

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

A SEVEN REALMS STORY

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LIGHTBOUND MEDIA

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PREFACE

Practically ever since I began writing fiction in earnest as a young girl, I've dabbled in Christmas short stories during the Christmas season, often side stories to the long-form stuff I was already writing. I remember finishing one—my first one—and sending it as a kind of Christmas present to my siblings and a friend. My finish rate went downhill from there, but finishing wasn't the main point. The main point was only to immerse myself a little more deeply in the magic of Christmas each year *my way*: by writing.

For better or for worse, my whole life, I have poured my creative skills into one bucket: the written word. Unfortunately, that meant I have seldom ever been able to give a truly good "homemade" Christmas gift to anyone, even though I think those are the best kinds of gifts, because I lack pretty much any craft or artistic skill that *isn't* writing. (Unless you count organizing/optimizing, but that's stretching the definition of creativity beyond the bounds of this discussion, and most people don't like you organizing and optimizing them, so it makes for a poor gift most of the time anyway.)

This lack has occasionally made me sad. Then, when I needed some extra Christmas magic this season (December 2025), and I felt the urge again to write something on theme, I realized I *could* give something "homemade" to many of the people who have been so good to me this year. I could revive my Christmas writing tradition, and this time, I was determined to actually *finish* and *share* it. I would write a Seven Realms Christmas short story.

Then I started brainstorming. What kind of story could I write? And then the answer was obvious, in the form of another question: what would the Lind family's first Christmas away from Earth be like?

I knew I had the perfect idea when I couldn't wait to start writing to find out. Because, yes, that meant I *finished* it. And now I can give it all to you.

It may still need a bit of polishing, so be kind, but it's good enough for now to share here, and it's time. (Writing is never finished—it's only due.)

Merry Christmas and warm dreams,

Leah

SPOILER WARNING: This story takes place over two months after the events of book five in the Blood of the Covenants Series, *Dragon's Hope*, and before the events of book six, *Dragon's Child*.

You can find out more about the series and where to buy the books at <https://www.leahewelker.com/the-blood-of-the-covenants-series>.

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

SARAH

“SARAH,” A FAMILIAR VOICE sighed over me, and a warm, familiar hand brushed my hair.

“What?” I started, jerking upright. And immediately regretted the motion as I felt the crick in my neck from falling asleep at my desk. Again. There was even a small puddle of drool.

“Aaagh,” I said with a wince as pain lanced down my neck and back.

“Steady—hold still,” Ben snapped, wrapping his hands around my neck and sending healing power down through me. I felt immediate relief and held as still as I could as he did his thing, though that was difficult from how I wanted to melt back down to sleep. I had trouble remembering through my lingering brain fog why I shouldn’t.

“Alright, that’s it,” Ben said as he finished up and gave me a visual once-over. “I came to *ask* if you wanted to wrap up and head over to your family’s hold early, but I’m making the call and *telling* you you’re done.”

“What, Ben, no—” I spluttered, looking down at my desk scattered with papers and tablets. I remembered why I couldn’t just take a nap like I longed to. Like I *should* have done from the beginning instead of laying my head down and pretending I was just closing my eyes. Again.

One would think, nearly three months into being pregnant with twins, that I would have learned by now.

I picked up the tablet I'd been reading. "I have three more reports to get through and documents still to sign and Ramian still needs me to get back to him on Moonguard—"

Ben gently but firmly pried the tablet from my fingers, deactivated the magic so it returned to normal blank black stone, and placed it out of my reach. He turned and partially sat on, partially leaned against my desk as he folded his arms and loomed over me. "Sarah, if there is one thing I have learned over a lifetime of this kind of life, it is that there will *always* be more. And as your primary healer and your husband, I'm telling you—you're done for today."

I couldn't argue with that. The brain fog, which still hadn't entirely lifted, didn't let me. Instead, I reverted to grumbling like a teenager. "You've been so bossy lately."

Fortunately, Ben knew exactly what was behind my mental regression and didn't hold it against me.

"And you, my star," he said with a sigh, fingering my chin and kissing me on the forehead, "have been working too hard lately. It's a good thing your family has this 'Christmas' celebration planned, or I'd steal you away myself, just to give you a break."

He paused, a grin slowly coming over him. "On second thought, maybe I'll do that *anyway*. They can celebrate without you, right?"

"Don't you dare," I warned him, the spike of adrenaline finally clearing most of the fog. "If I don't show up tonight, Mom will murder us. It's Christmas Eve."

Only...approximately. This was all guesswork to begin with, but we were fairly sure we had the days right. If the day cycles were anything close to the length of Earth's, that is, and we thought they were close enough.

Though it was still so disconcerting not to know for *sure*. To be so disconnected from it all, so adrift, like me and my family were castaways on an isolated island. An already populated island, true, but one with entirely different languages, cultures, and customs.

One that had never even heard of Christmas.

There had been no holiday music blasting in every public space since Thanksgiving (and no Thanksgiving, other than the one we'd put together ourselves), no strangers wishing me a Merry Christmas as I passed them, no familiar wintery decorations everywhere. And—here in the scorching deserts of Ythra, which Crownhold and my new home were in the middle of—*definitely* no snow.

Sure, a break from all the commercialism was nice. And from the really annoying kind of Christmas music that was played far too much, especially in stores.

But the absence of the spirit of Christmas itself....

That...that hit harder than I had thought it would. Harder and for longer than I'd admitted to anyone. This past week especially, I'd frequently felt the worst waves of homesickness I'd ever felt, and certainly more than I'd thought I'd feel, being so happy to be here with Ben, feeling like I had everything a young woman could ask for. But though I was still happy, sort of...it was like that happiness was out of my reach for the moment.

The only way I could think to describe it was that it just felt so *wrong* that I couldn't surge back into my old living room just as easily as I, the luson Queen of Light, could take myself anywhere else in the universe that I could picture clearly enough. That I couldn't just slip into that old familiar life just as easily as stepping into another room and sit by our Christmas tree, basking in its glow, playing a card game with the twins while Rachel set out homemade hot chocolate and paneton on the coffee table and Mom bustled in the kitchen, working on the tamales with David, and Dad played "Silent Night" on our small upright while Lizzy and Abby sang along and we all stayed up until midnight on Christmas Eve to wish each other merry Christmas.

I could picture it so clearly, so *vividly*, could smell the scent of pine and chocolate, could see the lights, could hear the singing, could feel the cards in my hands, that it seemed like I should be able to slip into that moment without a thought.

When I'd woken up one morning in "December" and realized I *couldn't*, and would never be able to again in my entire life, not even when Earth thawed, because not only was I a grown woman with her own husband, home, and growing children now, but because that living room in my mind's eye was burned to the ground, along with all ties I had to that life. To my childhood. To my home...

Well, as soon as I finished throwing up from my usual morning sickness, I broke out into sobs so violent, Ben had been frantic until I'd calmed enough to even somewhat explain things to him.

I blamed it on my hormones to him then and stood by that statement to that day.

Even though when he talked me through it, and later, when Syver did the same in her own way as my friend, they both assured me that the grief and homesickness I was feeling were natural and only to be expected.

"Hellfrost," Ben had said ruefully, rubbing his neck. "Sometimes I thought you were suppressing it. You've just been so eerily *calm* about this all."

He waved his hand, referring to our surroundings in our bedroom and my new life more broadly.

