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# Empire's Ghosts

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Empire's Ghosts

By

Ashley Phillips-Tirey

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of  
English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2010

College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the committee  
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the Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
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At the (month and year) graduation

*April 29, 2010*

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## Acknowledgements

To my husband and my family: Thanks for your unending support and love.

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## Preface

On January 8, 2007 I was listening to NPR on my way to work. That morning, the radio station broadcast a story about one of their Iraqi staff members. In it, he described the harrowing birth of his son (Newborn's). At the time, Baghdad was increasingly experiencing ethnic violence between the Shia and Sunni Muslims who made up its population. His story haunted me, and within a week I wrote a short piece based on it from an unknown first-person's female perspective. I placed the woman in an unnamed country and changed the religious details to make it less politically charged, but many of the details of the birth stayed the same. Later that winter, when I was applying to Kennesaw's MAPW program, I used the short story as part of my portfolio. I liked the story, but it felt incomplete and sketchy.

When I started reviewing my work to choose a Capstone project, I kept coming back to this story, which was untitled. Initially, I considered updating it and including it within a collection of short stories. However, the more time I spent with what has become *Empire's Ghosts*, the more I felt that my unnamed protagonist deserved a more complete story of her own. I didn't just want to tell about the night her baby was born; I wanted to explain how such an awful situation could arise and how it affected the mother's life. With the support of my Capstone committee, I decided to expand the short story into a novella. My heroine, Raina, is a college student when her world begins to fall apart, but by the end of the story and the dramatic birth of her son, she has become an adult.

*Empire's Ghost* is a tale in a recognizable world, but it is set in an alternative universe. This choice is deliberate and essential to the work. While there are political aspects to the story, I did not write it to oppose or support current international policy in any corner of the world.

Therefore, I could not place it in Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa, or the Balkans, although experiences and history from all of these places inform the narrative. Creating an alternate universe is an enormous challenge because as an author, you need to decide how to skew the world and change its parameters without rendering it unrecognizable. A long period of the evolution of *Empire's Ghosts* was devoted to this task. Originally, I kept all of the places and political parties unnamed; however, that made the geopolitics impossible to follow, so I have adjusted accordingly. Most of the names are pure invention; the only exception is Dashari's capitol city of Karst. This is the Herzegovinian word for "upland plain," (4) and I used it because the country that overwhelmingly inspired my descriptions of Dashari was Slovenia, which broke away from Yugoslavia in 1991. I owe any understanding I have of the process of creating a country from chaos to my friends Petra and Sinisa, both proud citizens of Slovenia. The story of Slovenia is an inspiration and challenge to the world. Dashari is an examination of its triumph through a warped mirror that in no way reflects my assumptions about the actual nation.

Geographically, the world of *Empire's Ghosts* is the same as ours, although none of the countries are familiar. The easiest way to visualize the alternate geography is as a dartboard with Dashari in the center. I have placed Dashari near, in our world, Frankfurt, Germany. It is surrounded to the north and east by small, self-contained countries that were once Bal-Moravian provinces. Ghent, the country which lures Raina's father with its stable government, is to the east near modern-day Warsaw, but was outside the Bal-Morian Empire even at the height of its power. The northern country of Jabal extends up to the Hamburg area, while the empire has been confined from its former lands which included all the land up to our Denmark to an area roughly covering the very southern reaches of Germany and most of Austria. Lycanthia, the Bal-Moravian Empire's historical opponent in the same way that the Austro-Hungarians opposed the

French, adjoins it near Switzerland and the very northern reaches of Italy. These boundaries were not directly influenced by the Holy Roman Empire, but the German nation-states and history of self-determination can be used as a frame of reference.

Most of the technologies available to the Dashari are familiar to citizens of our world, with the obvious exclusion of the internet. While Raina and her compatriots have access to newspapers, radios, cell phones, airplanes, and word processors, there is no internet. This gives the story a vintage feel which helps highlight the Dashari people's isolation. I used African politics as inspirations here; while some elite Africans may have access to the internet, most survive without it. When their government falls apart and begins to restrict their rights, they have no blogs or social networks to create or ease political pressure, so it boils over more easily into violence.

The Bal-Morian Empire is a conglomeration of our historical Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires, with some unique attributes that I invented to serve the story. It grew from a strong centralized government in its home territory of Bal-Moria. Originally, it was surrounded by small feudal and tribal nation-states to the north and west. More than two hundred years before *Empire's Ghosts*, it aggressively expanded its influence and overtook traditional ethnic groups like the Dashari and Jaballians. Since its land holdings were vast, it appointed regional governors and created enormous bureaucracy like the Austro-Hungarians and Ottoman Turks. This allowed the different ethnicities to maintain their individuality and traditions, but required them to survive under an umbrella culture which inevitably influenced their own.

Under the Bal-Morian Empire, the ethnicities were all given their own provinces but owed obeisance and loyalty to the Bal-Morians. In his book *The Balkans*, historian Mark



Mazower explains that the Balkan states failed to industrialize and commercialize their agriculture for a variety of reasons including bureaucratic obstruction and religious objections to both the free press and scientific progress (27). I have adopted these same problems for Dashari and the other former provinces which are seeking to maintain independent states in *Empire's Ghosts*. However, I have modified the ethnic tensions so that they are no longer between two or three religions but instead between the officially atheistic state and the traditional religions of the areas they occupy. How freely newly minted Bal-Morian citizens could continue to practice their religion was dependent on their governors and local bureaucracies and varied greatly. This explains why the southern Dashari citizens are more likely to be secular and the northerners faithful to their *dakkari* religion, although the two groups are mixed throughout the country.

Within twenty years of the beginning of the story, the Bal-Morian Empire crumbled in much the same way that the Russian Empire fell apart in the early 1990s. Regional corruption and external pressures from other countries—such as Lycanthia—collapsed the system. Facing political challenges from within their own borders, the Bal-Morian government was stunned at the student protests which started in Dashari (based on Tainnamen Square and the Slovenian Independence War) and spread throughout the region. After an initially combative reaction, the Empire bowed to international pressures, retreated and granted autonomy to a number of provinces, including the two mentioned in the story.

Dashari created a constitutional republic twenty years before the beginning of the story. Like many European nations today, it consisted of a number of territories that elect officials to a Parliament. The Constitution provided for local territorial governments as well, but at the time of *Empire's Ghosts*, these were rarely called into session. An independent judiciary was charged

with upholding the Constitution, and the country's leader was a Prime Minister from the Parliament. The Parliamentary seats were divided by a combination of local and preferential voting, and the party with the most votes often formed a government through a coalition with parties that had the most similar viewpoints. At the time of the story, their neighbor to the north, Jabal, has been under the rule of a dictatorship for eight years. Its descent into civil war was based on the reaction in our Zimbabwe to Robert Mugabe's elections in 2008.

I chose not to place two religions in opposition to one another within Dashari. Instead, I created a conflict similar to the clashes between Soviet atheism and Russian Orthodoxy in the early Communist era. Raina and her friends are young and cosmopolitan, and they tend to be secular, while the rural peasants of the northern territories cling to their old religion. This is almost exactly analogous to the urban aristocracy and middle class of late tsarist and early revolutionary Russia, who accepted the Communists' atheistic policies much more easily than the peasantry who lived in the rural areas of the empire. *Dakkari*, the religion, is a strict monotheistic religion loosely based on Judaism which is partially hereditary and deeply cultural. Despite its strict and traditionally conservative background, it has been liberalized by the influence of the Bal-Morian Empire. Elizabeth and Mike, who are a religious couple, continue their relationship with Raina and her circle in spite of their cultural differences.

Raina and the characters around her represent many tropes throughout the narrative of *Empire's Ghosts*. They experience conflicts which transform them from pacifists to survivors (although I think it's worth noting that none of the characters join a militia), but they also experience gentle emotions like love and friendship in the middle of chaos. Few of the Dashari people depicted in this story are uneducated or poor. Instead, these characters embody middle-

class morality and higher education; factors which might shield them from harm or disappointment in normal circumstances. Yet even their myriad advantages cannot protect them from political instability and random violence. Raina's parents are symbols of the "brain drain" which makes rebuilding countries so difficult after a war. Her friend Jamie embodies the law of unintended consequences—by attempting to circumvent the will of their constituents, she and her political cronies destroy themselves and contribute to the disintegration of the country.

However, Raina's journey is the center of my story. Spoiled, impulsive, and emotional, Raina is far from an idealized hero. Yet, in spite of her flaws, she finds a crowd that supports her as she moves from her fantastical idealism to a pragmatic realism. I like Raina, even though she reminds me of the "charmed" cheerleaders from high school. She is, perhaps, abnormally lucky in both her circumstances and experiences, but I find myself rooting for her all the same.

Writing *Empire's Ghosts* has been the biggest challenge I've ever undertaken. It is not only the longest piece I have ever completed; but also the one where the characters, circumstances, and world have invaded my everyday life to the greatest degree. Few news stories of the past year have failed to impact and change my approach to and understanding of this story. I hope you enjoy it.

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## Chapter 1

“And so, we must remember that the Bal-Moran Empire was already very weak when the students staged their coup. Thus, while it was not quite bloodless, the revolution was enabled to proceed at a low loss of life.”

As Professor Laustre continued to drone on about recent history, Raina marveled at her tone. She tapped her fingers impatiently on her too-small student desk and idly traced the blue ink graffiti that no one had ever bothered to clean. “This sucks” the screed pronounced, and she couldn’t help agreeing. This Dashari history class was the worst of her required courses. Everyone knew this stuff back to front. Yet Professor Laustre had spent an entire class last week explaining that the government was a republic of twenty territories and their Parliament was divided among majority and minority coalitions. An entire day on something every ten year old in the country could explain! And worse, she was turning one of Raina’s favorite stories—how the students of what was then the Dashari Province had taken to the streets and brought down the biggest empire in the world—into a dry lecture. Professor Laustre’s face was still young; she couldn’t have been more than a student herself when the student protests were occurring. Why couldn’t she make them interesting?

A knock interrupted Professor Laustre’s lecture, and the patrician woman barely hid her annoyance as her colleague, Professor Jančić, peeked around the door. All of the students looked up expectantly.

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt, Aline,” Professor Jančić apologized. “But I need to speak to you immediately.”

“Go ahead, Professor,” invited Professor Laustre exasperatedly. Professor Jančić pushed into the room and leaned close to her coworker, her curly hair swinging forward to hide her mouth. Her hushed voice, however, carried well in the suddenly tense silence.

“Well, it’s just that the election results are in from Jabal. And the most awful thing—the opposition was winning, you see, and so the current government declared the election invalid. Which would have been bad enough, but they declared the opposition traitors, and shot their leaders in the forecourt of the Parliament! There’s a video. The news is promising to broadcast it shortly.”

No one waited for Professor Laustre’s reaction. Like a magnet was pulling them, Raina and all her classmates stood up and began to follow Professor Jančić to the nearest television. The audiovisual room, although full of other students from other classrooms, was silent except for the voice of the grim-faced television anchor, explaining how they had managed to get the footage and that it was quite graphic and unsuitable for children. Then they played the short, grainy scene. As the Opposition’s leader’s forehead exploded in a sea of red, a collective gasp of horror was pulled from the students and faculty watching.

“This will mean war,” Raina heard a man to her left say assuredly. She couldn’t disagree. The citizens of Jabal had not had as smooth a transition into statehood as their neighbors to the south in Dashari. However, they had widely regarded the new elections as an opportunity to rejoin the area’s functional governments. Neither sanctions, strikes, demonstrations nor

diplomacy had seemed to sway the despotic rule that the country had been suffering for the past eight years. Then, in what had seemed like a move towards democracy, the government had scheduled elections. The entire populace had mobilized in favor of either the opposition party or the status quo. It seemed impossible that the populace would take this slap in the face without retaliation of some sort.

After several minutes, it became clear that everyone was too engrossed in the television for classes to resume. Raina was as fascinated by the assassination as her classmates and professors, but she knew a place where she'd rather be in the middle of a major crisis. With a small wave to a friend from class, she quietly slipped out of the room.

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The newsroom at the paper was chaotic. Phones were ringing off the hook while reporters dashed around with notepads and typed busily on their word processors. The editor, Darren, slammed a phone, looked up and saw her. Heaving himself and his extra bulk out of his chair at the phone bank, he gestured eagerly for Raina to come closer.

“Raina, fantastic. Good nose for news, kid. I need you to answer the phones for the next couple hours. If the embassy calls back, put that right through to Kevin. Otherwise, just ask who they want to speak to and take a message. Thanks so much for showing up.”

With an obvious sigh of relief, Darren ceremoniously pulled the chair out and handed her a notepad.

“Pencils in the cup. I'll get you some coffee. Black, right?”

Without waiting for an answer, he wiped his sweaty comb-over and moved off, trying to get the attention of one of the assistant editors.

Raina sat in the chair, dangerously close to crying from the combination of stress and exhilaration she was feeling. Fortunately, the phone rang, so she snatched it up, instead.

“*Daily News*, how may I help you?”

“I have an eye-witness here, says she heard the opposition leader’s last words. Get me Jack.”

“Um, Jack who?”

“Jack Hastell, who do you think?”

“I’m not sure where he is at the moment, can I take a message and have him call you back?”

“Who the hell is this, anyway?”

“I don’t think that’s important right now, but I’m Raina. Who the hell are you?” All chance of tears gone, Raina started scribbling details for her first message as the line indicators on the phone started flashing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Raina finally made it back to the dorm around ten that night. After seven hours of phones ringing all around her, her head was pounding and she was hallucinating faint bell echoes. Unsurprisingly, her roommate Marta and Marta’s boyfriend Thomas were still sitting in the common room, watching the news. She and Marta had been friends since they were seven, which



explained their continuing friendship, since Marta was much more studious and logical than she. In anyone else, she found those traits irritating. Even Thomas had occasionally gotten on her nerves in the two years since he and Marta had met in a chemistry class. However, she liked him most of the time and they were friendly, even if he could be too serious.

“Hey, Raina, where have you been?” Thomas asked. “They cancelled classes five hours ago.”

“Newspaper, answering phones. I’m exhausted.”

“Did you hear about the mutiny in the barracks?” Marta asked.

“Yep, took the phone call myself. One of the only ones Darren took right away.” Raina fell into the wooden chair at the end of the small dining table. She immediately toed off her shoes and started rubbing her feet. “Awesome, right?”

Marta looked at her strangely. “It’s an unholy mess. Unless you’re talking about your day, of course.”

“I am. It was insanity, Marta. You have never seen forty men and women go so crazy so quickly. I’ve been working at the paper as an intern for two years and the only thing that came close was the Prime Minister’s re-election.”

Thomas turned and looked at her. “You look like you’ve been through the wringer. Are you going to head to bed?”

“No, I’ll stay up with you and watch the news for a little while. I gotta go back to the newsroom tomorrow morning. Darren said I might as well be on the payroll for the next couple days.”

Marta came over to give her a hug, and Raina caught a whiff of her clean, lemony perfume. Somehow Raina never remembered little touches like perfume. “That’s really good news, hon. I just wish this hadn’t had to happen for you to get a break at the paper. What do you want me to tell your professors tomorrow? I’m sure school will be back in session.”

Raina shrugged. “Don’t know. Just fob ‘em off for a couple days, and I’ll come back and ask for make-up work or something. It seems weird that things’ll be back to normal that quickly.”

“They won’t be in Jabal, but it’s not like we can get out of classes forever, just because another country is going to war,” Marta observed. “We have to keep living our lives, you know?”

## Chapter 2

Within a month, at least for the students of Karst University, the quotidian routine had been restored. Beyond a few postponed tests and papers, it was difficult to tell that anything had happened unless the news was on the television. However, for Raina, life continued to change at a dizzying rate. Since so many of the paper’s reporters had been sent north to cover the continuing collapse of their neighbor’s government, the smaller stories of the country’s capitol could only be covered by low level cub reporters and interns. Raina’s first by-line appeared in the paper three days after the assassination. Admittedly, it was only a three-inch story about the

local school board's latest meeting, but Raina was thrilled; she was at last on her way to serious journalism. If Darren hadn't been a stickler for details like university degrees, she would have stayed in the newsroom permanently. Its energy and purpose made her feel—shimmery was the best word she could think of. She felt useful and intelligent in the newsroom. Her colleagues teased her for being young, but mostly treated her as an equal. Her contributions to the daily effort of creating a paper were recognized and appreciated, even if Darren could be gruff and thoughtlessly cruel when her work didn't meet his standards.

Additionally, Thomas had been called up for his mandatory army service. Although Marta and Raina were initially surprised, since he was supposed to have a deferral until his graduation, more and more of the men in the University prepared to leave for the same reason. Even with only two months to go until graduation, the northern border was so unstable and the government needed border patrols so desperately that they could only give Thomas fourteen days notice before he had to report to camp. While he was disappointed that he wouldn't receive his degree, Thomas tried to rationalize his departure.

"Let's face it, Marta," he explained as he, Marta, and Raina finished a take-out pizza the day after he received his draft letter, "I was only getting the degree for Dad. Even without a mechanical engineering degree, I can always help out at the garage. So what's the point of a piece of paper?"

Marta nodded, trying to be supportive although Raina knew she was upset. "I think you're right, Thomas. We both know you would have gotten the degree, and I guess you don't really need anything more than your hands and your experience. You've been working as a mechanic since you were fourteen. I know mechanical engineering is more fulfilling than tearing

apart engines, but at least you have a career path to follow. A lot of the guys in my chemistry classes with me are absolutely heart-broken. They need a degree to work, so this will put them at least a semester behind, and some of them are losing research grants and prestigious positions with professors.”

“Personally, I think it’s awful,” Raina said, swallowing a sip of iced tea. “I know that the northern territories are being invaded on an almost daily basis, but seventy percent of the men in the country have already served and trained in the army. Instead of speeding up the mandatory service for the ones who are already exempted, why not use someone with some experience?”

“Those people have already served, Raina,” Thomas pointed out mildly. Raina felt a flash of irritation but tamped it down. It was his problem, so if he leaned towards being philosophical, good for him. Except that it was messing with her best friend, too, so she thought he should be more upset. “The Constitution asks for two years of service from every able man. It’s not as though we didn’t expect to go into the army as soon as university was finished, anyway. You work in the news, and yet you’re still surprised that the government is changing its policies? They need to keep the northern provinces safe. They have an election coming up within a year, and the raids are devastating the rural areas.”

“The cost of milk is showing it,” agreed Marta fervently. “I had the checkout girl double check my total when I bought groceries yesterday!”

Happily, within four days of Thomas’s departure, the Parliament passed a law that all young men in their final semester of university would be awarded their degrees, as long as they

were currently holding a passing GPA. Raina, in the newsroom for a quick shift over lunch, immediately called Thomas on his cell.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Thomas, it’s Raina. I’ve got some awesome news for you.”

“Ok, what’s up?”

“You’re going to graduate!”

“What?”

Raina quickly explained the new provisions by the Parliament. To her surprise, Thomas didn’t immediately respond.

“Thomas? Are you all right?”

“I’m... things must be worse than we thought, Raina. This is the kind of provision they’d make if they expect us to be up there for months or years. So, yeah, I’m happy that I’m getting my degree. But honestly, I’m worried, too.”

Raina was surprised, but she tried to be reassuring. “I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that, Thomas. They’re just trying to make up for rescinding your exemption.”

“I hope you’re right, Raina. I’ll, um, catch you later. I need to do some stuff and call Marta.”

