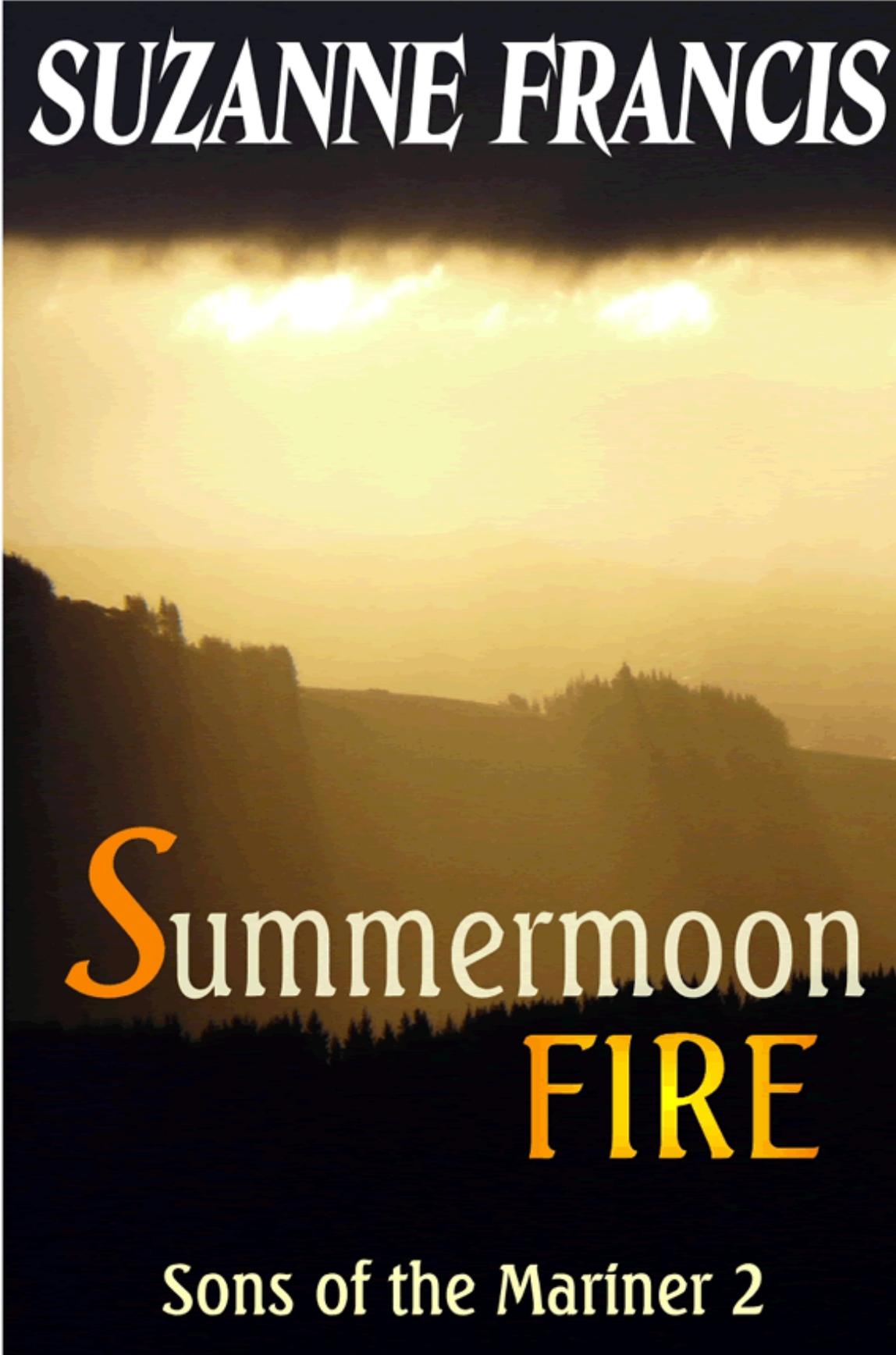


SUZANNE FRANCIS



Summermoon
FIRE

Sons of the Mariner 2

SUMMERMOON FIRE

SUZANNE FRANCIS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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First published by Mushroom eBooks in 2011.

This Edition published in 2011 by Mushroom eBooks, an imprint of Mushroom Publishing, Bath, BA1 4EB, United Kingdom

www.mushroom-ebooks.com

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Chapter One

SUVI

The first step is admitting our addiction.

Sobriety Partnership Handbook

The shadows in the kitchen had once been frightening, but now they were her friends. Huddled with her — enveloping table and chairs, cupboard and stove — they helped, in their silent way, hiding the filthy floor and the food-crusting dishes stacked in the sink.

Suvi Markku stared at the empty glass in her hand. “One more, then I will get to work. I have a lot to do, don’t I?” *One more...*

Tom’s words came back to her. “It’s always one more, isn’t it, Suvi? One more before you study for your entrance exams, one more before you clean the house, one more before you come to bed.” He had snatched the bottle from her hand and thrown it into the sink. “No more! That is what I say. Do you hear me, Suvi?”

She had heard the precious liquid dripping down the drain. “I’ll try, Tom, really I will. It’s just...”

He was already putting on his coat, reaching for his keys. “Just what?”

“I get so lonely here by myself. Why do you have to work so many hours?” She got up and crossed the kitchen, walking a little unevenly. “Stay here tonight, please? We can put that Tommy Dorsey record that you like on the phonograph and dance. I love dancing with you, Tom.” Her feet tangled with each other, and she staggered forward, only just catching herself against the countertop.

He gave her a withering glance. “I have to go to the hospital and check on some patients. Don’t wait up for me.”

She held out her hand, wordlessly begging, but he turned on his heel and left. As soon as the door slammed, she staggered to the sink, determined to rescue what was left of her bottle.

Now, Suvi filled her glass again. The rich, ruby-red port looked almost like blood. *Why shouldn’t she have a drink or two if she wanted?* It warmed her; made her forget her loneliness and her failure to adapt to the strange land to which Tom had brought her. He was always busy at the hospital — he hadn’t even tried to help her fit in.

Another swallow washed away the stab of guilt she felt inside. *Tom worked so hard... For her. So that they could leave this shabby flat and buy a house somewhere. So they could afford to start a family.*

Suvi let her head sink down on her crossed arms. The shadows pressed close, offering their comfort.

A tap at the window brought her head up. She stared at the indistinct image through the fly screen. "Ludde!"

She stood; careful, this time, not to move too quickly lest she lose her equilibrium. Suvi paused for a moment to straighten her rumpled clothes, then opened the door.

Lut waited on the step and peered past her into the darkness. "I thought you might not be home. Why are all the lights off?"

Suvi shrugged. "Nothing to see. But, anyway, come in, please." She brightened as he crossed the threshold. "I'm so happy you came to visit me. Do you want a drink?" She swayed to the cabinet and fetched him a glass.

