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WEN SPENCER



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# 1: BLACKBIRD SINGING IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT



“*What? Wait!*” Tinker cried, cutting off the flow of Jin’s explanation. She’d been wakened up in the middle of the night to be told that the tengu’s spiritual leader needed to speak with her immediately. The household staff had set out a formal tea in the dining hall and made themselves scarce. They were probably lurking in the deep shadows nearby, just in case she would need more dainty sandwiches or little fruit tarts or another pot of strong tea.

Tinker suspected that the shadows also held Jin’s bodyguards. She knew from experience the tengu could come and go like ghosts despite their massive wings. It would explain why her entire Hand was present for the meeting. The five holy *sekasha* warriors were fully dressed, heavily armed, and standing guard at her back as if they hadn’t been asleep just minutes before.

Lightning flickered; it lit up the garden outside the dining hall’s windows. The thunder made Tinker jump a little. Was Windwolf fighting for his life someplace? Most of the *domana* elves in Pittsburgh were gathered at the far eastern edge of the Rim; they planned on fighting the oni in the morning. She hadn’t felt Windwolf call the Wind Clan Spell Stones to cast lightning. Nor could she sense anyone using Fire Clan or Stone Clan *esva*. None of the *domana* elves were fighting. The lightning was normal electrical discharge and nothing else. Rain started to drum on the dining hall’s roof. It was an oddly comforting sound.

“I have what?” Tinker was sure this conversation would make sense if it weren’t some ungodly hour in the middle of the night.

“Twin siblings.” Jin looked exhausted. Since she’d seen him late in the evening, he must have flown to his village and back. “Six of them.”

Tinker squinted at him. Maybe she was still asleep. This could be a weird dream. She had had a lot of those lately. “You’re—you’re kidding. Right?”

“No, I’m not.” His great black wings rustled with his nervousness. “I know that technically that they belong to Esme Shanske, but Gracie Wong would love to adopt Leo’s—”

“Back up. Back up,” Tinker said. “I have what?”

Jin sighed. “Twin siblings. Six of them.”

“How can I have six twin siblings? Wouldn’t they be six-something—sextuplets?” No, that sounded like a porn video. “No, wait, if I have six siblings then we would be seven. Seven . . . seven . . . seven . . .”

The conversation was in English, so only Stormsong was following her muttering. The tall warrior leaned over Tinker’s shoulder to pour her more tea. “Sextuplets, *domi*.”

“Are you sure?” Tinker spooned several teaspoons of honey into the tea before gulping it. “September is the ninth month.”

“It was the seventh month, but it changed to the ninth when the Gregorian calendar added . . .” Jin sighed again and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “It’s a naming convention. I believe it’s because all of the eggs are fertilized at the same time. If all the resulting embryos were implanted immediately in one woman, the resulting children would be twins. The term ‘twin’ stays true to that concept even if the embryos are used at different times by different women.”

He was talking about how Tinker had been conceived in vitro ten years after her father died. She vaguely knew the mechanics; Lain had explained it to her when she was very young. She’d alarmed Lain by talking about having a brother who lived far away. (Only after Lain went through all the biology had Tinker confessed that she confused “brother” with “cousin.” She had meant Oilcan, who lived in Boston at the time.) Lain had kept referring to possible siblings as “theoretical” until Tinker thought that the word meant “imaginary” because Lain indicated that it was quite impossible for such siblings to exist.

But Jin wouldn’t wake Tinker up in the middle of the night for imaginary siblings. Since Stormsong was quietly translating

the conversation to the others of her Hand, Tinker switched to Elvish.

“Wasn’t all that stuff—the genetic material—stored at some place in New York City?” She had found the paperwork recently while digging through her grandfather’s belongings.

“It was,” Jin said slowly and his wings rustled. “All of the stored fertilized eggs have been used. To make children. Many children.”

“Six of them?” Tinker said.

“As far as I know.”

She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with the information. “Two more and we would have had a baseball team.”