“Ok. Bye, Thomas.” Raina hung up the phone slowly. His reaction had not been at all what she’d expected. Either Thomas was being pessimistic or she was not paying enough

attention. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to worry about it, because Darren wanted two stories edited before she left for her Social Sciences class.

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When Raina got home at seven, she didn't even bother to organize herself, but just toed off her shoes and dropped all her bags at the door. She wanted to collapse, but since finals were coming up, she really needed to write some of her 20 page history paper for Laustre.

"Raina, is that you?" Marta called from her room.

"Yeah, I'm home."

"Great, come here and give me a hand, please?"

With a sigh, Raina wandered towards Marta's door. Marta was standing in the corner, brushing her long black hair carefully. When Marta turned around, Raina saw that she was wearing her best blue dress.

"Wow, Marta, you look beautiful. What's the occasion? It's a freaking Thursday!"

"Thomas called and said we were going to The Raven for dinner."

"Whew, really?" Raina asked in surprise. "That place costs an arm and a leg. What's the occasion? I thought your anniversary was next month."

Marta shrugged, "He won't be here, so maybe he's doing it early. I don't care; I've been dying to try their herbed lamb for years. I'm blowing off a lab tonight to go, so I hope it's as nice as advertised."

Raina smiled. "I'm sure it will be. I have a paper to write, so not to be rude, but what did you need help with, hon?"

"Oh, shoes!" Marta pointed down at her left and right legs, both clad in different heels. "Which do you like better? I usually wear this dress with the brown open-toed deals, but it's still a little early in the spring, so maybe the black pump is better?"

Raina laughed. "I like the brown ones, but it's chilly so if your toes are going to freeze, wear the black." Fortunately, she was saved from further fashion decisions by the doorbell ringing. "I'll get it, you primp." With a little wave for Marta, she went to let Thomas in.

Outside the door, Thomas stood looking remarkably nervous in a blue suit and a red tie with small white dogs on it.

"Hi Thomas, sounds like you have a big date," Raina said cheerfully as she gestured him inside. "Marta will be right out."

"Uh-huh," he muttered. Raina looked at him a little more closely and felt a spurt of worry. He was so pale he looked green.

"Hey, are you ok?" she asked, grabbing his shoulder so she could stare at him in the face. "You look like you might faint or puke or something."

"Just a little out of breath, I walked up the stairs instead of taking the elevator," he murmured.

"Sounds like you might be a little delicate for the army," Raina joked. "Four sets of stairs and you practically fall apart."

Thomas just shrugged uncomfortably and dropped onto the couch. He sat there, breathing deeply and not talking much, so Raina started unpacking her notebooks and setting up her laptop in the dining room until Marta opened her door about five minutes later.

He rose and crossed to her, kissed her, and said, “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Thomas. You look really nice, too. Let me just grab my coat and we can go. Sorry I’m late. Will we miss our reservation?”

“No, we’re alright. It’s at 8.”

“Okay then. Don’t wait up, Raina!” With a wink, Marta rushed Thomas out of the house.

“Have fun, you two,” Raina called after them absent-mindedly, already mentally analyzing the impact on her paper’s thesis of an old newspaper article she’d just found in her old notes.

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Three hours later, when Raina had changed into pajamas and was rolling her shoulders from the effort of concentrating and typing for so long, Marta and Thomas banged open the front door and waved an unopened champagne bottle in her face.

“We’re engaged,” they chorused, looking so thrilled that Raina immediately blinked all the exhaustion in her eyes away and jumped up to help celebrate.

“Congratulations!” she trilled as she hugged and kissed the couple. “Ring, please,” she demanded. Marta obligingly held out her hand to show off the small sapphire in a swirling white gold setting.



“Wow, that’s gorgeous, Marta.”

She glanced at Thomas. “Is this one of the things you had to do today so suddenly?”

He shrugged. “I just had to make the last payment a little early. I was going to propose after graduation, anyway.” Suddenly shy again, he looked around for something to do. He glanced at the bottle in his hand. “I’ll just open this up, shall I?”

Raina’s paper was left happily unattended as she celebrated with her friends long into the night.

### Chapter 3

Two months later, Raina and Marta had finally graduated. They found a small apartment in Karst together and Raina began to work at the newspaper full-time while Marta studied for the pharmacology exams and worked part-time in a dress shop. Both girls were happy even though they were concerned about the worsening northern border. Thomas wrote cheerful letters from the front, but his contented reports were belied by the growing discontent among the farmers and burgeoning political pressure on the Liberal Populace government.

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Raina glanced at the clock as she hurried up the steps to her parent’s flat. Dammit, she was late. The meeting at the paper had taken much longer than she’d expected. Darren’s face had been pinched beneath its florid coloring as he went over the safety procedures in excruciating detail. To be honest, Raina couldn’t understand his concern. After all, she wasn’t headed towards the actual war front, like Ben. Her assignment was one hundred miles inside the border in the

Northern Territories. While the area had been unsettled, she wasn't going to be out on the farms that were still being regularly raided, but in the town covering the local parliament's first meeting in twenty years. Secession rumors were her major concerns.

She knocked twice on the door but didn't actually pause –she simply opened it. The sight of her father's old student Matthias brought her up a little short. Mom had said "family dinner," not dinner party. Still, she tried to cover her surprise.

"Hello, Matthias, how are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Raina." He leaned in and kissed her cheek in greeting as he asked, "How are you? Your parents are in the kitchen with your aunt and uncle. Would you like a drink?"

Raina nodded and accepted a cherry brandy, trying not to feel annoyed. After all, Matthias had been around for so long that he was practically family. Maybe the awe she'd felt at twelve when he started studying with her father still lingered, but that didn't make him less of a valued friend.

"Um. I'm fine, just busy at the paper. How are you?" Raina asked.

Matthias laughed. "You already asked that, Raina. Are you alright?"

"Oh sure, I'm just flustered by being late."

"Why don't you go tell your parents you're here, then? I don't think they were overly worried, but you'll feel better," Matthias suggested.

“I will. Thanks.” Raina gulped her drink and hurried towards the swinging door to the kitchen, hoping she wasn’t blushing. She always seemed to make an idiot of herself with Matthias. She pushed through and announced, “Here I am! Sorry I’m late, Mom.”

Clara looked up from her bowl where she was mixing biscuit dough. “Raina! Hello, darling.” She raised her hands awkwardly and held them away as she leaned over to kiss Raina hello. Aunt Ana, who was enthralled in her stew, looked up from the stove and smiled vaguely as Clara continued. “Dinner in ten minutes, ok? Can you go roust your father and uncle from the balcony?”

“Of course,” Raina agreed. She dropped off her brandy glass near the sink and ambled through the kitchen to the glass door which led to her parent’s small alcove. Once through, she could see her father and uncle companionably and silently smoking. Wordlessly, Raina burrowed underneath her father’s arm and felt it rest on her shoulder.

“Hi, sweetheart,” her father offered absently. “I heard Matthias a minute ago. Did you bring him along in your car?”

“No, he was here already. Mom says dinner in ten.”

Uncle Jonas, his usual stern self, puffed once more on his cigarette and flicked it over the balcony. Raina watched the orange butt disappear into the early-evening gray. “I’ll go join Matthias in a drink,” he muttered over his shoulder as he ducked back into the warmth of the kitchen.

Raina simply stood with her father for a moment, enjoying his warmth and comfort. Since he seemed unusually distant, she started to tell him about her day. “My editor wants me to

go report on the Northern Territory border infringements and the parliament meetings about secession. I think it's strange that they want to pull away from the government here in Karst, because in my opinion that will make the borders less secure. However, I'm looking forward to covering all the action. I have an interview coming up with the mayor in one of the towns. Thank God for Marty and his infamous connections, or I'd never have swung it. Every paper in town is trying to interview her. Without his philandering, I'd be at the bottom of the heap." She grinned at him, waiting for him to smile back. Instead, he focused on her with a slight frown.

"You like your job, don't you, Raina?"

"Are you joking, Dad? I love it. Darren had a hard time keeping me out of the newsroom long enough for me to graduate; you know that. I really feel like I'm contributing to people's lives. I mean, take the situation since the assassination. Everything in the North is such a mess right now, and we're not much better here. Still, when somebody picks up the newspaper, he can find out some of the facts, or entertain himself with a crossword to forget his troubles. Ever since the first day at the phones, I've known this is the perfect job for me. I can't imagine doing anything else."

"That's good, honey. It's always nice to hear that my money was well-spent." Raina shook her head at the familiar joke. Since her father was a professor at the University, her education had been free. She was surprised at his next remark, though. "Especially with all the changes coming up."

"What are you talking about, Dad?"

Aunt Ana stuck her head through the back door. “You’re going to burn your fingers if you’re not careful, Jacob.”

Raina’s father looked down, surprised, at the cigarette which featured a good inch and a half of ash and was quite close to burning out on his hand. “Of course. Come on, Raina, let’s quit being unsociable and go join the others.” Carefully, he tamped out the cigarette butt in the amber glass ash tray, and squeezed her shoulder. Together, they turned to go in.

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Once everyone was seated at the table with a heaping serving of stew and a biscuit, Jacob tapped the side of his wineglass and cleared his throat. Clara smiled at him warmly from the other end of the table.

“Clara and I have an announcement to make. As you know, I’ve taught at the University for nearly twenty-five years now. I have occasionally had very tempting offers from other schools of higher learning in this time period. However, both Clara and I thought it was important to stay near home, maybe out of a misplaced sense of loyalty, but also so Raina could grow up in one place and have a sense of family. You are all important to us, and we’ve loved living here in Karst.”

Clara interrupted him gently, “You’re rambling, dear. Just tell them.”

“Yes, right. Well, to put it plainly, I’ve been offered a job that’s impossible to turn down. It’s a department headship, with faculty housing and a generous salary. But, for me, the most important part is that it’s out of the country. Specifically, it’s in Ghent, which has been a stable country for the past fifty years and shows no signs of changing. Clara and I have been here

before.” He glanced around the table worriedly, “Jonas, Ana, you recognize these signals as well as we do. Trouble is brewing here in Dashari, and we both feel too old to deal with it. So we’re getting out. And we advise you to do the same.”

“Dad, what are you talking about?” Raina demanded. “We’re fine. You love your job at the University. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that this is an offer I can’t refuse, Raina, professionally or personally. But that’s not to say it wouldn’t be better for my peace of mind if I knew my family was safe and close to me while I was enjoying my new job.”

“I’m sorry Jacob, but you know that Ana and I aren’t going anywhere,” Jonas stated flatly. “We’ve worked hard to build our life here. Even if the political situation gets worse, it’ll never be as bad as it was under the Bal-Moran. We’ll stick it out.”

“I thought you’d feel that way, and with Raina doing so well at her newspaper, I didn’t have much hope I’d convince any of you. But honey,” he turned toward her, “you know you’re more than welcome to come with your mother and me. We would be happy to help you get on your feet again. And Matthias, I could easily get you an interview in the languages department. You’ve been an important part of this family for as long as I can remember.”

“I appreciate it, Jonas, but I can’t accept. I’ve just taken a position as a translator with the state department. With all the disturbances, they need willing backs and I was a little tired of academia, anyway.”

Clara spoke up for the first time since Jonas had made his announcement. “That’s good of you, dear. I’m sure you’ll do a wonderful job.”

Ana nodded her agreement. “You’re just what the government needs, dear, an honest man and an intelligent one.”

Matthias looked slightly embarrassed by their tributes, but he shrugged. “I’m just good at languages, Ana.”

Raina jumped back into the conversation. “Mom, Dad, I can’t believe this. Are you really moving because of a government hundreds of miles away? I mean, I’m obviously not going with you, because I think you’re nuts!”

“Now, Raina, calm down please. Your father and I are not moving for the political situation only. We’re also making a smart career move for your father. Besides, you’re fooling yourself if you think that your life won’t be affected by Jabal’s instability. Already, your role at the paper has expanded exponentially.”

“But that’s a good thing!”

“For your career, but not for the Northern farmers who are being invaded on a daily basis,” Clara pointed out mildly. As usual, Raina felt helpless in the face of her implacability. “Don’t forget to eat your stew.”

Raina fought back the tears in her eyes. If they didn’t change the subject soon, she would cry and totally embarrass herself. In a carefully controlled voice, she changed the subject. “That reminds me, Mom. I’m heading up to the Northern Territories next week. I have a story about the Parliament. And Darren was being a bear! So maybe I’m in a bad mood.”

“I’m sure you’ll be careful?” Clara inquired. There was a mild note of concern in her voice, but she continued to eat her stew.

“Yeah, Mom, we’re sticking to the buddy system. I think we’ll be ok.”

Everyone stared at each other, unsure what to say next. Finally, Matthias cleared his throat. “When will you and Clara be leaving us, Jacob?”

“Oh, not too soon. I start in a month. Plenty of time for us to get in our goodbyes, I’d think. This is damn good stew, Clara.”

“No need to curse about it, then, is there Jacob?”

Raina laughed at the throwback to her childhood, and the mood around the table lifted.

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When she got home, Marta was curled into a ball in an armchair and sobbing.

“Hell of a day,” Raina murmured under her breath, but she immediately went over and patted Marta’s arm. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

Marta looked up, her green eyes blazing through her tears. “Not wrong. Incredibly right. Thomas is being sent home.”

“What?”

“I just got a phone call from his mom. Thomas kept collapsing on duty, so they took him to the hospital. He has a serious heart valve leak. So they honorably discharged him and told him to go home. He gets out of the hospital in two days and will be back on Wednesday afternoon.”



Raina blew out a breath. “Wow. That’s—that’s amazing, Marta. But, a heart valve leak? He sounds seriously ill.”

Marta shrugged, “We never noticed the problem before. I think he’ll be ok once he’s not marching and drilling all the time. He’ll take it easy at a computer somewhere as soon as he can find a job. Besides, I don’t care if he has to go answer phones in his Dad’s garage and lie in bed ten hours a day. He’ll be home, and we’re going to get married as soon as possible.”

Raina nodded. She was still worried, but the normally level-headed Marta was head-over-heels in love and needed some good news right now. Quite frankly, so did she. “I can get the afternoon off tomorrow and we’ll go see the judge.”

Marta squealed and dashed the last of her tears off her cheek. “And then shopping for dresses,” she demanded. The request was so girly and excited that Raina laughed as she agreed. Her best friend was showing some unexpected facets.

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Raina stared out the window as the car drove north. Darren had assigned a young photographer, Mike, to this story with her. He was only five or six years older than her, tall and gregarious. Raina liked him immediately and agreed easily when he offered to drive. She was getting a little nervous, so not having to concentrate on the road was nice. There wasn’t much traffic and many of the farms along the road stared back hollowly at her. Raina remembered them as prosperous and busy from her last visit to the area on vacation several years ago. However, most of the farmers had fled south to city relatives and abandoned their last crops to seed and scavenging soldiers from the civil war still raging just across the border. The stalwarts

and impoverished sharecroppers who couldn't afford to follow suit would all be in town today at the local Parliamentary meeting.

“Are you excited to meet the mayor, Raina?”

“What? Oh, sorry Mike, I was...daydreaming, I guess. This is kind of depressing.” Raina gestured out the window. “I am excited to meet the mayor, though. It could be a big story, an important story.”

Mike nodded. “Yep. We should get there in the next twenty minutes or so. I can't say I'm sorry I got to come, even though it seems like a long haul for the both of us. The parliament meeting seems like a good step for this area. I doubt they'll vote to secede, but at least they'll feel like their concerns are being heard. Still, if Darren wasn't so worried about everybody's safety, I doubt this one would have rated a photographer. What am I going to take pictures of? The windows of the building no one is allowed near without security clearance?”

“Maybe you can take a shot of the mayor looking frazzled,” Raina suggested. “That's certainly how she sounded on the phone when I did the pre-interview with her earlier this week.”

“Hey, I'd be frazzled, too! A lot of people milling around your town, a high-security meeting where there hasn't been one in ten years, and don't forget those pesky soldiers. It's enough to make a mayor wish for a lost election.”

Raina smiled at Mike. “I'm just going to go over my background notes, ok?”

“Yeah, sure, no problem. You'll do a good job, Raina. Don't worry about it. Darren would have pulled one of the vets if he thought you couldn't handle it.”

“Thanks, Mike,” Raina said wryly.

When they finally pulled up in front of city hall, Raina was relieved they had press credentials. Without them, parking would have been a nightmare. All of the emptiness and desolation of the drive up contrasted sharply with the milling crowds. Strong police barriers kept most of them hemmed in around the building complex, but there were plenty of men in black suits escorting local politicians and harried-looking city workers behind the barriers, too. Mike rolled down the window, flashed their badges, and nodded his thanks to the security guard who pulled away one of the metal gates for them to pass-through. Raina started gathering her bags so they wouldn't be late for their appointment.

“Oh, dammit,” she exclaimed as she checked her recorder. “How the hell did I leave this thing on? Now the batteries are completely dead!”

“What kind does it take?” Mike asked. “I think I've got some double-A's around here somewhere for my back-up digital.”

“Thanks, but it takes triple-As.” Raina sighed and looked around. “Oh, look,” she pointed. “I think that's a tobacconist on the corner over there, past the assembly hall they're using for the Parliament meeting today. I know we're running late, but could you just head inside and tell the mayor we're here while I run and grab some batteries?”

“Sure, no problem,” Mike said. “Hurry, though, ok? I want to get some shots of the representatives arriving, since that's as close as I'm going to get today, and most of them seem to be there already.”

Raina nodded and started to jog away. “Oh, and Raina?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you grab me a pack of lights? My wife hates them, but you only live once, right?”

Laughing, Raina flapped her hand at Mike. “Consider it done.” She hurried past the barriers on the far side of the street, pausing to show security her press credentials and explain her errand. Raina pushed open the glass door to the shop, and a bell sounded wheezily. As she looked around the small space filled with brightly colored candies and knick-knacks, an old man, equally wheezy and heavily wrinkled, greeted her from behind the counter.

“Good morning, miss. How can I help you?”

“A package of light cigarettes and some triple-A batteries, please.” Raina requested.

“Sure thing. What brand of cigarettes do you want, young lady?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Raina exclaimed as she realized that Mike hadn’t specified. She turned to look at the display, but was distracted by a large crash. She and the old man both turned to look out the front of the store as a truck barreled towards the temporary Parliament building, a metal crowd-control gate hanging crazily off its front bumper.

“What on---

The truck smashed into the side of the building, narrowly avoiding the wide stone staircase. As gasps and cries began to fill the air, it exploded. Raina saw the fireball, and then felt her body picked up by the concussion. Helpless, she screamed as the wall filled with candy rushed to meet her.

Raina woke up because something was beeping, dammit, and if she didn't turn it off, she was going to go crazy. Her head was pounding in sympathetic waves with the beep.

“Beep,” pound pound, “Beep” pound pound. Raina threw back the coverlet, and started to get up as she opened her eyes, but the wave of pain from her left leg made her stomach heave and her eyesight go gray, so she froze. What the hell?

“You're awake,” her mother's voice sighed with relief. Raina slowly opened one eye again, and when nothing moved in her digestive system and the pain in her leg stayed at a throbbing ache, she opened the other one as well. She cautiously moved her head until she could see her mother.

“Mom? What are you doing here? And why am I in a hospital?”

Clara explained softly, “Someone drove a truck filled with explosives into the regional Parliament. You got caught in the blast zone, and were injured by a piece of shrapnel. It cut into your leg and you lost quite a bit of blood before the rescuers found you.”

“And my head?” Raina gestured weakly, afraid to turn it or lift it more in case the nausea returned.