He sat opposite her at the table, and she pushed the bottle over to him. Lut poured himself a splash in the bottom of the glass. "*Dagsanat!*" he said, as he raised the port to his lips. Two swallows, no more, and he had finished.

Suvi took much longer.

Lut studied her wavering image through his glass. Her dark brown hair had grown thin and straggly since the last time he had seen her. "How are you, girl?"

She smiled cheerlessly. "Fine. Very fine. Happy as a degum in a rette's nest. Can't you tell?"

He frowned. "No, I can't. Where is Tom, anyway?"

"Out. He's always out." Suvi reached for the bottle.

Lut beat her to it, and moved it beyond her grasp. “Good. Then you and I can have a chat.”

“Just like the old days, eh? You and I used to be the best drinking buddies, didn’t we?” Suvi gave him a lopsided grin. “We left no bottle of *poteen* untouched. I could drink you under the table then, too.” She reached again, further, and he placed the bottle between his legs, on the chair. Suvi frowned. “Why did you do that? I’m thirsty.”

“Because I want to talk to you, not watch you get drunk.”

“I’m not...” An idea formed in her mind. She glared at Lut suspiciously. “Did Tom put you up to this?”

He watched as she upturned the glass, her tongue hungrily seeking the last drops. “To what?”

“Another lecture about my drinking. Because if he did, you are wasting your time. I’ve heard it all before.”

Lut sighed. “I didn’t come here to lecture. But I won’t deny I am worried about you.”

Her voice gained a belligerent edge. “Why? I just told you I was fine.”

He changed the subject. “How did you get on with those tests you had to take? The ones to see if you could go to nursing school. Last time I came to visit you were studying for them.”

Suvi stared at her hands. “I... failed. All of them. But it wasn’t...”

“Your fault?” Lut’s face was grim. “You always say that, Suvi.”

“It’s true! I had to learn English first. No one else in the room had to work as hard as I did. And Tom wouldn’t help me, not at all.”

Lut shook his head at this. He had seen Tom patiently drilling Suvi on her English vocabulary many times. “So now what? What will you do?”

“I can try again in six months. This time I am sure I will pass them.”

“Are you? Have you started studying again?”

She blinked slowly. “Yes, of course...” His blue eyes bored into hers. “I mean, no. But I plan to. Tomorrow. Honestly.”

He didn’t say anything.

Anger made her gut feel as though it churned with broken glass. “Why did you come here? Why don’t you leave me alone? I’m doing the best I can. But it’s hard.” Suvi put her face in her hands and sobbed. “It’s so hard...”

Lut stood quickly, forgetting the bottle. It fell to the floor and spilled, making a dark red puddle amongst the dust and food scraps. With a cry, Suvi dropped to her knees, scrabbling under the table.

Cursing, he dragged her upright again. “Leave it! For the gods’ sakes, girl, it doesn’t matter.”

She struggled against his arms, then suddenly went limp. Suvi buried her face in his chest. Her words were quiet, muffled through his cable knit sweater. “Take me back...”

“What?”

She raised her head, and her amber eyes blazed with desperate need. “I said, take me back. To Severnessa. Your house will still be there, by the ocean. We can live together. I’ll help you catch *pikken*...” Her voice trailed away as she felt his sigh.

“Suvi... It isn’t that easy.”

She pounded his chest with a closed fist. “But we are married! You made a vow to take care of me. Remember?”

The shadows swirled around Lut, reminding him of the past. His own battle with alcohol. Suvi had been there, in Severness, and had tried to help him, just as he was trying to help her now. But he had found his reason to sober up on another world, in another time.

Jane...

Suvi pulled away from him, as though she had read his mind. “Oh, I see. You have your doctor lady to think about. No time for stupid Suvi, not now. You don’t care if I am happy or not...”

“Stop it! How can you be happy in all this darkness?” With an angry cry, he grabbed her arm and dragged her through into the tiny lounge.

Lut switched on the light. This room was even messier than the kitchen. An ironing board took up one corner, surrounded by baskets of unwashed laundry. Aluminum TV dinner trays and filmed-over cups of coffee littered the low table. A threadbare settee and chair hunched around a dusty television set. Lut watched the ghostly image of Lawrence Welk cavort across the screen. “My gods, girl. How can you live like this?”

She cleared a space on the settee and flopped down, then stared at her bare feet. “Humph. You should talk. Your house in Ayedeen Beach was far worse. I should know. It took me all day just to clean out one corner.”

He sat down beside her, and then took her hand. “Fair enough. And you know why — ’tis the drinking. Makes you blind and deaf to the things and people you should be caring about.”

Suvi frowned. “I’m not that way. I have to do everything around here. Tom is always working.” She leaned close to Lut and laid her head on his shoulder. “I get very lonesome sometimes.”

Lut sighed. “Is it any wonder? You never go anywhere. Why don’t you try and make some friends?”

Her voice was devoid of any emotion. “I did, in the beginning. When Tom first started at St. Luke’s, he used to invite the other doctors over for drinks and dinner. From the kitchen I could hear them asking questions about where I came from and why I couldn’t speak English properly. Someone cracked a joke about a dumb *Polack*, whatever that is.” Bitterness crept in. “Their wives were so pretty, with fancy clothes. They wanted nothing to do with a peasant girl like me.”

Lut grabbed her arm, and held it up before her face. “Look at this tattoo! It says you are a Harp, the highest of the bright realm.”

“That was in Severness,” she argued dully. “Here, I am like a Dog or a Snake. Even though people in A-merica don’t mark themselves with Soli, they still stick to their own kind.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in that rubbish?”

“I didn’t. I mean, I don’t... In Carina, I managed to get everyone to work together. But that was only because of the War. Once it ended, they went back to the same old thing again.”

He patted her hand. “At least you tried. You kept a lot of folk at that shelter from starvation, Suvi. You should be proud.”

She brightened a little. “We did have some fun there, didn’t we? Remember Brini, with her endless pots of stinky cabbage soup? And you, bringing us more *pikken* than we could eat?”

Lut laughed. “The children loved their *kaapjies*, didn’t they?”

With a wistful sigh, she continued. “And the dances. I believe that was my favorite part of all. We made music with washboards, jugs and string. But somehow it sounded so wonderful.”

“And you with your yitar,” Lut added quietly. “What happened to it?”

Her smile faded. “I left it behind. I left everything behind, really.”

They sat for a long time, each lost in memories of the past. Lut finally broke the silence. “Suvi... There is an organization, called Sobriety Partnership. Jane told me about it. At first, I didn’t want to go, but then...”

Suvi sat forward and swept four of the TV dinner trays to the floor. Underneath lay several stained SP pamphlets and a schedule of meetings for Cloudy Bay. “Is this what you are talking about? Tom brought these

home from the hospital three months ago. I should have thrown them out with the other rubbish.”

