

Changing Tides
As Told by Keper Shipwright
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The late afternoon sun had turned the sky in Culleyport a glorious red. The air hung low, laden with the type of heat that made even the mongrels in town take pause from their usual scrapping and begging for entrails at the fishmongers. Rodin Rae marveled at how oppressive the sky could be and smiled as she made her way from the *Chain and Anchor*, down past the row houses, to the docks. She loved the feeling of summer, the taste of the sea in the air.

As the town baked in the heat, the inhabitants found ways to slow their movements and ease their workloads in the hottest part of the afternoon. Most napped at this hour, so there was an unnatural still that descended, augmented by the oppressive air and heat. But for Rodin Rae, there was no time to rest. She felt the blood in her veins racing, her feet and heart beating to the rhythm of anticipation.

As she turned out of the wharves, her heart skipped a beat. There at the dock, in her slot, was the *Emerald Lady*. The ship gleamed like no other boat in the harbor, and drew quite its share of attention. It was Jomton's quintessential piece – a carrack. The wood for its construction, gifted by the faerie queen of Ravenhilt, Lady Laurel Angelica, was from dryads who had perished in E'atara's great cataclysm. Consequently, it had an air about it, a presence that no other ship could match. Each peg, each plank, had been skillfully and lovingly crafted and planed by hand. Its hull had been carved and painted to look like leaves trailing out from the front, the veins of the leaves trimmed in gold leaf. At the front was a beautiful carving of a dryad, her outstretched arms either a welcome or a warning. The *Lady* was armed to the teeth.

It wasn't just her own ship that made her hear the roar of the surf in her head, it was the collection of ships here in Culleyport. Ships of every shape and size, loading and unloading, taking on crew, embarking on journeys to every part of E'Atara and beyond. Rodin Rae loved the feeling of possibilities that the docks brought. Any journey might bring something fantastic. The town may sleep, but the docks never ceased their movement. It's what Toolibrie used to look like, before the Cataclysm, Kraken, and the Lyfeyian influence spoiled trade in that port town.

With just a casual glance at the surrounding ships, she noticed fourteen different types. Two years ago, this town didn't even have a dock serviceable for a Caravel. Now there were six loading and unloading cargo next to the *Emerald Lady*. She took another moment to see if the *Darkmyst*, which she used strictly for privateering, might also be around, but the sloop had not yet arrived. Or if it had, Dranoel, her first mate, has chosen a more secluded place to dock. She would find out for sure when she boarded the *Emerald Lady*.

As Rodin Rae came up along side the *Lady*, she noticed something aloft – was that Kyara up in the nest? Apparently, her friends and family were already gathering for the journey.

“Hail Captain!” A well-known and beloved voice called from the poop and Rodin Rae could hear from the note of gaiety that Brother Bart was very much enjoying the *Emerald Lady*.

“Who are we missing?” She asked, as she began to climb aboard.

“Rodin Rae!” Kyara called from aloft. Rodin Rae waved an arm to her, and the elf started shimmying down the main mast. “She’s fearless, Bart.”

“Aye! She tells me masts are just trees without limbs.” He chuckled and shook his head as Kyara came running up behind him with a positive glow of delight on her face.

“Rodin Rae!” She exclaimed, “This ship is the most amazing in the harbor! Have you seen how the others oggle it? Not one even comes close the beauty of the *Emerald Lady*.”

“I’m sure the Lady Laurel Angelica would agree,” Rodin Rae said, smiling.

“This is Jomton’s finest work,” Bart added.

“Aye, it is – now to set it out upon the sea for its maiden voyage.”

“When do we set sail?” Kyara was filled with anticipation. Rodin Rae wondered if Kyara was mentally feeding off her own desire to set out and be once again upon the sea that she loved. Could a wood elf show that much excitement for a sea journey?

“As soon as we have everyone gathered, and I go over the ship with Dranoel. So who *are* we missing?” Bart extended his hand and Rodin Rae took it, pulling herself effortlessly from the ladder. She smiled as her feet touched the deck and Bart clapped her heartily upon the back. Laughter passed between them and Rodin Rae knew that Bart was proud of her, excited for her, and thrilled to be on this new and glorious ship with her. It was amazing what could be said without any words needed. Once a seaman himself, Bart could appreciate all that Rodin Rae loved about seafaring, about the open waters, and they never needed speak of it.

“We’re missing Argenta and Giles,” Kyara said.

“And Amnesia,” Bart added. “I hope she remembers where I told her to meet us.”

“And Starshadow and Are asked that we send someone to fetch them from the Inn when it’s time to leave,” Kyara added.