“A moderate concussion and possibly some temporary hearing damage from the blast,” Clara suggested.

“No, I can hear just fine. It's the beeping of the monitors that's driving me crazy!”

“Well, I'm sure the doctors would be more than happy to give you some pain medication. You had several stitches in your leg, and you're covered in bruises.”

“What about Mike?” Raina asked, suddenly remembering her cameraman. “He was inside the Mayor’s office. Did he make it out alright?”

Clara nodded slowly. “He’s alive, but the City Hall caught on fire because it was attached to the building that exploded. He has some pretty severe burns, so his recovery will be slow, but his wife and children are here.”

Raina struggled to put all the questions in her head into some kind of logical order. “I don’t understand; what happened? The truck just crashed into the Parliamentary building?”

Clara shrugged. “We don’t know what happened, but it blew up the building. It may have been separatists, or spillover from the civil war up north. It could even have been someone with no political motive at all.”

Raina was fighting an overwhelming urge to go back to sleep, but the part of her brain that wasn’t fighting her pain and exhaustion still wanted to get the story, so she pushed out another question. “How long have I been here?”

“Seventeen hours,” Clara answered. “Your editor called your father and me, and we all caravanned up here together.”

The sleep was coming in a tidal wave, so Raina closed her eyes again and murmured, “You’ll stay?”

“Of course.”

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Raina woke to less pleasant company several hours later as a nurse bent over to draw some blood. “Is that really necessary? My mother told me I lost blood!” Raina muttered grumpily.

“Sorry, hon, but we need to check a couple things,” the nurse said in a sing-song tone that made Raina seriously consider strangling her. She decided to pump her for information instead.

“What time is it?”

“Around midnight. Are you in pain? We can give you some more medication.”

“No, thank you. How soon can I get out of here?”

“You need to ask the doctor that, hon, and he won’t be in until tomorrow.”

Gritting her teeth, Raina forced herself to ask pleasantly, “Are any of my family still here?”

“No, visiting hours are over so we convinced them to get some rest in one of the on-call rooms. Your boss is still standing in the hallway on the pay phone and chomping on the cigar I’ve had to ask him to put out twice, though.” With her first flash of irritation, the nurse commented, “Some people just won’t stick to the rules.”

Raina felt a spark of excitement. “Could you possibly ask him to come in here, please? I promise to keep him out of your hair for a little while.”

“Visiting hours are over,” the nurse pointed out again.

“Yes, but he’ll be in here and away from the other patients,” Raina tried hard to disguise her pleading with a helpful tone.

“Well...it’s sort of late, so don’t let him keep you too long.”

“Thank you!” With a shrug that clearly expressed the nurse’s disbelief that Raina wanted to see such a pain in the ass, the nurse left the room. A few seconds later, Darren edged around the door.

“How you doing, kid?” Darren asked. “You and Mike sure gave us a scare.”

“Wrong place, wrong time,” Raina commented uncomfortably. There really wasn’t a better explanation. “What happened to the Mayor? Think I could still squeeze in a phone interview?”

Darren shrugged. “Not really necessary, unfortunately. Kylie just finished her obit. She got caught in the stairway by a falling beam”

Raina blinked, “Oh. I’m really sorry to hear that. She seemed nice in the set-up call.”

“According to Marty, she was a great girl. She wasn’t the only casualty; about twelve of the people from the assembly hall are dead, and a couple more are in serious condition here. Most of them were the representatives, and a couple bodyguards. Plus the bomber, of course.”

“Wait, you know for sure that it wasn’t an accident? I was thinking the driver had a heart attack or something. A deliberate attack seems so unlikely.”



Darren shifted at the foot of her bed, looking at her closely. “You really wanna know this? I’ve got other reporters on the job—you could take it easy for a couple days, find out more when you’ve recovered.”

Raina slowly reached up and carefully tapped her nose. Her head pounded a little, but it wasn’t too bad. “Nose for news, remember Darren?”

“Ha, good one. Ok, sure, at first everyone thought same as you, just a catastrophic accident. But a couple hours afterwards, one of the militias up here in the north who wanted secession called in and claimed the bombing as their work. Analysts went in and looked at the scene. They decided it was a deliberate attack from the tire tracks—they swerved INTO the building. That’s fresh out of the lab, as of twenty minutes ago.”

Raina was shocked. She didn’t want Darren to see how upset she was, so she reached up and tapped her nose again. “Looks like I’m not the only one, Darren.”

The editor flushed. “Well, we’re a little short-handed at the moment. Between you, Mike, and all my guys in the field a little north of here, I think I’ll be writing some copy this week.”

“I could...”

“Nope. Don’t even start. You’re on paid sick leave for the next fourteen days, minimum. Promise me. No stories, no copy, no research. I need you back, but I need you a hundred percent even more.”

Raina looked at Darren carefully. Underneath his pudge and exhaustion, he was genuinely worried. “Alright, I’ll promise, but only if you promise to keep me absolutely up-to-date.”

Darren snorted. “Sorry, kiddo, but I have to get back to Karst now that I know both you and Mike are gonna make it. Buy a paper?” he suggested. Then he waved kindly and left the room.

Raina smiled and closed her eyes. Fourteen days was an eternity, but if she went to sleep, it’d be thirteen in the morning. Besides, once she got out of the damn bed, what Darren didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

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A few hours later, Raina’s head was pounding again, but her leg felt like it might actually be on fire. Maybe she should have taken that nurse up on more meds. It was barely dawn, judging from the gray skies and lifting shadows outside her window. Raina sighed. Between the constant beeping of her monitors, the pain, and the lack of a clock in her room so she could count the hours, this bed was rapidly becoming hell.

“Are you alright?” a quiet voice asked. “Do you want me to get you a nurse or something?”

Startled, Raina lifted her head. As soon as the rainbow of colors and pain faded, she saw a small, dark-haired and heavily pregnant woman staring at her worriedly.

“Do I know you?”

The woman shook her head lightly. “No, we’ve never met. I’m Mike’s wife, Elizabeth.” Her face crumpled a little as she said his name, but she shook it off. “I’m sorry if I scared you. I just, I couldn’t sit in his room anymore. It’s too...” she didn’t complete the thought. “You were with him, and you were ok. So I was just going to stay here a little while until my brain could process the fact that Mike is going to be ok, too.”

Very carefully, Raina lowered her head back onto the pillow again. “How’s he doing?”

“Second degree burns on twenty-five percent of his body. A couple fractured fingers from where his hand hit the window frame when he broke the glass to escape.” She breathed out long and low. “He’ll be back to work in a couple months, so it can’t be that bad, but he’s in so much pain. Even through the strongest drugs they have, he lies there and moans. It’s unnerving.”

“I’m sure,” Raina tried to hide her horror underneath her sympathy. “I’m feeling guilty for wanting an aspirin right now.”

“You shouldn’t,” Elizabeth said matter-of-factly. “You have twenty stitches in your leg and your face is about ten shades of black and blue. I’d be screaming bloody murder by now.” She reached over and pressed a button next to Raina’s bed. When the nurse answered, she briskly told her to bring more pain medication.

“Thanks,” Raina offered.

“No trouble,” Elizabeth assured her. “You’ve helped me, so I’ll help you.”

“How did I help? I’m lying in a hospital bed?”

“You’re talking to me. That helps.”

Elizabeth seemed nice, so Raina tried to think of something neutral to talk about.

“When’s the baby due?”

“Seven weeks, and it can’t come soon enough.” She laughed and rubbed her stomach.

“I’m a chef and I’m *this* close to bringing a recliner to sit in front of my stove. The last two weeks before maternity leave are always the worst.”

“You’ve done it before?”

“Three times,” Elizabeth agreed. “Mike and I got started early.”

The nurse bustled in. Raina was relieved to see that this woman was not her overly-cheerful battalion from last night. She didn’t give Elizabeth a second glance, just walked straight over to Raina. “I’m going to give you something pretty strong,” she warned her. “Your friend is going to be bored in about fifteen seconds.”

“That sounds perfect,” Raina couldn’t help saying. The idea of oblivion was too tempting for her to be polite.

“I’ll get out of your way,” Elizabeth commented smoothly. “Thanks for the peace and quiet, Raina.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Raina offered before the room faded.

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Despite many firm discussions with her doctor, Raina found herself consigned to the hell-bed for three days. The only upside that Raina could find to the stay was Elizabeth’s frequent visits. Marta called her once a day, but was pre-occupied with Thomas, whose heart condition

was much worse than Marta had realized. He wasn't an invalid, but without new medications he was at constant risk of a heart attack.

“Just think,” Marta had expostulated. “If Thomas hadn't been called up, he probably would have killed himself before we ever knew! None of his physicals ever found the problem, but his doctors think he's had it since he was a kid.”

“Incredible,” Raina had mumbled into the phone, since this was the third time Marta had explained it.

Her daily phone calls and friendly visits with Elizabeth aside, Raina spent most of her time following the coverage of the suicide bombing on the television and in the papers that her dad brought every morning. Thanks to her concussion, too much reading gave her a headache, so Jacob took over the job. It was nice to lie there and listen to him read the articles to her like she was a little kid again. When Darren wrote an op-ed piece praising both her and Mike as valued employees of the paper and wishing them speedy recoveries, Raina was so torn between mortification and pleasure that she started crying. Fortunately, her father understood and just handed her a tissue without any of the exclamations or cuddles that her mom would have found necessary.

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With only ten days to go until Darren would let her back into the newsroom, Raina needed to get out of bed. She knew it, and she knew that Dr. Stevens knew it. They eyed each other warily from across the bed.

“I just want to get up,” Raina repeated for the umpteenth time.

Her doctor sighed. “Fine. You probably should anyway. Short trips,” he warned her when it looked like she would jump out of the bed immediately. “I still don’t want you to sit with those stitches so high on your thigh, so you can shower with the help of a nurse but no baths or chairs. Horizontal or vertical only, with as little in between as possible, please. Have your family walk you around the hall or to visit your friend Mike. Try to stay on your feet no more than ten minutes. One trip a day, minimum, and no more than four.”

“That’ll work,” Raina assured him. “I don’t think it will take me more than four minutes to walk out the front door and into my get-away car, and that’s only one trip.”

“Funny,” her doctor returned. “If you can handle the walking for two days, we’ll discuss sending you home.”

“Really? No offense, but I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Believe me, the feeling’s mutual.”

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Two days before Darren would let her go back to work, Raina acted as the honor attendant in Marta and Thomas’s wedding. Her bandages and stitches made her limp a little, but her bruises had faded, she was off the heavy medication, and the short civil ceremony allowed her to stand the whole time. Fortunately, both Thomas and Marta were from secular families—if she had needed to stand for the elaborate four hour religious ceremony that was common in the neighborhood, she might have needed a wheelchair. Once the judge had pronounced them man and wife, the new couple proudly hosted an elegant dinner reception for some of their friends and family at a local restaurant.

“This is really beautiful, Marta,” Raina commented to her friend when they were seated at the head table. Candles glowed on all the tables and white rose petals floated in cut-glass bowls. “I’m impressed that you arranged all of this so quickly.”

“One of the girls at work had to postpone her wedding since the groom’s stuck up north, so she let me use her reservation. I felt awful, but she seems to be holding it together.” Marta discreetly pointed to a slim blonde at a near-by table, who was calmly eating a chicken appetizer.

“May I kiss the bride?” The girls looked up to see Matthias, wearing a gray suit and a big smile.

“Of course,” Marta offered her cheek and stood up slightly so he could deliver the tribute more easily. “I’m so glad you could come. I know you’re awfully busy at your new job.”

“It’s a madhouse,” Matthias agreed. “The current government seems to think that long hours and short tempers will keep the wolf from the door. I’m not so sure, myself. Some of the polling numbers are pretty eye-opening. The neighbors have noticed, too. Foreign investment is up in a big way.”

“It’s so strange to think of political instability as an investment opportunity,” Raina commented.

“Not really. If you think about it, our products are in high demand up north, our politicians are facing re-election and secession rumors, and we’re funneling many of our young men to the border to focus on security instead of industry. It’s a good time to get into the market, at least if you’re slightly unscrupulous.”

Thomas joined the conversation, “I probably wouldn’t have gotten such a good job at the water plant if they weren’t a little short-handed right now. Mechanical engineering jobs don’t grow on trees—it’s a miracle that I got a position within a week of getting home.”

“You deserved it,” Marta exclaimed loyally. “Sure, it’s an important job right out of university, but you can do it.”

Thomas didn’t answer her verbally; he just kissed her. Matthias and Raina shared a “newlyweds” look, and Matthias cleared his throat. “How are you feeling, Raina? Jacob said that you were recovering well from your misadventure.”

“I feel lucky,” Raina told him honestly. “I probably should still be in the hospital with the paper’s cameraman. And by the time I was done there, you could go ahead and have me committed. It was miserable.”

Matthias laughed. “You never could stand being confined. Whenever your dad and I studied together, you’d run past the windows and play as loudly as possible. It was like you wanted to prove that you were having more fun.”

“I was.” Raina smiled at the memory.

“Maybe, but at the time I just thought it was funny.” He shifted. “I’d better get back to my table—looks like they’re serving the main course.”

“See you soon,” Raina offered. They didn’t see much of each other outside her parent’s home, but she still considered him a cross between her big brother and a dear friend.



“I’ll be at your parents’ to help them pack up the moving van in a little over a week.” He blew out a breath. “It’s going to be strange to have them gone. I guess we have to fend for ourselves, now. Maybe we can grab coffee or lunch sometimes since our offices are close.” He squeezed her hand, then with a smile and a nod to Thomas and Marta, he left. Raina, feeling a little lonely, stared at the ballroom as the guests all drifted back to their tables from chatting in small groups.

She was awakened from her reverie with a jolt. “Is that fish I see before me?” Marta asked as she gave Raina a friendly elbow to the side. “I’m starving!”

Raina laughed and, signaling a waiter for more wine, prepared to dig in.

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The newsroom was buzzing with a typical Monday morning hum. There had been no major stories overnight, but the regional emergency elections were scheduled to begin primary campaigns, so several of the younger reporters were busily fact-checking the basic details of the candidates. Raina saw George and Marty hurry by, gesticulating wildly. Darren must have been really short-handed to call them back from their foreign assignment. She walked towards the “Editor-in-Chief” door and tried not to feel nervous.

Darren looked up at her light knock and gestured her in vehemently. “Come in, come in. Do you want to sit down? We’re thrilled to have you back. I’ve got Marty going to a press conference in the capitol building today. Do you feel up to going with him? He’s got great contacts; it’ll go better for you if he introduces you. Also, maybe the sympathy card can get us a scoop.” He winked at her, outrageously.

Raina laughed. “I would love to go today; my leg feels fine. I get the stitches out next week and everything. Why would Marty give me his hard-earned contacts, though?”

“It’s your new beat. I’m putting him in as a war correspondent permanently --or until the civil war is resolved. You know, whichever happens first.”

“You’re cheerful today.”

“I managed to hire away a damn good photographer from The Sun, and between you, George and Marty, I’m finally not short-handed for the first time in almost three weeks. I’m ecstatic. Go find Marty.”

Raina sketched a little salute and then left the office, looking for her colleague. She quickly found him by the coffee, dosing a mug with lots of cream and sugar.

“Hi Raina. Ready for the passing of the torch?”

“I really appreciate this, Marty. You’ve already helped me so much...”

“Hey, to be honest I’m thrilled to get off the capitol beat. Back-stabbing, bloodshed, intrigues — war will be easier on my ulcers.”

Raina smiled. Marty was charming. It was easy to understand why most of his sources were women. Marty finished his coffee in one long swallow and gestured for Raina to follow him. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The capitol building was imposing, with strong columns and warm yellow stone bricks. Raina had only ever been inside on a school tour before, so she couldn’t help being impressed when Marty drove right into the parking lot, walked into a side door, and called the security

guard by name. After a brief walk through metal detectors, they were escorted into the office wing. Through an open door, Raina saw several parliamentarians huddled around a table in a conference room.

“Committee meeting,” Marty said cheerfully when he saw the direction she was looking. “They’re probably discussing the game on TV last night, though.”

Raina nodded. “Where are we going?”

Marty stopped abruptly outside a small wooden door. “To meet Jamie. Come on, newbie.”

Knocking twice, Marty gently opened the door. A woman, talking animatedly into a phone while typing frantically on a computer keyboard, glanced up and mouthed “sit down” at them. Raina and Marty both settled quietly into the ratty leather armchairs facing the desk.

“Mmhhh, I see it. Yes, I’ve already re-written the wording. It’s not a problem, I’m happy to do it, ma’am. Of course. I’ll bring a new copy for your approval this afternoon. Yes. Good-bye.” The woman hung up the phone, then smiled warmly at Marty.

“Marty, how nice to see you. Who’s your friend?”

“Jamie, this is Raina. I’m going north for a while, so Darren is giving her the beat. Raina, meet Jamie Lysencki. She is your first, last, and often only source, otherwise known as the assistant to the Prime Minister.”

Raina shook hands, a little awed. “That sounds like a big job.”

Marty added, “She also plays a mean game of billiards and has her ear to the ground constantly. If something’s rumbling, she knows about it. Speaking of which, anything happening on the home front, J?”

Jamie tilted her head and stared at Raina. “You’re the reporter who got hurt in the blast up north, right?”

Raina nodded, unsure whether to be impressed. “I was supposed to interview the mayor of Horste, but her office was next door to the wrong building.”

“Darren’s a smart man. The sympathy card, young, cute, and eager...” Jamie looked at Raina closely for a second, then seemed to come to a decision. “Alright fine, let’s test your mettle. You want a scoop; I’ll give you a scoop. We’re going to announce the election dates early. Constitution says every five years, but our polling numbers show serious trouble for the current Liberal coalition for every month that the frickin’ war that’s not even in our country continues. We need to boost the troops again with the recent security breach, and we’ve got foreign powers looking at us like a meat pie, even without violent dissenters in our own borders. The PM’s going to schedule the elections for next summer and hope like heck he beats the wave of negative opinion. You’ve got four hours on everybody else. And just so we’re clear sweetie, that was all from an unnamed source and I won’t repeat it. So don’t screw up your quote, and write most of it as background, or you’ll never get another one.”

As Raina desperately pulled her pad out of her purse and started scribbling, Jamie walked around the desk, pulled Marty up out of his chair and kissed him lavishly on the mouth. “Be

careful up north, ok? Now get out of my office; I have about fifteen meetings today and no time for fun or games. Nice to meet you, Raina.”

Raina nodded and stood up immediately. Marty seemed content to let her write this story, so no matter what, she wasn't going to piss Jamie off. “Thanks. I'll see you around.”

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Darren was thrilled with Raina's copy when she telephoned it in, although Raina was very careful to give Marty most of the credit for his sources and reputation. He printed it immediately, and thanks to another story she managed to dig up the next day about one of the newer senator's strange use of fundraising money to re-carpet his office, she was a hero in the newsroom.

She should be on top of the world, Raina thought as she wandered around her now roommate-less apartment, making a cup of tea. Every dream she'd entertained about her career was coming true, and Marta was ridiculously happy with Thomas. While they no longer roomed together, the three friends ate dinner together at least once a week, and Elizabeth had called just that day to tell her that Mike was being released from the hospital at the end of the month. He should be back at work soon thereafter. In short, her life was close to perfect, with the exception of tomorrow.

“You're being a baby,” Raina said to herself out loud. “You're twenty-two years old, and don't need your mommy and daddy anymore. It's not like they've died; they're just moving. Holidays exist for a reason, and you'll always have an excuse to travel. It's a great opportunity

and you know it. So quit being such a pain in the ass. Whatever happens, you will be bubbly, excited, and supportive tomorrow.”