Lut kept his voice very low. “He only wants to help you. So do I.”

She leaned back and tucked her knees beneath her faded skirt. “Oh yes. Everyone wants to help poor Suvi.” Her golden amber eyes did not warm her bleak expression. “If you truly want to help, then take me back to Severness. I’d *be* happy if I was there with you.”

“I... can’t. I would do anything for you, Suvi. But not that.”

Her head settled on his shoulder again. “Then stay with me, just for tonight.”

Lut inhaled sharply. “Tom is my oldest friend. I couldn’t possibly...”

Her hand crept across his chest, like a needy spider, and then began to move downwards, towards the brass buttons of his dungarees. “I’m not married to Tom. You are my husband. I want you.”

“Why did you run away from me then? You left the ring I gave you behind, remember?”

“I made a mistake,” she insisted softly. “A big mistake.” Her fingers fumbled with his belt buckle. “Let me make it up to you, right now...”

He threw off her hand and stood. “No! That isn’t what you need.”

She stood too, and walked around to face him, then reached high to wrap her arms about his neck. “Ludde, please... I’m so lonely. What difference will one night make?”

He looked down on her face, hesitating, half drawn in by her plea. Suvi stood on her toes and brought her mouth to his, and twined her fingers in his long blond hair. His hands crept around her back, suddenly pulling her closer. After a moment, he let his arms drop, then pushed her gently away. “No, girl. It wouldn’t be right. Not now.”

She stood before him, lips parted, cheeks blazing. It took a few seconds for her to catch her breath and then she slapped him, hard. “Not... now? What in the hell does that mean?”

Lut put a hand to his cheek and wearily rubbed the sting away. “What you and I had was in the past, on another world. It is over now, do you see?” He looked over the top of her head, into the distance. “I am going to ask Jane to marry me. That is why I came here tonight. I wanted to tell you first.”

She didn’t hit him again, though he had tensed, this time, to stop her. Instead she asked, “Does your doctor lady know that you already have a wife? Will you explain that to her, before you propose?”

His gut contracted, even though he had told Jane the truth, long ago. “What are you saying?”

Now her eyes glittered like golden daggers, though she tried to make her voice sound innocent. “Nothing. And I’ll keep saying nothing, as long as you do as I ask.”

He backed away, shaking his head. “This is 1952. I live more than half a century away from here.”

“But I know how to get there, Ludde. I could find her. Tell her the truth. We *are* married. You know it, I know it, and soon Jane...”

He could leave, right now, and never return. Her empty threats did not move him. But that she should be so desperate for companionship... *I owe her this much, don't I?* Lut sighed. “All right. I will stay with you, just this once — if you are sure Tom won't be back.”

She smiled triumphantly. “Oh yes. I am sure. He sleeps in the rooms reserved for the interns almost every night now.”

Lut didn't bother to ask why. “Suvi?”

She was already removing her blouse, her fingers clumsily struggling with the pearl buttons. “Yes?”

“You won't see me again. After tonight. Do you understand?”

She shrugged and turned away, slouching towards the shadowed hallway. “Make me a fresh drink, will you? I'll be in the bedroom.”

* * * *

Six weeks later, Suvi sat once again in the kitchen, an open notebook before her. She wrote rapidly in her neat script:

November 27th

Another week has passed. My monthly cycle has always been a little irregular, but now I am very late. I don't think there can be much doubt about it — I am pregnant. Ludde wore a rubber, but even though we

were very careful, it must have failed. I suppose I should feel ashamed, but I don't. Not at all.

Suvi took a long swallow from the glass of milk in front of her, and then made a face.

I'll have to take much better care of myself — starting right now. No more wine! I'll eat all the right things and go to bed early every night. I want everything to be perfect for my baby. Everything.

She looked up, and chewed the end of the pen thoughtfully.

Tom says we can't afford a family yet, but now I am having a baby he won't be able to stop it from happening. I'm so happy. I will have something important to do, something no one can take away from me. And I won't be alone anymore.

Suvi nervously drummed her fingers on the table, wondering what Tom would say when he found out.

How am I going to convince him that the baby is his? We haven't shared a bed in months.

She sat at the table, sipping the milk, as the sun poured through the dirty windowpanes. Tom had stopped by earlier, to collect some clean clothes before heading back to the hospital for the early round of surgeries.

“Will you be back tonight?” Suvi had asked him.

He looked uncertain. “I have a lot of paperwork to catch up on...”

“Bring it home with you, Tom. I’ll make something special for dinner. Please? We haven’t... eaten together in ages.”

He wouldn’t promise her anything. “I’ll try.” But he did give her an unexpected kiss on the cheek. “Bye, baby.”

Suvi touched her cheek, remembering. She stood, resolutely, and put the empty glass next to the sink, which overflowed with dirty dishes. She emptied it and then filled the bowl with hot water and suds. After finishing the mountain of dishes, she tackled the filthy floor with a mop and bucket.

The sitting room yielded a second pile of dishes. Cursing cheerfully, Suvi gathered them up, and did another round of washing up. Then she collected the washing baskets and staggered down the outside stairs to the basement-level laundry room. After finding dimes and soap powder, she left four machines running and headed back up the stairs.

The clock on the wall said 12:15. Time for a quick nip of..

“Milk,” she told herself firmly. Suvi had another glass of milk and a peanut butter sandwich. Then she ran the carpet sweeper over the gritty floors, and dusted the television. The Guiding Light was on, and she briefly paused to watch as Bert Bauer cried, sitting at her kitchen table. Suvi grimaced, then turned the switch so

that the picture disappeared into a small white dot in the middle of the screen.

She had more important things to do today than watch other people's troubles.

By three o'clock she was worn out from all the unaccustomed activity. Suvi donned her shabby coat and a scarf, then trudged down to the market, wishing she still had the motapede she used to ride in Severnessa. During the war, she thought nothing of working eighteen-hour days, keeping the shelter running by sheer force of will. She had *cared...* Nothing since then had mattered overmuch.

Until now. Now she had a baby growing inside her, everything was going to be better.

Suvi lifted her head and walked a little faster. The market had been daunting when she first came to Cloudy Bay, but now she navigated the crowded aisles with ease, ignoring the unkind whisperings of the women behind her.

Let them talk about her funny clothes and funny accent. Soon she would have someone who would love her just the way she was. *The baby will be a boy. I will name him Benjii, after my father.*

Suvi checked her wallet and then selected two pieces of steak from the butchery counter. The meat would blow her food budget for the rest of the week, but it didn't matter. Tonight she would make all Tom's favorite dishes, put shining candles on the table, wear her prettiest dress.

