

13 – Seeds of Trust

“Flowers?” Lucy asked.

Ganessa nodded. “Easier if I show you.” She looked, eyes wide and hopeful, to Elder Bek, who sighed and nodded.

“Go on then,” Bek said, waving toward the door. “You’ve taken over the meeting, you might as well.”

“I’m *sorry*, Uncle,” Ganessa cried, moving closer to the older man and leaning forward, nearly pressing her forehead to the floor. “My impatience—”

“Has always been a problem. Don’t worry, Ganny; I know you mean well.” Bek looked from Ganessa to the rest of them. “Lucy, thank you for taking the time to meet me. I’m afraid that I’m not as vital as I once was. I need to rest. Please continue your talks with my nieces and with Torfal, who commands the warriors of our clan.”

Torfal inhaled sharply and mimicked Ganessa’s bow, lowering his head to the floor. “I thank you for the honor, Elder Bek.”

“It is well earned.” Bek smiled, then faced Lucy. “Please take my earnest well wishes. If there is any way that you can aid with our plight, know that my people will be in your debt.”

Lucy, not really knowing exactly what the issue was, other than that some flowers were struggling to grow, simply nodded. It was her job, after all, to try to make friends with these people. Of course, her mind had immediately gone to Madi—who could be better to solve an issue with some plants than a Druid? “Of course we’ll try.”

As the others stood, so did Lucy, and then she waved one more time to Elder Bek before following Torfal onto the platform. He gestured to their left, and Lucy saw the only building in the community that wasn’t on stilts—a long structure with bright yellow wooden walls and an arched glass ceiling. “Our nursery,” he said, then held out his arms. “May I?”

“Oh, um, yes.”

Torfal leaned forward, and Lucy put her arm around his neck again, and then he scooped her up and dropped off the wooden platform. Her stomach lurched as his wings hummed, and then they were down, and he gently lowered her to the ground. It was only then, as Lucy looked at the yellow building from that level, that she saw the guards posted at the arched opening and at each corner.

She heard the thrum of wings and then the soft impact of their feet as Ria and Ganessa touched down behind her. Then Ganessa took her arm and gently pulled, urging her toward the building. “Our nursery houses the only soil we brought from our homeworld—even there, it is increasingly scarce, and we believed the System when it told us we could thrive on this world.”

“So we didn’t try to bring more,” Ria clarified.

“Should you be so loose with your tongues?” Torfal asked, his voice gruff.

“You heard Elder Bek,” Ganessa replied, straightening her slender form and drawing her shoulders back. “He trusts us to handle this matter.”

“Us,” Torfal emphasized. He looked at Lucy and ducked his head. “We are all a bit short of temper, and our communication suffers from a lack of sleep. Our time here has been harrowing.”

Lucy smiled. “I understand. Are you all related, then? You’re cousins?”

“Distant,” Torfal replied, “in my case. These two are daughters of Elder Bek’s brothers and will, Stem willing, inherit the Words.”

“We *will*!” Ganessa cried.

“Come, we’re imposing on Lucy’s time,” Torfal said, striding toward the nursery.

“As if we weren’t all walking that way,” Ria muttered, and Ganessa snorted softly.

The guards, armored similarly to Torfal, nodded in deference to the tall warrior as he strode through the arched opening. He paused there, waiting for Lucy, and then he gestured to the left and right, where Dondalli men and women attended long, narrow beds of dark soil. Plants filled the planters—delicate, leafless green stems, each adorned with a single flower.

The flowers were of every color imaginable, but what caught Lucy’s eye was the way they shimmered in the waning sunlight. The petals looked almost like they were made of glass, but when Ganessa pulled her closer, Lucy saw that each petal was spotted with tiny flecks of reflective minerals. “They’re beautiful,” she whispered.

“They tether our spirits to this world,” Torfal said.

Ria hissed, clicking her teeth together. Torfal shrugged at her, and she huffed a sigh and said, “I suppose if we want help, we must be honest.”

“We *are* desperate. Elder Bek—” Ganessa shook her head, looking at Torfal for help.

“We shield him from the worst of it. It was his decision to trust the System—to try to forge a new foothold on a foreign world for our people.” He shrugged. “We trust in his vision, but...”

When he trailed off, Ria whispered, “He’s not what he once was.”

Lucy licked her lips, fearing she was learning more about the Dondalli than she wanted to know. The truth was that she was nervous about how they were handing her so much information—so much *trust*. These were things she could use against them, and all she could think was that she was glad Vince wasn’t there.

