, so sharp it stung her nose and she ran with her head in the air, belling triumph to the trees as she raced past. She overtook the trail, and it took only seconds to backtrack the critter where it crouched in a tree. Treed, treed, freed! Her sweet, full trail cry changed to something choppy as she stood against the tree trunk, getting a face full of crittersmell from the scruffy specimen clinging to the lowest branch of the tree. Stupid critter, it ought to have climbed a little higher! Treed, treed! she barked joyfully, leaping up so far she fairly blew its fur back with the blast of sound. The insignificant noise of Tallon's approach cornered very little of her attention. Bounding ever higher, she bellowed treed treed treed critter! and on her last bounce, leapt so high her head was level with the critter's.

With a squeak of mindless fear, it shot out off the branch like a sling-shot stone, landing squarely on Tallon's chest. His stupid walking stick flew into the air as he slapped frantically at his body, always one step behind the panicked critter. Finally the thing launched off his back and as Tallon flung one last grab at it, he lost his balance and came down hard on his back.

The air whooped from his lungs, but that didn't stop him from snagging Shiba's collar as she bounded after the critter. She dragged him several feet, belling trail all the while, until his shoulder slammed up against a tree. Magic smell! she cried woefully, and looked down at him from a vantage point of just over his face.

He still hadn't found his breath, though he seemed to be trying to say something. His face red, his lips moving soundlessly, all he got out was, "-a bitch!"

He was learning! But was he all right? The noises that came from him still didn't sound normal. Shiba looked down the scant hand's breadth separating her nose from his face, and

Shiba stretched out full length on the shady side of the clearing, her ears mournfully long, her eyes accusing and wounded. Chained. Disgraced. Fastened to the cabin porch like any common hound mutt.

Maybe if she hadn't been so hot from the run... maybe if she'd had time to calm, to regain her composure, maybe if-

No, let's face it. She always drooled a lot. It was just Tallon's bad luck to have had his mouth open so wide.

Shiba wore her harness with ill grace, plodding along the border path with her ears hanging low and long. The harness, like her mail, was meant for combined operations with other linehounds and their Linemen. Not for daily work. Definitely not. Sullenly, she kept just enough tension on the leash to throw off Tallon's natural stride. The tip of that stupid walking stick stubbed against the ground in uneven intervals, providing Shiba with spiteful satisfaction.

At least she had Eldon's mild comments to salve her wounded pride. "Did you check your detector?" he'd asked Tallon, referring to the only magic allowed in the kingdom—a device that detected the same magic Shiba could sniff out so much more easily.

They'd spoken in the cabin, where they'd thought Shiba-chained to the porch—couldn't hear. And when Tallon admitted he didn't think to check, Eldon said, "Shiba's not a [critter]-chained. Give her some room."

Except he hadn't said critter. He'd said the Awful Word instead. Even so, that hadn't stopped the little swell of appreciation in Shiba's hound heart.

Not that Eldon's words had done much good. "She isn't acting right," Tallon said. "I think the incident with Jehn broke her."

"That wasn't her fault," Eldon said. "The old man went too far over the border when she was on trail, and fell right into one of the spellrunner traps. It was just a scare-spell... if only his heart had withstood the shock, he'd be in retirement right now."

Thinking of that day, Shiba whined, right there in front of Tallon, in harness, on the leash. Jehn had winded the horn—recall with his last breath—the recall that meant break trail, and with any linehound, Shiba included, was liable to ignore. She hadn't, though, not on that day. She'd found Jehn just as the silver-chased horn fell from his limp hand to the mossy ground, and it had taken three Linemen to haul her away from his body when her howls finally guided them to the spot.

"I didn't say it was her fault." Tallon's response to Eldon had been sharp enough to come clearly through the cabin walls. "I said I think it broke her. And I'm not about to chance losing another dog."

Shiba's whine turned into more of a grumble at that memory, and now she gave an extra tug against the leash. Shiba, broken? Ready to farm out as someone's pet? Critter-crap!

Ah, yes, and there was some now. Shiba wrinkled her nose at the scent, but she recalled magic-critter from the day before and let her nose do her thinking. Crittersmell, it told her, predictably enough. Crittersmell... magic smell! She barked, and looked over her shoulder at Tallon.

"Uh-uh," he said. "You'll do this one in harness."

Magicsmell!! she told him, barking more demandingly the second time.

"Good girl. Find it, Shiba!"