“Well, we hardly have time for that! Do they mean to be left behind?”

“I think the rocking was making Areanna ill,” Kyara said, “And to tell you the truth, it was better for me, too, when she left. I don’t feel sick at all when I’m not empathizing!”

“I think that is *exactly* what they had in mind. You know how Starshadow is with boats. Better to get them at the last minute.”

You mean how he *isn’t* Rodin Rae thought and sighed. She wondered if at the last minute her friends would come at all. Of course they said they would, but to get Starshadow on a boat – that would be a feat. And Areanna was a desert elf – she was going to be miserable the entire journey, Rodin Rae was certain. Rodin Rae hid her disappointment in her duties. “Well, the tide waits for no one. We will set sail after dark, with or without our friends. Dranoel!” Rodin Rae caught sight of her first mate.

“Captain! I did not know that you would be arriving so soon! Forgive me, I

would have sent the boatswain to pipe you aboard!”

“No need for such formality, but where is Keper? I would like to go over the numbers with him, and the charts with you, before we embark.”

“I assure you, Captain, things are in fine order. Bart has taken the lion’s share of the preparation, the old sea dog. This will be a fine journey. And I have word from a reliable source that the weather will cooperate.” He winked at her and she raised a brow.

“Rahne?”

“Aye, but none in our forecast! She could not join our little adventure, but she sends her love. And Amathya assures us that the water fairy will cooperate. She has been all over this ship, fluttering about with the greatest of anticipation.” Dranoel pulled Rodin Rae a little off to the side, “But I do hope that you will keep her under control. She can make the crew – jumpy.”

“Yes, I will do what I can.” Amathya had pledged her services to Rodin Rae as thanks for the elf’s help in freeing her from an iron cage, but she had never fully recovered from the trauma. She could be a little flighty, even for a fairy. Rodin Rae waved her first mate’s worry aside, though. “I have other plans for Amathya. Let us talk in private, and review our course. Bart, Kyara, gather the others, I will be with you all shortly.”

* * *

“So everything is set?” Rodin Rae dropped herself down into her favorite chair in her cabin; it was made out of a rich red brocade with dark wood, carved like lions leads at the arms and feet. It had been the chair of a king, stolen by a pirate, and re-appropriated by Rodin Rae. Now it was her favorite place to sit; her special thinking spot.

“Yes,” Dranoel said. “I have set Keper up on the *Darkmyst*. And twenty fighting men, paid from your coffers, as you asked. The Keeper of Obscure Knowledge sails with them, as well.”

Rodin Rae nodded her approval. “Good. Amathya will go with them, too, and fly to us as messenger if anything should go wrong, with either party.”

“Then the *Darkmyst* will shadow our journey.”

“And be our means of escape, should it come to that when we reach Sheldon.”

“*New Sheldon*, my Captain,” Dranoel corrected.

“Whatever they wish to call it now. Home is home. I have no care for names.” Rodin Rae waved her hand, as if by that gesture alone she could erase all of her past and all of what the Cataclysm had brought to the threshold of her future.

But her first mate knew that she lied, and was trying to hide her nervousness from him. “I assure you, this ship is well rigged,” he said, “and well protected.”

“I was here for the test firing of the ballistae and catapults,” Rodin Rae agreed, “very accurate.” She distracted herself by pulling out her charts. She began to review their course.

“Wine?” Dranoel offered, sitting down beside her and pouring her a glass

without waiting for her answer. “Jomton saw to the protection of this ship personally. It has quite a few surprises. He is always looking out for you.”

“He should, I pay him well.”

“I look out for you, too. You don’t pay me that well.” Dranoel poured himself a glass as Rodin Rae looked at him in surprise.

“I’m kidding,” he said and she nodded, though she had missed the joke. She never quite understood it when Dranoel tried to chide her. Perhaps it was the crossing of boundaries between working together and friendship that confused her. But Dranoel thought that she just preferred to let his kidding slip by her on purpose, so that she didn’t have to change the nature of their relationship. *All business*, he thought.

“Let us review the course, just once more. To be certain,” she said. And for the sixth time, they plotted how they would sail to New Sheldon.

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Rinka Tur volunteered to climb aloft and hang the flag that would be the beacon of their journey: a golden embroidered dryad on a green field, with *Emerald Lady* written in two forms underneath, one common, one in the language of Rodin Rae’s homeland. Rodin Rae watched her, thinking, *there is another who loves the sea and misses her home as much as I*. She felt unnaturally calm as she watched the banner of her ship unfurl and the crew spontaneously burst out in applause and hoots. Rodin Rae wondered if it was the magic of the wood that played upon her mind.

