Coming of Age

Alfrieda

Alfrieda trudged across the fields, looking at the gardens grown by her agemates. All beautiful, all thriving. She got to hers and sighed. Weeds were everywhere and insects had eaten the leaves of several seedlings. "Better get to work then, before anybody else sees this."

She had come out here while everyone else attended morning prayers, or else slept late after revels the night before. But since she had almost no chance of being accepted into the tribe next year, she felt no need to worry about prayers, and she was never invited to the revels. There was no need for her to hide her exploits in the fields - everyone already knew that she couldn't work the magic to keep her garden healthy and safe - but her pride wouldn't let her admit it openly. Honestly, she didn't mind the work.

Being out under the open sky and getting her hands dirty as she pulled out weeds and thinned the seedlings brought her a feeling of serenity and peace that she never found in the company of the others. Maybe it was because she wasn't born here in Hinngarth, or maybe she just didn't get along with other elves; she'd never had the opportunity to find out. She had met elves from neighboring villages and other parts of the world, but had never spent enough time with them to find out if she would fit in any better there.

As she finished weeding the first row, a sparrow landed by her knee and cocked its head, looking at her expectantly.

Alfrieda wiped her hands on her apron and smiled "Sorry, but you know I don't have any more seed. I planted it all over a month ago."

"You can't blame me for asking, now can you?," the bird quipped. Alfrieda was glad no one else was around. Most of the others didn't take very well to her conversing with animals when they couldn't hear anything but a chirp.

"You could always take some from the other gardens. Some of them might be going to seed already."

"You know I can't."

"Yeah, I know."

It made Alfrieda bitter to admit it. "They've already woven the magic over them, and no one - bird, beast, or even human - can disturb them now. They'll get perfect sun and perfect rain, no insects will bother them, and only enough seedlings will sprout as have room to grow." She spat this out with more venom than she realized, and sighed.

"Hey, but thanks for not eating my garden, at any rate. It's something"

"We do what we can for our friend."

"I know. You don't think you could ask the bugs to stop eating my leaves, do you?" He laughed a bright, high laugh and said, "Now that is something you have asked before, and you know I can't do it. They don't understand the feathered speech any more than your foster family does."

"I know." She returned to weeding, and after considering her for a few more minutes, the sparrow flew away.

The sun rose higher in the sky, and still Alfrieda worked in her garden. She had moved on from weeding to staking up some of the taller plants. She hoped to create some kind of an arch, as the other students had done. Theirs were done with Weavings, of course, but maybe that didn't matter. Maybe what mattered was how beautiful the end result came out. That was all she could hope for.

Children of Hinngarth began learning the Weavings at a young age, first with the simple task of balancing rocks in precarious towers against gravity, and later progressing to living things like the gardens. Weavings formed the basis of their society, and everyone had to prove their abilities before they could be welcomed in the Coming of Age ceremony. The accepted method to prove oneself was by growing a garden in the traditional way. The methods employed by people outside - weeding, watering, thinning, pruning, or any other physical method - were looked down upon. Instead, complex Weavings governed every detail of the endeavor - protecting the plants from drought, heat, insects, weeds, and even crowding. That was what everyone Alfrieda's age was doing right now. Everyone but her.

Alfrieda had never been able to master even the most basic Weaving. No matter how much she focused, she could not detect - much less control - the threads that govern all. At first people had thought she was just a slow learner, or stupid, but she never made any progress in Weaving. The adults accepted her ineptitude with puzzled silence, but the other children were less forgiving. It hurt, not having any friends her own species, but she was used to it. As long as they accepted her into the village, it would be all right. Once she was an adult member of the community, no one could doubt her any longer.

Alfrieda stayed out in the field until the time of dinner had passed, but that was nothing unusual. No one even looked askance when she walked in as the dishes were being cleared from the table. She had been in her own room for some time when a knock came at the door, and her foster mother walked in.

"Alfrieda, we need to talk." The concern in Elska's voice was evident, but Alfrieda didn't hear it.

"Yes, foster mother?" She knew that hurt Elska, when she called her "foster mother," but she didn't care. Not right now.

"You know the requirements for entry into the village. What has to be done before the coming of age ceremony."

"Yes. I do," she snapped curtly. Elska sighed. "The Elders have spoken. As much as your garden looks beautiful, we all know how you did it. It wasn't with the weaving, but with your bare hands. And while they admire your dedication...." She trailed off.

"They're not going to pass me." Tears glistened as she looked up to meet the gaze of the only mother she had ever known.

"They wish to, but they do not see how they can do so without abandoning our traditions." Her eyes held sorrow, but remained dry. "If there was any other way open to them, they would take it." She turned to leave the room. "I'm sorry," she said, and added so quietly that Alfrieda was never sure if she truly heard it, "my daughter."

Alfrieda lay on her cot for hours, the possibilities of the future lying dead before her. She had never truly believed she would be accepted into the village at Coming of Age,

but she had also never believed that she would not. Each option was as unthinkable as the other. How could they not allow her entry in full village life? She had lived here since she was a babe, found outside on the first day of spring so many years ago. Her foster mother had had no children of her own, and had taken her in. She had raised her as one of them. But she never really was one of them, though she tried her hardest to pretend. The adults never commented on her differences, but the other children made sure that she knew her place. She was too clumsy to weave the tapestries her people were so famed for, and too dense to weave the tapestries of the earth to protect the plants. There had been no presence at her naming, as if even the village gods had refused to accept her. She wept into her pillow long into the night.