He would want her, just as he used to. When they first came to Cloudy Bay, she couldn't wait for him to come home from the hospital. He would step through the door, smiling, call her *pretty Suvi* and, more often than not, carry her off to the bedroom for lovemaking, even before dinner. They were like greedy children, feasting on each other instead of strawberries and cream.

She shook her head sadly. *What had happened?*

"Afternoon, Mrs. Finn." The checkout girl's sharp eyes took in everything and found it wanting. "Celebrating something?" She spoke slowly and distinctly, so the foreign woman before her could comprehend her words.

Suvi kept her voice low. "No, no... Just getting some things for dinner."

The girl glared. "What was that? I can't understand you."

"Never mind. How much?"

That, at least, got through. "Five dollars and sixteen cents." As Suvi dug to the bottom of her purse, hunting for another dollar, the girl added loudly, "I hope you realize that we don't offer credit here, Mrs. Finn. Cash only."

Suvi handed her the money, grabbed her bags, and strode away, mortified.

The girl called after her. "Hey! You forgot your change..."

Dinner was ready at six. Suvi sat at the table, nervously awaiting the sound of Tom's tread on the stairs. At six-fifteen, she went back into the kitchen, poked at the

steak, simmering in rich dark gravy, then tossed the salad again.

A bottle of wine stood open on the counter, next to a single glass. *Maybe I'll have just a little before Tom gets here. One tiny glass wouldn't hurt, would it, Benjii?*

Her right hand reached out eagerly, almost as if it had a thirst of its own to quench. Suvi used her left to slap it away. "No! No more drinking."

At seven, Suvi picked up the phone and dialed the hospital. The operator answered crisply. "St Luke's. How may I direct your call?"

She had never tried to call Tom before, not when he was working. "Hel.. Hello. I want to speak to Dr. Thomas Finn, please."

The smooth voice did not falter. "Could you repeat that please?"

"*Tom.* Tom Finn. I want to..."

"Hold, please."

She waited. After a moment, efficient words poured from the earpiece, like ice water. "Dr. Finn has already left for the day. May I take a message?"

"No. No message... When did he leave? Can you tell me?"

"Did you ask me when?"

"Yes."

Another pause. "He signed out at six o'clock. Are you sure you don't want to leave a message?"

Suvi hung up.

At eight fifteen she ate, her teeth tearing at the tough steak by the dim light of the guttering candles. The salad had gone soggy, and made a wilted lump on her plate.

Where was he?

Angry tears slipped down her cheeks, and she used her cloth napkin to wipe them away, and blow her nose. Then she took her half-finished dinner back to the kitchen and dumped the plate in the sink.

The bottle of wine still stood there, invitingly.

This time she had poured half a glass before she could stop herself. Suvi took the wine and settled on the couch. The glass felt warm and smooth in her fingers, like a baby's cheek. *Benjii will have blond hair — just like Ludde's — and his blue eyes too. Tom will never know the difference... He and Ludde look enough alike to be brothers anyway.*

They *were* related, in a confusing way that Ludde had tried to explain to Suvi long ago. Tom had been born on this world — Earth — but he had once been alive somewhere else. A long way across the gyre, in a place called Yr, Ludde said, and Suvi hadn't understood that at all.

"Something like my home?" Suvi had asked.

"A little. But Nunabind, where you come from, is much smaller." His blue eyes had grown bright. "There are so many different worlds scattered through the gyre — like fish in a sea. Strange beyond any imagining..."

Suvi drifted off to sleep, the untouched wine still clutched in her hand.

When Tom let himself in, about midnight, he was exhausted, and a little drunk. He stumbled blindly through the kitchen and into the shadowed lounge. Suvi still slept, with her knees curled up. He stood, watching her for a moment. She looked younger somehow; pretty in a way she hadn't for years.

Tom reached over, intending to shake her gently by the shoulder, but when he saw the dark stain on her dress his face hardened. He spoke harshly "Get up... Go to bed and sleep it off."

She jumped awake and rubbed her eyes. "Tom?"

Suvi stood and the wine glass that had upended itself in her lap while she slept fell to the floor and broke.

"For Christ's sake, Suvi. Can't I come home for once and not find you passed out?"

She bent to pick up the pieces. "I haven't touched a drop all day!"

"Don't lie to me. You stink of wine."

"It spilled! I didn't drink it." The stale smell of beer and cigarettes washed over her as Tom took off his jacket and loosened his tie. "Where have you been? I had dinner all ready at six o'clock."

He spoke over his shoulder as he headed down the hallway. "I *told* you I might have to work late. I ate in the hospital cafeteria and then went back to my desk."

Suvi closed her eyes, not knowing what to say. After a moment, she followed him into the bedroom.

Tom sat on the edge of their bed, stripping down to his t-shirt and boxers. He looked up as she paused in the

doorway. “Did you do something to your hair? It looks different.”

She nodded uncertainly. “I wanted things to be nice for you when you got home. I’ve been cleaning and cooking all day. That’s why I fell asleep on the couch.”

He gave a guilty sigh and patted the bed beside him. “I’m sorry I jumped on you like that. Whatever you made for dinner will keep, won’t it? We’ll eat it tomorrow. I’ll come home early, I promise.”

“I guess so...” She sat down, close by his side. “Tom... I wanted to ask you...”

He pulled off his socks and wiggled his toes. “What? Do you need more housekeeping money?”

“It isn’t that. Couldn’t we... start our family? Now? I’d be so much happier if I had a baby to look after.” Her unbound hair formed a dark shroud around her face as she hung her head.

Tom frowned. “We have to save enough for a down-payment on a house first. You know that. How can we possibly raise a child in this crummy apartment?”

“Why don’t you ask your father if he...”

He stood, the slump of his shoulders sullen. “No! He hasn’t been in touch since I shut my practice in Litchfield. We could have stayed there like he wanted me to, bought a big house on the river, but you said...”

She rose too, and faced him. “I don’t care about a big house, I told you! I want a family. Please...”

Tom looked at her worriedly, wondering where this sudden desire had come from. When he didn’t answer her right away, Suvi sighed and turned from him. She

wandered back up the hall, and into the kitchen. He heard a few dishes rattle as she tidied away his untouched dinner. Tom's eyes brushed against the familiar confines of their room, noticing for the first time the row of freshly ironed shirts in the wardrobe. She had tidied the dresser, swept the floor, even changed the bed linens.

I've been cleaning and cooking all day...

Tom wadded up his shirt and threw it at the empty hamper. *Gods, he was such a bastard.* He closed his eyes, thinking back to half-past five.

Rich Stanley had squeezed into his tiny office. "Hey Tommy-boy, coming for a drink?"

Tom bent over his desk, wrestling with a mound of paperwork that threatened to submerge his inbox. "Not tonight, buddy, I have a lot of notes to catch up on, and I promised Suvi I'd be home early."