Leashed? Why... he meant it! All right, then. Just see if he could keep up with her. Nose to the ground, she hauled him into the woods, and immediately hit trail so strongly she just couldn't help the bellow that escaped her. Ohhh, yes, magic smell! Forgetting her resentment of the leash, Shiba hauled Tallon along behind her, racing along the mixed scents of critter and magic. The nasty creature couldn't be too far ahead—here! Here, it had treed, and in a silly little bush barely taller than Tallon. Treed, treed! Shiba bounced into the air, joyfully inhaling the magic and happy to be bawling treed in another critter's pointy little face.

A jerk brought her down to earth, startled. Tallon's firm hand on the harness kept her there. "Another [critter]," he said, his voice strangely flat. "Shiba, Jehn would be ashamed of you."

Magicsmell! she barked at him. If only humans had something better than that puny little thing they somehow called a nose!

With jerky movements, he retrieved the magic detector from its belt pouch, aiming it at the critter. "Nothing. I didn't think so."

The disappointment in his voice made her fold up upon herself despite the insistent tickle on her nose that meant magic. Jehn hadn't detected magic when she'd chased the critter-enhancing spellrunners, either. But he'd always trusted her nose. She was a linehound, his linehound, but no detector would ever be as sensitive. Tallon, now... Tallon was stroking her head in a silly way. "It's all right, Shiba. We'll just start you over from the beginning, if we have to. That's all right, girl, it's all—"

The cowardly critter could stand no more. It sailed over Tallon's head, emitting a little waresqueak on the way. Shiba answered it with a belling cry—magic smell! Slave to her nose and in delight, she flung herself after it, jerking Tallon off his feet and onto his face. The weight meant nothing to her; she dug her feet in and dragged him with her. And then the leash flopped loose behind her, and in her freedom she thought nothing of Tallon and everything of the magic smell.

It was her job, after all.

She was barking treed when he caught up with her, the critter cowering not far overhead.

"Shiba!" he bellowed, timing to catch her between barks. There was anger in that voice. Definite anger.

Suddenly, Shiba remembered the feel on the harness as she'd dragged him over roots, the sound as he broke through low-lying brush with his face, the ripping noise of good stout broadcloth as he hit the greenbriar she'd slicked right through...

Just as suddenly, she realized she was high off the ground, balanced on three different branches with one front foot clawing to find purchase in the bark... of the tree... she was in. Tallon looked up at her, and now she saw astonishment mixed in with the anger on his face. She could see the way his hair was thinning on top, too. She barked encouragingly at him.

He fisted his hands on his hips and said, "Shiba, come down from that tree."

Come down? She didn't remember getting up here-how was she supposed to get down? Her front foot slipped again; bits of bark rained down on Tallon's head. Come down? Not a chance. Never.

Tallon looked at her, looked at the critter, looked at her, swore... and started to climb. This was more like it! Shiba wagged her tail. They'd get the magicsmell together!

But when Tallon came to a stop between Shiba and the critter, it was to reach for Shiba's harness. Ohhh, no. He wouldn't-he couldn't-

He tugged. Shiba's four legs turned to twenty, all clawing for purchase amidst the convoluted branches of the low-slung maple. One insistent man's arm was nothing against ninety pounds of determined hound.

Tallon muttered another curse, his gaze swiveling to the critter. Beady-eyed, it stared back at him, all four stubby little legs wrapped around its branch, its tail hanging down like something already dead, a naked scaly appendage no farther from Tallon than he was from Shiba.

In one quick, decisive movement, Tallon grabbed that tail, ripped the animal off the branch and flung it at the ground. Magicsmell on the move! Shiba's nose-brain kicked in and she launched herself into the air, no more thinking about the long drop than she did about Tallon's precarious position-

Whump! They collided and fell together in a collection of flailing limbs. Tallon hit first, curling up to take it in a roll; Shiba bounced off him and careened off in the opposite direction, ending up on her back with all four legs in the air, askew and undignified.

She scrambled to her feet and located Tallon. He'd ended up on his back, too, his arms and legs looking as disorganized as Shiba felt. Shiba shook herself off, shedding leaves and twigs. She went to encourage Tallon to do the same, peering down into his open eyes from much the same vantage point she'd had the day before.

He scowled back up at her. His eyes grew less dazed and more angry. Uh-oh.

And then... then... Shiba smelled the smell. The magic smell. Enthusiastically, she sniffed the air around Tallon, and the juncture of his body against the ground. Oh yes, oh joy, definitely, the magic smell was here-

She couldn't help herself. She bawled the discovery to Tallon, whiskers brushing his face. His eyes squinted against the noise; his nose wrinkled against her breath.

But he kept his mouth closed.

Tallon's shirt flapped in the breeze, shifting another hand's breadth along the porch railing. Stark against the light wet cloth was a bloody, greasy stain in the approximate shape of a flattened critter.

It didn't look like it had washed out very well.