"I...don't think I was," I said with a hiccup, blowing my nose for what felt like the hundredth time. "It just...hadn't hit me yet. I haven't had time for it until now."

He sighed. "Yeah. I know."

The first couple months of our marriage had been chaos, dealing with all the repercussions from the Battle for Earth, the splitting of the Linds into two clans, my re-crowning as Queen of Light, the establishment of a new monarchial structure over the Seven Realms with Ben and me as co-rulers, my many lessons to even let me *begin* to govern properly, and Ben pulled everywhere to deal with consumed.

And that was on top of the *normal* adjustments needed for a newly married couple in a new home and a pregnant wife whose body was changing faster than she'd bargained for to support not just one but two little ones. When I thought about it all, it was actually a miracle we hadn't had a major fight. Maybe we

were too tired to let the little things in life irritate us. We normally just collapsed together at the end of a long day and fell asleep.

Ben's face reflected the same utter exhaustion I felt for a moment. Then...he got this thoughtful look.

"Ben...." I said slowly.

"Huh?" he said with a guilty start.

Then he made some excuse about needing to get ready for an early meeting and got away from me before I could get whatever it was out of him. And thanks to my pregnancy brain, the moment slipped from my memory, and it never came up again.

Even though Svyer came to talk to me that same day, and since Ben had clearly told her what was wrong, I went through it all again with her, except not as badly. That second time was less of a geyser and more just a clearing out of the tears that remained inside me, and I felt better afterward. I truly did.

And yet, something was still missing. Some trace of homesickness still returned every time the absence of Christmas as I'd known it rubbed against me, and it only got worse when I returned "home" to my family's hold to help with what little Christmas preparations we were able to manage: paper ornaments strung on twine on a small tree Svyer had helped them temporarily transplant from our garden to the assembly room—our new makeshift living room; Ben, Svyer, and Mom debating for hours in our kitchen how best to replicate hot chocolate and paneton and doing endless tests (the smells hit me so badly that I usually avoided the kitchen during those times); carols sung at dinner purely from memory while the dramá listened in fascination and I tried not to cry. Again.

I thought that much was inevitable, and that I'd eventually get over it over the years. I thought it was just something I had to stoically work through, as with all forms of grief. Ben did his absolute best to comfort me, and he even offered to help me decorate our own home however I liked, even though it was long past their own winter solstice, and I knew he found many of our holiday traditions a bit strange. I thanked him for being so sweet, but I told him I just didn't know whether it would make me feel even worse, and I left it at that. There was a

reason I was avoiding my family's home nowadays and burying myself in work, especially this past week.

But tonight was Christmas Eve, as Ben well knew by now, and I was serious when I said to him that if I didn't come home tonight—and *stay* the night—then Mom would kill me.

Ben's lips twitched as if he'd like to see my mother—who was normally shy and timid around him when they weren't actively cooking together—try.

"You don't know her like I do," I said, wagging my finger. "You've only gotten a *taste* of her party-planning mania this past month, Ben. Christmas is sacred. If I don't come home tonight, I'm as good as dead to her."

Alright, not quite that bad, but I realized that the adrenaline Ben had shot through my system with his threat to kidnap me had had its desired effect when Ben's grin deepened.

"So, you'd better close up early like a good daughter and take us there now, right?"

I sighed and pushed back my desk chair. "Alright, you win. I probably won't get anything useful done here now, anyway, so we might as well."

"That's my *sera*," he said, kissing my forehead again.

"I don't know what you're calling me valiant for," I grumbled. "Mom's just going to have me sit in a corner and do nothing again."

I placed a hand on my tight, slightly bulging belly as I stood with a groan. Mom had been fussing over me since the first day I told her I was pregnant, and it had only gotten worse with each week since.

It didn't help that I needed her advice—and even her fussing—more than I ever had in my life. Or that I really wasn't good for much at times, with all the exhaustion, soreness, nausea, and brain fog. I truly hadn't expected things to get like this, this fast.

"That's exactly why," Ben said with a tight smile as he put a hand on my back. "Sometimes, my star, doing nothing is the hardest thing of all."

SURE ENOUGH, THE MOMENT we entered the kitchen in my family's hold, Mom gasped in delight and then gave me a light scolding that I'd taken *this* long to come, and what was I still doing standing there, come sit here and let her make me some icemint tea, and Ben, would he mind tending that pot on the stove?

Only in her kitchen and garden was Mom the undisputed queen and Ben, the King of Flame anywhere else, merely an occasional helping hand. Though she'd come to appreciate his skills and knowledge as a dramá chef enough to trust him with more than any of the rest of us in the kitchen—and certainly more than Svyer (who, admittedly, was a bit helpless there when it didn't involve herbal infusions).

Which explained why, once I sat down, and Mom bustled away, I could see Svyer was free to talk quietly with Dad in the northern antechamber between the kitchen and the bathrooms. I narrowed my eyes and strained my hearing in vain to catch what they were saying over the kitchen hubbub.

Many a time this past month, I had caught Svyer quietly conferring with a family member about something. With the older ones, the topics seemed harmless enough: Christmas traditions, favorite Christmas memories, and so on.

I was a bit more troubled by her conversations with the younger ones, which had been about what toys they were wishing for from "Santa," whom the littles had excitedly told her about of their own initiative early into our "December." Those wishes often required elaborate explanations so Svyer could even remotely understand what they were talking about, especially when it came to electronics, which was how I'd caught her in the middle of two such conversations.

After the second one, this time with Abby, I pulled her aside. "Svyer, just what are you up to?" I whispered.

We older Linds had been handling the topic of Santa carefully ever since it first occurred to Jonah, much to his distress, that Santa might not know how to find us on this new world, potentially across the galaxy from Earth. Or

might not even have the power, as magical as he was, to get to us. (Somehow, miraculously, we managed to sidestep the problem of the time freeze of Earth itself, which I didn't know how much the littles understood. Abby, especially, never seemed to believe us when we said the Tree of Ice was dead. She didn't seem to be in denial, either. She would just shrug, smile, and say the Tree had told her She was fine.)

We'd reassured the littles that Santa had let us know he'd be able to make a quick stop, but that he might be...limited in the kinds of things he could bring this far in his sleigh—what with customs and border crossing rules for magic interstellar portals and all that. And fortunately, Abby's simple faith worked in our favor yet again. She said she had a dream Santa said he was coming, and that was that in her mind. She never needed the occasional assurances Jonah and especially Noah did.

Lizzy remained quiet whenever we'd talk about Santa, which told me all I needed to know from her in that regard. I'd just give her a hug, and she'd hug me back, burying her face into me and holding me tight. Both of us, without saying a word, just seemed to share in the same kind of grief for a home and a childhood forever gone.

So far, I thought we'd managed Noah, Jonah, and Abby's expectations well, but Svyer was making me nervous with her prodding.

But she had only winked at my question. "Oh, don't worry about it, Sarah. I'm just thinking about how we can...give that man a bit of help."

"Svyer," I had said with a sigh. "I know you mean well, and I appreciate that, I do. I just...I just don't want them to be disappointed."

"Oh, they won't be," Svyer said with such perfect confidence, I couldn't find a reason to keep arguing with her.

Even Kor couldn't seem to leave things alone. With scholarly fascination, he would ask about every tradition in elaborate detail, even taking *notes*. As weird as it was to have him living with my family now, and particularly with Rachel, his wife as of little over a month ago, having him taking notes on the twins' enthusiastic and not-entirely-accurate recap of *Frosty the Snowman* during a

family dinner was the final straw of surrealism for me at him officially joining our family.