Rich put his meaty hand down on the file Tom had just reached for. "Come on, Tom. It's a cocktail party for our newest staff member. Have you met her yet?"

Tom pulled the file away and uncapped his fountain pen. "Her?"

"Yeah, man. And what a her." His voice grew husky. "Built like a sweet little two-door coupe."

Tom laughed. "Down boy! I guess I had better come along to protect the lady's honor. But I'm only staying fifteen minutes."

The party had gone on much longer than expected, but once Tom made the acquaintance of the newest staff

member of St Luke's Hospital, he hadn't thought to look at the clock.

Remorse made his chest feel raw, every new breath like sandpaper. *Why had she chosen today, of all days, to turn over a new leaf?*

As the melancholy sound of Chet Baker's trumpet drifted down the hall, Tom ran his hand across his crew cut, feeling the ache building in his temples. He was going to have one hell of a hangover in the morning.

He got up, drawn by the music, and walked barefoot down the hall. Suvi stood in the middle of the lounge, waiting for him. Tom crossed the room, determined to tell her the truth, but she smiled and raised her arms, misunderstanding his intentions.

"Why thank you, Dr. Finn. I'd love to have this dance."

He couldn't refuse her.

Tom and Suvi moved slowly in time to the music. The musky scent of her hair and the pressure of her breasts on his bare chest woke a need, and he pulled her closer. Suvi had her head on his shoulder, but when she felt his arms tighten she raised her chin. Her eyes looked like golden lamps, searching his face, trying to find her way back.

He brought his mouth down to hers, pressing hard — hurting her — but she didn't pull away. Tom swept Suvi up in his arms and walked back to the bedroom, ignoring the voices that shrieked and shrieked in his head, telling him that it wouldn't help, that it was all too late.

He put her down, and tugged at her dress. She pulled it off, without taking her eyes from him. The question was there, still unanswered.

She lay back on the bed, and he threw himself on top of her, pressing his pulsing erection between her thighs, waiting for instinct to throttle the life out of his unhappy thoughts.

“Tom...” she whispered. “Put a rubber on. You don’t have to...”

He spoke, almost harsh. “No. If this is what you want, then I want it too.”

But it wasn’t really what he wanted at all.

Chapter Two

TESSA

The disappearance of the Irrayan has been a contentious subject amongst anthropologists. We guess far more than we know for certain.

Dr. Theodore Black, *A Study of the Irrayan Belief in Yannfar*

“Would you like some sangria?” Tessa Kivelson pushed aside poster board and markers, and passed a plastic jug filled with sliced citrus fruit and wine across the picnic table as Jane sat down on the bench.

Jane shook her head and pointed to the bottle by her side. “No thanks. I’ll stick to water.”

Tessa shook her golden curls and gave her best friend a wry smile. “My goodness, Dr. Piper. You are taking your responsibilities very seriously these days. Just because Lut can’t have any...”

Jane adroitly changed the subject. “Love the new deck. Jakob has done a magnificent job on it. And don’t forget, I’m Dr. Armstrong-Piper now, swabbie.” She

laughed as she looked at the wide gold band on the third finger of her left hand. “I still can’t get used to it being there.”

“Me either.” Tessa sighed and took a sip of sangria, then went back to work with the markers.

Jane bent her head to see what Tessa was making. Her dark hair fell down into her eyes, so she tucked it behind her ears. “What are those signs for?”

“I need to rent out a few more of the cottages.” Tessa had cut fish-shaped pieces of poster board, and now added her contact details with a wide black marker.

“Very cute,” Jane observed. “But why are you so keen to rent them all of a sudden? Don’t they usually fill up by the end of the summer anyway?”

Tessa looked vague. “Oh, you know. I’m trying to fix the place up, and that takes money. But I didn’t ask you here to rattle on about me. I want to hear all about your honeymoon.” She looked a little enviously at Jane’s trim legs, exposed by a pair of white shorts. “You got a great tan on the boat.”

Jane stared over the railing of Tessa’s deck, to the rocky shores of Cloudy Bay, where a tall man stood next to a pair of fishing rods. The wind stirred his long blond hair as Lut turned and waved, somehow sensing her eyes upon him. Jane gave him a dreamy smile. “It was... fantastic. We flew straight down to Aruba after the wedding. Lut had already organized a twenty-six foot yacht for us to cruise around the islands. All we had to do was sign a few papers and we were off.”

“That’s a pretty big boat. Weren’t you worried about crewing it with only the two of you?”

Jane shook her head, her brown eyes warm with pride. “Lut knows everything about sailing. He is an amazing teacher too. So patient. By the time the two weeks were up he had me trimming the sails just like a pro!”

Tessa’s voice was curiously flat. “Sounds like absolute heaven. You must have been sorry to go back to work last week.”

“Not really... I enjoyed the break, but we have so many things we want to do here, I was looking forward to getting back too. The closing on our farm is coming up in less than a week and then we have to visit the sale yards in Franklin to see about some stock. I can’t believe we’ll soon be living on a hundred and twenty acres with our own flock of sheep and lambs. Did I tell you the farm is called *Nant y Dafad*? That means valley of sheep in Welsh. How cool is that?”

Tessa gave Jane a sidelong glance. “So Lut will be running the farm, while you keep your pathology practice? Do you think that will work?”

“Why wouldn’t it? Lut has been studying animal husbandry for the last three years at Tech. And his mother kept stock on the island he grew up on.”

“It just seems like such a huge venture...”

Jane gazed fondly at her husband’s broad shoulders. “He’s a big boy. I think he can handle it.”

Tessa gave a delicate sigh. “I just worry that he is pushing you into something you might not be ready for.”

“Pushing me?” Jane broke into laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

“Don’t you know how many times I had to ask him to marry me before he finally agreed?”

Tessa shook her head in surprise.

“Three times. Once for each year we have known each other. He kept saying he had to get himself straight and find a job. I told him it didn’t matter, I’d be perfectly happy to pay the bills while he did what he needed to do, but Lut insisted we needed to wait for the right tide before we launched our boat together. I was totally shocked when he finally got down on one knee to ask for my hand.”

“Oh really? How... *quaint*.”

Jane frowned, and gazed at Tessa’s face intently. “What gives?”

“Nothing... I... What do you mean, Jane?” Tessa’s eyes visited the depths of her wine glass.

“You just seem kind of depressed or something. Worried about the beginning of term? You are full Professor Kivelson now, assistant head of Anthropology. That’s a pretty big promotion. Are you having opening night jitters?”

Tessa shrugged. “I’ll be teaching all the same classes, except for a new one on the Irrayan culture.”

“Well, what’s eating you then?”

She forced a smile. “Nothing much. I’m fine, and so is...”

Jakob pushed open the kitchen door and stuck his head out. “Tessa? Where are you?”