The kettle started to whistle, punctuating her statement. Raina drank her tea with an old movie droning in the background and forced herself to go to bed.

The next morning was chilly and gray, but the forecast didn't call for rain, so at least the movers wouldn't have to deal with inclement weather. Wrapping an old blue sweater around her shoulders, Raina headed into her parent's apartment and chaos.

Her mother was, surprisingly since she was usually mild-mannered, arguing with a mover about how to pack her china so it wouldn't break in transit. “I have had this since my wedding day twenty-eight years ago, young man. If one piece of it doesn't survive, I will take it out on your head, so I don't care if your boss counts the wrapping paper. Use four sheets for every piece, do you understand?”

Since she was pretty sure her mother would win, Raina left her to it and escaped to her father's study. As she'd expected, he was still putting the last of his beloved books into boxes.

“Hi sweetheart, glad you could come help.”

“Me too, Dad.”

“You had us pretty worried a couple weeks ago. Are you still sure you don't want to join us?”

“Still sure, Dad. I brought you a present.” With a little flourish, Raina gave him her first capitol beat story, matted and nicely framed in black.

“Well, would you look at that, my daughter the big-shot journalist.” He gave her a big hug. “And even better, I think I can squeeze it into the top of this last box.” He laid it carefully, and then started searching for his tape. “Where’d I put the stupid stuff?”

“I’ve got it, Jacob,” Matthias said easily, walking past the door with it balanced on top of a large carton labeled *Bathroom Towels*. “How are you today, Raina? I’ve been reading your latest stories in the paper.”

“Thanks, my boss loves it when people buy the paper. I’m fantastic, how are you?”

“Can’t complain. Well, I could, but it would take me a year to explain all of the stupid things that my department is doing, so I’ll stick to my first alibi and remind myself that I left academia to be a useful, contributing citizen.”

“Wow, that bad?” Raina lifted a box and started walking down the hall with him.

“The blush was off the rose pretty quickly,” Matthias admitted as they carted their loads down the stairs. “The bureaucrats who aren’t openly corrupt in the department are bored or lazy. The politicians who oversee us make suggestions designed to cut down on our budget instead of improve our standing with other governments, and some of the rumors swirling around the embassies are frightening. I translated a letter the other day for a general where the leader of a neighboring country thinly veiled an offer to bomb some of the Northern provinces’ militias so the military wouldn’t have an image problem. All he wanted in return were some mineral rights.”

“Who was it?” Raina and Matthias deposited their boxes in the van and started back into the house.

“Oh no, Ms. Busybody, no names. The last thing we need is an exposé. Some of the work we do is actually important and needs to remain secret.”

“You know I’d do a great job writing it,” Raina wheedled.

“I’m sure you would, but I’d be out of a job and the government might not be able to take another blow.”

“Hmm, somebody thinks they’re pretty important?” Raina teased. She felt excited and adult. Matthias was treating her like an equal instead of his little sister.

“I didn’t mean the blow of losing me; I meant the blow of hearing about the Liberal Populace’s diplomatic discussions.”

“You really think they’re unstable? I keep hearing it, but it seems so unlikely. Citizens were singing in the streets less than three decades ago to GET this government.”

“That was before it took half a paycheck to buy bread and milk for a family of four,” Matthias pointed out as they continued shuttling boxes. “People’s affection for political figures is pretty fleeting when they’re struggling for survival.”

“It’s hardly the government’s fault that marauders are turning our farms into their supply depots.”

“I don’t exactly disagree with you, but whose fault is it? People need someone to point at when circumstances are bad, and we don’t have the Empire as a scapegoat anymore.”

Raina fell silent for a moment, unsure how to express herself. “I hate that this is all we talk about anymore. If we were at war, I’d understand it, but we’re just unlucky bed-fellows.”



Half our exports went to a country that's currently a morass, so now our government, our industry, and our military are all a mess, too. Why is it so inter-dependent?"

"There was strength in those relationships, and we desperately needed it. It's no easy feat to start a country from scratch. We all need allies."

"You sound like you're giving a lecture," Raina mumbled.

"Well, why don't I stop, then? I see Clara has managed to scrounge up some lemonade in the middle of this disaster. Your mother is a remarkable woman."

They walked over to Clara, but Raina couldn't help feeling antagonistic towards Matthias, which deflated her earlier excitement. She just wanted things to go back to normal so she could enjoy her success and new life.

"Well, guys, it looks like we're almost done here," Jacob commented, falsely cheerful. "About time to head out, since anything left is going in the mover's van, not ours."

Clara handed Raina a paper cup of lemonade. "I want you to promise me you'll be careful. I don't like you living all by yourself in that apartment."

Raina rolled her eyes, but reminded herself to be cheerful. "It's just as safe now as it was when Marta and I picked it out, Mom."

"Speaking of Marta," Jacob pointed to the green car rolling up to the curb. "It looks like she came to say goodbye."

Running across the lawn, Marta made it to the group long before Thomas, who carefully parked and walked at a sedate pace to the family.

“Well, sir, it looks as though you’re almost packed up,” Thomas observed.

“We’ll miss you so much!” Marta nearly knocked Clara’s lemonade out of her hands with the fierce hug she gave her, but Clara just smiled and patted her back gingerly, careful not to slosh.

“You know that you’re as welcome in our new home as you always were here.”

“It won’t be the same, though, will it?”

“No, it won’t,” Raina agreed. She could feel the tears starting, so she started her mantra of bubbly and supportive in her head again. However, when she saw her dad subtly wipe the corner of his eye with his sleeve, she gave in. Her Dad was always her weak point. After hugs, tears, and promises of weekly phone calls, Clara and Jacob got into their car and left. Raina watched them until the car turned at the end of the street.

“Let’s go get a drink,” Marta said sympathetically. Raina nodded.

## Chapter 5

Raina almost dropped the phone; she was so surprised at the news. Fortunately, her office door was closed. Even though her colleagues respected her, there was no way they’d pass up this scoop if they could overhear her conversation.

“The parliament leaders did WHAT?” she practically shrieked at Jamie. Jamie, since she was now a good friend, kindly ignored Raina’s overreaction to repeat her news.

“They accepted the offer of the Lycanthian government to send in troops. Supposedly, they’ll help boost our current military and political establishments.”

“They’re going to let a foreign nation inside our borders to boost the government? This sounds like political suicide to me.”

Jamie sighed. “Raina, I’ve already packed my desk. Between the economy, the cost of maintaining a standing army three times its normal size, and the newest polling numbers, we don’t have a prayer in hell, and we know it. The only way to insure that the new Right Way party doesn’t just burn down the Parliament and the constitution along with it is to knee-cap them. So we’re doing it.”

Raina tried to think of something to say, but came up blank. “Jamie, I—“

“Hey, don’t worry about it. The Liberal Populace coalition has been in power for years, and the PM is a good man. He’ll limit the damage, I promise you. I wish he was a low-down slime ball at the moment, believe me. It would be so satisfying to throw the election and just watch the losers sweat it out.” She sighed, but Raina could hear the tears trembling at the edge of her voice. “I have no idea what I’m going to do now. Those Right Way-ers are a bunch of crazies, but they’ve effectively hijacked the political discussion. Now it’s all about closing our borders, strengthening our families, and avoiding the threat of the Empire, when it should be about re-building farms, strengthening our ties to sympathetic governments, and diplomatically ending the war in Jubal before it spills over our border for good.”

“You might be surprised, Jamie. I still see the value in those goals. Maybe others do, too.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears. If I believed in God, which I don’t. And isn’t that half the problem?” Jamie’s laugh was more bitter than amused. “The last time I saw the Right Way

party head, he was doing infomercials for the national religious pilgrimage movement. It looks as though the *dakkari*-influenced conservatives have won at last.”

“That seems a little overdramatic. I don’t want to get caught up in our old discussion here, Jamie,” Raina warned gently. She liked Jamie a lot, but her constant rants against the *dakkari* faithful in the country were, to her, off-putting. Secular and religious citizens were split almost exactly fifty-fifty, and while the religious parties tended to skew conservative (and therefore oppose Jamie’s policies), Raina insisted the country’s citizens deserved respect whatever their viewpoints. Both groups in the country had written the Constitution, so to Raina’s thinking, they both had equal stakes in seeing it upheld. Jamie disagreed, often vehemently, and thought that Raina was naïve to think that the current tensions between the religious conservatives and secular liberals were nothing more than ideological differences. To get the conversation back on track, Raina tried to snap herself into “reporter” mode.

“Tell me more about the, um... well crap, James, the only word I can think of is invasion, and I’m a frickin’ journalist.”

“At our request, our esteemed Southern ally will be sending about three thousand Marines into the country to help us with Army discipline, border patrol, and governmental stabilization shortly before our national elections.” Jamie sighed. “This is going to go over like a lead balloon, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I think that’s an understatement, especially in the north. So why are you doing it two weeks before an election?”

“Oh, there are many reasons. Number one, the international community has made it stunningly clear that they are concerned about election fraud and a power grab, which would result in a repeat of Jubal’s descent into civil war. Presumably, having an outside party witness the elections will give them legitimacy. Number two, our soldiers are deserting the army at an astonishing rate. Let’s see, what else? Oh yes, violence against women and growing food shortages in the Northern Provinces are turning them into an earthbound version of hell, yet the soldiers we manage to keep on duty can’t seem to stop it, or to be frank, stop participating in making it worse. The stress on our factories and food suppliers has put the economy in the crapper, so our current leaders are facing threats from every man-on-the-street who can’t pay his bills...” She paused for a breath. “I can go on, Raina.”

“No, I think I get the picture. Basically, our government has gone to shit and needs a white knight. But here’s a question for you—why do they want to help us?”

“That should be an easy one, Raina. Didn’t you pay attention in school?” Jamie teased, but underneath her voice was steel.

“The Bal-Moran Empire? This is still about the damned Empire?”

“Oh yes, baby girl, this is still about the Empire. After all, Lycanthia pumped thousands of dollars and hours of diplomatic pressure into ensuring we exist at all. The last thing they want to do is abandon us twenty years down the road.”

“It just seems so silly. Everyone knows the Empire is barely eking out an existence at the moment. Even the money is coming from private investors, not the government.”

“Look, I think you’re missing the point here. You were what, 3 when the Empire fell? I had ten years on you, and while my memories aren’t happy, the Empire’s not much more than a ghost story to me. However, the folks of the generation before mine are the people who run the government. And Raina, they remember the Empire as the genuine big bad wolf. Their memories are of oppression, torture, and mass murder. You can throw facts about how weak the government is at them all day. You can explain that what was once the greatest empire in the world has devolved into a bunch of fiefdoms run by drug lords and petty kingpins—and it won’t matter. The Bal-Moran Empire is the tiger in the brush in that generation’s history, Raina, and no matter how much you try to prove its claws have been drawn, you can’t overcome their fear. Selling this to the voting public down south in Lycanthia will be easy—it’s here that it will be difficult. We like to pretend we drew the monster’s claws all on our own, but the truth is that without significant financial and diplomatic support, we would have collapsed in much the same way as our northern neighbors did earlier this year.”

“Alright, I get it. They are continuing to fight a shadow and they’re willing to support our government to do it. So what do you want me to write?”

“Nothing, Raina. Please, do me a favor and sit on this one. They’re going to have enough trouble as it is. I just wanted to tell you because it’s probably the last time I can be any use to you, and we’ve been colleagues for months now. I guess I just wanted you to know that, well...I like you. So, you know, make any adjustments you think are necessary. Because the shit is about to hit the fan, and I’m about to be useless. My best hope is for a tiny cubicle in the minority wing of the Parliamentary offices. Go court some conservatives or ask Darren for a new beat if you know what’s good for you.”

“Jamie, I... thanks. I appreciate the advice.”

“You’re not going to follow it,” Jamie stated bluntly.

Raina prevaricated, “I think you’re overreacting to some upsetting news. I do appreciate the thought, though. Let me give you a heads-up back. Not only do I feel no need to “court” conservatives, but I’m also writing the story as soon as I can get some corroboration.”

“Don’t quote me, ok? I’d like to put off the inevitable job termination as long as possible.”

“I can do that. Want to grab some dinner next week?”

“Are you buying?” Without waiting for an answer Jamie hung up, leaving Raina listening to a dial tone.

Raina sat back in her chair, disturbed. At twenty-three, she was the youngest person in the newsroom with an office. Darren had warned her that the promotion to desk head was only temporary, but from the outside, she was an editorial pet. Her fellow workers didn’t hesitate to let her know they resented it, and her friends on staff were limited to Marty and Mike. She knew that her rise at the paper had been meteoric, due in no small measure to the invaluable information Jamie had provided over the past few months, as well as her introduction to other key staff members. Her no-nonsense pragmatism had been the perfect model for Raina to copy as she pursued her journalism career with the same hunger that Jamie pursued her next piece of legislation. To hear a woman she now considered her friend so shaken, so defeated, was unsettling. However, her role in both their friendship and at the newspaper remained clear. Raina picked up the phone and called her next informant—Matthias. It had been hard on both of them

when Raina's parents moved away, but their friendship had grown exponentially the last few months. Where Raina had once thought Matthias was intimidating because of his age, she now found him comforting because of his experience.

It took him awhile to call her back, so Raina spent the time researching the Right Way candidates who were currently aligned to sweep the Parliamentary elections. With less than a month to go until the elections, their rhetoric seemed to be very effective, especially in the north. Violent crime was on the rise across the country, but seemed especially endemic up north, which helped their historically more religious populace to turn increasingly conservative. The issue of secession subsided as it became increasingly clear that the national government was going to be revolutionized in the upcoming elections. That didn't make it easier on the soldiers stationed there, though. Guerilla bands raiding from Jabal were reported almost daily, and the farmers and the few industrial cities in the north were frustrated with the cost of feeding and housing an army that was patrolling their borders ineffectively. It had been a hot-button issue for months now, but it was about to boil over.

Even so, Raina was surprised at the candidates' currently surging numbers. Many of them had little to no background in politics and were campaigning directly out of their local *dakkari* congregations, yet were surging against experienced, reasoned candidates, including those from the conservative parties which had formed the original opposition to the current Prime Minister.

Maybe there's an op-ed in here, Raina mused as she continued to flip through the campaign literature. She was just about to dial Marty's extension for a quick consult when Matthias called her back. Raina breezed right through the pleasantries to ask him about his feelings on the feasibility of the invasion, and its repercussions.



Matthias was much faster to grasp the implications of the government's decision. "Wow, we've all been complaining that we've been working almost non-stop. I guess this explains all the late nights and hushed phone calls. Constitutionally, the government is walking a fine line here. If Lycanthia doesn't stay out of actual governance of the country, the Prime Minister and his party-members could be charged with treason."

"Don't say that. It makes Jamie's parallels to Jubal seem more realistic. I thought she was just back-pedaling to justify her actions."

"No," Matthias lingered over the syllable as he gathered his thoughts. "I was a teenager when the Empire left us and the other territories to fend for ourselves. History books make it seem like it was a smooth transition, but we barely ratified a Constitution, and until the regional parliaments went into place, most of the Territories discussed seceding at least once. Our borders are still technically disputed towards the East. I guess we just thought we were out of the woods when we were really at a break in the trees."

"That's just stupid. I'd know it if I lived in a country on the brink of collapse."

"Would you? We've been taught hyper-national pride to compensate for our short history, Raina, and I think we're erring on the side of optimism. I finished translating a letter about strengthening anti-religious militias in the south about twenty minutes ago. They weren't forming for the first time—they've been there all along. How are they going to feel about our new legislators if the Right Way party gains control?"

"They aren't really a threat," Raina pointed out. "The army has control of all of the major munitions in the country."

“Strange words from a girl who nearly died in a suicide attack carried out by two men,” Matthias commented mildly. “You should know better than anyone that it doesn’t take an army to create chaos.”

“Do you have a quote or not?” Raina demanded.

“No, I don’t. As two friends talking, though, thanks for the information. I’ll be interested to see how it works out.”

“Matthias? Will you stay working for them? Even if the Right Way party takes control and the southerners invade?”

“I didn’t leave academia for this job because I agreed with the current government, Raina. I took the job because I’m talented with languages, and people need good interpreters when they speak at cross-purposes. If your story pans out and the Liberal Population government has given away the election, I think I’ll be more important than ever.”

Raina ended her conversation with Matthias and realized with a start that she was late for an editorial meeting. Crap. There was no way that Darren would let her run with the invasion story with what she had now, and her only other idea was the op-ed.

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Two weeks before the election, Raina was having a rare leisurely lunch with Marta. She was excited to be out with her friend instead of at work, but especially sans Thomas, who seemed to be a permanent fixture these days. Both girls had just ordered dessert when the troops arrived from the south. She and Marta watched through a plate glass window as trucks flooded

down the street, filled with Marines in drab green. Along the street, some passers-by jeered and tossed rocks, but the soldiers stood stony-faced and failed to react.

“I hate this, but I can’t help being impressed,” Raina commented as she watched the seemingly never-ending row of trucks. “I went to a base for an article and our army looks like a bunch of kids playing soldiers compared to this. If these guys are as good at patrolling the border as they are at ignoring hecklers, they may actually help us.”

“How many of them are there?” Marta asked, craning her neck to look further down the road.

“I have no idea,” Raina confessed. “When Jamie told me about the invitation, it was supposed to be three thousand, but after the basic tenets of the deal were brokered, the details were turned over to the military. I’ve heard rumors that the numbers climbed significantly once they got into the details of what help was needed. I’m not friends with Greg, who has the contacts in the defense department, so I’m behind the curve.”

Marta’s eyes twinkled as she teased her friend. “You don’t like only knowing what we ordinary citizens know, do you?”

“I got used to being on the inside. I don’t know how you plebeians can stand being so ignorant,” Raina teased back.

Raina’s cell phone began to ring insistently just as the server arrived with their desserts. She gazed longingly at her chocolate and strawberry concoction, but picked up the phone, anyway.

“Sorry,” she whispered at Marta as she opened the line.

“Hello, this is Raina,” she said into the receiver.

“Where are you?” Darren demanded.

Raina sighed. “Do you ever sleep or take a day off, Darren?”

Marta made a face when she heard Raina say Darren’s name. “Eat your dessert,” she mouthed.

“Come on, just a few quotes from observers as they see our country being invaded! I need some more hands. Where are you?”

“I’m at the Rhubarb Café. And yes, I can see the trucks. However, I’m off today. Can’t you call Leslie or Timothy?”

“And drive THEM crazy,” she whispered to Marta, cupping her hand over the receiver.

“Raina, be serious. You have a desk for a reason. And I’ll be honest with you, it’s not because you’re a good reporter, it’s because I can call you at any time and know you’ll respond. So hop to it, now.”

“Grrr. You owe me a wildly expensive dessert that is probably going to melt while I go talk to angry mobs.”

“See? I can feel your instincts kicking in already. Just add it to my IOU list. On my desk in an hour, please.” Darren hung up before Raina could protest at the ridiculously short timeline.

“Dammit, I really earned that chocolate,” Raina protested to the dial tone.

Marta laughed. “You picked your own road, sweetie. I work in a lab because my boss doesn’t care when I do my work as long as the reports are turned in on schedule. Schedule is the operative word there. It’s nice to know when you’ll be home every night. You should try it sometime.”

Raina quirked her eyebrow at Marta and gestured the server over to pack up her dessert. “Sounds deadly boring to me.”