Though in characteristic fashion, I couldn't see any sign of him right now, when the full bustle of preparing Christmas Eve's dinner was underway. Heaven forbid he get pulled into doing something to help. Though I tried to be generous and assume he was simply caught up in his latest experiment. The arcanist nook in Rachel's royal suite had been a dream come true for him, and from what I heard, he hardly ever emerged these days.

"Hey, Sarah," Lizzy said tentatively, settling into the spot on the bench beside me. "How are you feeling?"

Tired of people asking me how I'm feeling, I thought.

But because this was my tender-hearted twelve-year-old sister, I only said with a slight smile, "Tired."

Which was still true, and was probably the real reason behind my grouchiness, anyway.

Lizzy glanced at my stomach and then away, sheepish.

"What?" I teased as I placed a hand over my belly. I was only just showing now, but even so, I'd needed new clothing already as what I'd worn before became too tight in that region. "Still can't believe you're going to be an aunt in six months?"

"No, I honestly can't," Lizzy said with a nervous laugh.

"That's OK," I said with a wink. "You've got six more months."

Hopefully it would be six. I was praying with all my might I'd last that long, for my little ones' sakes, at least. Although there was a part of me that was already wondering how much more I could take.

"Hey, Sarah!" Svyer said, collapsing happily into the spot on my other side and throwing her arm around me. "How are my littlest cousins?"

"Fine, I think," I said with a tired laugh, lifting my hand off my belly. "Do you want to check for yourself?"

"Nah, I trust Ben, and I'm beat," Svyer said, leaning back.

"Long day?" I said sympathetically.

As my leftwing, and as the head of the White Crown who had even the faintest clue what she was doing (the others being David and me), a lot of the work had fallen heaviest on her first. And still she stubbornly insisted on spending at least some of her time each day helping out at Lindhold. Ben and I were trying to find someone else we trusted enough to take her place with my family to stop her from doing double duty, but we hadn't yet managed it. My family *liked* Svyer now, and it had been hard enough to get Michael to let her stay in the first place.

"You have no idea," Svyer groaned, running a hand over her face. "Actually, you probably do. I'm surprised you're here this early."

"Ben dragged me away."

"Ah, there's a good man," Svyer said, patting my shoulder and looking fondly at her cousin across the kitchen. Then she mock-whispered, "But don't tell him I said that. I have to keep him in line, you know."

I laughed. "I know."

"Uh, Svyer?" Lizzy said, tucking a lock of her white hair behind her ear.

"Yeah?" Svyer said, leaning forward to glance at her across me.

Lizzy took a tremulous breath as she fiddled with her thumbs in her lap. "Did you, um, ever hear back from Kol—I mean, Lord Strongshield? About...my present?"

I held in a sigh. A week or so ago, when Svyer had innocently asked Lizzy what she had wanted from Santa, Lizzy just gave her a sad look and said nothing for a moment. Then she said she didn't need anything, so Svyer didn't need to worry about it. When Svyer pressed, Lizzy said that the only thing she *wanted* was to give a present of her own, to someone she had little hope of reaching.

She sheepishly admitted that she'd thought sometimes about Lord Kolwin since meeting him at the dance the night before my wedding, and she thought he had looked lonely. Christmas, she'd explained to Svyer with heart-breaking sweetness, was a time of looking out for those who were lonely. She'd been experimenting with glasswork with Alya's help, and she'd made him a glass rose, thinking that something small and beautiful like that would make him smile, just as he'd made Tommie smile with an even more magical bauble at the dance.

But she'd been too shy to ask for help in getting it to him, let alone actually daring to send it, until Svyer insisted on knowing what she wanted.

So, after checking with Mom and Dad to make sure it was alright with them, Svyer made sure it got to him.

"Oh," Svyer said with a guilty start. "So sorry, Lizzy! He said he loved it and to thank you. Um, let me think. Ugh, I wish I had the exact note on me—I'll get it to you later—but I think he said something about the craftsmanship being...‘quite promising’?"

Lizzy colored, and Svyer, perhaps alarmed that Lizzy might have been crushed by such sparse praise, added hastily, "For him, for a Strongshield, that's saying something, Lizzy! He doesn't exaggerate one bit, and the Strongshield are passionate about art. If it was horrible, or if he didn't like it, he'd say so. Ur...politely. But that wasn't the way he'd say it!"

"Oh, I know," Lizzy said, looking away. But a smile she couldn't seem to suppress told me she truly did know and was basking in the glow of that praise. And...perhaps something else.

I held in another sigh, but it wasn't like anyone had done anything improper. All of this had been done aboveboard and with Mom and Dad's approval, and neither Lizzy nor Kolwin had direct contact besides. So, if Lizzy wanted to harbor a secret, long-distance crush on a young man seven years older than her, well...there seemed little harm in that for now.

As I'D WARNED MOM, I didn't even make it anywhere close to midnight before I became so drowsy, Ben literally carried me to bed, and I was too tired and sad by then to even protest.

Ben settled me into the bed in Svyer's room, which she had cleared out for us, saying she'd bunk instead with Lizzy and Abby for the night to give me and Ben a private room to ourselves—one that felt more part of the household than our distantly connected suite in this Realm did.

Once I was tucked in, Ben kissed me on the forehead and told me he was going back out to spend the rest of the time until midnight with everyone.

“Thank you,” I said in a sleepy slur. “Don’t worry about coming back for my midnight wake-up. I can ride it out.”

He just shook his head at me, and that was the last thing I remembered before I was out.

But when I woke up to throw up at midnight, he was there, and he settled my systems with his magic and then brought me back to bed, as usual. He kissed my forehead again, and I was under once more, too tired to even notice that he didn’t join me on the bed until much, much later.

FOR ONCE, I WOKE not to a wave of nausea but to the sound of shrieking delight. Abby’s high, gleeful cries jolted me forcefully out of my slumber, and yet it was still a second or two before the meaning behind her words sunk in, even as she came closer with each word.

“Santa came! Mommy, Daddy, Sarah—Santa came!”

Ben, who had instinctively rolled partially over me and clutched me closer, relaxed with a groan, falling onto his back.

“What time is it?” I rasped, blinking blearily in the darkness, fumbling around in the cubby for my watch. Fortunately, I was on the side of the bed against the wall.

“Maybe a deken before dawn,” Ben moaned, throwing his arm over his eyes. “Flame, you weren’t kidding about the early morning part.”

Then he lowered his voice to a mutter I probably wasn’t meant to hear, so I only caught “told me” and “regret it.”

Our bedroom door slammed open, and Abby burst in, outlined in the light from the hall.

“Sarah! Santa *came!* I told you he would! I *told* you.”

That last declaration was directed at Noah, who also appeared in the doorway. From what I could tell through my bleary, crusted, unadjusted vision, he appeared to be acting marginally more dignified about this development—but only marginally. He was still visibly vibrating with excitement.

“Yeah, yeah, we get it,” he said hastily. “It’s true, though, Sarah! Santa came, and there’s a *mountain* of presents now. And the biggest Christmas tree in the *world*.”

My brain abruptly cleared, as if doused with cold water. I could imagine Noah exaggerating a small pile of presents as a “mountain,” especially given his relief, but he should be well familiar with the size of our family’s modest, makeshift Christmas tree already.