She knew it wasn’t a fair thought; Vince had been willing to give the “invaders” the benefit of the doubt, after all, but she hated the idea that he or really *anyone* would try to use the Dondalli’s connection to their flowers against them. Even putting that aside, there was clearly a lapse in their leadership, and that, too, was knowledge that could be weaponized. Lucy didn’t like having it.

She cleared her throat, deciding to focus on the flowers. “So they’re not doing well here?”

Ganessa gestured to the nearby planter. “Our flowers must put roots into the native ground in order for us to thrive. They cannot sustain us with just this bit of soil in the planters. We tried to plant them, of course. We put several flowers into the ground with a generous amount of our native soil, but—”

“They wilted,” Torfal finished for her. “Five of our kin are near death from the experience.”

“Um, I’m sorry—maybe this is a rude question, but I’m trying to understand. Why are your spirits tied to the flowers?”

Ria giggled and squeezed Lucy’s arm. “It’s not rude....”

Ganessa nodded, looking into Lucy’s eyes. “I’m not sure how to explain the *why* of it. It always has been.” She looked at Torfal. “Has it not?”

He nodded, then he narrowed his eyes, tilted his head, and looked at Lucy. “Do your kind not plant your seeds when you are born?”

Lucy blinked, looking from the flowers to Ria, Ganessa, and Torfal. “Seeds?”

“Oh, *Stem and Petal!*” Ria cried. “How can she help if her people are seedless?”

Lucy held up a finger, shaking her head. “We may not be born with seeds”—she was beginning to wonder if the Dondalli were actually some kind of *plant*-person hybrids—“but we care about plants, flowers, and trees. In fact, I have someone in my party who has a very special relationship with a grove of trees. She might be able to do something about your flowers.”

“Truly?” Ganessa asked.

Lucy nodded. “Truly.”

“Then we should escort you to your people,” Torfal said, and even his voice was tinged with excitement.

“When we return, may I show you my flower, Lucy?” Ria asked.

“And mine!” Ganessa said, squeezing her arm again.

Lucy laughed, nodding vigorously. “Of course!”

With that, the three Dondalli guided Lucy through their settlement again, shooing away the children who rushed to inspect Lucy, often flying right in front of her for a better view of her eyes. The adults weren’t much different, calling out questions that Ria and Ganessa were all too happy to field—usually with an answer like, “*That’s the elder’s business!*”

When they walked out the gate, Lucy looked at the others and said, “I can move faster downhill. I’ll jog and you all can fly if you want.”

In answer, the three Dondalli’s wings began to thrum, and they lifted into the air—just a few feet—and flitted along beside her as Lucy began to run down the gradual slope, retracing her

earlier steps back toward camp. Even at that pace, the sun was nearly gone behind the western horizon before she caught sight of the flickering campfire.

She slid to a stop and turned to her three hovering escorts. "Do you mind waiting here while I speak to my party?"

She caught a nervous glance from Ria to Torfal, but the big warrior only nodded, his helmet gleaming in the fading light. "We will await you."

Lucy shifted her bow on her shoulder and said, "I'm sure we have guards posted on the nearby ridges, but if any monsters threaten you, just call out or whistle or something. We'll come help." She chuckled, shaking her head. "I'll try to hurry, but some of my companions like to talk."

"Of course, Lucy," Ganessa said, settling down to the ground as her wings slowed their rapid thrumming.

Lucy turned and jogged down the slope, rounding the ridgeline until she came face to face with Julio. He stepped out of the shadow of the hillside and said, "Are those them?"

Lucy nodded, wiping some sweat from her brow. "Yep. I think it's going to be easy to make peace with them. Um..." Lucy looked up the trail, then out over the Sonoran Desert to the west. "Can you keep a lookout while I go and talk to the others?"

He nodded, lifting his bow. "I was planning on it."

She smiled brightly. "Thank you!"

She found most of the others—Cary and Keesha were also out on watch—gathered around the fire. The odor of cooked meat was thick in the air, and Lucy could hear it sizzle and pop as the skewers of jackrabbit meat cooked.

"Lucy," Janice said, her deep voice rumbling out of the dark behind the fire's glare. Benny looked up from where he was tending the skewers, and everyone else turned toward her.

"Hey all," Lucy said. She walked to the fire and took one of the skewers from where it sizzled over the perimeter of coals—put there to keep from burning, she was sure. "I'm starved."

"Well?" Vince asked. "Are you going to tell us what you found out?"

She slid a piece of meat off the end of the skewer and blew on it, her mouth salivating. "Yep. Just let me finish this bite." She put the meat in her mouth and chewed slowly, savoring the juicy, salty bite. "Did Julio start this cooking?"