“*Domi.*” Pony murmured. “Since cousin could tap the Stone Clan Spell Stones even prior to being spell-worked, we need to know where these children are located.”

Tinker wasn’t sure if he meant “we” as in her Hand or the entire *sekasha*-caste whose job was to keep tabs on the *domana*-caste. It made suddenly clear why Jin was there, in the middle of the night, to report the news. She’d been thinking that this could have been handled by a phone call in the morning. To the elves, her siblings were potential walking weapons.

Jin was waiting for her to ask. His people were safe only because he promised to be her loyal servant. She was learning that everyone else understood that they had to wait for her to realize what the hell was going on and give the appropriate order.

“Where exactly are these . . .” Tinker paused as she realized that Jin was implying that her siblings weren’t adults. “Did you say children?”

“Technically two are children, and the other four are about to be newborns. They are at Haven.”

The tengu village was someplace deep in the virgin forest, in a location secret even to her. The adults kept travel from Pittsburgh to where their children were hidden to the minimum, going so far as staying at safe houses within the city instead of going home. Jin apparently returned to Haven to discover he’d been invaded by an army of little Dufaes.

“That is not all,” Jin added.

“This gets worse?” Tinker cried.

“In a manner of speaking—possibly. There is a third dragon in Pittsburgh.”

Okay, a dragon was not a phone call in the morning.

“Malice-size?” She spread her hands wide as possible to indicate the massive dragon that Jin helped her kill a few weeks earlier. The monster had been the size of a house. “Or Impatience?”

The second dragon was “small” only in scale to Malice. They were still talking large as a pickup truck.

Jin put his hands together so that they nearly touched. “Her name is Joy. She has claimed all your siblings as her Chosen. We cannot do anything with the children without her approval. She is very protective.”

Tinker snorted. “How protective can a pocket-size dragon get?”

“Very. She can and will summon help. We would be facing Impatience and most likely Providence against any attempts to go against her wishes.”

Dragon tag-team fighting. Okay, that was a very scary thought. Impatience nearly killed Tinker and her Hand when they first met. He had a mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth and impenetrable magical shields all backed with a genius that intimidated even her. Providence was dead and not-dead in a way that made her brain hurt. He was the guardian spirit of the tengu and they worshipped him as a god. It meant that in addition to fighting something that couldn't be “killed,” it could push the tengu's loyalty to her to a breaking point. The elves considered the tengu a valuable ally because of Jin's alliance with Tinker. Otherwise, the elves would have wiped out the tengu—adults and children alike.

*What Joy wants, Joy gets. Check. That's assuming what Little Miss Pocket Dragon wanted was within reason.*

Gracie Wong had been married to Tinker's father and loved him deeply. There was little wonder that she would want to adopt Leo's babies...

“Wait,” Tinker said again as she stumbled over another weird turn of phrase. “*About* to be newborn?”

“Yes, in a few months.” Jin's wings rustled loudly. “Forgiveness, *domi*.” He murmured the command to dispel his wings and they vanished from his back. The dining room suddenly seemed a lot less crowded.

“So there's really two kids and a very pregnant woman about to pop? Or are we talking four women about to have babies? What the hell? Is someone on Earth giving out Dufae kids like lottery tickets?”

“It’s—” Jin paused for a minute, obviously trying to find a safe, sane explanation. Considering Tinker’s summer to date, there might not be one. Single-handedly, she’d managed to accidentally change her species, rip a hole in the fabric of reality, kidnap a major USA city, fall off the planet, crash a spaceship into Turtle Creek, kill a dragon . . .

Tinker was sure there was more but she was losing track of the weirdness. Not a good sign.

“It’s . . . it’s complicated,” Jin finally understated. “Maybe I should back up.” He paused again for several moments, mouth open, eyes flicking back and forth as he tried to find a safe place to start. “There are two girls, Louise and Jillian Mayer. They are twins, and very much like you.”

What did that mean? Short? Dark skin? Genius? Snarky? All of the above?