I jolted up onto my elbow, fast enough my head spun, and Ben grunted at me in disapproval as he grabbed my shoulder to brace me. I ignored him and stammered at my little brother, “A tree? A *bigger* tree?”

I never got an answer, though. Abby had already darted back out of the room and begun shouting again, no doubt giving others the same wake-up call. Noah couldn’t contain it anymore. He began bouncing on his heels and waving.

“You gotta come see! Plus, um, Svyer says we can’t open anything until you do.”

Ben chuckled tiredly. In a whisper Noah wouldn’t hear, he said while looking at the ceiling, “And I thought I had it bad. Did that woman get *any* sleep?”

“Are *you two* behind this?” I hissed at him.

There was enough light from the hall that I could clearly see Ben’s grin and twinkling eyes as he met my accusatory glare. And then he winked.

“For now, let’s just say that your Earthen ‘Santa’ got quite a bit of help this year.”

“Sarah!” Noah whined.

I could hear the commotion as the others started rousing. Both secret doors to Rachel and Kor’s suite must have been open, because I could hear Rachel’s answering shouts from here. Except hers weren’t the happy kind.

“We’re coming, we’re coming,” I told Noah with a half sigh, half laugh. “Close the door, for goodness’s sake, so we can get dressed.”

“Aw, but I like you as you are,” Ben whispered in a mock pout as his eyes trailed down my thin silken shift—only barely modest enough for my nine-year-old brother’s eyes. And that was with the distance and dim lighting.

And no, it wasn't even lingerie. Or, at least, that wasn't how I used it. I'd learned early on in our marriage (and my pregnancy) that I needed to dress lightly to sleep beside a furnace like Ben—if I wore anything at all. But on nights when I could expect to have someone pounding on our door, I made the sacrifice.

Noah hastily closed the door, belatedly aware of the dangers of seeing more than any preteen boy ever wanted to.

His concern might have been warranted, because in the darkness, I could hardly miss that Ben's eyes were beginning to soulflare with a look I knew well by now. I slapped Ben lightly on the chest. "Behave, or they'll be sending in the big guns next."

At least the light from his eyes was enough to help me find and touch the lightgem that activated all the others in the room, which began their slow brightening sequence.

"Big guns?" Ben said in amusement—and what looked like a bit of alarm. Given his wariness of my family's magic-class version and all I'd warned him about human weapons, I could see why.

I shook my head at him as I threw off my side of the blankets and got up into a kneeling position. "Figure of speech, never mind. In this case, that means my parents. So, move your big body so we can go see what mischief you and Svyer have been up to."

I shoved him, but I was grinning as I did, feeling a girlish fluttering in my chest I hadn't felt in what seemed like a lifetime.

Unfortunately, Ben seemed to like that look on me, too, because the soulflare in his eyes didn't die out. He gave me a crooked grin as he turned toward me and propped himself up on an elbow. "Don't I deserve at least *one* wake-up kiss for all the sleepless hours I've put in?"

"Oh, alright," I huffed with a laugh as I leaned in. "But just *one*."

Ben cradled my neck with his free hand and pushed himself into a full sitting position. Even before our lips met, I knew he was going to try to make it a long one. But he once again underestimated the enthusiasm of children on Christmas morning. Only a few moments in, Abby pounded on the door.

“Sarah! Ben! Come *on*!”

Ben pulled away with a grunt and a sigh. “They’re really not going to leave us alone, are they?”

“Nope. I tried to warn you. So, you’d better get moving.”

“Moving, moving,” Ben groaned, swinging his legs around to the floor and rubbing his neck. “Flame, why did I even bother going to bed?”

“Hmm, maybe because I was here?”

He grinned at me over his shoulder, eyes soulflaring again. “Oh. Right. That’s why.”

ONLY A FEW MINUTES later, Ben and I were walking hand in hand out of the kitchen, with the children racing ahead of us. Right then, I had to stop and gape. Whatever I had been imagining Ben and his cousin had come up with, it had been *nothing* like this.

The entire Inner Rim was festooned with all the regalia one would expect of a palace decked out for Christmas.

All the mighty pillars lining the inner rim were wrapped in giant red ribbons edged with gold and topped with gold bows, and strung between each one were thick garlands of ivy woven with red berries and dangling with blue stars. The top rim of the marble balustrade was wrapped with smaller versions of the same red ribbon, and the supports were wrapped in more ivy.

A series of long red carpets had been rolled out along the southern portion of the Inner Rim, leading to the arch directly across from us that led into the assembly room. Each carpet was a typical rectangle, so they didn’t perfectly match the curve of the rim, but the occasional corner that stuck out was at least partially hidden by the placement of a large potted tree, each of which was adorned with more red ribbons and blue stars—these glowing with charged golden gems in the centers.

Last but far from least, the hold’s helping lights were dancing around with childish glee of their own, having abandoned their regular nighttime duties to join in the fun. A whole cloud of them raced after the children like a scattered

comet; some of them hovered around us, perhaps providing us with light as the hold's lightstones remained unusually dark and inactive; and the rest had scattered themselves at aesthetic intervals across the entire space, bobbing gently in place like floating candles in the great blue pre-dawn dimness.

Rachel, walking hand in hand with Kor, stopped at my side, her own jaw dropping. Michael, with a dozing Tommie in his arms, and Laura did the same on my other side, both of their eyes wide. I hardly heard Mom, Dad, and David come up behind us.

“You gotta be kidding,” Rachel breathed.

Kor chuckled. Which let me know even before he spoke that *he* had been in on this too. Of course he had. Which also explained why he was as mussed and tired-looking as Ben but fully functional. Most likely he, like Svyer, hadn't even bothered going to sleep.

“I'm almost as surprised as you are,” he said, “that we somehow executed the full scope of Svyer's ambitions.”

“We wouldn't have, we really wouldn't,” Ben said with a grin. “But then the lights decided to help.”

He waved his free hand up at the ones hovering above us.

“They rather *insisted* on it, in fact,” Kor said dryly, eyeing one. “They started stealing decorations straight from our hands. We could hardly summon things from our hoards fast enough to keep up with them. *They* were the ones who decided where much of this went, not us. Fortunately, they and Svyer seemed to be on the same page, because *Lady Christmas* was satisfied.”

“‘Lady Christmas’?” I said with a startled chuckle.

He looked at me sidelong. “If you only knew what a tyrant she's been to us over these past few sevendays, you would understand that is the kindest appellation I could give her.”

Ben winked at me. “He's only a bit bitter because he's finally gotten a taste of his own tonic.”

Rachel snorted a laugh, and Kor glared. But he had the good sense not to say anything to that, lest he open himself up for more ribbing.

Speaking of Svyer, she was already at the arch to the assembly room, and in *drakáform* to boot, lying in front of the arch like a green dragoness guarding her hoard from the small mob of children once again descending on her. No doubt she was the only reason the littles weren't already neck deep in this "mountain" of presents—regardless of the giant red curtain draped inside the arch to conceal the contents within from view.

She raised her head and laid her tail across the way as they approached, and I could just imagine her sending them words stern enough to make them halt in front of her and not dare to clamber over her (as I'd heard they were actually quite practiced in doing whenever Svyer would turn herself into a living dragon playground for them). With great restraint, Abby, Noah, and Jonah began bouncing in place in front of the barrier of her tail, turning, waving, and shouting at us to hurry.

Ben gestured for Mom and Dad to lead the way, and they did so, Mom with a shy, grateful smile at him, and Dad with a suspicious gleam in his eye that showed my stoic father was on the verge of almost *grinning* as he looked ahead at his youngest children. Neither of them appeared that surprised, though.