Finally, she climbed out of bed and went to the forest, where she always found comfort and respite. In the darkness, the village seemed so peaceful, so beautiful. Night was the only time when she could appreciate the majesty of her adopted people. The buildings were tall and graceful, held aloft by powerful weavings. The stained glass of the temple, the only building illuminated at this hour, shone out over all. Alfrieda sat down and stared at it, looking in at the beauty from without, as always.

A low voice whispered, "What pains you, my child?" Alfrieda turned to see a familiar hawk perched low in a tree. "Nothing. I just couldn't sleep. That's all."

The bird hopped closer. "That is not all. Why do your eyes water? They only do that when you are sad." Alfrieda wiped her eyes vigorously, as if to hide the evidence. "You have confided much to me before. Why do you hide now?"

Finally her reserve broke and she poured out the events of the day. All her pain flowed out. "All that work, and I'll never belong. Never. Not here, not anywhere," she concluded.

"Don't say that, child. The world is a bigger place than you know."

"I've spent my entire life here. If I can't belong here, how can I ever hope to belong somewhere else?" The hawk tilted her head. "If you haven't looked, how can you know that you will not find what you seek elsewhere?"

"I just know," she replied glumly, staring into the night.

Alfrieda did not go into the fields the next day, nor the one after. In fact, a full week passed during which she failed to attend to her garden. She spent some time in the forests, collecting herbs and talking to the animals that only she could understand, and some time reading, or making jewelry, one of the few crafts at which she showed any aptitude at all. But most of all she waited for the inevitable news that she would not be able to participate in Coming of Age that year: that she would likely never be able to become a full member of the community.

As she sat at her beading, a tall elf robed in swirls of blue and purple strode into her room. "The Council of Elders requests your presence," he stated. She expected the worst as she followed him towards the meeting hall.

While not as imposing as the Temple, the meeting hall was still one of the tallest buildings in the village, and Alfrieda could only imagine the Weavings that had gone into its making. She shuddered as she walked down the cobblestone path and under the arched entryway, with its complex carved knotwork and real vines intertwining in harmony. If only she could work such Weavings, she would be safe and accepted.

The thirteen council elders sat impassively on the bench, behind which hung tapestries of such splendor that legend told they had taken generations to make. They depicted the harmonies of life in the village in symbolic form, and were the most prized possessions of the community at large. Each child, upon his or her Coming of Age, was granted symbolic ownership of one part of the tapestry.

Alfrieda approached the elders, trembling under their stern disapproval, and waited for them to acknowledge her.

An older female elf looked at her with pity and said, "I imagine that you know why we summoned you."

To kick me out of the only home I know, she thought. "I suppose so."

"To confirm your Coming of Age next season."

"Excuse me?" She blushed at her own forwardness in the presence of the Council, but she was sure she had misheard. "My garden..."

The same woman spoke again. "Yes, we had believed that you were unable to master the Weavings, but your garden surprised us all in this past week."

"There must be some mistake. I haven't done anything to my garden! I never did master the weavings!"

The air in the council chamber grew thick with the sound of conversation, as each of the elders began to speak at once. In the confusion, no one noticed the squirrel perched on a window ledge that winked at Alfrieda. All at once, she knew. Alfrieda ran to the window and confronted her friend. "Did you do it?"

"We knew you'd be pleased!" He chittered with happiness. "We all knew how much this meant to you, and the old hawk told us that you would be kicked out, and we didn't want that to happen and make you sad, so a whole bunch of us got together and made your garden look just like you always said you wanted it to look!" Alfrieda stared at her friend in disbelief. Before she could formulate a response, the council called her back, startled at her sudden dash across the room "Alfrieda, we do not believe that you could have created the garden as it is now without the aid of the Weaving. No great feat, no work of beauty, can be accomplished without it."

The council members proceeded to inform her of the next steps in her Coming of Age, but she barely heard them. All of her dreams were coming true before her eyes. She would be accepted into the village. All would be well. except that nothing felt right. When she had envisioned this moment, the townspeople gathered around and accepted her for who she truly was. Her childhood tormentors apologized, and everyone told her how wrong they had been to call her dim-witted or stupid. In none of the scenarios that had played out in her mind did the council accept her based on a mistake.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of congratulations, both sincere, from her foster mother, and less so, from almost everyone else. When night came, she found herself unable to sleep for the second time that week.

In that sleepless state, something finally clicked inside of her. She could not possibly go through with the Coming of Age ceremony. She would not join the village based on a lie. Though they offered her all that she had ever wanted, she could not accept and keep her dignity.

She rose from her bed, and crept through the house as quietly as she could, putting together a small bundle of food and clothing. For a moment, she considered leaving a

note, but decided not to. As she walked out of the empty village, the same hawk to whom she had spoken a week ago wheeled overhead and took a perch directly in front of her.

"I thought you wanted to stay."

"So did I."

"Did the small ones' ruse not work on your elders?"

"It worked."

"Then why are you leaving?"

Alfrieda paused for a moment, turning to look back at the village in which she had spent her entire life. "I realized something. I could either spend the rest of my life fighting to be accepted someplace where I will never belong, or I can find my own way, knowing that I will never belong anywhere."

"I would not be so certain of that, little fledgling."

Alfrieda shrugged. Her companion bobbed her head, to show that she understood, and together they moved on into the woods.