“I have gathered you all together to talk to you about our journey,” Rodin Rae began, once Rinka had returned and the shouting had abated. The sun was almost set now, and though she should have begun to feel that particular brand of nervousness that always accompanied a journey’s beginning, Rodin Rae did not feel it this time. It was one thing to take a journey, it was quite another to return to her homeland after seven years of absence. She looked over the face of her friends. Had all of these people agreed to sail with her?

Among her regular sailing crew, there were additional fighting men, several sea elfin archers, and what she would have considered a host of friends from her clan. Brother Bart, Kyara, and Rinka Tur. But also Loquitor with Sabine, whom Rodin Rae noted had already found his way to her stash of good rum. She’d have to remind him how potent it could be. Or perhaps it would be better to warn Sabine.

Khallil and E’ile were there, too. Rodin Rae had not had a moment to say hello, and greeted them now with a nod of the head. She supposed they would have two weeks at least on the journey to talk more personally. She wondered if E’ile would try to use this time to find out more about the Morningstar Cove. She hoped not. With her mind preoccupied with her own family and the possibility of seeing her father, Rodin Rae wondered how strong her resolve would stay to keep the secret of Morningstar Cove’s location from her good friend.

Argenta and Giles, the Faun, were also arrived, and she noticed Amnesia, too, who had apparently found her way in time. She noticed that Giles sat far away

from Amnesia, and kept moving as she came closer to him. It was subtle, but as Rodin Rae observed, it was Amnesia's malice, Spike, that was apparently the source of the Faun's discomfort. Someone would have to remind Amnesia about that. But Rodin Rae wondered how Giles would survive most of the journey, since there was so much iron around. He must be used to it, if he has been following Argenta.

"This may prove to be a difficult journey," Rodin Rae continued. "We have been promised good weather, and I agree that after consulting the almanacs and charts, it will not be the sailing that proves the challenge."

A few of them nodded and she heard one or two members say "aye."

"As you know, I am headed home after a seven year absence. Much has changed in our lands, and what once had been hidden is now revealed. The path to my homeland has been reopened, due to the Cataclysm, and I have set a course that will take us there." She took a breath. Now she was beginning to feel nervous.

"New Sheldon. We do not know what to expect when we reach those waters. I can tell you, from what my homeland used to be, that I would not consider it a friendly place, nor a welcoming port for the fey. And yet, I commend all of you, for taking the chance to sail with me and risking your person so that I may have this chance to once again see my homeland." She had practiced this speech over and over to Dranoel in her cabin. Was she going to choke up on the words now, when it counted that she appear composed?

Rodin Rae looked at Kyara, who nodded to her as if to reassure her, and continued, "Loquitor has received a missive from my brother, Sir William, who signs himself as Master of the Guild of Merchants of Elenshire; Elenshire being my island home." She ruffled inside at this reference. Was not E'Atara her home now? Could an elf have two homes and feel alliance to two families? "In this missive, my brother has granted safe passage to our ship and crew, to come to Elenshire for the purpose of discussing exclusive trading rights between the Baron of Crescentwood and the Guild. He grants us safe passage under the name of New Sheldon's king, His Majesty Fergal Diamaird II and the lord of Elenshire, Cardon El the Fifth. Now, while this may sound very regal and safe, I assure you, I once knew both of these men personally." She inclined her head to let them chew on that fact for a minute. No one seemed to bat an eye at it, so she continued, "Now, I must tell you all, I feel very certain that the missive is true and not a devise or a ploy. It positively reeks of my brothers bad writing style."

Loquitor laughed under his breath until Sabine jabbed him to silence with her elbow.

"I do not know if my brother has designed this missive because he genuinely seeks trade arrangements with Crystalmyst, or if he has perhaps gotten word of my connection to FALO, and wished me to return home. If that were the case, I would have expected he send a missive to me directly, but one can never tell with the Guilds. As I have told you all before, they are secretive and my brother – er, brothers, for in fact, I have two, would not be pleased that I, a woman, own and operate not one, but two magnificent ships."

"To hell and the Kraken with them!" shouted one of her crew and a general mumbling of support swept through those gathered. Angelica had mentioned that

one of the boat's traits was to inspire loyalty. She wondered if that loyalty would last when ballistae were being fired upon them from enemy ships.