"OK, who all was in on this?" I demanded as the rest of us trailed behind.

"Me," Ben said, "Svyer, and Kor, obviously. Also, your parents. And Alya. At least for the main core who set this all up. Alya and Kor helped with the more...complicated presents. Svyer was the main organizer and...er, fundraiser."

I made a note to come back to that last bit, but at that moment I had a more urgent concern. I gasped and looked around. "Alya—does she—"

Ben laughed. "She helped set up, but she adamantly requested not to be woken up after she left to go to bed."

And since she'd insisted on making the workshop her sleeping quarters, she would have been spared the littles barging through every bedroom to wake us. I grinned and shook my head. Part of me envied her, but only a very, very small part. I wouldn't miss this for anything, even sleep. As precious a commodity as that was to me these days.

Then my eyes fell back on the carpet.

As if the way we were supposed to go weren't clear enough, gold glitter was strewn across the entire length of each red carpet, already disturbed by many a child's footprint.

So *that* explained the smattering of glitter I'd seen tracked into the kitchen and sleeping area. Don't get me wrong—I was enormously awed and grateful for this overwhelming gesture, which we were presumably only getting the first taste of, but as I eyed the glitter, I couldn't help but wonder just how long it was going to take us to entirely get rid of it. If that was even possible.

"Don't worry," Ben said as he followed my gaze. "It's the kind that disappears after a day."

"Oh, good," I said, trying to sound casual and not enormously relieved that my family's hold wasn't going to be infested with gold glitter forevermore.

I took a deep breath. "All I can say is...wow. And also...*how*? Did the Crowns fund all this?"

"No—this is all privately and voluntarily funded, thanks to Svyer."

"Privately..." I murmured, trailing off as I stared all around me again. "But *who*?"

Ben's eyes softened as he looked at me. In a quieter voice, he said, "Are you still so unaware of what we owe you all? Of how so many of our people would jump at the chance to pay you back in some small way?"

"Practically speaking," Kor said while casting me a smirk as he walked on my other side with Rachel. "Svyer's got *connections*."

Ben rolled his eyes. "It was more than that, Kor."

"Yes, yes, but to discreetly raise funds like this within a few weeks, with so few leaks and political fuss, you need connections. And honestly, though I know I have been a sometimes-complaining servant under the reign of our Lady Christmas, I still tip my head to her, one former Monarch's leftwing to a current one. Excellent choice, by the way, Sarah."

"I didn't have many options," I said under my breath.

Kor grinned. "Well, I was being generous in complimenting your judgment instead of saying that you were simply very lucky."

Rachel snorted another laugh, but at least was kind enough to me to try to hide it right after with a cough.

My eyes fell on Svyer just ahead of us, and on the silver edging to her very scales. Luck had something to do with it, but not all—not by a long shot. Not with Svyer's goodness and the Trees watching out for us all so carefully. But I knew how sensitive a subject that still was for Ben, and even Kor, so I didn't say that out loud.

About time, Svyer teased silently. I was about to be overrun.

Then she shifted rapidly back into amáform and called out across the suddenly vacant space while raising her arms, "OK, hatchlings! Fly free!"

The "hatchlings" didn't need to be told twice. They raced across the space with shrieks of glee and burst through the part in the curtain.

Svyer's braid was frayed, her green clothes were rumpled and covered in a suspicious amount of gold glitter (I suspected a bit of cousinly mischief was at play there, which Ben could have simply washed off before coming to bed), and her eyes were tired, but she was grinning from ear to ear as I left Ben and came up to her.

Well, she said silently, perhaps for Lizzy's benefit, since my sister was standing nearby. I was about to ask you how we dramá did putting together our first "Christmas," but judging from those tears in your eyes, I'd say the answer is splendidly, isn't it?

I choked a laugh. Clearly, she was as humble as a Monarch's leftwing should be, too.

That didn't keep the tears from finally spilling over. "You know you did, you...you...."

At a loss, I trailed off and simply hugged her with all my might.

"Oh, come on," Svyer said, a bit of emotion in her voice as well, though she tried to laugh it off as she gently pushed me away a moment later. "You haven't even stepped inside yet."

"I don't need to. Even this is...."

I just shook my head. If I said anything else in that moment, my voice would crack. Instead, I said silently, *For the littles' sakes alone...thank you.*

Svyer just nodded with a soft smile. *Oh, the pleasure was all mine.*

“Now, go on,” she said out loud with a soft smile, putting her arm around my shoulder for a moment to turn me and push me forward.

Lizzy was still standing by the curtain, looking dazed. She had been by Svyer the whole time, not having run to fetch us—allowed beyond the barricade of Svyer’s tail even, perhaps because Svyer trusted her not to burst through before it was time.

“Hey, Lizzy,” I said with a watery smile, holding out a hand for her. “What’s up? You know you can go through now, right?”

Almost everyone else had by this point, including many of the lights. Only Ben and Svyer lingered outside with us.

Lizzy met my gaze with a nervous start. “Sarah,” she whispered as she took my hand, as if it were a lifeline.

My smile faded, and I tucked a stray lock out of her face. “Something wrong, Lizzy-loo?”

A term of endearment I hadn’t used in years but felt right at that moment. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” I finished with another attempt at a smile.

She looked up at me. Then she swallowed thickly, eyes wide. “Sarah...Santa is *real.*”

I stared at her. “Uh...what in particular brought this on?”

She swallowed again. “Svyer, uh—Svyer let us peek through the curtain—” “Just *one* peek, mind!” Svyer said to me in alarm, as if Lizzy had revealed a grave transgression on my leftwing’s part against the laws of Christmas.

Ben just chuckled. “Of course you did. Couldn’t resist giving them a taste, couldn’t you?”

Svyer folded her arms and pouted. “Hey, it was effective, wasn’t it?” While they bickered, I looked back at Lizzy. “And? What did you see?” I murmured, hoping that she would feel more comfortable telling me with them distracted.

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Her face firmed, and she said, “I saw—”

“SARAH!” Abby shouted with glee, bursting through the curtain and waving a clear orb with perhaps a hundred glowing specks of light floating inside, which swirled like snow in a snow globe as she shook it. “Look at what I got! And this is just one! You gotta come see! You gotta!”

Not taking no for an answer, she grabbed my hand and dragged me inside. And I gasped, thoughts of Lizzy driven from my mind.

Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw the room was decked out similarly to the Inner Rim, with helping lights scattering for light, but I could hardly take my eyes off the centerpiece: the tree, which was practically drowning in gold and red ribbons and strands of blue stars, and yet still scattered with all the paper ornaments we had so lovingly and painstakingly made. Most magical of all, helping lights had settled themselves throughout the boughs, replicating that warm glow we’d been craving so desperately better than any other (safe, non-fire-hazard) way we’d come up with.

Sure enough, Noah had been exaggerating...but not nearly as much as I’d thought.

It wasn’t the biggest Christmas tree I’d ever seen...but it certainly wasn’t the original one we’d set up, and it definitely was as big as the assembly room would allow. The very tip of the white star-topper looked like it was only a hair’s breadth from touching the possibly forty-foot ceiling, and the boughs of the massive, full evergreen stretched maybe twenty feet in diameter at the base.

Maybe. It was a little hard to tell with the giant mound of paper- and cloth-wrapped presents around it. Yes, not a *mountain*. But that stack must have been over three feet high. And it went in a complete ring around the whole tree.