“Here, at the picnic table. With Jane.” Tessa jumped as the screen door slammed behind him. A pair of great egret, that had been expectantly watching Lut fish, took to the sky with a rush of snow-white wings.

Jakob strode across the deck and around the house, to the sunny side facing the bay. “Must be nice,” he growled to himself when he saw Tessa’s wine glass. “I thought you were going to help me?”

Jane stared at him, thinking, as always, how alike Jakob and Lut were. But whereas Lut looked relaxed and happy after the honeymoon, Jakob’s face was tense, his eyes clouded, as he hovered impatiently, waiting for Tessa’s answer.

She slid over so he could join her on the bench. “I will, I promise. After Jane goes. I haven’t seen her in ages. Come and sit down with us and have some sangria. You look like you could use a break.”

He turned away, shaking his head. “No, thanks. Someone has to take responsibility for the important stuff. I guess it will have to be me.”

Jane called to his retreating back, “Hello, Jakob. I missed you too.” Her frown redoubled as the screen door slammed again. “Okay, Tessa. Out with it. What’s up with Mr. Shorts-in-a-twist?”

Tessa didn’t answer her right away. *What was wrong with Jakob?* She wondered if his brother’s success in adjusting to their new home bothered him more than he let on. Lut had gotten a driver’s license, finished a couple of years of school, and made more than enough money to split the down-payment on the farm with Jane.

Jakob, on the other hand...

“He just doesn’t seem to fit in here, Jane. I’ve tried and tried to get him to learn to drive, but he’s happy with that crappy ten-speed he found on someone’s trash pile. And he won’t get a proper job.” She sighed in frustration. “Don’t get me wrong. He isn’t lazy or anything. Captain Romine says he is great on the *Damsel*, and he gets paid plenty for helping with the charter fishing tours, but...”

Jane waited, sipping her water. “But?”

“I just wonder if he is deliberately trying not to put down roots...”

“In case he is only passing through?” Jane finished for her. “Come on, Tessa. Jakob adores you. It’s obvious, even when he is being a grumpy jerk, like now. What are you supposed to be helping with, anyway?”

“He is looking for Suvi’s mirror.” Tessa smiled sheepishly. “I stashed it away somewhere, to keep it safe, and now I can’t remember what I did with it.”

“Why? I thought we were through with all that mess.” She looked suddenly fearful. “Maybe he has seen a Poly...”

Tessa shrugged. “I think he would have told me if he had. But something is bothering him. About a week ago, he started asking me about the mirror. We looked around all the places I might have put it, with no luck. Now he’s clearing out Suvi’s storeroom, in case it got in there by mistake.”

“Has he found anything interesting yet?”

“A big dusty pile of old books. Oh, and a weird box with carving all over it. Remind me to show it to you when we go back inside.”

“But no mirror?”

“No,” said Tessa, softly. “No mirror.” She watched as Lut’s rod dipped, and he snatched it from its holder in the rocks. With practiced ease, he began to reel in the line, playing the fish on the other end.

Jane jumped up. “I’d better give him a hand. Back in a second.” She vaulted the deck railing and landed gracefully on the sand.

Faint sounds of banging and cursing drifted out of the open kitchen window of Sea Drift. Tessa looked behind her and grimaced, then reached for the wine again.

Jane and Lut made a perfect tableau with the setting sun behind them. She held the net as he hauled in the spotted sea trout that had struck at the bait. Lut said something to Jane, and she threw back her head in a shout of laughter. He disentangled the fish from the net, gently removed the hook from its mouth and returned it to the Bay. Then Lut curled a massive arm about Jane’s waist and lifted her off the ground, into a long kiss. Tessa exhaled noisily and looked away.

She was deep into her third glass of sangria by the time Jane rejoined her on the deck. “Sorry about that.” She grinned. “Funny, I always thought fishing was so boring. But with Lut...”

Tessa interrupted, a little huffily. “What was wrong with the fish?”

Jane had subsided into dreaminess again. “What? Oh. That one wasn’t big enough to keep. Doesn’t matter though. He’s already caught three for supper. Want to help me clean them?”

* * * *

Later, around midnight, as Tessa lay in bed beside Jakob, she asked him, “Are you going to keep on looking for the mirror tomorrow? We’ve just about torn apart the whole house.”

Jakob rolled over and looked to the ceiling. “We haven’t even started on the attic yet. You might have put it there when you packed away all the Christmas decorations in January.”

He kept his voice light, but Tessa saw unspoken tension in the line of his jaw; the flicker of his eyelids. “I really don’t think I did. But... Why do you want the mirror so badly, all of a sudden? I mean, if we can’t find it, then no one else can either. Why not let it rest?”

She could feel his body stiffen, though he wasn’t touching her. “Something like that shouldn’t be left unguarded, Tessa. Even though we believe that Tristan is no longer a threat, there might be others who want the mirror. I just can’t forget about it.”

“Others?” Tessa did not try to disguise the nervousness in her voice.

“Maybe. If that looking glass is the last shard of Geya’s mirror then it would be worth a great deal — to some people.”

“Who in the world is Geya?”

He turned again, and faced the wall — addressing his answer to it rather than Tessa. “One of the Amaranthine.”

“The beings who made Tom’s knife?”

“Yes.”

Tessa felt his interest in the conversation winding down, like a nearly spent hourglass. She tried to restart it. “Was your father one of them? An Amaranthine?”

Jakob took so long over his answer that she gently touched his back to see if he had dropped off. He hadn’t. “Dad’s grandmother, Eydis, raised him and his elder sister Gytha after their parents drowned. Eydis also ruled the Amaranthine for many turns of the Gyre. So I think he grew up surrounded by their influence. But later, when he found his own strength, and became the Mariner, he refused to have anything to do with them. Even after they asked him to be their new Stavebearer.”

She hadn’t expected such a flood of information, and she found it a little disturbing. In the three years they had been together, Jakob had spoken only rarely of his past. Now she wondered what had changed and what else he would be willing to tell her. “Why not? If they were his family, I mean?”

“I don’t think he felt that way about them. He never knew his parents and Gytha married and moved away when he was very young. Ma, Pop, and us children were the only family he cared about.”

She leaned closer, using the darkness between them as a confessional. “But to have all that power, and not be

tempted to use it... He must have been an extraordinary man, Jakob.”

“I guess so. I didn’t think of him in those terms when I was with him. He was just plain old Dad. But now I understand him a little better, I guess. All he wanted was a simple life on Asaruthe with the people he loved. As long as he had that and an ocean to sail on he was content.”

Her worries swarmed back. “And what about you, Jakob? Are you content?” Tessa held her breath, waiting for his answer.

He sighed to the wall. “You know I am, Tessa. It’s just...”

I won’t interrupt. I’ll wait and listen to whatever he has to say. Nevertheless, after a minute had passed, and Tessa’s lungs had begun to burn, she exhaled and said, “Just?”