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Elizabeth smiled at Raina as she poured her some more tea. “I hear that you’ve been assigned to work with Mike again on Election Day.”

“Hmmm?” Raina looked up from cooing at her tiny goddaughter reluctantly. Kalinda’s eyes were green like Mike’s, but in every other aspect she was a miniature version of her mother. When Elizabeth had asked her to be the godmother, shortly after Mike’s release from the hospital, she’d been flattered. She’d hesitated before saying yes, however, since it was a religious role and she’d been raised secularly. Elizabeth and Mike, though both were *dakkari* members, had graciously waved away her objections and encouraged her to participate in every step of the process from Kalinda’s birth to frequent visits.

“Hello, are you in there? You and my husband are working together in two days?”

“Oh. Yes, I’m excited about that. I’ve never actually worked with him before, since our last outing was rudely interrupted.” Kalinda gurgled and Raina started bouncing her gently.

“You’re good at that. I should make you babysit sometime.”

“Please tell me you’re joking. Kalinda is a darling, but add in your other three and my utter lack of baby experience and we’re asking for disaster. Surely your mother told you about my coffee fiasco while you were in labor?”

Elizabeth snorted. “She overreacted. Jilly loves coffee. It wouldn’t have been a big deal even if you had given it to her.”

“I think I’ll stick with visiting, if it’s alright with you.”

“You say that now, but wait until you have one of your own. It changes your life.”

“Oh, you mean when I finally take my pick from the line of suitors currently wrapped around the block?” Raina joked.

“Well, let’s say when you get your head out of your word processor and look around a little.”

“I love my job.”

“I love mine, too,” Elizabeth responded. “I started in the kitchen at the hotel when I was sixteen. Do you really think I’d still be slinging hash if I didn’t like it?”

“I don’t know how you do it, Liz. Doesn’t having four kids and being a chef make you crazy?”

“At times, sure. You have to prioritize. Look, we’ve been friends for awhile now. My only criticism of you is that you tend to look at the world with tunnel vision. Getting you out of the newsroom for a cup of coffee or God forbid, a date... it’s challenging. You see the news as

your calling as much as your job. That's admirable, but it means the people in your life tend to get short shrift. When was the last time you had dinner with your Aunt and Uncle?"

Raina cuddled Kalinda and reminded herself that Elizabeth's biggest strength was brutal honesty. "It's been about a month."

"I'm not saying you should drop everything and devote the rest of your life to your friends and finding a husband or that it's a crime to be fulfilled by your job, Raina. I'm just saying you look tired. I see you with Kalinda, and you're so happy. Maybe you should try to find some balance."

"All due respect, Liz? I don't think this is the time for that. I mean, less than six months ago I was blown up. Less than two weeks ago, Dashari was "peacefully" invaded on our own government's invitation. Oh, and in two days, one of my friends might be out of a job because people are scared and voting with their emotions instead of their heads. If there was a time when people needed cold, hard facts, it's now. I would think you'd understand, as a newsman's wife." Kalinda started whimpering at the rising tone of Raina's voice, so she lowered it and tried to focus on getting her point across without getting angry or turning it into a political discussion. "I've never missed a play date with you and the kids, and I have dinner with my best friend at least once every two weeks. Maybe my family has fallen a little by the wayside with my current schedule, but the best thing about family is that they forgive. I know you're just trying to be a good friend but you're out of line. My life is not going to magically get better if I take an evening to go on a date with some guy from the accounting department."

Elizabeth stared at her for a moment as if she wanted to speak further, but eventually shrugged. “Alright, I’m sorry Raina. Sometimes I let my thoughts get ahead of my filter.”

Raina held out Kalinda, and Elizabeth took her smoothly. “You’re forgiven, but my arms are tired. Also, my tea is getting cold and I know you need to get the kids to your mom’s before your shift. So, we’ll drink tea, gossip, and then do it again next week.”

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The elections came and went, but not peacefully. There were riots and accusations of election fraud in spite of the foreign observers. The anti-religious militias in the South vociferously claimed that voters had been denied access to the polls and intimidated. However, desperate hours of street violence which left ten dead and vacated entire neighborhoods forced the election officials to close the polls early and flee for safety, so in some territories where incumbents had been polling well, the elections were declared invalid. Raina was hurriedly sent out after filing her first story to the capitol’s courthouse. There, faced with a Constitutional crisis, the superior court held an emergency session and affirmed that the new government elected elsewhere could appoint officials from these areas, since a peaceful choice was unattainable. Mike went south to the regional capital of Grest the next day. The riots had lasted for hours there, although Darren had refused to send reporters until they were over.

“I lost two of my best workers for weeks the last time there was major violence,” he commented. “Not to mention that my reporters up north are using most of my insurance coverage. We can cover the aftermath instead.”



Despite Raina's concern about their journalistic integrity, they had plenty of copy to run that day, and when Mike returned with haunting images of women picking their way carefully through broken glass to buy milk at the one remaining storefront in their neighborhood and dogs running wild in the streets, they had pictures to underline the destruction, even if no one had seen it first-hand. Jamie was distraught when Raina called her that evening.

“Why didn't we see this coming? We were so worried about the Northern border and terrorist violence that we completely screwed up the poll security. Now, we've got people dead in the streets and look even more incompetent than we did before our deal with the Lycanthian marines. No wonder the conservative party will have a super-majority. Shit, even when we try to be noble and self-sacrificing, it shoots us in the ass.”

Raina tried to comfort her, but she was still in shock over the violence and bitterness that seemed to be bubbling up out of nowhere. “What will you do for a living now?”

“Well, my career in politics is over, so I guess I'll go back to my parent's farm and start hoeing potatoes.”

Raina started to laugh, but then it occurred to her that Jamie was serious. “How long do you have?”

“Election results will be certified tomorrow, so a week tops. Your sources were all turned out of office?”

“With the exception of a couple security guards and a junior legislator from the south, yup,” Raina agreed.

“You might want to work on your ass-kissing skills, then. I liked your spunky determination and the fact that you put the story first, but the next guys may prefer obsequious obedience.”

“You think I’ll have trouble developing new sources?”

“People around the Capitol know that we’re tight, Raina, and your stories tend to have a liberal slant because most of your sources were in our party. I wouldn’t be surprised if some people wanted you replaced with a more sympathetic ear.”

“Not only am I offended by the slanted comment, but I also think that you’re increasingly paranoid, Jamie.” The two friends agreed to have lunch before Jamie left town.

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Raina was editing in her office when Darren came and knocked lightly on the door.

“Hey kid, can I have a word with you?”

“Sure, Darren. I was just working on this afternoon’s piece about the new Northern farming stimulus. It’s well written; Joshua did a good job.”

Darren pulled the door behind him and sat down. “I’ll be sure to look at it.” He shifted in his seat. Raina just stared at him until he blurted out his news. “There’s no easy way to say this, Raina, but I’ve got to pull you off the desk and give you a new beat.”

Raina dropped her pencil. “What? Darren, the Right Way guys and their kin have only been in office a month. Their election was the most sweeping overthrow of a government in our history. I know I’ve been a little slow to pick up new contacts, but cut me a break. Seventy

percent of the incumbents got knocked out, and twenty percent of the remaining politicians were in formerly minority parties. Those are tough numbers to overcome.”

“It’s um, not about your sources. Do you remember the series of op-ed pieces you did back a few months?”

“You need to be more specific, Darren. I write op-ed pieces whenever there’s a hole and we’ve been short-handed.”

“These were about electing experienced politicians over pastoral leaders. In them, you suggested that the politicians were better positioned to uphold the Constitution.”

“Ok, sure, I remember those now. Obviously, a lot of people disagreed with me, since all the candidates I mentioned were elected.” Raina smiled. “Are you feeling political pressure? Are you sorry you ran them?”

Instead of smiling back, Darren slammed his hand on her desk. “Dammit, Raina, I may be the Editor-in-Chief, but I have bosses, too. The Board is unhappy with you as the head of our political coverage. They think it looks slanted, and that reflects poorly on the paper. You’re a damn good reporter, but at the moment you’re shut out of the Capitol, and there are rumors that it will stay that way. The fact that you haven’t filed any big stories recently is just a convenient excuse.”

“I only wrote those pieces while I gathered corroborating evidence on the invasion story,” Raina exclaimed, surprised.

“I told them that! I even said you were my star political reporter, but they weren’t listening. By the end of that meeting, I was fighting to keep you on staff at all. I didn’t have a prayer of keeping you as the desk editor. There’s been a coup, and I’ll be lucky if I’m not replaced soon, too. I don’t think their biggest problem with you is your politics. Apparently some of the board’s favorites have been quietly complaining that you were given preferential treatment over veterans.”

Raina struggled to control her tears. “That’s ridiculous. You gave me a leg up, but we were short-handed at the time, and I’ve earned this desk since then.”

“I know it,” Darren said quietly. “I thought you’d earned your shot with your dedication and the suicide attack. But I’m willing to concede that from the outside, it looks bad. The rumors about you and Mike don’t help.”

“I haven’t heard any rumors about me and Mike.” Raina felt like she was drowning and couldn’t find the surface to save herself.

“It hasn’t escaped anyone’s notice that all of your friends on the paper are male and that you’re single but don’t date. Reporters like to gossip. Add in your frequent visits to Mike’s house and…” Darren shrugged. “They’re pretty sure you’re not a lesbian.”

“Elizabeth’s one of my closest friends!”

“You’re young and pretty, Raina. Rumors were inevitable. To be honest, I’m surprised you didn’t know about them.”

Raina tried to organize her whirling thoughts. “This is overwhelming, Darren. You’re telling me the office thinks I’m sleeping with Mike, I was unfairly promoted, and that I’m a biased journalist? How can this get worse?”

“It’s worse. They think you’re sleeping your way to the top, Raina, and that Mike’s a sideline. I’m supposedly your main target, and with your current position it looks like it’s working. I need to stop this before it destroys my newsroom and my career. So. You’re demoted. Report to Kevin at the city desk, please. And thanks for being a sport about it.” Darren held out his hand for her to shake it.

Raina shook her head vehemently. “You’ve known me since I was an intern from the university, Darren, and you’re fooling yourself if you think I’m going to take this. No, I’m not going to accept a demotion I don’t deserve so you can save face with an interfering Board and twenty gossiping prigs. If you need me gone from your newsroom, I’m gone. I quit. Oh, and I’d highly recommend Joshua to replace me, but he’s only thirty, so he might be too young. I wouldn’t want you to promote anyone on anything as unimportant as merit. Send my last paycheck to my apartment.” Her hands shaking, Raina gestured Darren out of the office and started to pack her things.

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Marta, Elizabeth, and Aunt Ana all made it to the apartment within two hours when Raina called to tell them about her job. Elizabeth brought chocolate, but Marta and Ana brought wine. Although it was early afternoon, Raina was already in her pajamas and pissed.

“I can’t believe I quit my job,” she moaned as she stomped around the apartment. Marta and Elizabeth looked on sympathetically while Ana made snacks in the kitchen. “Why couldn’t Darren grow a backbone and tell the Board to stuff it?”

“He likes being an Editor-in-Chief?” Marta asked snottily. “He’s covering his own ass by leaving you as his flank.”

“Do you want to know the worst part? Jamie warned me this would happen, and I laughed it off. The woman was the Prime Minister’s right hand for seven years, and I thought I knew better than her. Why am I so stupid? She knows better than most that politics is a dangerous career path—that’s why she’s selling rutabagas instead of sitting here with us.”

“You didn’t quit because of the politics,” Ana pointed out as she brought in a tray filled with sandwiches. “The desk was temporary, you knew it, and you would have taken the demotion if you understood the rationale behind it. You quit because of the rumors. You were insulted and hurt, and rightfully so.”

“Well, Elizabeth told me to start dating more months ago, but I didn’t listen to her.” Raina stopped with a sandwich halfway to her mouth. “Oh my God, you knew!”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Not exactly, honey, I promise. When Mike got back to the newsroom, he noticed some tension between you and the other staff. I didn’t know they thought you were sleeping with Mike. I just thought you were putting all your energy and time into the newspaper, and I didn’t see it giving a lot back to you.”

“Amen, sister,” Marta commented. “No offense, Raina, but you never talked about anything that wasn’t work-related anymore, and even when we were together, your mind was

usually on copy. When was the last time you went to a party or talked to a guy because you wanted to, not because he could help you write a story?"

"When did I have time to go out and flirt?" Raina defended herself. "I've been covering a collapsing government, running a major news desk and maintaining the friendships I already have."

"Maintaining is a good word for it," Marta agreed. "On the surface, you've been coming over and hanging out with us when you could squeeze in some time. Underneath, you've been living and breathing the job ever since you got out of the hospital. I think it was your version of revenge. It was like you were saying to the terrorists ok—you blew me up, I will bury you in facts. Does that make sense?"

"Sort of," Raina admitted. "Lying in that bed was unnerving. I love being a reporter, and I thought the story with the mayor would be a big break. Then suddenly, my colleague was trapped in a bed down the hall and I couldn't even go to the bathroom on my own. When I finally got up, I just wanted to prove I was independent and could handle whatever was thrown my way. Which I did, up until today. How can I expect to find a new job? There are only two other papers in Karst. I can't ask Darren to recommend me now—whatever he writes, in my head it will all be tainted with the sex allegations. Plus, there's nothing he hates more than being left in the lurch. I didn't even wait until the first edition went to bed before I walked out."

"You're already falling into old habits," Ana pointed out. "Drink another glass of wine and relax. We'll worry about your future employment tomorrow."

“On another note, I have a question: What did Matthias say when you told him about this?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

Raina blushed. “I haven’t called him yet.”

“Why not? You barely made it to the steps of the building before you called me,” Marta pointed out, “and you clearly called every other person in town or we wouldn’t all be here having a pity party.”

“I know you called your parents. Your father’s called me twice,” Aunt Ana added.

“I didn’t want to bother him. Matthias has been just as busy with his work as I’ve been with mine. They transferred him last week, and he’s working as a simultaneous translator for one of the Jabal’s generals and his Marine unit. That’s a lot of pressure.”

“I was at a meeting with my sous-chefs. You make time for emergencies,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“Well, Matthias is also a man. To be honest, I am not very happy with the gender right now, which you all obviously know because even though we’re all here at four in the afternoon, I don’t see Uncle Jonas, Thomas, or Mike.”

“I didn’t really think Mike would help,” Elizabeth agreed. “He was unwittingly part of the problem.”

“I didn’t know you were anti-man,” Marta said. “I just didn’t want Thomas to take off work because he’s been missing a lot of time for his heart condition. I think Matthias should be here, though.”



“Your opinion is noted and ignored,” Raina teased. “I’ll call him later, when I’ve worked myself up into a good cry again. He’s great at being a protective older brother type.”

“You’ll call him tomorrow,” Ana said firmly. “I intend to have you drunk, stuffed, and incapable of coherent thought before I tuck you into bed by ten o’clock. You can call Matthias when you’ve returned to sobriety. Nothing good comes of drunk-dialing.”

“On that note,” Elizabeth said, holding up a bottle of red, “who needs more wine?”

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The phone buzzed repeatedly, but Matthias didn’t pick up.

Shit, this was the fourth time Raina had tried to call. She was starting to get nervous. She felt better today, even with a pounding headache from all the wine. She and Ana had decided that it would be best for her to give up the apartment and move in with them so she could look for a job. She still didn’t know whether she should use Darren as a reference, but having her friends around had helped ease the sting of the injustice.

“Everything alright, hon?” Ana asked. Without waiting for a reply, she walked toward the kitchen to start cooking breakfast.

“It’s fine, but Matthias isn’t answering his phone. I guess he’ll have to wait a little longer to hear about my job crisis.”

“As you said, he’s busy.”

Shortly after breakfast, someone knocked on the door. Ana raised an eyebrow, but went to get it silently.

“Hi, Matthias,” she greeted him as she opened the door.

“Hi, Ana.” He stopped to kiss her cheek. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s doing just fine,” Raina called from the table. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw you’d called, so I called you at work. Darren told me that you quit yesterday! What’s going on, Raina? Darren told me he asked you to switch desks and you left.”

Raina shook her head and then winced when her head pounded back. “I quit because he demoted me and told me that my job was in jeopardy. I didn’t want to wait around for the other shoe to drop.”

Ana opened her mouth to add to the discussion, but decided not to interrupt when Raina shot her a “butt-out” look. Instead, she went to get Matthias a cup of coffee.

“What are you going to do now? Are you applying at other papers?”

“I don’t know yet. According to Darren, the Board of Directors at the paper felt that my journalistic integrity had been compromised by some op-ed pieces I did.”

“That doesn’t make any sense; the entire point of an op-ed is that it’s an opinion.”

“You’re right. I think it was just a convenient excuse. Jamie’s theory is that the new government didn’t like my ties to the old one. She’s probably being cynical, but I could still have problems getting another job. Most of the work in my portfolio is political, so if a new paper doesn’t want to gamble on someone who’s lost her contacts and handed in her press credentials...” she shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I’m out of luck.”

Matthias reached across the table and rubbed her hand encouragingly. “You’re an excellent journalist, Raina. I’m sure that you’ll find a job easily. I’d also like to point out that you haven’t lost ALL your sources. You still have me. I was glad you called today; the general and I are heading north tomorrow to oversee some training exercises. There should be lots of juicy tidbits to share, so call me the minute you get your next job.”

Raina smiled. “You are an excellent cheerleader, Matthias. However, last night I realized I haven’t gone to a movie or relaxed in months. Share your tips with Marty; he’s embedded up there anyway and deserves a good turn from me. I am on sabbatical. Thanks to a little finagling and a guilt-inducing phone call, Darren has arranged a severance package even though I left without notice.”

“Then why don’t I treat you and your Aunt to lunch and a movie? I’m due a day off, myself.”

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Raina had a hard time adjusting to living with parental figures again. Ana and Jonas were not overprotective, and they let her come and go as she pleased. However, leaving her apartment felt like she was leaving her independence and it didn’t help that she was bored. She had never taken a break from work before, and she wasn’t very good at it. The two months she had given herself as sabbatical helped her to regain her confidence, but meanwhile the country was shocked by violent protests breaking out all over the country. In the North, these were due to the still-increasing food shortages caused by the large number of soldiers being housed there while the farmers fled south and abandoned their crops. Raina was glad she could contribute some of her

severance money to the household; food was getting scandalously expensive even in the capitol. However, in the South, the protests were driven by tensions between the *dakkari*-influenced political leaders and the mostly secular citizens. The militias insisted that the Right Way government had stolen the election, and they staged hundreds of protests and strikes which slowed down industry in all the cities. The government responded by imposing a nation-wide curfew and reducing the rights of assembly. With the exception of night-workers in factories, the streets were supposed to be empty after 11 pm.

Matthias came back from the North looking haggard. “The new regulations are putting a lot of pressure on the general’s soldiers. He’s furious that the government is changing their role from tactical support to law enforcement, but after a fifteen hour meeting, the two groups have decided that the original agreement covered aid in any capacity the legislators passed. So, even though it’s going to be a public relations nightmare, expect to see some Marines along with our own police on your street corner.”

Matthias’ prediction was proved correct the next day. The citizens of the capitol mostly ignored the soldiers as a nuisance, although they did bestow the nickname of “Greenies.” However, the Territories outside of Karst were furious at the “foreign interference.” One of the stronger Southern militias, calling themselves the “Deliverance Group,” threatened to expel the Marines on their own. Armed with Molotov cocktails and small handguns, fifteen of their members started a skirmish that ended with one foreign Marine and four militia members dead. The already troubled relationship between the Right Way government and their Lycanthian ally worsened.