“What...is all of this?” I whispered as Abby left me to dive back in.

“Don’t worry,” Ben said as he came up behind me. He put his hand on my shoulder and leaned down to whisper the rest in my ear. “There’re a few fun things for each of them, but most of that is practical, things they truly do need. Your parents approved every item on the list. Consider it another...bit of compensation, if it makes you feel better. Just one that’s a lot more prettily wrapped.”

“OK, but I have to know now,” I whispered, numbly reaching up to put my hand over his. “Just who *were* those donors?”

But my dad still heard, and he tilted his head back toward us slightly as if he didn’t know either—and wanted to as well.

“Almost all of them wished to remain anonymous,” Ben said carefully, rising and not looking at me or Dad.

Rachel had abandoned Kor in favor of diving in with as much glee as any of the littles, after giving him a good enough smooch I’d *heard* it behind me. So, Kor was looking satisfied as he came to my side and cleared his throat pointedly.

“I’ll give you a hint at who the four biggest ones were from the colors. Which, by happy coincidence, Jake said were perfectly appropriate for your holiday.”

Gold. Green. Red. Blue.

Blue for Kor, or at least his Starkissed *tol’lon* kin, who I already knew were numerous and, if not individually wealthy, could probably amass quite a bit of money collectively.

Green for Syver and her parents—the Peacegrowth Lord and Lady—and probably other “connections” she had with the Peacegrowth clan. I could well imagine many of them giving so generously, especially with in-kind donations of trees and other greenery.

Red...

Kolwin. It had to be. He had such an air of *noblesse oblige*, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had been born into wealth—and had been taught to give of it generously.

I sighed, but I could also understand. Who wouldn’t have been moved by a tender gift like Lizzy’s? And, once understanding the occasion, and potentially catching wind of a quiet fund-raising effort, why wouldn’t he want to contribute toward giving her a special day in return? And in making it a gift that was shared universally with the family, and keeping himself anonymous and apart, I felt like he had handled his gesture of gratitude and goodwill appropriately. I was sure Syver would have made sure of that, so I let that twinge of concern go and instead felt a rush of warmth and gratitude for the Strongshield Lord in turn.

But gold...

Ben glared at Kor for that revealing clue, his eyes flicking to me and away, which gave me the final confirmation I needed.

“*Ben*,” I whispered up at him.

It suddenly occurred to me that I didn’t know how much money I’d married into. A funny thing to realize several months into a marriage, but with most of our needs provided for by the Crowns and both of our stipends coming from separately handled budgets and deposited in separate gembank accounts, it simply had never...come up. Especially not in the last few hectic months, when it felt like we’d hardly had time to breathe.

I’d gathered that the Monarchs of the Six—now Seven—Realms were compensated much differently than on Earth, and I knew they were often chosen from the humblest among them. Both those things meant Monarchs didn’t necessarily have much wealth to their names, but it suddenly struck me that they still could. Even if they came to the position with nothing, they had practically no necessary expenses, so even a little income each month could accumulate to a lot over time, if one was careful.

And something told me very forcefully in that moment that both Ben’s parents had been careful...and had lived quite a long time.

Confirming all my suspicions, Ben sighed and then smiled at me. “Don’t worry about it, Sarah. I have more than enough to spare. And that’s while continuing to give as generously as Avva and Avvi did.”

He glanced away from me with a frown. “Many people...in my clan aren’t very well off. No one starves, thank Tree, but you don’t get rich off sand. Avva, coming from a poor, remote hold himself, never wanted there to be a great disparity between him and them, so he hardly ever spent on himself and gave away most of what he got. Or, at least, that’s what I always thought, and that’s what he and Avvi raised me to expect from them. But when he died, I found out they...still made sure that I...and the family I would have...would be well-provided for.”

He returned his gaze to mine, eyes soft. “And this is exactly the sort of thing they would have wanted me to use those funds for: providing for my *family*.”

I swallowed thickly, so overwhelmed with love and gratitude for that man, I didn't know what to say.

Kor helped with another cough, this time accompanied by an elbow nudge to my side. "Perhaps this is the moment to make use of another element of my discreet research into your winter customs."

When I only blinked at him, he pointed upward with a smirk. When I looked up, I burst out into a choked laugh, which made the tears finally spill over again.

"What?" Ben said in complete bewilderment, looking at the ribbon-wrapped sprig of leaves and berries hanging by a string. "Is that...icemint? I thought you all didn't have that on Earth."

"We don't," I said as I wiped my eyes, voice tight with laughter and emotion. "It's supposed to be mistletoe."

I glanced at Kor. "Figures *you* would find out about that one."

He just grinned at me. "Oh, Rachel was adamant that it was an absolute requirement."

And he was more than happy to oblige.

Ben frowned, staring upward, as if tradition were a puzzle he could unravel by looking at it. "But what's the custom Kor's blathering about?"

"Oh, I think you'll like this one," I said with a grin, wiping away the last of the moisture. "When a couple is caught underneath it, they're supposed to kiss."

Ben blinked at me, then back up at the "mistletoe." "Really? Why?"

I shrugged. "No idea, actually. But isn't that the way with a lot of traditions?"

Ben gave Kor a pointed look. Kor only shrugged. "Like Sarah said, I thought you'd appreciate that one. Especially when I so perfectly positioned it at the spot I knew Sarah would be standing when she would have no idea how to thank you."

I elbowed Kor for that.

Ben said to him, voice dry, "Be that as it may, why am I getting a feeling that you've maneuvered us into this position *before*?"

I huffed a laugh. Despite a repeat of Kor's blatant machinations, I wasn't going to pass on the opportunity any more than I had the first time. "Oh, quick overthinking this, Ben, and get down here and kiss me."

He looked at me and started to grin. “Well, if it’s because my Queen *commands* it....”

“It is,” I said imperiously.

“Then of course.”

He did one better than bending down to me. He scooped me up and brought me up to him, crushing his lips to mine.

And that day could have ended right there, right in that moment, and have been the sweetest, most wondrous Christmas I’d ever had. The Christmas in which I was given more than I could have ever asked for, more than it felt like I could take.

But there was one thing more.

Two things, actually.

“Ben! Sarah!” Abby squealed, her voice coming closer. “I found your presents! These ones are for *you*!”

That gave Ben enough of a start, he broke the kiss. “What?” he said, a little breathless. From the kiss, not surprise, though he looked plenty befuddled.

We both turned our heads to the side and down to see Abby impatiently waving two bundles at us, one in each hand. Both were about the same size and shape, thin and square. One had white linen wrapping and a silver ribbon tied in a bow at the top, the other had burned yellow linen strewn with metallic gold threads—the kind that Ben used to wear for his more formal Sunfilled uniforms before he’d transitioned to primarily black—and, oddly enough, a ribbon of a familiar emerald-green shade.

Syver, I thought immediately with a smile, glancing at her hair. It was a good match—slightly off, but close enough in my opinion. Surely it wasn’t always possible to find colors that matched exactly.

Ben seemed to be thinking the exact same thing as he cast a glare at his cousin while setting me down. Evidently getting *him* something hadn’t been in the plans.