The ghosts of the past, long unspoken, now made the room feel crowded. “Lut might be happy to loaf around here, but I believe there is another battle waiting. And the Gyre won’t be safe until we fight it.”

Maybe he has seen a Poly...

Tessa sat up suddenly and tucked her arms in front of her shins. “You would tell me... If you had seen something or had some warning. Wouldn’t you?”

Another pause. Another reassurance delivered to the wall. “Of course. Absolutely.”

* * * *

Jakob slept restlessly, as he had for the last week, beset by troubling dreams and visions. He could see Tessa, waving frantically from an open window. She seemed gauzy, no more substantial than the net curtains that billowed in the stiff breeze off the bay. “What’s wrong?” he called to her. She shouted something back, and her expression spoke of its urgency. But he couldn’t hear her.

Silence filled him — lonely silence — the silence of loss; of regret.

He struggled forward, through an unexpected hail of shingles and wood. A brick hit him square on the top of his head, and he staggered forward, and a little to the left; gap shifting without meaning to. The familiar rush of nausea hit him hard, far harder than it did in real life.

Was this a dream?

The fear subsided, and Jakob looked about him. A dream... Where was he? High trees reared their leafy crowns, touching the clouds; the impossibly blue sky; perhaps even the stars. Crenellated boles, bark like shaggy velvet, scented of cinnamon and ashes. Shafts of grass as green as jewels filled the spaces between his bare toes.

Rythis.

He wanted to call Tessa’s name, to bring her here with him, warm and alive. She was his anchor and his harbor, as solid as the rocky cliffs of his island home, Asaruthe. His mouth opened. He shouted until his lungs hurt.

“Where are you? Maia!”

No. Tessa. It was Tessa he wanted.

He tried again, with painful concentration. “Maia!”

His voice would not obey him. *Wake up*, he told himself. *Wake up before you say it again*. To call a thing, say its name thrice.

His mother’s other husband, whom he had called Pop, had told him that, long ago. Pop, who had forgotten more than most men knew. *Say its name thrice...*

Why should it matter? She was dead. But the sense of impending dread that filled him said otherwise — said it mattered very much.

His diaphragm tightened, preparing to push another sound from his larynx. The word echoed in his brain, bouncing from side to side, bent on escape. *Maia, Maia*. He clawed at his temples, trying to rip the reverberation from his mind.

Teeth and lips parted. Jakob put his hands over his mouth; tried to stop himself from saying anything else aloud. The sound built, like a whirlwind, from the bottom of his chest cavity. The pressure tried to suck his tongue back down his throat. Mmmm...

It became his prayer, his mantra, and finally — his release. “MA...AI...A!”

“Jakob!”

The earth shook.

“Wake up!”

No. It was he who shook. Shook and staggered. Somehow she caught him, held him upright, though he weighed far more than she.

“It’s all right. I have you. Sit down here for a moment, until you get your balance back.”

Would his voice betray him now? “T... Tessa? Where am I?”

She lowered him gently into a chair. “In the kitchen. You’ve been sleepwalking, Jakob.”

He frowned. “Sleepwalking? I don’t do that.”

Her exasperation didn’t quite hide the worry in her voice. “Well, obviously you do. Because you were, just now. Are you ready to come back to bed?”

“Let me get a drink of water first.” His throat hurt, as though he had been screaming. The dream clung to him, like a cold sweat, making him shiver.

“I’ll bring it to you. Get back under the covers, love. Your hands are like ice.”

He let her mother him.

Later, as they lay together, huddled under the safety of Suvi’s oldest woolens, Tessa asked, “What were you dreaming about? Do you remember?”

What could he tell her? That he had dreamed she was a ghost? That he had called and called for his dead lover? These thoughts made him pause long enough to draw a sigh from her lips. “Just forget I even asked you. It doesn’t matter.”

He decided on a lie. “I wouldn’t mind telling you. But I don’t remember much. Only waking up and finding myself in the kitchen. Did I... say anything?”

She lied too. “No. You didn’t.”

He could hear the catch in her voice, and it made him suddenly afraid. Jakob reached out to her, and pulled her closer. She came willingly, and pressed her body against his side. Even this didn’t erase the surety that

time, their time, flowed as a swift moving stream. Soon they would be submerged, fighting for air; fighting to stay together. “Ach, Tessa. I love you. More than anything. Don’t forget that, even if...”

Tessa always asked questions, but this time she kissed him instead.

* * * *

The next day, Tessa stood before the lectern in her classroom at Bay Tech, trying not to yawn. A class of ten mostly eighteen to twenty-year-old undergraduates scribbled furiously in their notebooks as she began her first lecture of the spring term.

“Welcome to Anthropology 205, people. Which, as you should know by now, is an overview of the history and culture of the Irraya tribe of Native North Americans.”

Tessa’s interest in the Irraya was longstanding, begun when she was a freshman undergraduate, sitting where her students were now, in this very classroom. She remembered gazing starry-eyed at her lecturer, Dr. Theodore Black — in awe of his encyclopedic knowledge of the tribe’s social structure and advanced technology. It had been Ted’s baby, his passion, and he had drawn her into it as surely as he had lured her into his bed as a sophomore.

She shuddered at the thought.

Nevertheless, she had pushed hard to teach this class, offered for the first time since Ted Black’s disappearance three years ago. The fact that Tessa had been the last person to see him alive bothered her still.

A student in the back row raised his hand. “Dr. Kivelson? Is it true that the Irrakish worshipped a God unlike any other of the local indigenous populations? Wasn’t it some kind of winged being?”

Tessa frowned. She hadn’t planned to cover the tribe’s religious beliefs until much later in the term. “Some anthropologists believe that to be the case, yes. But no concrete evidence has ever been found.”

He did not seem satisfied with this. “Dr. Theodore Black was one of those anthropologists, was he not?”

At the mention of her former fiancé, Tessa’s cheeks reddened. Her answer came out very clipped. “Dr. Black’s ethnology papers are available at the Beckwith Library. You can read them yourself.”

“But you studied under him. Surely you are quite familiar with...”

The other students in the class began to murmur as Tessa cut him off. “If you wish to discuss this further, you will have to see me after class. Now, if you will all please turn to page 43 of your books, we can see by the population distribution graph...”

The rest of the hour passed without further interruption. After the requisite groans of dismay when she announced the reading list and assignments for the next lecture, she dismissed the class.

He waited until the rest of the students had filed out, then approached her lectern. Tessa looked up, impatient to be on her way, home to Sea Drift. When she had called the roll, the man before her had answered to the name David Aaron. He looked a good bit older than the

average student — maybe forty. Something about the width and straightness of his shoulders shouted ex-military, and his dark hair was very short.