“Their father worked at the clinic where Leo’s sperm was stored,” Jin said. “Esme used Leo’s sperm to fertilize a dozen or so of her eggs. Some number of the fertilized eggs were used to create you and the rest were put into storage. Nine years ago, Mr. Mayer took some of the frozen embryos and implanted them into his wife. They raised your sisters as their natural-born children and I gather they were very good parents.”

“Were?” Tinker latched onto the word. Adoption usually happened after parents died. “Are they dead?”

“Yes. I’m not clear how they were killed but it was recent. After that, your grandmother gained custody of them.”

“My grandmother? I don’t have a grandmother. I had a grandfather. Two, if you count Forge, but he’s more like a great-great-great-something.” She’d made peace with her elf ancestor that afternoon, though he was still on probation with her for what he’d done to Oilcan. Forge was going to be ecstatic at the news that he had six more grandkids. If they were orphans, he’d probably want custody of them. She wasn’t sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing. Certainly, it would make the *sekasha* happy if the babies were with a *domana*, but her siblings were still human. She would prefer that they stay that way. No more of this changing species without warning.

“Esme’s mother,” Jin stated. When she looked at him confused, he expanded the statement with, “Esme’s mother is your grandmother. Anna Desmarais.”

“Desmarais? Shouldn’t it be Shanske?” Tinker tried to remember if Lain ever even talked about her family. Lain talked about Esme in terms of “my sister, the astronaut” but never anything else. Wait, there been something recently about Empire of Evil and Flying Monkeys. That didn’t sound good.

“Your grandmother remarried after Esme’s father was killed. I didn’t actually talk to the twins; they were asleep and apparently very emotionally fragile after everything they’ve been through. I thought you should be told immediately. I didn’t want to blindside you with any of this.”

“This didn’t count as being blindsided?” Tinker asked.

“This is still just between us—and Joy—and the other dragons. I believe that the Stone Clan might want to claim the children. And there is Esme to be considered. I owe your mother a great deal; without her intervention none of this could be possible. You would not have been born. Everyone on my ship would have been lost. My people would still be enslaved. Biologically, your siblings are her offspring. She did, however, abandon her genetic material when she left Earth. The children were carried by other women. Nor is Esme in a situation where she could take on the responsibility of raising six children, four of which are newborn.”

“Yyyeeaaaah.” Tinker wasn’t even sure where Esme was living since Tinker planted her mother’s spaceship into Turtle Creek. She knew Esme had spent several days in the hospital. Tinker had last seen Esme when they’d dropped her at Lain’s. No, wait, the sisters had come together to Poppymeadows—later—sometime. Tinker had totally lost track of time. It had been a super-condensed-weird summer and not yet officially over.

Esme and six kids in Lain’s house? With all those deadly plants? Tinker had spent the first two years of her life on a literal leash to keep her from toddling into the reach of the various man-eating plants. And there was a good reason why she hadn’t moved in with Lain when her grandfather died. Lain was the type of person who loved kids as long as she could send them home. Tinker had lived with Lain the month it took Tinker’s grandfather to fetch Oilcan from Boston after his mother was killed. Her stay degraded into a battle of wills that only stopped before open warfare because her grandfather had returned.

Esme had been distraught when she thought her “son” had

been killed. She'd been overjoyed when she found out that Tinker was her daughter.

"Esme is capable of committing to crazy, impossible plans," Tinker said. "She might want to try."

"*Domi*," Pony murmured. "By our laws, a child belongs foremost to its mother, but then to its clan. Who exactly qualifies as the children's mother might be debated, since what your mother has done has never been tried among our people. It means that Stone Clan has the strongest claim, lacking a birth mother. Sunder is currently head of Stone Clan in the Westernlands."

Tinker growled in frustration. "The Dufae stopped being Stone Clan generations ago. I have always considered myself as Wind Clan."

"It was your right as an adult to choose a clan, but children are not considered mature enough to decide this."