Rodin Rae put up her hand to quiet them. "But the Guild of Merchants should be the least of our concerns. While I do not foresee any direct confrontation or problems getting into the port at Canis in Elenshire, you must be aware that that city is the direct stronghold of another Guild, that of the Assassins. And while they do not, generally, spend their time milling about at the harbor, we should be aware that they pose a significant threat to my person and perhaps even to our Clan. I would encourage you all to keep a low profile when about – mention only that we are here on a diplomatic trade mission should someone directly ask, and please, please, do not use my first name. You may call me Captain, or I would prefer 'Duana Cordelia', once we dock in Canis. But when we move from the ship, I am no longer to be referred to as Rodin Rae, for I will be traveling with you as one of Crystalmyst's entourage, and I would prefer to have a chance to assess this *New Sheldon*," she practically spat the word "new," "before anyone has a chance to glean too much information about who we are or from whence we hail. "

"Understood," said Bart, and the others gathered nodded, each imagining in their own minds' eye what this new continent would look and feel like.

"But until then, we have a fortnight to relax!" exclaimed Loquitor.

"And prepare," added E'ile. Rodin Rae tried to gauge her friends' reaction and generally felt satisfied by what she saw. *Yes, they are prepared for anything, and that is good. Because at this point, anything might happen.* Rodin Rae dismissed them and then sent up a silent prayer to her goddess, *Let us make it safely back to E'Atara, Lady Leta – and all together and in one piece.*

"Loq!" She called, after she sent Dranoel to make their final preparation for departure, "Let me have some of that drink."

* * *

Six rum-sodomies later, Rodin Rae tried to stand and managed only to sway before she sat back down. Loquitor, Sabine, Giles and Argenta had long deserted her as a drinking partner. They had all gone to find more subtle evening behavior. Rodin Rae sighed, remembering the days when a game of sparklies and good rum could keep her sated for hours. She had pulled out her charts again, attempting to review the course just one more time, but gave up when she kept seeing two New Sheldons. One was quite enough in her book. Smiling from the drink, but troubled just the same, she tried once again to stand. This time, a hand caught her elbow, and she spun instantly, drunk, but on her guard for the elf that had managed to step so quietly that she had not heard him come into her cabin.

"Shtarshadoh!"

She might be slurring his name, but he didn't miss the fact that she had, from who knows where, managed in the split second before recognizing him, to pull a bodkin on him. *Ever prepared*, he thought.

"I made it," he said, "And Areanna, too. Though, she is sleeping off the heavy herbs she took to calm her nerves. Looks like maybe you've been finding your own way to calm your nerves?"

Rodin Rae shrugged, casually, then dropped the act and nodded. Her eyes glassy, she managed to sit loudly back down into her chair and make the dagger disappear. “I’m drunk,” she said.

“I can very well see that. But we should talk,” he added.

“When I’m sober. Help me find my bed. We’ll have two weeks to talk.”

“Or two weeks to avoid the conversation.”

“Please, Star, I need to go to sleep.”

“Fine,” he conceded, and then smiled, “What *do* you do with a drunken sailor, Duana Cordelia?” He took her arm and helped her stumble to her bed. He marveled that in such a small space, she could manage to have a feather bed with a velvet cover. *Ever the epitome of style.*

“We tie ’im to a line and go a trol... ling... trolling,” she mumbled as her head hit the pillow. “But the song says NOTHING about what they do with the Captain.”

Starshadow laughed, and let her sleep.

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The next day dawned glorious and red – for those who were awake to witness the spectacle. Rodin Rae managed to peel herself out of her bed around noon, and she silently thanked the Lady again for having made Brother Bart a sailor in his younger days. He had looked after everything, including the shift she had herself slept through. She cursed herself and made a vow not to let that happen again. As punishment, and to set an example to the crew, though they violently protested, she began to scrub the deck. She found it refreshing to be doing manual labor, as opposed to demeaning. Aboard her ships, everyone pulled their own weight. And although she may often carry an air of disdain toward work, when it came to her own ship, Rodin Rae had an eye for everything, and often helped her crew when she could be relaxing. This is what bought their fierce loyalty to her, and why, in the past, they had been willing to fight with her and die for her. She was busy daydreaming about her homeland, when E’ile found her.

“Well, I’ve lost Khallil to the kitchen again,” E’ile tossed up her hands in exasperation.

Rodin Rae smiled. “After our meal at Springfestival this year, I’d say I’m a lucky woman to have his skill on board. My crew is going to be spoiled!”

“He’s with Rinka Tur and Kyara. I didn’t know Kyara was such a good baker.”

“From the time when she was a sla ...” Rodin Rae paused and rephrased her response, “From the time before she was a Baroness.”

“Everyone has such interesting pasts,” E’ile mused.

“Hmmm ... some would like to forget them.”

“I’m anxious to see your homeland, Rodin Rae. What is it like there?”

Rodin Rae paused, then scrubbed harder – at what, E’ile wasn’t sure. The ship was brand new, and had very little that needed scrubbing.