"Him and me," Benny replied, his voice practically a growl. "Eat all you want; we're stuffed."

Smiling and licking her fingers, Lucy sat down in front of the fire. "Well, apparently our new neighbors are in a little trouble." She focused on Madi. "And I think *you* might be able to help them."

She ignored questions and repeated attempts to interrupt her—mostly from Vince—and carefully told the tale of her visit with the Dondalli. After a few minutes and a dozen more bites of meat, she said, "And that's when I came back to camp. Now...any questions?"

Of course Vince spoke first and loudest, “So you’ve already made an agreement without us?”

Lucy sighed, shaking her head. “I told them I’d try to help. If you don’t want to...” She shrugged.

“Of *course* we will!” Madi cried, jumping to her feet. “I have to see these flowers!”

“Now hold on,” Denise said, pressing both hands downward. “I’m not saying I’m against helping, but we ought to *think* about this. Are we sure these people are, well, *good*?” She shrugged.

Lucy clambered to her feet, ready to leave with Madi right then and there, but she supposed it was a reasonable question; the others hadn’t met the Dondalli, so they hadn’t seen their facial expressions or heard the intonation of their words. They hadn’t tried that special *apple juice*! She couldn’t help smiling at the thought as she replied, “I think they’re good, Denise, but why not come along and see for yourself? I saw their little kids and the way they treat each other—they’re not monsters.”

Denise stood, pushing herself to her feet with her metal staff. “Good enough for me. Let’s meet them.”

Vince was still scowling, but Lucy could see he was struggling to find an objection. He’d spent the trip out there talking—as he liked to do—about how he wanted to advocate for people, about how the “settlers” deserved the benefit of the doubt. He couldn’t very well tell Madi not to help them. So, when he stood and said, “Can I come, too?” Lucy wasn’t surprised.

“I don’t think we should overwhelm them,” Denise said.

Vince bristled. “It’s just four of us if I come!”

Lucy waved her arm, turning to lead the way. “Come on. Four is fine.”

Madi was already starting to walk, and Lucy hurried beside her. “Do you think you’ll be able to help?”

Madi looked at her, lips pressed tight as she considered her words. After a moment, she nodded. “I think so. I can help things grow, but my magic’s a lot weaker when I’m not in my grove. There’s...” She hesitated, looking over her shoulder at the others, then she started to speak and stopped again as they walked past Julio.

“Going back up?” he asked.

“Yep!” Lucy replied. “Keep the others safe, okay?”

“You got it, Luce!” His chest visibly puffed up, clearly quite pleased that she’d put the others’ safety in his hands. Lucy looked away so he wouldn’t see her smile. When they were a few paces beyond his post, she looked at Madi. “Go on—out with it!”

Madi reached into her coat pocket and took out a handful of dried, blue-streaked, yellow seed pods. “You know what these are?”

Lucy laughed. “I *should*; they’re all over the settlement right now. Mesquite seeds.”

Madi nodded, smiling. “I can, um, I can kind of extend my grove if I plant some of these.”

Lucy's eyes widened. "Like in the Dondalli settlement?"

"Yep. Of course, it would give me a lot more power there, but it would also be a risk to me—having a piece of my grove so far away from the Mother Tree. If someone were to cut them down or burn them or..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

"So, you get something out of it, but it would also create more risk for you?"

Madi sniffed, stuffing the pods back into her pocket. "That's right. When I got the spell, the System pretty much said exactly that. It's a way to expand my power—to let me influence more area—but, yeah, if I can't defend the trees, there's a risk."

Lucy nodded, her brow furrowed in thought. She didn't want to encourage Madi to do something dangerous, but she also thought it might be a worthwhile risk. If the young Druid *saved* the Dondalli, and if her trees were what kept their flowers healthy, then there was no way they wouldn't defend those trees. Of course, there was probably a simpler solution...

"What if we just have them move to the mesa?"

"Would that be wise?" Vince asked, apparently listening to their conversation. "Can we sustain every population that's friendly? Would they be happy with our customs? Would *we* be happy with theirs? They are from another world, let's remember."

Lucy shrugged. "We can think about it; besides, it may be a moot point. They might not *want* to live on the mesa."

She put her arm on Madi's shoulder and pointed up the hill. "They're right up there. You'll see; they're really nice. Anyway, don't worry—none of us will make you do anything you don't want to do."

Madi laughed, shaking her head. "That's the problem—the idea of saving a bunch of people by helping their flowers grow? I'm afraid you'll have to convince me *not* to do it!"