Shiba skulked at the edge of the woods, a limp, flattened critter at her feet. She hesitated, knowing the words Tallon would use to greet her. He'd been angry enough before he'd fallen out of the tree. Now that she'd twice torn herself from his grasp to retrieve the critter he kept throwing away, there was no limit to what he might do.

Gingerly picking up the greasy blot of dead critter, Shiba slunk into the clearing. He must have been watching, because he came out to meet her at the top of the porch steps, his expression dark. Shiba all but crawled the last distance between them, gingerly placing the critter at his feet. Quietly, almost inaudibly, she whuffed-a doggy whisper. Magic smell.

The anger melted from his face. "Poor Shiba," he murmured. He stroked the top of her head and down the length of her ears. Shiba pushed her head into his hand with some relief. That was goodness, he was finally smelling the sense of her actions. "You've worked hard today," he told her. "Come in and get some supper."

Hers was not to question food. She followed him willingly, watched while he picked out some of the best bits from his meal, and gratefully shoved her nose in her bowl when he put it down.

While she ate, he threw the critter away. And then he chained her.

Shiba started the night locked in the cabin with him, but that hadn't lasted long. Fed up with her whining, Tallon chained her in the moonlit clearing. Nose to the sky, Shiba broke into howling. Halfway through the night, she stopped the howling and broke the chain instead. She greeted Tallon on the porch in the morning with the stiffened critter between her front paws.

He gravely thanked her, shut her in the cabin, and threw the critter away. Shiba spent the night with her head on her paws, wondering that any good lineman could be so dense. Tallon was on the border alone that day, using only his wits, the stupid walking stick, and his detector. When he returned, tired and cranky, Shiba blasted through the open door and into the woods.

Tallon had taken some care to secrete the critter away from the cabin, but it had taken on a distinct deadcrittersmell and wasn't at all hard to find. Carrying it was another matter. Shiba gingerly grasped the tip of its tail and dragged it home, leaving behind great patches of its fur.

Tallon sat on the front porch, his head in his hands. It didn't look like he'd ever made it inside after Shiba's escape. He looked too weary to hide the critter again; this time, maybe he'd take the time to look it over, to find whatever gave it magicsmell.

However, when she proudly presented him with her flat stiffened decaying bald critter, taking a closer look at it seemed to be the last thing on his mind.

The next day, Tallon buried the ragged little corpse. That made the job of finding it a little tougher, but Shiba persisted, and in the end she thought the encrusting dirt coat was a distinct improvement over the critter's splotchy baldness. Tallon, she thought, gently laying the prize on his lap, would surely agree.

Tallon didn't.

Dramatic over-reaction, she sniffed to herself, quietly curling up in the far end of the cabin to sulk herself to sleep—a task more easily accomplished once Tallon stopped making so much noise. Sooner or later, he'd understand. Shiba was a Linehound, and the boon and bane of a Linehound was its perseverance. Shiba would retrieve the critter corpse again and again, until Tallon finally got the message, and she would do it until she was presenting him with nothing more than greasy bones.

Some called it being stubborn, but then, they didn't know any better.

He'd fixed the chain-it was much shorter now, but that was her own fault-and wrapped the end around the bottom of a porch railing post. But he'd unwittingly made the job easier for her by choosing the post that she'd long ago marked with her milk teeth. Left behind for the day, Shiba quite happily applied her strong adult jaws to the same place.

She was taking a panting break when she smelled magic, and she stopped spitting splinters to check the air, licking the end of her nose to hike it to full power. Ohh, yes, magic-smell, coming from a distance but still thick with strength. She barked sharply, announcing her find to no one at all, and sat up on tight alert. Magic-smell, and strong enough that Tallon's silly little detector would find it.

The sight of Jehn's body flashed into her mind. Jehn had gone over the border to follow the magic scent without her, and had died for it. What if Tallon had learned nothing from the lesson and done the same, braving the magic-infested woods of the Other Side without a linehound?

"Ahhrrr-ahhhr-arrhhwoooo!" Shiba bark-howled, demanding immediate freedom so she could go do her job. The startled birds at the edge of the clearing fluttered away into the woods, and nothing else paid her any attention at all. "Ahhrrr-arrhhwoooo!!"

Nothing. No one swooped into the clearing to release her right this minute. No one even tried to shut her up. All her patient chewing forgotten, Shiba lunged against the pull of the chain, again and again and-

The chain gave. Yelping with surprise, Shiba rolled head over heels in the dust of the clearing; behind her came a great clattering noise. When she found herself right-side-up again, she discovered she was free. Free, that is, if you didn't count the post and several sections of railing attached to the end of the chain but no longer to the porch.