The small fight galvanized the Deliverance Group into action. However, they'd learned their lesson and did not attack the Greenies. Instead, in a coordinated Wednesday morning offensive, they attacked two *dakkari* schools and a judge on the superior court who had voted against new elections for their district. Predictably, the religious citizens of the Southern Territories took stabbing a judge and shooting at teenagers personally. In response, dozens of religious militias sprang up to counteract the already thriving secular groups.

Raina was dying to get back into a newsroom. Any newsroom would do, but being on the outside of all the turmoil was killing her. However, there were only two other papers in town, and they'd both declined her request for an interview. She called Elizabeth to complain about it.

"I really don't understand what I did that was so horrible," she whined.

"Honestly, I don't understand it either, but maybe they have the idea that you're a diva because you quit without notice?"

"That's awful, Elizabeth!"

"I agree, but I can't think of a logical reason, so I'm giving you my best conjecture." She dropped her voice. "Are you open to the idea of a job in another field?"

"I guess, although I have no idea where to look outside of a cashier or a server in a restaurant. I need something, Liz. My severance pay is about to run out and the landlord just raised the rent on the apartment last month. It's a nice place, but the walls are thin. The cost of feeding and housing me is starting to affect my aunt and uncle."

"Well, let me know if you get desperate. The hotel is always hiring maids."

Raina laughed, “I’m not there yet! Just think, you’d have a university graduate scrubbing toilets.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t be the first.”

## Chapter 6

After four months of job-searching, Raina was ready to reconsider her position on being a maid. The constant flow of refugees escaping from the Southern Territories contributed to growing tensions in the city and no one wanted to be out after dark. All of the new migrants put pressure on the housing market. Rents rose and families crowded together to ease the financial burden. Marta and Thomas moved back in with her parents because the cost of Thomas’s healthcare rose out of their budget. To keep herself sane, Raina re-wrote articles from the newspaper and watched the television news constantly while she kept the apartment spotless. Raina didn’t want to leave her aunt’s apartment anymore; she just wanted to contribute. Any money coming into the household would help; her parents were already sending a monthly check to alleviate the stresses on their finances. Not only was food expensive, but it was also difficult to find basics like butter and milk. Unemployment was endemic as restaurants and theatres closed and strikes continued to disrupt the country’s industry.

The only businesses that were surging were illegal. A black market for weapons had sprung up in the south, and deserting soldiers often stole their rifles before leaving their posts. In early July, three officers in the army successfully robbed their Marine trainers and drove away a truck filled with Lycanthian armaments. Even though the weapons were in the hands of insurgent groups when they killed civilians, public anger over the Marines’ presence grew. The

men in the unit where Matthias worked as a translator reported being kicked, spat at, and bullied when they were out on patrol.

In the more peaceful capitol, the black market ran on mundane items like alcohol, cigarettes, and food. Matthias started bringing Jonas a carton of cigarettes every time he came for dinner, along with his usual gifts of wine and dessert.

“The men in my unit confiscate them,” he explained when Ana asked how he could afford the luxury on a government salary. “They’re not allowed to profiteer, so they sell them to me at the tobacconist’s prices. It’s still not strictly legal, but it’s better than making Jonas go without.”

Desperate for something positive on their political agenda and dependent on the heavily-religious Northern Territories for support, the Right-Way government agreed to host a regional summit which was supposed to alleviate their internal tensions by ending the civil war in Jubal. The leaders of the surrounding countries wanted guarantees of their safety, so the main road into Karst was heavily fortified and patrolled constantly by the unified forces from both Lycanthia and Dashuri. Elizabeth’s hotel, since it was located on the thoroughfare, was selected as a host site for the summit-attendees.

This time, when Elizabeth tried to convince Raina to take a job at the hotel, Raina accepted. Her first day, she walked from the apartment toward the hotel. The streets weren’t empty, but the foot traffic was completely different from what she remembered. Soldiers in both the green uniform of the Marines and the tan uniform of the army stood at guard posts every thirty feet. Most of the men who walked between buildings wore identity badges that placed

them as government workers. It was a startling contrast to the milling downtown crowds she remembered from a few months ago. Instead of a happy mixture of workers, stay-at-home-moms, and tourists strolling to take in a movie or grab lunch, there were only dour-faced citizens completing chores as quickly as possible. Raina saw a few women with babies or toddlers, but everyone looked tense or purposeful as they strode quickly on their way.

As she reached the service door of the hotel, Raina was stopped by an Army lieutenant.

“May I see your identity papers, ma’am?”

Raina had been warned to bring all of her identification along but she’d assumed it was to fill out employment paperwork, not to get in the door. “Yes, of course. Here you are.” She handed her ID card to the officer and waited while he carefully checked her name against a manifesto on a clipboard.

“You’re all right,” he declared. “Go to the left and report to the head housekeeper. If she does not hear from you in five minutes, we will enter the hotel to find you and your name will be removed from the admittance list. Do you understand?”

Raina nodded. This level of security struck her as faintly ridiculous, but she was willing to put up with it in order to have a job. She stepped past the guard and walked towards the utility room. A large red-headed woman was just inside the open door, counting sheets.

“Hello, are you the head housekeeper?”

The woman looked up and nodded. “I’m Marsha Lytton, the Housekeeping Supervisor. Are you my new girl?”



“I’m Raina. I was hired yesterday.”

“Hang on a second, then.” Lifting the phone hung outside the utility room door, she muttered a few words. After she hung up, she examined Raina critically. “The shoes are fine for today, but tomorrow you’ll need black and as comfortable as you have. You’ll want to make sure you only wear stockings because socks tend to get dirty. We’ll get you two uniforms from the closet down the hall. When you go off duty, you’re welcome to use the machine to wash your uniform from that day before you leave. Just make sure you clock out first. I’m going to start you with conference room duty; it’s less strenuous than the bedrooms and you’ll need an adjustment period.” She walked down the hall as she spoke, reached the uniforms room and grabbed two off the rack. “Here, go try these on, quickly.”

Raina entered the staff bathroom she pointed to and stripped. The dress was fir green with a tan apron, ugly and itchy, but it fit properly. She checked the other one to be sure its fit was similar and presented herself to Marsha again, holding her street clothes under one arm and the extra dress hanging from her hand.

Marsha nodded, “That’s fine. Don’t lose these dresses; we give them to you at a discount and we’ll take their cost out of your first paycheck. If you lose one you’ll need to pay me sixty dollars up front before I can provide you with another. Keep all the hems nicely sewn or I’ll dock your pay. Your locker is here. You are entitled to a fifteen minute break every two hours and a dinner break of half an hour every shift. Call me before you take the dinner break so I can approve it. My extension is 8420. Got that?”

“Yes ma’am. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Cleaning the conference rooms requires replacing soiled tablecloths and ash trays, vacuuming, emptying all the trash cans, straightening chairs and polishing all the mirrors. You should take between forty and fifty minutes a room, and obviously don’t go into any that are being used. I’ll be coming to check your work and progress once an hour.” She smiled for the first time. “Welcome aboard, and go clock in. I’ll introduce you to the other girls at the end of the shift.”

“Thanks.”

Raina pushed her cart into the first conference room and shook her head at the overflowing trashcans and cigarette butts. “I thought this sounded easy,” she murmured to herself. “If this is what I’m working with, it’s going to be a long day.”

That evening, Raina sat on the couch and stared blankly at the television screen. She tried to drink the cup of tea her Aunt made her, but she was too exhausted to follow the show. Martha’s permission to use the hotel washing machine, which had not made much sense to her when she gave it, was perfectly clear now. She had finished her shift covered in dust, ash, food drippings, and what she suspected (from the smell) was someone’s vomit. The girls on her shift had all seemed nice, but they looked as depressed as she currently felt. This job was so far from her time at the newspaper that the only similarity she could think of was that she’d be paid. And she’d have to go back tomorrow. With that miserable thought echoing in her head, she went to bed.

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Of course, it got better. The work was still disgusting and degrading, but at least Raina didn't collapse the second she got home the way she had the first day. The factional violence from the north and south was beginning to spill into the capitol, and Raina was glad she worked days. The nights were full of black-market shoppers and militias playing cat-and-mouse with the patrols enforcing the curfew. Even in broad daylight, Marta often walked with her to work, since she was still clerking in the dress shop while she waited for her pharmacology exams to come back. The national testing center was located in the south, and the moderators were currently on strike.

"It's so frustrating," Marta complained. "I want to be a pharmacology student, and the strike is slowing down things even more than normal. Yet every time I buy Thomas's medicine, I can tell that the pharmacies are understaffed by qualified workers. We wait hours to see the pharmacist. They should want us in the schools to fill in the gap."

"I think that requires insight and planning, Marta. More and more it seems like people are just choosing to do what's immediately expedient. I can't even complain, because I'm doing it too. I took this job as a maid to try and offset my room and board for my aunt and uncle. If I could quit, I absolutely would."

"When Thomas and I got married, I thought we'd be able to walk into the future together. Everything seemed to be going our way, right down to his honorable discharge from the Army and finding the job at the water plant right away. But ever since then, it just seems like everything is going against us. We're treading water financially even though Thomas's job seemed like it was ample compensation originally. My schooling is at a complete halt, and I really think the stress is killing Tom. He's pale and ill most days."

“I know you’re worried about him, sweetie. We all are, although I think it’s a good thing that he’s made it to work every day this month. Personally, I still think that you two are lucky. You have each other, you have a roof over your heads, and you’re both employed. There are a lot of people in this city who can’t say the same.”

“You’re right, but telling myself I should be grateful just makes me want to scream even more! And if my mother tells me one more time to clean my room—good Lord, it’s like being in high school again.”

“Except for the sex,” Raina pointed out cheerfully.

Marta laughed. “Except for that.” The girls arrived at the hotel, and as Marta prepared to walk on, she asked, “Should I stop by and have a coffee in the hotel while I wait to take you home? I’m not all that comfortable with you walking back alone in the evening.”

Raina shook her head. “Matthias is coming over for dinner again, so he’ll pick me up. I wish there was a shower for the hotel’s employees. I’m disgusting when I get off of work!”

“Friends don’t care about appearances,” Marta asserted. “We just like to see you.”

Raina paused, wanting to support her friend but unable to think of anything rousing to say. “It’ll be okay, Marta. I know you’re worried and stressed out, but something great will happen, you’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right,” Marta sighed. “If you can be optimistic wearing that dire uniform, I guess I don’t have a choice other than to suck it up and be optimistic, too. Don’t be late; I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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Raina scrubbed hurriedly at a coffee stain on her skirt. If Martha saw it, she had no doubt she'd be paying the penalty fee of sixty dollars for a replacement dress. She didn't want to lose that income, but she was already fifteen minutes late off her shift. Matthias would be waiting; probably in the kitchen with Elizabeth. The management had put up a bit of a fuss the first time he snuck out of the dining room and into the back, but they had backed off when Elizabeth pointed out his influence with the "greenies" who kept the hotel operational. Now they grudgingly accepted that he was a VIP, and like so many important people, eccentric.

Pleased that she'd managed to avoid Martha's eagle eye, Raina hurried toward the hotel kitchen. As expected, Raina found Matthias perched on a stool and sipping a cup of coffee while Elizabeth sautéed greens at her gas range. They were chattering like magpies but fell suspiciously silent when Raina walked in.

"Uh-oh, am I the subject of conversation again?" Raina asked lightly as she carefully kissed Elizabeth's cheek and warmly squeezed Matthias's shoulder.

"We were discussing whether you'd accept a gift," Matthias offered. "No national secrets."

Despite her exhaustion, Raina felt herself perking up. "Ooo, a present? I haven't had one of those in a long time. Who's it from?"

Elizabeth tossed her greens onto a plate, added a sizzling fish filet, and drizzled the plate with brown butter. "One perch," she called to her line manager. "That's what Matthias is worried about. He's afraid you won't like it because the Marines got it for you."

Raina stole Matthias' coffee up and took a sip. "Why would they get me a present? I've never met them."

To her surprise, Matthias reddened, "They've asked me to come to a couple card games when I've had plans with you and your family. Due to my constant unavailability, they've decided that you and I are an item. So, they found this...thing, and none of their wives or girlfriends are nearby. They presented it to me and told me to give it to you." His blush deepened. "They were just being nice; they didn't mean anything by it."

"Good Lord, what is it, a diamond necklace?" She handed Matthias his coffee cup back and went to dig up some club soda for her stain.

"I think you should take it," Elizabeth called over her shoulder as she ran into the crisper. "Every girl needs presents."

"I would love to have it, whatever it is, unless it was stolen or something." She eyed Matthias, who seemed to be returning to his normal color now that she'd glossed over the couple thing. It was kind of funny that Matthias didn't have a girlfriend, now that she thought about it. Sure, he was on the shy side, but he was good-looking in an academic, graying-at-the-temples sort of way. He was a lot of fun, too, even if he had a tendency to win every argument, which could be irritating.

"Not stolen, just...re-appropriated, sort of like the cigarettes for Jonas. Dammit, this is ridiculous; just take the thing." Matthias pulled a paper-wrapped disc out of his pocket and shoved it at her.

Raina took it and examined the object carefully. It was about the size of her palm and wrapped in lavender paper. A big white sticker showed a picture of wildflowers. Her heart suddenly slamming in her throat, she peeled it away and unfolded the paper to reveal a small circle of finely-milled, scented soap. It was the most feminine and delicate gift she'd ever received, and was all the more precious because she so often felt dirty at the end of a shift. "It's lovely," she murmured, a little surprised that she was close to tears. "This was really sweet of your friends. Thank you, Matthias." She hugged him, but it felt awkward and she backed off as soon as she could. "Um, I think we're running late, so we'd better go."

"I'll just go get my coat and your family's gifts," Matthias agreed hastily.

He walked out of the kitchen and Elizabeth snorted loudly as soon as the door swung shut behind him. "The greenies bought that, my fanny." She chopped at a pork loin expertly. "That gift was 100% Matthias' doing, and don't you think otherwise, my girl."

"Don't be stupid, Elizabeth. Why would he lie about it?" Raina asked defensively.

"Ha, like I'd answer a trap question like that," Elizabeth commented as she began seasoning her slices. "You both can't see the forest for the trees, and that's a fact. Now get out of my kitchen and go eat dinner with that sweet man."

"One pork loin," she called across the line.

## Chapter 7

Marta's concerns about Thomas's health seemed prescient when he had a heart attack two weeks later. His heart was failing, and the doctors felt that the only way to save his life was

through a transplant. Raina took off an afternoon to go visit him in the hospital since Marta had to work, reflecting that she'd spent far too much time with injured friends in the last year.

Thomas's appearance was a shock. Thin and quiet, he had a gray-blue pallor to his skin that made him look like a corpse. Raina had seen him only the week before when he'd come to pick her up at work, but the heart condition had turned him into a shell of himself.

"Shit, Tommy," Raina blurted as she walked into the room. "You look awful."

Thomas laughed rasply, "That's nothing compared to how I feel. This is hell."

"It looks it." Sympathetically, she reached out and took his hand, careful to avoid all the wires poking out of him. "How's Marta handling it?"

"With facts and medications," Thomas said. "But underneath, she's scared to death. I don't blame her. I never would have married her if I thought I was going to leave her a widow at 23."

"Don't be ridiculous," Raina protested. "You look like crap, but you're not dying."

"I am," Thomas returned steadily. "They can hide it behind Latin words and hopes for a transplant all they want, but somehow I blew out my heart when no one was looking. I'm supposed to leave the hospital in a couple days and become an invalid until they find me a new heart." He shook his head. "Maybe I should just stick with the one I have and fade away. It'd be a lot easier for Marta that way."

"You're just depressed, and who can blame you?" Raina said fiercely. "But I know my best friend, and her life is much better for having you in it. So quit talking about dying, before I kill you." They both smiled weakly. "Why don't they just do some surgery—repair that sucker?"



“They can’t, and opening me up to perform a useless surgery would just weaken me before the transplant surgery. At least, that’s what they say. I don’t really understand what’s going on.”

“Nobody does anymore, Tom,” Raina observed sadly.

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If Marta was a wreck when Thomas was in the hospital, she was ten times worse when they sent him home. Due to a medicine shortage, the hospital pharmacy could only provide Thomas with enough of his new beta blockers for three weeks. The hospital was praying that they could find a heart for a transplant by then or get a new shipment of the medication. However, the drug company’s supply chain ran through the southern territories, and the latest anti-government protests by the Deliverance Group included blowing up roads and railways from the Southern Territories into the capitol to try and starve the government out of power. It hadn’t seemed to faze the Right-Way legislators, who simply legislated against the militias more stringently and continued to lean on the dwindling resources of the north, but it had effectively created shortages for the capitol’s populace. Ana, Raina and Matthias spent all their spare time scouring local pharmacies for more of Thomas’s medication to refill his supply while Marta ran herself ragged trying to care for him, deal with the loss of his income, and work full-time to help their parents pay for everything. Elizabeth sent as many low-sodium meals as she could sneak out of the hotel kitchen to help, and Jonas quietly started sending all the cash he could spare to the household.

“I’m so grateful to everyone for their help,” Marta sobbed as she lay in Raina’s lap one afternoon. “This is by far the scariest thing I’ve ever gone through, and you’ve all been so nice.”

“Shh,” Raina murmured, rubbing her back. “We’re happy to help you and Thomas, you know that. We’re your friends.”

“Well, I should be able to pull everyone off the constant medicine search soon,” Marta stated determinedly and suddenly sat up. “I found a black-market supplier. One of the pharmacists told me about him. I’m meeting with him tonight at midnight, and he’s supposed to bring a two-month supply. Surely by then they’ll have a heart for Thomas.”

“Marta, have you lost your mind? How can you possibly afford black-market medication? You’re barely making ends meet as it is!”

“I sold my emerald earrings,” she whispered. “They got me enough, I think.”

“You inherited those from your grandmother!”

“My husband’s life is more important than some silly earrings,” Marta stated firmly, even as her chin started to wobble again.

“I agree with you,” Raina hurried to reassure her. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to be a jerk. I know it must have hurt you to give those up. But sweetie, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go get this medicine. Let your Dad do it, or Matthias. He knows the patrolmen and can probably get away with being out after curfew.”

Marta shook her head, “No, this is my responsibility. Besides, if Matthias got caught he’d probably lose his job. Thomas and I need to start doing something for ourselves.”

“I really,” Raina began, but Marta interrupted her.

“No. I’m serious. Don’t tell anyone, and don’t expect me to ask anyone else. I’m his wife, and I am going to do this.”

Raina looked at Marta carefully. Her friend could be incredibly stubborn when she got something into her head, and she also had a temper. Was it better to keep objecting or avoid adding the stress of a fight? Marta’s lower lip was sticking out in a slight pout, and her cheeks were bright with unnatural color. Raina knew from experience that it would be better to back down.

“Alright honey, I’ll keep quiet.” She cuddled Marta a little more, and then got up to go home. “Imagine everyone’s face when we show them the medicine tomorrow!” she forced herself to add cheerfully.

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Raina had been fighting dread all night, and when the telephone rang shortly before Ana knocked on her door that morning, she knew the news was bad. One look at her aunt’s tear-streaked face confirmed it.

“What happened?” Raina whispered. She could feel nausea building in her stomach. “Is it Thomas?”