At first, Syver was oblivious. She was sitting on the floor in the middle of unwrapped chaos, helping the twins figure out how to play with their new solaruses—which looked much more for entertainment than the informative variety

I'd always seen before. From just a glance, the activated one seemed to be projecting an interactive holographic *game*, which had both of my video-game-deprived brothers almost wild with excitement, no matter the simplicism of the "graphics" that harkened to classic arcades. The game she currently had on was eerily similar to Pong, with the boards on either side being manipulated by each hand, requiring Syver to use quick reflexes and intense focus to keep the ball bouncing from side to side.

Then, Ben must have sent something to her, because Syver twitched and missed one deflection, and the ball went sailing off and dissipated to nothing. Ignoring the boys' chortles and then exclamations of protest as the game flickered off entirely, she glanced at Ben in surprise, then at the gift Abby had shoved in his hands, her eyes widening.

She met his gaze again and shook her head in genuine bafflement. Ben frowned and transferred his glare to Kor.

Kor also shook his head. His eyes were gleaming, but this time with curiosity, and he raised his hand in protest. "Don't look at me. I knew your rule just as well as Syver did, and dared not bend it. The only one who would have is Lady Christmas, and I think we can rule her out."

"Let me guess," I said to Ben. "You ordered them not to give you anything."

"Today isn't about me!" he grumbled, blushing a little as he looked at the bundle in his hands. "Besides, I have everything I want already. I don't need more stuff crowding up my hoard."

"Oh, Ben," I said, smiling at him and shaking his head. "That's not the point. You give so much to everyone, all the time. Sometimes you need to let others give to *you*. If no one gave you anything after all of this, well...something wouldn't be right with the universe."

He sighed. I could tell I hadn't convinced him to accept the gift with grace, but he wasn't going to argue about it with me. Instead, he began examining the cloth-wrapped square for a tag. "But...*who*?"

I turned mine over but couldn't find a tag either.

Lizzy sidled up to me. She looked steadier than before, but her eyes were still wide and her voice was still quiet as she said to me, "Sarah, that's what I saw—"

But Abby butted in again. “Santa, obviously! Like I told you. Now come on, Sarah,” she said with a pout, poking the gift in my own hands. “Just open it!”

I shook my head and gave Ben a tired laugh. “Nothing for it but to just open them and see, I guess.”

Leading by example, because Ben still seemed reluctant, I pulled out the bow and slid off the ribbon and cloth, stuffing them in my pocket for later. They were both so pretty in and of themselves, I fully intended to keep them and use them in the future.

While I was looking down to stash the wrapping materials, I heard Ben inhale sharply. I glanced to the side and saw his gift still untouched in his hand. He was looking at mine—a beautifully stained but simple thin wood box with a sigil of a tropical flower and six circling stars engraved on the lid.

Kor whistled. “A Rondai original, is it? Well, *someone* thinks highly of you, Sarah. Her work was expensive in her day, but now that she’s gone and passed on her art to her granddaughter, Kolieri, they’re torched priceless.”

“Well,” I said, giving the box another polite look, this time handling it much more delicately. “It’s very nice—”

Kor snorted. “Not that, silly. That’s the packaging. *Open* it.”

“Oh, right,” I said, flushing. I flipped the clasp and swung the lid up. And gasped.

Inside was a necklace set in a deep green velvet bed: a thin and short but solid omega chain made of silver or white gold so pure and light-colored it almost glowed. The pendant was a star-shaped, pearlescent white flower surrounded by gleaming emerald-green leaves and with tiny gold gemstones set on gold filaments in the center.

“Ooo,” Abby said appreciatively. “Pretty!”

“Very pretty,” I murmured, hoping my expression was at least neutral.

I loved it at first sight. It was somehow delicate and yet had inner strength, elegant and yet simple enough I could imagine choosing to wear it for just me, just for pleasure, unlike with much of the finery my attendants put me in for formal occasions.

And yet, that was part of the problem. With that other stuff, I didn't mind so much that it clearly cost a fortune because it was a costume: something others put on me so I could play a part and then took away again—no more mine to store, maintain, and keep than any player's costumes were. Those things belonged to the White Crown and would be passed from one Monarch or consort to the next, just with alterations as needed to fit the current style. I'd felt much better about my wardrobe budget after Vadya had explained it all to me.

I wanted this necklace, for me, yet I could see that Kor was not exaggerating in the slightest about its cost. And now I wasn't certain I could accept it.

I glanced at Kor, opening my mouth to ask for another appraisal or at least a guess at the giver, but I stopped when I saw his expression. His eyes had narrowed on that flower.

“Wait a moment,” he murmured. “That...”

He looked up at Ben, and I followed his gaze. Then I blinked at what I saw.

Ben was as pale as a sheet. Paler than Lizzy had been when I'd jokingly told her she looked like she'd seen a ghost.

“It can't be...” he whispered.

Svyer had drifted over by this point, and she looked nearly as floored. “No...surely it isn't the.... It's just a copy, Ben. Or a sister, made at the same time.”

“Rondai didn't make any others like it,” Ben said dully, with his eyes never leaving the necklace. “And told me she never would. It was for *her*.”

He held out his free hand, which trembled slightly. He swallowed, eyes still on the necklace, and said, “May...I?”

I nodded, baffled and a bit alarmed at this point.

He picked it up from its bed so delicately, it was as if he were afraid it was merely a bubble that would burst the moment he did so. And yet it remained solidly in his hand as he lifted it. He carelessly handed his own gift to Svyer to free up his other hand, then ran his fingers over the silver scales of the chain, examining every link and every curve of the flower with an almost desperate intensity, until he finally turned the pendant over and gazed at something. I took

a step back and to the side, standing on my tiptoes to see something inscribed in Drona on the back, but I couldn't tell what.

But Ben read the words for me, even in a whisper. "For Avvi."

I inhaled as I finally understood.

Even so, Ben explained after another swallow, closing his eyes as he said the words. "I gave this to her the Summer Solstice before she died. I'd saved my Heir stipends for *months*."

Kor spoke with a small smile. He was clearly trying to lighten the mood, and yet his voice was perhaps the gentlest I'd ever heard him speak to Ben. "I'm shocked you had enough, even then, for a custom Rodai."

Ben gave a choked laugh, wiping at his eyes. "I didn't. And I wasn't trying for a custom, either. I just...Avvi had always loved Rodai—the woman, because they were friends, and her work—and when we heard she was fading...Rodai, I mean—we didn't know about Avvi yet."

Ben swallowed again. I took his free hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. He didn't look down, but he squeezed back.

He took a deep breath and picked up again a moment later. "I thought that could be my Solstice gift for her, if I saved up enough. One last Rodai. Except I didn't even get close to enough. I'd gotten the numbers all wrong in my head. So, when I showed up at her shop and saw I couldn't afford any of it...well, Rodai caught wind I was there and came out. Grabbed me just as I was about to run out in shame, asked me what I'd come there for. But she somehow already knew. And she had it done. *Already*. She said she'd just had a feeling.... So, she gave it to me. She took my little measly bag of gems, put the inscription I asked for on it, and gave it to me, in that box. When I think about it now, I don't think she'd ever sold one of her own works so cheaply in over a decade. But she just winked at me and said it was for Avvi. From her...and from me."

He had managed to keep his voice remarkably steady until those last couple sentences, when his voice cracked and eyes spilled over again. He let go of my hand and placed the necklace carefully back into the case so he could blot his eyes and nose with a handkerchief.

I wasn't doing much better, with a few tears of my own running down my cheeks.