That was the same line of bullshit that Iron Mace used to justify what was done to Oilcan, despite the fact that her cousin was twenty-two and, as a human, adult. Tinker hadn't met Sunder yet; the three new Stone Clan *domana* had arrived while she was out playing hide-and-seek with Chloe Polanski. With a name like Sunder, though, he or she probably wasn't a pushover. Forge had promised never to betray any of his grandchildren again. He would be the lesser of evils—if he could be trusted.

"The children are only the tip of the iceberg," Jin said.

"Oh good gods!" Tinker shouted. "What else? You didn't even talk with the twins!"

Jin nodded that this was true. "They have been in Haven since you disappeared. I was focused on finding you and supporting Wolf Who Rules. It is our policy to maintain no communication between Haven and Pittsburgh, lest it would give away Haven's location. They arrived, however, with one of the *yamabushi*..."

"A what?"

"Forgiveness." Jin pinched the bridge of his nose. "I forgot you do not know the term. There is so much that we should share with you about ourselves, but there never seems to be time."

Tinker laughed tiredly. "Yes, I know. Story of my life lately." She needed a crash course on everything from proper etiquette of "formal" meetings between clans to elf reproduction cycles. (The talk of babies reminded her that she wasn't using birth control and earlier conversations on the subject boiled down to

“don’t worry about that now.” She really should find out *why* she didn’t have to.)

“The *yamabushi* are what we call the blood guard of the Chosen One. They are descendants of Wong Jin’s loyal servants who—” He caught himself with a grimace. “It’s a very long story and most of it is not important right now. Your siblings arrived at Haven with a young male *tengu* by the name of Haruka Sessai. He’s been trained since birth to gather information. Haruka gave me a brief but concise report. I wanted to bring him with me so you could question him yourself. The girls, however, wake often from nightmares and find his presence comforting. They trust him and Joy tolerates him, so he is keeping guard over them.”

Tinker made a motion for Jin to move on. “What important details?”

“Your ancestor—Forge’s son, Unbounded Brilliance—died in France during the Revolution. Apparently when he fled Elfhorne, he had with him a spell-locked box, which we believe he’d stolen from Iron Mace, hence the reason that the warlord came to Pittsburgh. Iron Mace wanted to know if your family knew what was in the box. When Unbounded Brilliance was beheaded in France, his infant son was taken to America, but the box was lost.”

It felt painfully wrong for something that happened over two hundred years ago to still be important, but Iron Mace had tried to kill Oilcan because of this box. “The only thing my family knows about it is some song.” Oilcan had sung it to her while telling her about his kidnapping. “Knock, knock, open the box . . .”

Jin nodded. “The box was recently found in France and flown to New York. It was at the American Museum of Natural History. It was part of a traveling exhibit that the humans put together using objects that the elves left on Earth before contact between the two worlds were lost.”

Stormsong gasped.

“What?” Tinker asked.

“I’ve seen this box!” Stormsong said. “I was—oh—oh—oh sweet light—I’ve seen one of your sisters.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” Tinker shouted.

“You were still human and we had not yet met. Officially,” Stormsong added the qualifier. Tinker wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean; she would remember meeting a blue-haired *sekasha*. Officially or unofficially. “I didn’t recognize the girl as



your sister at the time. She was just a little human child, one of millions in New York City.”

“How do you know it was my sister?”

“She was at the museum after it was closed to the public, inside an invisible paper box.”

Was this “confound *domi*” night? “A *what?*”

Stormsong spread her hands. “I’m not sure how she managed it, but she was using a spell to be invisible so she could move through the museum unseen.”

That did sound like something Tinker would try to do. “But how? There’s isn’t magic on Earth!”

Stormsong spread her hands wider and clicked her tongue in an elvish version of a shrug.

“Esme is a powerful dreamer,” Jin said. “She foresaw that your presence was needed to save Pittsburgh. She apparently also knew that her attempts to produce you might create multiple children. It seems that she set up fail-safes to protect your siblings on Earth before she left the planet. One of the things that she gave them was the Dufae Codex.”