Her aunt shook her head. “Worse, it’s Marta. They...” she swallowed. “They just found her in the gutter near the Gershalle Market. She-“

“Oh God,” Raina cried out. “Not dead?” Her aunt nodded reluctantly and came into the room to try and comfort her, but Raina pushed her away and ran into the bathroom, locking the

door behind her. Sitting on the floor, she wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked herself as she sobbed. My fault, my fault, she thought as the pain came up in tearing waves. She vomited and wiped the burning acid away from her mouth, but could hardly stop her tears long enough to keep from breathing it in.

Hours later, she woke up on the floor where she'd cried herself to sleep and wondered what had woken her. Her uncle had just finished taking off the doorknob, and it lay in pieces on the tile floor as he opened the door. "Sorry, Raina," he said softly. "But your aunt is worried and you wouldn't open the door."

"Are you ready to hear the rest?" Tears still on her cheeks, Ana peered in and stared at Raina.

"There's more," she croaked. Her vocal cords were completely worn out from the abuse of her crying jag.

"Sadly, yes," Ana told her. "Since you locked yourself away, the police have discovered that Marta was not just robbed and killed. She was also," her eyes shifted away from Raina's face, "assaulted."

"Oh God," Raina scrunched herself into a ball again, but had no more tears left. "Who did this?"

"The assumption is that she was intercepted by a group of men from one of the local militias," her aunt said uncomfortably. "They may have imbibed a little too freely. She was found with broken bottles around her."

“They also found medicine for Thomas,” her uncle added gruffly. “Which explains why she was out after curfew.”

“Yes, she mentioned that she had found a black-market dealer,” Raina whispered breathlessly.

“You knew she was going out,” Ana asked sharply, “and you didn’t tell anyone?”

“She told me not to,” Raina said tonelessly. Ana opened her mouth, but Jonas put his hand on her arm and stopped her.

“Come on, little girl,” he said, and bent over to pick her up. “You should be sleeping in a bed, not on a bathroom floor.” Surprised into silence, Raina found herself cradled against Jonas’s barrel chest as he staggered into her room. Ana followed silently. The unexpected tenderness from someone Raina had always considered gruff and distant brought the pain back worse than ever, and Raina caught her breath at the strength of it. Overwhelmed, she silently allowed her uncle to tuck her in and turn out her light. She stayed in the dark room, listening to her own harsh breath, until the tears returned.

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Raina’s parents couldn’t come back for the funeral. The Dashari government would issue them entrance visas, but offered no guarantees that they could get back out of the country. Raina was glad that they hadn’t risked it—at the moment, she considered Dashari the worst place on Earth. Her parents also tried to get Raina a visa to leave and come live with them, but the Ghentish government was afraid to open their borders to the floodgate of Dashari refugees who would surely come if given the opportunity.

Thomas committed suicide two days before Marta's funeral. All the pills she had died bringing to him helped him join her in the funeral parlor. Raina couldn't even feel the fresh pain. She was too busy blaming herself for not asking Matthias or Jonas to go in Marta's place. Everyone assured her that it was a tragic accident and not her fault, but Raina thought her aunt's first reaction was the more accurate one.

The funeral service was led by a *dakkari* minister who had offered his services for free out of sympathy for the family's double tragedy. Objectively, Raina knew it was a lovely ceremony, full of candles, prayers, and incense along with genuine mourners of the two people in the coffins. However, she sat in the second row, clinging to Matthias's hand and hated every second of it. She silently seethed at Marta's mother, Rhiana, for allowing the hypocrisy of a religious ceremony when both Marta and Thomas had been secular thinkers. No one knew whether the militia men who had raped and killed Marta were secular or religious, but Raina was already angry that Marta was dead, and the purely political choice—Rhiana's boss was a member of the *dakkari* and had helped pay for the coffins-- infuriated her. She barely made it through the service without screaming.

Matthias took her for a walk when everyone left for the cremation service. "You've had enough," he said mildly when she asked to go along with the crowd. "I know you, and you're about to explode. It will make you feel better, but it will hurt everyone else. So let's just walk, instead."

Calmly, he pulled her down the street and toward a sadly neglected park, which was covered in litter. All of the flowerbeds were grown over with weeds, but Matthias seemed

unfazed. Tucking her arm under his elbow, he pointed at the different trees which still stood and told Raina their names in Latin.

“What are you trying to do, teach me a botany lesson?” Raina asked smarmily.

“No,” Matthias shook his head. “I’m giving you the opportunity to cry for our friends. You loved them, but the ceremony was making you bury the pain under your anger, and it was going to end badly for everyone. We’re alone now, so you can be as loud or angry as you want. Let it out before it eats you up.”

Raina opened her mouth to blast him for being wrong and officious and wrong again, but instead, she gurgled and started sobbing. Matthias pulled her closer and cradled her head as they both mourned for Marta and Thomas.

## Chapter 8

Matthias watched quietly as Raina’s aunt cleared the coffee from the table. Then, as soon as she left the room, he got up and crouched down next to Raina’s chair.

“Raina, there’s no easy way to say this, but will you marry me?” he blurted out.

Raina stared at him, shocked.

As if he’d been poked with a stick, Matthias rushed into an explanation. “Look, we both know that you’re miserable here. It’s been a month since Thomas and Marta... you’re not recovering well. I’m worried about you, and so are Jonas and Ana. Elizabeth says you wander around the hotel like a ghost. I have a good job with the Marines. I can provide for you, which will help your aunt and uncle with their living costs. As a married woman, you’ll have your own

apartment and a lot more freedom. Best of all, you won't need to work as a maid anymore. Maybe you'll find something else to occupy your time so that you can be happy again."

Carefully, he reached out and grasped Raina's hand. He turned it over and examined all the rough spots and broken nails. Raina took a deep breath and tried to answer him, even though she had no idea what to say, but Matthias interrupted quickly.

"I know there's an age difference, but come on, Raina, twelve years isn't that bad. We've known each other forever. We can take it as slowly as you like, but I really think it would be better if you married me."

Raina sat back, amazed by her growing certainty as her thoughts raced. She was trying to be less impulsive and emotional, but she couldn't help feeling as though the answer was simple. Matthias had become her closest friend since Marta's death. How nice it would be to have him around all the time.

"Yes," she replied, surprised by the strength and assuredness of her tone. "I'll marry you. Let's tell Aunt Ana and Uncle Jonas right now."

"Really?" Matthias asked, suddenly blushing. "I've never proposed before. Thank you for saying yes."

Raina stood up and reached down to help Matthias to his feet. Shyly, she stretched up to kiss his cheek. "Aunt Ana," she called.

"Yes, darling," Ana reappeared in the doorway.



“Matthias and I are going to get married,” Raina stated firmly. The more she said it, the better she liked the plan. She reached out and clasped Matthias’ hand, happy to feel its warmth on her fingers.

Ana clapped her hands, a smile breaking out across her face. “It’s about time,” she exclaimed. “When?”

“As soon as possible,” Raina felt a mirroring smile grow on her face as she watched her aunt’s eyes dance. For the first time in weeks, she felt a happy glow. “I know we haven’t got any champagne, but...”

“Blackberry wine,” Ana said firmly. “I’ll have Jonas fetch it from the cellar.” She turned back into the kitchen to give him the task.

Matthias tugged on their joined hands. “I might need to sit down,” he commented. Raina saw that he was shaking.

“You really were nervous!”

“It’s nerve-wracking to ask a girl to marry you when you’ve never even taken her on a proper date,” Matthias replied.

“Are we going to date?” Raina felt interested in the answer. The proposal had seemed more business-like than that.

“Let’s start with getting married, and then talk about dating?” Matthias suggested, laughing as he cocked a brow at her.

“I think that sounds like a plan,” Raina agreed. Jonas stalked in with the wine and a small smile, so they turned back to their celebration.

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Even with Matthias’s Lycanthian connections, they couldn’t afford an elaborate ceremony. Instead, Elizabeth helped them book a conference room at the hotel for a combination ceremony and lunch. Jonas gave Raina away and Elizabeth proudly served as Matron of Honor, holding Kalinda on her hip because the baby was still teething and grumpy. One of Matthias’s Marine friends, a jokester named Alexei, offered to run away with Liz if she would just get rid of Kalinda, which gave everyone a big laugh. The judge said the words of the civil ceremony quickly, but the vows still felt real to Raina. When it came time for Matthias to kiss her, he cupped her cheek in his hand and laughed.

“I’m awfully glad we practiced this a couple of times,” he whispered. “I feel as shaky as the night I proposed.” Raina smiled and leaned forward to make it easier. The room burst into applause, so that both bride and groom were blushing when they turned back toward the on-lookers. As they walked down between the chairs, Elizabeth immediately handed the baby to Mike and rushed away to check on her lunch dishes.

Raina and Matthias had a small table to themselves, but they decided to walk around and say hello to their small crowd of guests before they sat down. Some of Raina’s old co-workers from the hotel were there, along with several Marines from the unit Matthias worked for and, of course, Mike and his family. To Raina’s surprise, Darren was sitting with Mike at one of the corner tables, playing horsie with their three year old son, Kyle.

“Hi, kid,” Darren said gruffly. “I hope you don’t mind that I crashed your wedding. Looks like you’re doing ok.”

Raina agreed, torn between anger and sadness toward the editor she’d held in awe for years. “I’m fine now.”

“I still feel bad,” Darren confessed. “I shouldn’t have let you quit like that.”

Matthias spoke up, “Are you trying to offer Raina her job back, Darren? Because that would have worked better a year ago.”

Darren flushed. “No, I can’t do that. I’ve been demoted by the board because our circulation is falling. I’m just a reporter again. I just wanted you to know that I thought you were talented. Don’t let it go to waste.”

Raina was speechless. She tried to pick something to say from the shocked, angered, flattered, and bewildered thoughts flitting through her brain, but came up empty. Fortunately, Matthias stepped into the breach again.

“I appreciate your accurate assessment of my wife, Darren. However, I think it’s ill-mannered to show up uninvited to someone’s wedding. Since there will be plenty of food, please stay. We will be celebrating with our other, chosen guests. I’m sure you understand.”

Darren nodded and turned his attention back to Kyle, who had pulled his fountain pen out of his pocket and was busily chewing on it while Mike cuddled and soothed the still-whimpering Kalinda. “Hey kid, don’t do that!”

Raina and Matthias quickly moved on to the other tables. “I wish Mom and Dad were here,” she said softly.

“I know. They were so excited when we spoke with them on the phone. It does seem like an important part of the wedding is missing.” He turned to face her. “Are you sorry we got married without them?”

Raina shook her head emphatically, no. “I think this was the best idea you’ve had since peanut butter ice-cream sandwiches when I was fifteen.”

Matthias laughed loudly enough that everyone in the room stopped to look at them. Elizabeth came out of the kitchen with a glass of wine in her hand and started tapping on it. “Attention, everyone: I’d like to announce that lunch is served.” With a flourish, she gestured to the servers who carried out plates of brandied chicken, green beans and mashed potatoes on cue.

“Let’s eat!” Raina said enthusiastically.

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Since there no money or time for a honeymoon, Raina moved quietly into Matthias’s apartment and saw him off to work the next morning. Then she made herself a cup of coffee and looked around the place. Strangely, in the almost twelve years she’d known Matthias, she’d never been in the apartment before the day she moved in. She’d immediately loved its exposed brick walls and sunny windows. It was a quiet place on the north side of town. Like the rest of the country, Karst was divided almost equally between religious and secular citizens. Also like the rest of the country, the inhabitants tended to live in mixed neighborhoods, although the northern side of the city was more religious and the southern side more secular. Raina’s father

had once explained that the southern areas of Dashari had been closer to the officially atheistic Bal-Moran Empire's capitol, so those people had been less able to openly practice *dakkari* and, over the two hundred years of Bal-Morian rule, had grown secular themselves while the northerners continued to practice their religion under more lax regional governors. That explanation worked for the territories, but Raina couldn't understand why it extended into the capitol city of Karst as well, since the city was in the middle of the country. Still, even though most of the neighbors in the building had a *palona* on their door which proclaimed them to be religious, Raina liked the feel of the apartment. A neighbor had already left a plate of cookies with the word "congratulations" attached.

Raina finished her coffee and started unpacking her clothes into the small closet that she and Matthias had to share. She hung up the dresses and skirts next to Matthias' suits and stared at the silent message the clothes sent, that she lived here now and was no longer a child. Raina felt melancholy, which surprised her. The last few weeks had been full of hustling, last minute preparations and excitement. She had openly acknowledged missing her parents, Thomas and Marta as she got ready for the wedding, but it was only now that it was over that it was hitting her they'd really missed it. Raina sat in a wicker rocking chair and contemplated crying.

"Ding-dong," her doorbell chimed. She rose to get it and smiled when she saw Elizabeth, Jilly, Kyle, Kalinda, and Mike at her door.

"Getting ready to cry?" Elizabeth asked shrewdly as she breezed in, "I bawled like a baby my first day alone after I got married."

"I was considering it," Raina admitted.

“It’s kind of like being pregnant. The adrenaline kicks out and suddenly you’re left with an aftermath. That’s why I brought the kiddies along. They’ll break something so you get it out through being mad or make you laugh it away.”

“I have some cookies,” Raina offered. Immediately, a stampede of small bodies headed toward her kitchen door as Elizabeth rolled her eyes dramatically.

“Don’t you know better? Spell it out if you want any to be left by the time we get there.” She handed Kalinda to Raina and went to oversee her other children’s snack. Raina snuggled her chin on top of Kalinda’s chin and felt better.

“You sure are sweet,” she whispered to the baby who blinked at her sleepily. She carried her gently into the kitchen where Elizabeth had already found her teapot and two mismatched cups.

“Such a bachelor,” Liz commented, gesturing to the cups. “You’re going to have a hard time domesticating that one. The trick is to get them early. Of course, you were already out of luck with Matthias. By the time you were legal, he was thirty.”

“Liz,” Raina laughed. “I think Matthias was domesticated when he was ten. He’s one of the gentlest men I’ve ever met. I can live without matching china.”

Elizabeth squinted at her. “I still can’t decide if you two are doing this right,” she complained.

Raina shrugged, not sure how to answer the question Elizabeth was really asking. “We like each other, Liz. We have for years.”

“It’s a lot more than like, in my opinion. I think you two are crazy in love and won’t admit it.”

“I don’t have an answer to that,” Raina said lightly. To her relief, Jilly put a permanent hold on the conversation when she spilled her water all over the table.

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The days began to blur together. Every day, Matthias would get up and go to work while Raina kept the house clean and did the shopping. At night, they would sit quietly in the living room and talk or play board games. Matthias didn’t own a television, but he had shelves of books and Raina started to read for hours at a time. The weekends were almost always spent out with Ana and Jonas or Mike, Liz, and the kids. Alexei and some other Marines dropped by the house occasionally. Raina sweated her way through a state dinner with the General and some of the leading officials of the Dashari government. It was strange to be a lower-level public figure at an official event instead of the person reporting on it. She almost waved at Joshua as he took diligent notes outside the door, but decided it was more dignified to ignore him.

The Greenies, at the behest of the regional government in Grest, put down another riot in the south. This time, it was a religious group, the “Brown Lions League”, who lost militia men in the fight. Suddenly, public opinion in the country and capitol city turned sharply against the “Lycanthian interlopers” and their relationship with the Right Way government, always strained, worsened dramatically. The government desperately needed the support of the Northern territories to hold the country together. However, the north claimed that even with Lycanthian training for over a year, the Jaballian border was no safer. They also resented the “Brown Lions

League” deaths in the South. Following the examples of their southern brethren, the northern militias began to actively agitate again. Foreign Marine units and even some Dashari army trainees were openly attacked by militias. The Lycanthian death toll from suicide bombings and open attacks climbed to twelve and the Lycanthian government tried to pull their support, only to find that they were hopelessly entangled with the Dashari government. Every country in the region expected them to stay and stabilize the Right-Way government they’d inadvertently helped bring to power. The Prime Minister refused to call new elections for fear that the country would disintegrate into constitutional referendums. The curfew was stringently enforced and police raided militia headquarters every night, but the government couldn’t seem to stop the spiraling violence, even when it washed up against their front door and made the streets of Krast unsafe after dark.

Raina and Matthias had been married for three months. Raina marveled at how quickly the time had flown as she hummed and shaped her pie crust. Although she had expected to be as bored as a housewife as she was when she was unemployed and trapped at her uncle’s apartment, to her surprise she filled the days easily. Of course, that was often because food was hard to find or streets were closed with demonstrations or riots, but even so she found making a home for Matthias damned satisfactory.

“Who knew I was a happy laze-about?” she asked herself cheekily. She knew that she actually worked quite hard to provide a clean apartment and good food to Matthias, and she had also started writing short articles about her experiences. She hadn’t tried to edit them or have them published; they were just little ways to keep herself entertained whenever she could spare an hour.



Someone knocked frantically, startling her. With a frown, she wiped her hands and went to get the door. "Alexei, what on Earth?" Raina stared disbelievingly as she opened the door wider. Alexei and another Marine she vaguely recognized were holding Matthias up between them. Matthias was lolling, bleeding profusely from the head.

"They attacked him on the street," Alexei gasped. "He'd just left the office when a group of Brown Lions jumped him. I got there and chased them off before they did too much damage kicking him, but I can't get the head wound to stop bleeding."

Raina rushed to get bandages, towels and iodine, her pie completely forgotten. "Put him on the couch," she called over her shoulder. As Alexei and the other Marine arranged him, Raina tried hard to keep her feelings in check. It was Marta all over again, but this time she could help. She returned with her supplies and started holding the towel against his head, trying to stop the bleeding.

"Matthias, can you hear me?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes, I hear you, Raina."

"Where do you hurt, honey?"

"Everywhere," Matthias gestured vaguely at his ribs. Raina immediately used her free hand to unbutton his shirt and gasped when she saw the rainbow bruises and welts from the crowd's kicks.

"Why would they do this," she wailed.

The other Marine answered with a thick Lycanthian accent, “I think they’ve been waiting to do this a couple days, ma’am. They were waiting in the shadows just past the door. I was one of the guards, and Matthias said goodnight as he walked by. I guess they wanted to hurt somebody friendly with us.”

“Alexei, go get some ice out of the freezer,” she gestured wildly. “The head wound is slowing down, but I can’t take the pressure off.” She added another towel as Matthias’ blood started to seep through. She was desperately trying not to panic now, even as her hands started to shake. “Should we call the police?”

“I wouldn’t,” Alexei commented as he began to wrap ice in another of her towels. “It’s fairly likely they belong to one of the militias themselves.” He placed the ice gently on Matthias’s chest, and Matthias groaned. “Not much sympathy around here for people who work with us.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Raina pointed out. “Matthias was assigned to be an interpreter; he didn’t ask for the job.”

“I don’t think these people feel inclined to split hairs,” Alexei pointed out grimly. “You and Matthias could be in danger. I tried to make sure no one followed us, though.”

“Thank you,” Raina could feel the tears threatening again as she pressed still harder.

Suddenly, Matthias grabbed her hand. “Raina, that’s enough pressure. I can feel the towel on my brain,” he groaned.

“Really?” Raina was startled and started trying to peel away her towels to see the wound. “I didn’t think it was that bad; I’ll call an ambulance.”

“It was a joke, baby,” Matthias murmured. “It feels better, I swear. Don’t call an ambulance, but maybe you can stop pressing so hard?”

His eyes were closed, but Alexei took one look at Raina and immediately took over pressing the towel against Matthias’s head. “Sit down before you faint,” he ordered. Raina complied, weeping soundlessly and shaking her head as the adrenaline faded.