“Well?” she said brusquely, when he didn’t speak. “What can I do for you?”

“I’d like an answer to my question. About Dr. Black. I was under the impression you knew him well.” He met her eyes boldly. His were grey, like the hair at his temples.

Tessa tried a distraction. Talking about Ted still upset her, a little. “Dave, is it? Is this your first semester? I haven’t seen you in any of my classes before.”

“David.” He folded his arms at this and waited.

Tessa cleared her throat. “I did study with Te... Dr. Black. So did a lot of other students. I’m not an expert on all his interests. You should talk to Dr. Spiller, the head of department. She...”

“You supervised the excavation out at Anenoa State Park, didn’t you? His holy grail?”

Tessa decided that she had had enough. She stood up straight, though that left her well below the level of her inquisitor’s chin. “I have another lecture to prepare for at the moment, Mr. Aaron, so we will have to continue this at another time.” She gathered up her things, expecting him to leave.

He didn’t. “When?”

Tessa flushed, now thoroughly exasperated. “When what?”

“When would be a good time to continue?”

She snapped, “My office hours are two to four-thirty on Wednesdays and Fridays. I will be available then to answer questions that have *direct* relevance to the class.”

He smiled, revealing the space between his front teeth. “Very well, Dr. Kivelson. Perhaps I will see you on Wednesday afternoon. Bye.”

* * * *

“...and then he just strolled out, as nice as you please.” Tessa sat in a café with Jane, close to the hospital. She took another sip of her cappuccino. “I just don’t get it. Why was he asking about my relationship with Ted? I got the impression he knew a lot more than he was saying.”

Jane looked skeptical. “Like?”

“He called the Anenoa project ‘Ted’s holy grail.’ Only other people in the department called it that, behind Ted’s back, of course.”

Jane laughed softly, wondering what the insufferably priggish Ted would have said if he had known. “Come on, Tessa. Don’t be paranoid. I’m sure the guy is just curious. A lot of people knew about your engagement, off the record.”

“Yes... But what about the winged man thing? I can’t go putting him off all semester about that. I never told anyone in the department what I stumbled into, that day in the cave. Maybe this Dave guy suspects something...”

“How could he?”

“I don’t know. The whole thing just has me spooked. Afterwards I asked Margie, our department secretary, about him. She said he was a new enrollment, tested out for credit on all the first year classes and got special permission to take my course without any prerequisites. He put his hometown down as Cherubont, New Hampshire. I checked — there is no such place. So he must be hiding something.”

“Lighten up. That could be a typo. Anyway, he might get busy with his other classes and never even show up at your office.”

Tessa’s voice rose to a wail. “He isn’t *taking* any other classes. Only mine.”

Jane frowned and offered a distraction. “Why not save your energy for more important things — like helping me plan my house-warming party? Lut wants to spit roast a whole pig in the back yard, can you imagine?” She launched into an enthusiastic description of the menu.

Tessa sat silently while Jane spoke dolefully about the farmhouse, and the lack of facilities in the kitchen. “No dishwasher, no microwave, no convection oven, no...” She stopped when her companion tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. “Oh, what? Am I boring you?”

“Of course not. I didn’t... sleep well last night. Jakob was very restless.”

“You really should buy a bigger bed, Tessa. I did, once Lut started staying over. Six foot six takes up a whole lot of mattress, and I need my space.”

Tessa smiled. “Do you really think I could fit a California king-sized mattress in my house?”

Jane shook her head. “No. I’d forgotten about the walk-in closets you call bedrooms. Why don’t you get Jakob to build you an extension? If he isn’t working a full-time job he should have loads of time to...”

Tessa’s worried expression redoubled. Jane said, “Okay. Out with it. Did you have a fight last night? About the mirror?”

“No... We did discuss it, but he wasn’t angry anymore, just really, really worried, for some reason. Then, after we went to sleep, something strange happened. Jakob started thrashing around on the bed like he was having a bad dream. I poked him a couple times, but he just rolled out of bed and stood up, with this weird expression on his face. Sort of stunned, and fearful. I could tell he wasn’t really awake.”

“He was sleep-walking?”

“Well, yeah. At least, that’s what I told him afterwards. But actually...” Tessa used her teaspoon to bring up the last of the froth from her coffee mug, then licked it thoughtfully. “After a few seconds, Jakob sort of staggered forward and then disappeared. He gap-shifted, Jane. In his sleep.”

“No way. What did you do then?”

“Sat in bed, feeling terrified. I mean, you never know where you might end up, doing that. He isn’t nearly as good at navigating the continua as Lut is — or me, for that matter.”

Jane started to look worried too. “But he came back? He was all right?”

“He came back, yes, but as for all right...” She sighed. “I heard him banging around in the kitchen, about five minutes later. He was muttering a few words over and over to himself. ‘Don’t say it,’ or something like that.”

“Must have been one hell of a nightmare. Did he remember anything about it?”

Tessa shook her head as she threw down the teaspoon. “I sort of wish I didn’t either.”

“Why?”

“Right before I got to him in the kitchen, he threw back his head and yelled out something. I practically wet my pajamas.”

“What did he say?”

“It sounded like a name; like he was calling for someone.”

Jane’s voice was teasing. “I hope it was you.”

“No... I think it was *Maia*.”

Her eyebrows shot skywards. “Maia, as in the tragically dead former wife?”

Tessa nodded despairingly. “What if he still has a secret thing for her? It would explain a lot. I mean, I only have his word for the fact that she is even dead.”

Her friend snorted. “Why would Lut and Jakob have been feuding for all those years if she was still alive? It wouldn’t make any sense. He is probably carrying around some unresolved feelings for her. Given the traumatic nature of her death and the fact that he found

her body, who wouldn't? Just give him time, Tessa. I'm sure he will deal with it in his own lovingly asinine way."

Tessa couldn't shake the feeling that time was the one thing that they didn't have. "I hope you are right, Jane. I truly do."

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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About the author

Suzanne Francis believes the inspiration for her writing lies in her chronic travel sickness as a child and young adult. While growing up, she happily participated in many family and school trips, though riding in the back seat of a car often left her suffering from nausea for hours on end. To help pass the time, she began telling herself stories, serialized over many days and weeks, often featuring the landscapes through which she was traveling. These imaginary adventures, along with an enduring love of books, sparked her interest in writing.

After earning her BA in Geography, Suzanne worked in many fields, from urban planning to migrant farm work, dishwashing, retail management and massage therapy. She has drawn on these experiences and a lifelong interest in travel to create the unique characters and settings of her novels.

Presently, Suzanne lives in rural Dunedin, New Zealand with her husband Michael and four children. She is the author of six fantasy/romance books, including the four volume series “Song of the Arkafina” and the two volumes of “Sons of the Mariner”.

<http://suzannefrancis.wordpress.com/>

Books by the author

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