Paying it little heed, Shiba charged off into the trees, following the magic-smell and leaving splintered wood and mangled brush in her wake. At first she gave a call, but soon found herself working too hard to manage it. As fast as the railing shed bits of itself, the post and chain gathered green briars and branches and clumps of moss-and one big poison ivy vine, roots and all. That particular acquisition had slowed her a moment, but not for long. She was well over the border, and by now had Tallon's smell and critter-smell and strange human smells in her nose and brain.

When she topped the little rise above Tallon, she'd smelled enough so she wasn't surprised by what she saw below her. Tallon sat against a tree, his expression unhappy. Not too far away but definitely out of reach, his stupid walking stick leaned against another tree. There were several men standing around him, gesturing angrily. A little donkey-drawn cart stood off to the side, loaded with critter cages and reeking of magic.

She was here in time! Tallon was alive, the magic-smell was hers to take to the tree! Shiba didn't

hesitate; she threw her momentum into a headlong rush down the hill, baying a wild challenge. The post, railing and debris combination gathered life of its own, and bounded wildly along until it was beside-and then ahead of-her. The ring of men around Tallon looked up with identical incredulous expressions, a whole circle full of open mouths and astonished eyes. Tallon's face went from surprise to a fierce smile, and he hollered, "Atta girl, Shiba!"

By the time the men thought to run, it was too late. Shiba blasted through them, the juggernaut railing at her side, and took down two men with her momentum alone. The chain tangled the ankle of a third and her teeth sunk firmly into the arm of the unfortunate who grabbed her. No strange man was going to get between her and the magic smell, oh, no! With two mighty bounds and a leap of prodigious proportions, Shiba landed on top of the critter cages. A terrified chorus of warsqueaks heralded her landing, and she responded with a mighty bellow of treed! TreedtreedTREED!!

The offended donkey commenced to kicking, battering the cart with its heels; Shiba did to keep her balance as the whole contraption jerked and wavered, and then suddenly dissolved out from beneath her. She found herself sitting on the wreckage of cart and cages with critters squirting out in all directions. One quick snatch nabbed her a squirming critter, and she sat proudly in the midst of her chaos with her mouth full, stubby little critter legs sticking out on either side and frantically paddling the air. Now... where was her lineman?

Tallon, it seemed, had used the confusion of her entrance to snatch up his stupid walking stick and turn it into a whirling weapon unlike anything Shiba had ever seen. The strangemen had pulled long knives-at least, the three who'd been able to get out of the tangle of post and rail and chain and branches and roots and vines-but none of them even got near Tallon.

Her new lineman could take care of himself!

Tallon stood panting, leaning on the stick, ignoring the fallen men around him as he stared at Shiba. Suddenly he grinned, and just as suddenly Shiba found she again adored his furry voice. "Looks like my new linehound isn't crazy after all. Good girl, Shiba!"

Good Tallon! Shiba thought. She'd have told him so outright, but it wasn't polite to bark when your mouthful was squirming.

Eldon sat on the porch with Tallon, looking out through the wide gap of missing railing. Shiba had started the evening there-unharnessed, unchained-but the discussion had reminded her of a job left unfinished: the training of Tallon. She'd wandered off, and Tallon hadn't tried to stop her.

He and Eldon had finished talking about interesting things, anyway-the way the spellrunners were using critters to carry amulets and curses across the border, using simple geases to do

the creatures to their destinations-and had moved on to intense discussion about a new line down the border who was actually a linewoman. They talked about her legs the way Jehn had spoken of Shiba's.

Hmph. Shiba had never seen a human man or woman whose legs could cover ground like her own. Just look how quickly she'd accomplished this little task! She reentered the cabin clearing not long after she'd left it, moving in a loose, purposeful trot. She ignored the porch steps and leapt up through the railing gap, a jump that placed her precisely before Talon's head. Just where she wanted to be.

She opened her jaws and dropped her burden into Tallon's hands. It hardly stunk like crap anymore, really-just the nice clean smell of decay.

"Yahhhhh!" Tallon yelped in surprise, flinging his hands up so the critter went flying. It landed on the other side of Eldon with a hollow thumping sound, losing bits of itself in the process. The tail landed separately.

Eldon had that helpless look of someone trying very hard not to laugh. Shiba's tongue lashed out; she laughed for him. And then Eldon did what she'd wanted Tallon to do all along. He picked up the stiff flat balding dirty decaying critter and looked it over. "Ah," he said, pointing at the encrusted little leather tube around the critter's ankle. "Here's something that doesn't belong on our side of the border."

"It's got one of the amulets," Tallon said, groaning. He threw up his hands. "I give up, Shiba. I'll never doubt you again."

Shiba opened her mouth wide in her best bitch-smile. Tallon, it seemed, was trained.