Hours later, they had Matthias’s head bandaged precariously. Raina had baked her pie and they had all eaten a solemn supper. Around midnight, Alexei and the other Marine, whose name was Hayne, tried to leave. Raina refused to let them go. She called the Lycinnthian headquarters and obtained permission for them to sleep away from their posts.

“You’re exhausted and covered in blood,” she insisted. “I won’t be responsible for someone arresting you for being out after curfew on top of it.”

The marines soberly carried Matthias to bed and helped her clean up the worst of the blood. Then they created makeshift beds out of blankets and assured her they were more comfortable than normal.

“Sleep well, and thank you for getting him home safely,” she wished them goodnight. Shakily, she walked into the bedroom where Matthias was already sleeping. She stared at him and realized that Liz was right. She was wildly in love with her husband, but hadn’t known it until two strangers carried him into her home bleeding and in pain. She changed into a clean

nightgown and tiptoed toward the bed. Matthias groaned when her weight dipped the mattress and she froze, wishing she could take all the pain and carry it herself.

“I’m sorry, Raina,” Matthias mumbled softly. “I know this must have been terrifying for you after what happened to Marta.” He opened his eyes and looked at her seriously. “I promise you, I’m fine. Alexei and Hayne saved me easily. I’ll be as good as new in a couple days.”

“A couple days,” Raina asked incredulously. “Alexei figures that you have at least two broken ribs and a concussion. Based on my experiences, you’ll be in more pain in a couple days than you are right now.”

Matthias laughed. “Nothing will hurt as badly as you trying to put your hand through my skull.”

Raina trembled as she flashed back to her terror. “I love you, Matthias,” she blurted out.

“Good, then we’re even.” With another painful groan, Matthias lifted his arm to pull her closer against him. “Now go to sleep.”

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Matthias recovered slowly but steadily from his attack. As Alexei had diagnosed, he had three broken ribs which made it difficult for him to move. The General came to their house on the third day of his medical leave. Raina served them coffee and wished she could speak Lycanth, since they were speaking in that language. Matthias didn’t bother to translate until they’d already been talking for ten minutes.

“Raina,” he called. “The General would like to know if we want to seek political asylum in Lycanthia.”

“Leave?” Raina knew it was rude, but turned to Matthias and ignored the General completely. “They think they can get us out of here? How? Visas to get out of the country are almost impossible to find.”

“The General feels that my attack was politically motivated. I’ve put in almost two years of work with the troops, and so he thinks he’d have the leverage to prove that you and I are in serious danger if we stay behind.”

The General made a comment, and Matthias shook his head and replied quickly. “He thinks you want to stay.”

“I”—Raina paused. Her first instinct had been to go as quickly as possible. Now, on reflection, that would mean leaving behind her aunt and uncle, as well as her friends to start over again. “I need to think about it, I guess.”

“I understand that,” Matthias said gently. “However, I think it would be best for us in the long run. As much as it pains me to say it, I don’t see things improving here in Dashari anytime soon. I’m going to tell them we want to go. It’s going to be a lot of paperwork and a lot of bureaucracy if they can get us out at all. We should get started as quickly as possible, even if we change our mind later.”

Raina nodded her agreement, and then excused herself. She needed to think. Matthias came and found her staring blindly out a window from the edge of the bed a few minutes later. “I

escorted the General out myself,” he commented as he limped toward the bed. “Are you ok?” He sighed with relief as he lowered himself to a horizontal position.

“I keep thinking about Kalinda,” Raina confessed. “It’s stupid, I know. I’m just her godmother, not her actual mother. But if we left by seeking political asylum, it would be permanent, and I would miss so much. She’s just a baby—she wouldn’t even remember me and I love her so much. Then there are Aunt Ana and Uncle Jonas. They’ll probably die here because they’re too damned stubborn to even try to leave.”

“That might change,” Matthias pointed out. “If things keep getting worse, they might be more open to leaving. We’d be in a strong position to ask to get them out, too, if we were in Lycanthia.”

Raina sighed and settled back against the pillows. “There’s no way to do it without leaving someone behind,” she commented sadly.

“No,” Matthias agreed. “I guess that’s why it took your parents so long to do it.”

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Hayne’s tour of duty rotated to an end about a month later. Although he had been a stranger the night of Matthias’s attack, in the last few weeks he had become a frequent visitor and Raina was sorry to see him go.

“I’ll be testifying in front of the Department committee about your asylum next month,” he commented as he drank coffee with Matthias shortly before his departure. “So I’ll be in a great position to make sure I see you soon.”

Raina smiled at the soldier. She knew he was eager to get home to his girlfriend, Becca, and his elderly parents. He had been teaching her some Lycanthian vocabulary as “preparation” for their move south, and had told her a lot about his hometown of Hursting and his culture. “We’ll miss you.”

“Don’t you want some coffee, Raina?” Matthias asked. “I’ll be happy to make it for you.”

Raina shook her head. She didn’t want to make her big announcement in front of Hayne; no matter how much she liked him. “No thanks, sweetheart. I’m fine with water.”

Hayne wished them goodbye a few minutes later and reminded them that “They’d all celebrate Raina’s birthday in Hursting.” Matthias and Raina cheerfully agreed with the proposition even though they knew their visas were nowhere close to being completed.

Matthias shut the door behind their guest. “All right, what’s up? You’re bursting to tell me something. You were fidgeting like a maniac the whole time Hayne was here.”

Raina stopped fighting her proud smile. “You, my love, are going to be a Papa!” She ended her announcement on a shriek as the words finally burst out. “I took a test this morning, but Hayne got here before I could tell you.”

Matthias stared at her for a second, then grabbed her and whirled her around the living room. “Sorry,” he gasped, putting her down as though she was made of glass. “I don’t want to hurt the baby. I just—are you sure?”

Raina shrugged, “As sure as I can be. I’ve never been pregnant before, but I have all the signs, and the test was positive.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard since the day we got married,” Matthias assured her.

“Are you excited? You look excited.”

“I’m ecstatic,” Raina smiled. “But your boys in green may need to help me find some prenatal vitamins. They’re hard to come by these days.”

“I’ll put them on it first thing Monday morning,” Matthias assured her.

“We’d better tell Uncle Jonas and Aunt Ana first,” Raina protested. “Ana will never forgive me if the Marines know before she does!”

## Chapter 9

As happy as Matthias and Raina were about the baby, the pregnancy was not an easy one. The factional issues exploded in Krast, which had the dual negative effects of slowing down their exit visas while the Lycanthian government dithered about bringing Dashari nationals inside its borders, and making their formerly peaceful neighborhood a war zone. Matthias added two locks to the door and bought a *palona*, which he installed prominently, since *dakkari* followers were the majority in the neighborhood.

“The secular militias are just as dangerous as the religious, and our neighbors know we don’t attend services,” Raina pointed out reasonably when she saw Matthias’s intention. “It’s hypocritical to pretend to be something we’re not.”

“I don’t care,” Matthias asserted. “If a secular militia decided to attack our building, we’re on the third floor and you’d have time to call the police. But we’re one of only two non-



*dakkari* followers in the building. I'd rather people who don't know us assume we're like everyone else. At least it might prevent random attacks."

Raina shrugged and gave in. She'd just finished reading in the paper that some of the secular groups were intimidating religious neighbors to leave their apartments in her old neighborhood. She wasn't thrilled to associate herself with either group.

Elizabeth was a godsend during the pregnancy. With four babies under her belt, she'd experienced every symptom, craving, and complication under the sun. She recommended her own obstetrician since his clinic was near-by, but warned Raina that he was highly religious.

"The best thing to do is not mention your affiliation at all," Elizabeth insisted. "I don't think he'd refuse to help if you were in the middle of labor, but it's better not to force the moral dilemma."

Raina agreed, and liked Dr. Oktek even though he was staid. The first time he examined her, he insisted on scheduling a c-section. "I can look at you and tell that the birth would be extremely difficult traditionally," he warned.

Although she privately wondered how he could be so sure when she wasn't actually in labor, Raina changed her mind when Ana revealed that she and Jonas had suffered a miscarriage early in their marriage.

"I was too small," Ana related sorrowfully. "I went into labor early and the doctor at the hospital sent me home. He thought they were false contractions because I didn't look right inside. The pain was awful; by the time I figured out the contractions were real it was too late. I wish I'd had a doctor like yours who wanted to do things surgically from the beginning."

Raina was impressed by this unexpected insight into her very private aunt's personal life. "I'll take his advice," she assured her aunt. She regretted that promise quickly. Dr. Oktek put her on bed rest in the fourth month.

The restaurant next to Elizabeth's hotel was blown up by an anti-Lycanthian group shortly after Raina was confined to bed. Elizabeth quit her job, saying that even the security guards at the door couldn't make her feel safe. Mike picked up whatever extra hours he could at the newspaper so that they could stay afloat. For entertainment, Elizabeth and the kids often came to visit Raina and bring Matthias food, but Raina fretted incessantly in the confines of the bed. Matthias was not much better—he yo-yoed between wanting to go to work and hurry along their visas and wanting to stay with Raina so that he didn't have to worry about the factional neighborhood violence.

"I never saw anyone borrow trouble the way you two do," Elizabeth commented as she rubbed Raina's feet one day. "You're getting ready to escape this hole, you're starting a family, and you're in love. Relax and enjoy it. We wish we could come with you."

The comment was dropped in lightly, but Raina heard the longing behind it. "We wish you could come too, Liz. I don't have any idea what I'll do with a baby without you."

"You'll do what comes naturally," Liz said fiercely. "Having a child is the most natural thing in the world, and you'll be excellent at it. Now what I'm going to do without you? I have no clue. If we can't go to Aunt Raina's, I have to keep my kids home with me! The horror." Elizabeth faked a shudder, but her eyes were full of tears. Raina hugged her friend and was grateful that so many people had stepped into the breach when she lost Marta.

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The visas weren't going to come before Raina had the baby. The Lycanthian government had finally decided that Dashari was embroiled in a civil war and that Matthias's involvement with their soldiers meant the couple were in mortal danger, but this meant their visas had to be redirected through the war department. The Right-Way government still refused to acknowledge that they were governing a merely nominal country, but the citizens knew. They knew when winter hit and thousands of civilians in the Southern Territories starved because northern crops couldn't get to them on the bombed and gutted roads. They knew when the former Prime Minister was assassinated on an open street by a *dakkari* student for inviting in the Lycanthians. However, they politely allowed the government to pose as leaders until the last straw. When each neighborhood and territory started fielding their own religious and secular militias to patrol the streets and clash violently, and the bodies overwhelmed the morgue, the country at last finished its long slide into hell. Tortured and murdered women, men, and children were piled into trucks by the local police and taken to be cremated. The government lacked the manpower to identify the bodies, so they buried them in mass graves marked only with the date of their cremation. Thousands of Damari citizens overwhelmed the few remaining embassies in Karst, begging to be taken in as refugees. Matthias and Raina would have been lost in the crush were it not for the tireless work of the men he'd assisted over the past two years.

The Lycanthian Marines overwhelmingly supported Raina and Matthias. They quietly slipped them extra food, confiscated black market medicines, and even weapons. Raina passed as much of her booty onto her friends and family as she could manage. However, even in the face of chaos, the Dasari people managed to scrounge through. Dr. Oksek began charging for check-

ups in potatoes. Neighbors bartered through their windows when it was dangerous to go into the street. Raina was torn between horror and amazement at the resourcefulness of those around her.

Somehow, Raina's secular upbringing slipped out during her seven-month examination. Dr. Oksek raised his eyebrows gravely when Raina admitted that she'd been eating beef, which was expressly forbidden to *dakkari*-followers, but instead of ordering her out of his office, he merely shook his head.

"We don't talk about your culture outside of this room," he whispered solemnly. "I can only protect you so far. My clinic is *dakkari* and strict. But as long as you don't bring any militias in to hurt my people, I will pretend you are like all my other patients." He paused. "You will need antibiotics and anesthetics for the operation. The baby will come soon, I think. Can you get them off the black-market?"

Raina knew from reception room gossip that Dr. Oksek had already traded his car and television to buy medicines for those who couldn't afford them.

"I think we can manage," she assured him.

"Good. I'll write down the names of what you need so you get the right products." He smiled at her. "Be good to your baby, Raina. He or she will be joining us very soon."

Raina curled her hand over her stomach protectively. She and Matthias loved this baby already. The only way she could stay sane with bed rest was for the sake of the child growing inside her.

Ana rushed toward her protectively when Raina ambled out of the examining room.

“Are you alright?”

“Right as rain,” she assured her aunt. “Baby’s hungry enough to eat an elephant, though.”

“Let’s go home—I’ll make you a sandwich,” her aunt assured her. The women walked slowly through the street since Raina was technically supposed to be horizontal. “I wish it was safe to take a taxi,” Ana fretted as they walked along. Raina tried to be gentle with her aunt’s feelings; she knew that Ana was reacting to her own tragedy and not their situation.

“It feels nice to walk,” she assured Ana. “I almost never get to anymore, unless it’s to the bathroom. Dr. Oksek thinks the baby will come soon. Will you help me pack my bag when we get home?”

“I will pack it with delight.” The ladies spent a nice hour deciding which nightgowns Raina would want to wear after her surgery, and after supper Matthias and Alexei walked Ana home. Matthias had been given a Marine rifle to carry after dark, but Raina admitted that she was more nervous when he had the weapon than when he was without it. Somehow, the dark metal in her gentle husband’s hands was more disturbing than all the other atrocities put together.

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Seventeen days later, a mere two days after Matthias and the Marines had finally collected all the medicines Raina needed to have her surgery, the contractions started. Raina went to bed slightly nauseated, but she woke up at 3 am screaming.

Dammit, anyone who said that contractions hurt was understating the issue! Raina moaned and thrashed as her insides curled up into a mass of hot flames. Matthias came awake

instantly beside her, but he could only watch her writhe. Raina hadn't had any false contractions, but she was willing to assume that these were real. Panting as the pain finally faded, she grabbed Matthias's arm.

“We need to go to the hospital.”

“Can you walk,” Matthias asked with horror in his voice.

“If we hurry,” Raina answered. “I should have at least five or seven minutes.”

Matthias called Dr. Oksek, then rushed to grab her suitcase, which had been re-packed with all of her medicines inside. “Let's go.”

They made it down the stairs before another contraction hit. Raina tried not to scream, but it was challenging. Matthias held her hand tightly as they moved fitfully through the streets toward the clinic. Only once, Matthias whisked her into the darkness of an alley as a group of five men walked by, carrying pistols and laughing loudly. Matthias reached behind his back and Raina realized with a start that he had his rifle slung through his belt. She started to ask him why, but he shook his head at her, made a sh sign in front of his mouth, and gestured for her to keep walking.

By the time they got to the clinic, Raina's contractions were four minutes apart. Dr. Oksek examined her cursorily and brought a nurse over to her gurney. “I need an IV here,” he explained. “We'll be performing a c-section.” The nurse nodded and quickly stuck a needle in Raina's arm. Matthias wordlessly handed over the suitcase filled with Raina's drugs, including a general anesthesia.

The last thing Raina remembered was Matthias holding her hand and panting with her through another contraction.

She woke up to full daylight. The nurse from last night was leaning over her, asking her to wake up.

“Where am I?” Raina asked. Then, she changed her question. “Where’s Matthias?”

She could feel herself starting to hyperventilate, but the nurse patted her forehead. “Calm down, hon. He’s next door, getting some sleep.” She paused. “Your husband is so brave!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Hang on a second, I’ll tell you the story but someone’s hungry.” With a smile, she handed Raina a small, blanket-wrapped bundle. Raina stared at her baby in awe. Dark eyes blinked at her out of a mountain of wrinkled, scaly skin. “It’s a boy,” the nurse added.

Raina nodded as she started to cry. The nurse ignored her tears to adjust her gown and help the baby start feeding. Then she continued. “As I was saying your husband is brave!”

“What happened,” Raina whispered.

“We were right in the middle of surgery when two men with guns burst into the waiting room,” the nurse exclaimed. “They claimed that someone called in and told them a secular bitch was in the hospital, and they’d come to find her. Dr. Oksek just stripped off his gloves, turned out the lights, and came out of the OR like it was empty. He told them they had the wrong address because this is a *dakkari* clinic.” The nurse glanced at Raina, squinting. “You know that, of course.”

“Yes,” Raina said quietly. She couldn’t tell if the woman actually believed she was religious or just didn’t care. The baby nuzzled against her and she gasped at the sensation.

“Where does my husband come into this?”

“Oh,” the nurse went on. “He saw the men after Dr. Oksek sent them away. Very upset, he was. Apparently the men talked about coming back after the doctor left and doing another check. So he sat in your room all night, hiding under the bed, in case they came back.”

“But they didn’t?” Raina asked.

“Well, they did,” the nurse admitted. “But we locked the doors and told them the clinic was closed. Then we moved you to one of the un-used wings so no one would know you were still here.”

“Thank you,” Raina said quietly. “You probably saved our lives. It doesn’t sound like those men cared about our religious affiliation.”

“No,” the nurse agreed. “I finally got your husband to take a nap about an hour ago. Other patients and doctors are in the clinic, so the militia men probably won’t be back. Would you like me to get him for you?” She reached over and started teaching Raina how to burp the baby.

“Yes, please,” Raina said. “Oh, and nurse? What’s Dr. Oksek’s first name?”

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Raina and Matthias debated over returning to their apartment. Had it been one of their neighbors who’d reported them to the militia? However, in the end, they decided to risk going



back. It was more likely that someone near the clinic had reported them, since their neighbors had tolerated their presence for a year without incident.

Elizabeth and Mike were waiting at the door with a casserole when Raina was released after two days. Elizabeth peered at the baby and declared, “He looks nothing like either one of you!” Matthias and Raina laughed.

“You’re right,” Raina agreed. “However, he’s the spitting image of my father.”

The friends had a wonderful visit. “I wish I’d brought the kids,” Elizabeth said wistfully. “It would have been nice to get them all together at least once.”

“What are you talking about?” Raina asked curiously.

Mike cleared his throat. “I have an uncle who lives in the East, near the border. Elizabeth and I have decided the city’s too dangerous. We’re going to move out with him and see if we can get out. Even if we can’t, we’ll be able to grow our own food and worry a little less at night.”

“Am I ever going to stop crying,” Raina wondered as she hugged her friends tightly.

“It’s the hormones,” Elizabeth said firmly, “and even if it isn’t, blame them. People don’t argue with new mothers.” She smiled. “We’ll visit you in Lycanthia if we get out. I promise.” She didn’t explain how she planned to get their address, and Raina didn’t ask. Friends found a way.

Two weeks later, the Lycanthian government finally granted them political asylum. Alexei borrowed a car and drove them to the airport.

“When do you get to go back?” Raina asked curiously. “It seems as though you’ve been in Dashari with us forever.”

“I agree,” Alexei emphasized fiercely. “But my time’s up in a couple months. I’ll be sure to visit you two and the tyke.”

“We’ll be in the capitol, since I’ll be translating ancient texts at the University,” Matthias offered. “My days of bureaucracy and diplomacy are over.”

“Sounds good.” Alexei parked the car and got out to help Raina with the baby. “I guess when this tour’s over I’ll get out, too.”

Raina couldn’t imagine Alexei as anything other than a military officer, but she kept her mouth shut. Until a year ago, the only path she’d seen had been in a newsroom. After a brief hug, Matthias helped her walk up the steps to the airplane door. Raina turned and waved goodbye to Alexei.

Once she was seated between Matthias and the General on the small propeller plane, she kissed baby Owen on the head. She was twenty-four, and he was three weeks old, but they were both about to take their first airplane trip.