Perhaps to take attention off Ben, Kor said conversationally to me as he gestured to the necklace, "This flower, you see, is common in the remote region of Ykran where she was from and was always her favorite—everyone knows that. It formed the basis for her sigil, and perfumes made from it are still popular today because of her. It's also useful for cooking. The dew has a subtle, sweet oil to it, and the beans can be ground for a spice."

"Oh," I said, trying to aid in the distraction endeavor. "Kinda like vanilla. Sorta."

Kor shrugged. "Perhaps."

"Well, if there *is* any parallel, Mom will be happy."

"Guys," Svyer murmured, coming up to Ben's side and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Please, I know you're trying to help, but you still don't understand. That's only half the story here. The other half is how in the *blazes* is that necklace *here? Now?*"

"Well, where was it kept before?" Kor asked. "Could someone have...."

Svyer just shook her head. But it wasn't the kind of shake that said "no" or "I don't know." Her eyes were too tight and misty for that, and she looked at Ben, as if for...permission. But Ben just looked down, face tight.

"Oh," Kor murmured.

His eyes widened and then narrowed as they fell on the necklace.

"Ben," I whispered, taking his hand. "It's alright. You don't have to talk about this now. We can move on."

He took another deep breath and shook his head, finally lifting it to meet my eyes again. Those golds were remarkably clear now, especially given what he said next. "It is...customary for the hearth family to place something of shared value with the deceased's ashes. She loved it so much...I chose that necklace. It was entombed with her."

I stared at him, breathless.

His eyes fell on the box in my hands. "And that case...was first burned with her."

Also customary, Kor sent me in a murmur, as if he couldn't help a scholarly footnote even in a moment like this. *Something to burn, something to remain.*

I swallowed, gripping the case. "So, unless this is a perfect replica...."

Ben nodded, eyes tight.

I just shook my head and breathed, "*How?*"

And would someone please, please give an explanation at once that didn't involve a disturbance of Ben's mother's final resting place for a trick as cruel as this one?

"Sarah!"

I looked in numb surprise to see Lizzy had stomped her foot. Gone were her paleness and uncertainty and even her typical shyness, even in the face of all the eyes that turned on her. "That's what I keep trying to *tell* you! *I saw Santa!* He was here! And *those* are the presents he was placing on top of the pile when I peeked through the curtain!"

She jabbed her finger toward the case in my hands and then toward Ben's present in Svyer's hands.

My mouth went dry. "*Santa?*"

"Yes," Lizzy insisted. "He had the robe and hair and beard and boots and everything. Except, well, um...."

She deflated a bit, as if the weight of all our blank stares was finally getting to her, especially given the incredibleness of what she had to say. But she kept pressing forward with almost desperate bravery. "Um...it was all gold. His robe and hair. And, honestly, from behind, at first I thought it was...I thought it was Ben. But then he turned and looked at me. And it wasn't. I mean, he was like Ben still, a lot like Ben, but he was a *lot* older, and his beard was bigger, longer. His hair too. Then he *winked* at me. And then...and then...he just...he just *disappeared*. Like that."

She snapped her fingers.

When she finished, none of us said anything for a long moment. Her shoulders sank, but she took a deep breath and lifted her chin, meeting my eyes right on. "I know it sounds crazy, but so does what you're talking about...about this."

She gestured at the necklace. "And...I just know what I saw."

“Of course it was Santa, Lizzy,” Abby chimed in firmly, coming to stand beside her in solidarity. “I saw him, too, in the dream I had *days* ago. He said not to worry about Christmas, that he and his helpers would take care of it. As I *said*, but none of you believed me.”

She folded her arms and pouted.

“It’s true.”

I started to see Dad finally joining our group, coming to stand behind Abby and Lizzy and placing his hands on their shoulders. He gave Abby a tender smile as she looked up at him. She beamed before giving in again to the allure of the presents and wandering back to the tree now that she was finally proven to be right once again. Dad let his hand linger on Lizzy’s shoulder.

To the rest of us, he repeated with the smallest of smiles, “What they both said is true. I saw...something of the same as they said it, just now.”

Lizzy let out a breath of relief and cast Dad a grateful look.

Silently, Dad added to the rest of us with a twinkle in his eye, *Even if...the truth could be interpreted another way.*

He looked at the necklace, then at Ben, smile fading, but only to something even softer and kinder. “Do not worry about it, Koriben. I feel all was done as it should have been done. I feel...she wants Sarah to have it. Don’t you?”

Ben finally let out a breath, so deep and shaking he might have been holding it. He nodded slowly. “Yes. Yes, I...do. Feel it. And want it too.”

“Are you sure?” I asked tentatively. “I mean, are you sure *you* want me to have it? Wear it? Won’t it...hurt?”

Ben huffed and picked up the necklace, smiling as he put it around my neck and did the clasp before I could protest. “Yes, I’m sure, Sarah. It was just...a shock all at once, but I’m sure. You always make everything...new. Not the same. But brighter and even better than before.”

He stepped in front of me and, for a moment, looked at the flower pendant sitting on my chest. His eyes glistened, but they otherwise remained clear. His smile was tender as he met my gaze. “Will you look at that? It could have been made for you.”

I laughed wetly and threw my arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Don’t thank me,” he murmured, kissing the top of my head. “Thank Avvi.”

“Alright, alright, that’s lovely,” Svyer said with a wet chuckle. She waved Ben’s present in front of us as we separated. “But now I am just *dying* to know what’s inside this one. So, open it, Ben, before I perish in suspense. Or do it for you.”

“That last bit sounds much more likely,” Ben said with a chuckle as he took the present. “But just in case, I’ll obey your command, O Lady Christmas.”

“Not you too,” Svyer said with a groan, casting a glare at Kor.

He raised his hands in protest. “Hey, if you don’t like it, don’t be such a tyrant about it.”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you.”

He put a hand to his chest. “I *embrace* the label of tyrannical mastermind, thank you. And may I remind you that I am even a King now?”

“Right. The day *I* call *you* ‘King’ without rolling my eyes will be....”

I’d tuned their quibbling into the background, because Ben, having had a little trouble with the ribbon, finally got the wrapping fully off. He let it slip from his fingers and fall straight to the floor as he froze.

“What is it?” I asked gently, coming to his side and putting my arm around his waist.

He whispered the answer. “Everything.”

I immediately saw what he meant.

It was a beautifully framed drawing, in a style I was coming to know well: one of Kavarian’s skillful and detailed realistic sketches, somehow bright and warm despite being uncolored. Except, if this was his, that meant the drawing was just as impossible as the necklace around my neck.

Because he could not possibly have drawn it in his mortal life. Not without being a seer like Dad.

It was of Ben and me...and his parents. Standing, as we were, now, with the Christmas tree and mountain of presents behind us, and helping lights floating all around, with Ben and me in the center, arms around each other, with Nyethra on my side and Kavarian on Ben’s, their respective arms around

us. It wasn't like a portrait photo, with everyone smiling at the camera. It was a candid moment of what could have been, with Ben kissing the top of my head, Nyethra beaming and playing with a bit of Ben's hair, and Kavarian grinning and winking at me. My free hand was on my slightly rounded belly, and my eyes were closed in bliss as I simply...smiled.

Ben was right. It was everything.

"Everything I ever wanted," he finished in that same whisper. He put his arm around me, just as in the drawing, and kissed my head.

I placed my hand on my belly, over our growing children, and as I closed my eyes...I felt it.

Felt *them*.

Felt their arms around us all.

And I smiled.

Because I was once again *home*.