“How did Esme get a copy of that?” Tinker asked. “My grandfather never let anyone outside the family even see it.”

Jin spread his hands to indicate helpless ignorance. “The girls had it when Haruki joined forces with them. From what he could gather, it was through the Codex that they learned of the box and the *nactka*.”

Tinker stared at Jin while her mind raced. Her copy of the Codex had an entire section on spell-locked boxes. She’d studied it closely before designing a custom lockpick spell to unlock the box she found in the oni whelping pens. Did the Codex mention Iron Mace’s box specifically? Far as she could remember, there hadn’t been any warning written in it about Dufae’s uncle. She was fairly sure that the Codex didn’t say anything about invisible cardboard—she would have been all over that. How would you make something invisible? In New York City? “But-but-but Earth doesn’t have magic!”

“The twins are very intelligent and resourceful,” Jin said slowly, as if every word out of his mouth was carefully chosen. “I would guess they are your equals in that regard.”

Why her siblings were running around invisible was fairly easy to guess. Tinker had seen enough movies to know that

Earth's museums were filled with security cameras to protect their valuable artwork. The most confounding tidbit of information, though, was that Stormsong had been in New York City.

"What were you doing there, Stormsong?" Tinker didn't think the elves ever went to Earth.

"I was with Sparrow. It was a diplomatic mission. She had taken half of Wolf's First Hand because they had been to Earth long ago, before the war with the oni. Since I speak English, I was included—or at least, that was the reason Sparrow gave for taking me. It's obvious now that she took the people most likely able to counter the attack on Wolf. When we returned, Pony met us at the train station with news that Wolf was missing and Hawk Scream was dead. The bitch ran us in circles all day until you brought Wolf to the hospice."

Sparrow hadn't survived Pony finding out that she was a traitor. She had been killed little more than a month ago but it seemed like forever now.

"And the box?" Jin asked. "Where is it?"

Stormsong shook her head. "It didn't come with us."

"Sparrow claimed it," Jin said. "The twins hacked the museum's computer system and intercepted emails stating that it had been taken by her."

Invisibility aside, her siblings apparently hadn't gotten what they were after. "What was in the box—and what are *nactka*?"

"There were twelve magical devices inside." Jin took out what looked like a Fabergé egg done on a bowling-ball-size scale. "They are called a *nactka*. This is the one that your sisters took from the box. The twins could not take the other eleven that day and when they realized how important the contents were, it was too late. The box was gone."

"What is it?" Tinker pointed at the oddly decorated egg.

"The term is oni; it means 'trap.' They were developed on Onihida. These, however, seem as if they were crafted on Elfhome; their esthetics are very elvish. Joy was inside this one."

"Little Miss Pocket Dragon?" Tinker eyed the egg-like container. Yes, Joy would have to be quite small to fit inside it. "You think there's eleven more baby dragons inside the other traps?"

"We do not know for sure what are in the other eleven devices but we know that your ancestor referred to the *nactka* as 'fully loaded.' It seems likely that they hold dragons."

Yes, twelve baby dragons and six siblings warranted an immediate visit in the middle of the night. And perhaps more house insurance.

Tinker was positive, though, that the Dufae Codex said nothing about weird magical egg traps. “Are you sure that what the twins have is the same thing I’m calling the Dufae Codex?”

Jin frowned. “I hadn’t considered... there wasn’t time to verify that. We can determine it later.”

“Okay. Assuming the spell-locked box at the museum was the one that Dufae stole from Iron Mace—where did Iron Mace get twelve baby dragons?”

“I don’t know,” Jin said. “I will try to get the information from Joy. She... She... I’m told that she is quite... difficult to work with. You should be aware that the spell the oni used to transform my people—all of my people in a single transformation—was done using Providence’s body. It was a test run of an even greater spell they had developed that required his soul as well as his body. It is why he asked us to kill him.”

“Oh.” Tinker felt like someone had punched her. Eleven possible world-changing spells all locked into one deadly box. “Stormsong, are you sure the box that we took from the whelping pens wasn’t it?”

“No, the box at the museum was smaller.” She measured it out with her hands. “Such boxes are common in the Easternlands. We traded with humans on Earth for centuries. I thought a traveling merchant must have lost it.”

“This is a picture of the actual box.” Jin pulled a slickie from his bag and flipped the pages until he found the desired picture.

Everyone leaned over the digital magazine to eye the gleaming photo. The box was roughly the size of a footlocker with the locking spell along its top edge. On Earth, the lid would have been sealed at a molecular level. The twins shouldn’t have been able to open it to take anything out—nor could anyone else.

“I believe,” Cloudwalker said slowly, “that I’ve seen this box here in Pittsburgh. Or, at least, pieces of it.”

Everyone stared at him in surprise.

“You have?” Pony asked the question that Tinker couldn’t form.

“While you and *domi* were being held captive by the oni, a fight broke out in the house of history.” Cloudwalker pointed toward the direction of the Carnegie Museum. Elves didn’t have museums so they didn’t have a word for them; it seemed to be

a weird side effect of being immortal. “The humans that killed the river monsters in the... the... the... I don’t remember the word for it. The big round place down by the river. The middle is flat. There are many seats. Thousands of seats.”

“The stadium?” Stormsong prompted while Pony continued to look confused. “The thing that looks like an amphitheater but without a stage?”

“Yes. That. The humans with the big...” Cloudwalker struggled with another English word that didn’t have a direct Elvish equivalent. “Ca—ca—cannon?”

“Cannon?” Tinker shouted. “What river monsters? What were river monsters doing in the stadium? Why didn’t anyone tell me about this?”

Cloudwalker spread his hands helplessly. “Because the monsters were already long dead before we could talk with you again?”

“Because there were so many other things to tell you?” Stormsong said.

“Because this is the first that I’ve heard about it?” Pony said. “What river monsters?”

“Massive carp that could walk on land and throw lightning!” Little Egret threw his arms wide open in an attempt to demonstrate either the large size or the throwing of lightning. Tinker wasn’t sure which.

“What? Carp? Like fish?” Tinker asked.

“Yes!” all the *sekasha* except Pony said.

“Very big fish,” Stormsong added. “Malice-sized.”

“That could throw lightning and walk on land,” Little Egret repeated.

It was oddly comforting to know that she wasn’t responsible for all the weirdness that hit Pittsburgh that summer. Tinker had lost track of how the river monsters related to her six siblings. “What does this have to do with...” What were they talking about? Her sisters being invisible on Earth? No. “The missing box with the baby dragons?”

“The people that killed the river monsters found the box at the house of history,” Cloudwalker said.

“Hal Rogers,” Stormsong supplied a name.

“Who? Wait! Hal Rogers as in *Pittsburgh Backyard and Garden*? That Hal Rogers? He’s a dangerous maniac! The police all hate him. He sets people on fire!”

“He’s got a new show,” Stormsong said. “*Monsters in Our Midst*. He’s been very aggressive at educating Pittsburghers about the dangers they’re facing at the hands of the oni. The people who wear blue hats are his fans. Hal’s Heroes.”

Tinker wanted to ask about the hats but didn’t want to derail the conversation even more. Now that Stormsong mentioned it, she realized that she’d been seeing a ton of people out on the streets wearing the same blue hat. “So *PB&G* was at the museum?”

The conversation screeched to a halt as all of the elves were confused by the initials.

“Yes,” Cloudwalker said once it was clear that they were all discussing the same thing. “I had been delivering a message from the queen, so I arrived just after the fighting broke out.”

Tinker locked down on a confused “What fighting?” because she didn’t want to change the subject again. Obviously, there was much she missed during the summer while being kidnapped by oni and falling off the planet. “You saw this box?”

“Pieces of it. There is a wood shop in the basement of the house of history. We found parts of a spell-locked box that had been cut open. I thought it was odd but the entire building is filled with odd things. They have life-sized dolls that look like humans being attacked by lions. Why would they have that?”

“Stay on target! Stay on target!” Tinker pointed at the fancy egg-thing that Jin claimed to hold the baby dragons. “There was nothing that looked like that?”

“I did not see anything that looked like that,” Cloudwalker said.

Which was a very careful way to say that the eggs could have been at the museum but Cloudwalker didn’t see them. At least the location made sense; Sparrow must have had the New York museum ship the box to its Elfhomelike counterpart. It would have allowed Sparrow to keep the *sekasha* with her ignorant of the box’s existence even as she orchestrated its shipment.

“Why would they need to cut the box open?” Tinker had taken days to carefully pick the lock on the box they found at the whelping pens because it was booby-trapped. Cutting that box open would have set off an explosion, destroying the contents and part of Poppymeadows’ enclave. “If it was Iron Mace’s box that Unbounded Brilliance stole, wouldn’t the Skin Clan know the key word to open it?”

Pony shook his head. “According to his Hand, Iron Mace

owned a medium-sized spell-locked box for centuries before Unbounded Brilliance was born. He alone knew the key word for it. His Hand did not realize the box had been stolen. Only after Iron Mace was killed did they realize that the last time that they could remember seeing the box was prior to his nephew's disappearance. Red Knife determined that while the song 'knock, knock, open the box' seems to indicate that the two events are linked, there is no concrete proof of treason on their part."

It sounded as if Iron Mace's entire household was questioned after Oilcan's kidnapping. Tinker hadn't been aware of it, so it probably had been done by the Wyverns. The Fire Clan's *sekasha* were considered the head of their caste. Red Knife, Prince True Flame's First, would have beheaded Iron Mace's people if he thought that they were in league with the Skin Clan. The idea was weirdly comforting and terrifying at the same time.

"After Iron Mace lost the box, the Skin Clan probably didn't trust him enough to tell him that they had found it again," Stormsong said. "Iron Mace came to Pittsburgh to find out what you and Oilcan knew about its contents. He wouldn't have done that if he knew that Dufae had lost it hundreds of years ago."

Tinker agreed with that logic. "If the box from the whelping pens hadn't been booby-trapped, I could have cut it open. Most Pittsburghers don't know how to work with ironwood, but the oni had dozens of carpenters disguised by magic to appear human. They made the wooden framework of the gate I built. Some of them might have worked at the museum." Tinker ticked off what they knew on her fingers. "Sparrow went to Earth during May Shutdown. She told the museum in New York that the box belonged to her. To make sure that the *sekasha* with her didn't find out about it, though, she asked the staff to ship it to Elf-home separately. The museum on Earth ships it to the Carnegie during the June Shutdown. Someone cut it open and took out the egg-thingies. After the July Shutdown, Cloudwalker finds the box in pieces. It's September now."

"Kajo has had the dragons for months," Jin whispered, his voice filled with horror.

"He hasn't done anything with them yet." Tinker stood up, her mind racing. So many problems that needed to be answered. Now. She snapped her fingers, calling to everyone that was hiding in the shadows: elves and tengu. "I need my datapad from my

bedroom. Someone find me a printer, a whiteboard, some power strips, and every lamp you can bring me. There's a cardboard box in my closet; get that."

The box contained the original Codex. She needed to cross-reference her digital copy with it. She had noticed recently that her grandfather had deleted key information, presumably to protect her as a child. What exactly had he taken out? She needed to know what Dufae actually knew about the Skin Clan's plan. What else? She was still in her nightgown, bathrobe, and slippers. "Get me some clothes! Pants and a shirt, not a dress! I want my boots. A couple yards of string in five different colors. Send someone to get my cousin. Tell him to bring his digital copy of the Codex. And get me another pot of strong tea."