“It’s much like E’Atara, if you’ve ever sailed from the Isle of Long to Celebar. Six islands, mostly flat except for Pirth, that’s one of the islands,” she

explained and E'ile nodded. E'ile had been one of the honored few who had seen the map of the Celestial Sphere that Rodin Rae had been granted, and on the bottom had been a rendering of Sheldon. "But mostly, it's a sea place. It smells like the sea all the time, everywhere there. Even when you are in the midst of the mountains, you can see gulls and feel the salt on your skin. It is very beautiful. You will see it for yourself, soon enough."

E'ile nodded. "And are you nervous, to see your family again?"

Rodin Rae stopped her scrubbing and wondered if E'ile was leading this conversation so that she could ask again about the location of her father in Morningstar Cove. "Yes, I am very nervous. My brother now holds my father's place as the head of the Merchant's Guild. He never cared much for me – my brother William, that is. So yes, I am very nervous."

"And your mother?"

"I don't remember much of her at all, since I was fostered with the other Guild when I was seven," Rodin Rae had made a conscious decision that she no longer wanted to refer to the Assassins Guild. Too many memories. Too much pain. She wondered, briefly, if Amnesia knew that she, Rodin Rae, kept a garden of her own – a whole lifetime of forgetting memories, or burying pain.

"Well, just remember, we're all with you, your family, I mean. We're all here because we want to be with you. You know, when you return. When you meet them again." E'ile said.

Rodin Rae kept her head bowed and continued scrubbing. When she looked up, E'ile had left, with no mention of her own family, of her own pain and loss.

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The weeks passed with little event, except that Rodin Rae's mood seemed to have taken a turn for the worse. Magic hull or no, she could get no benefit from dryad dreams if she did not sleep. As their course drew them closer to New Sheldon, Rodin Rae became uneasy. She was restless. During the day she barked orders at the crew, finding fault with everything down to how they tied their lines. She roamed the decks at night, checking and double-checking the crew's work, making notes about how the ship was faring, taking soundings of the new waters and comparing them with the charts she possessed. Everything was in order but nothing was right.

Finally, she came to understand that it wasn't the ship that had the problem. It was she. Upon that revelation, she retired to her cabin, and refused to either answer the knocks at her door or dine with her friends in the evenings. Five days she avoided them, and turned a deaf ear to Kyara's pleas, who came more often than the others, to coax her out. But eventually, it was Starshadow who "borrowed" the key from Dranoel, who, he told himself, would forgive him in time. Certain skills could still be useful, especially when a friend in need was the deciding force. Starshadow did not hesitate as he entered her cabin, unannounced.

The room was dark, but not too dim for his elfin eyes. *Duana Cordelia. Dark pearl indeed*, he thought. Rodin Rae had been brooding for too long in this alluring darkness, it was time for her to come back to the others, topside. But first, they

would need to have the conversation that she had been avoiding.

“Dranoel tells us if the tides are right, we will be entering New Sheldon’s waters by tomorrow night.” Starshadow addressed the darkness, then caught sight of her, once again in her favorite chair. “You should come topside and tell your friends what to expect.”

“I have no answers for them,” she curtly replied.

“And for me?” He walked to where she sat and took her hand. Only then did he notice the plain shift she wore and that her hair was undone, falling loosely around her shoulders. Her eyes were dark, and he wondered if she had sat in this exact chair for the full five days she had been absent on deck.

“Talk to me, Rodin Rae, tell me what is on your mind.”

She said nothing, and he waited, remembering another time when he had seen this one’s spirit grown dark. Lenardo’s murder in front of her and the clan had almost killed her. As it was, it had sparked a deep depression and a morbid fascination with death. He wondered what returning to her homeland might do for *that* memory. Then he heard her; She spoke so softly, he doubted a human would have known she spoke at all.

“Have you ever watched a man die, Star? Really watched? I don’t mean kill – yes, I know that you have meted out your share of death when it was required. But have you ever watched a man die slowly by your hand, seen the betrayal in his eyes, as you twist the knife?”

He knew she was remembering – not really asking him a question. Nor had she been ignoring him. She was lost in her own past, in her own garden of forgotten memories.

“There is a moment, as the light fades from his face, when Death comes to collect what will shortly be His. He waits, and looks upon you, so that for a few moments you become death’s beloved . . .”

Her voice trailed off and Starshadow squeezed her hand, to let her know that he was listening, and that she was still connected to the present. She continued “Beloved of a god, who thanks you with his presence for the sacrifice. Then, there is a great emptiness, as if you are abandoned, and a sadness that has nothing to do with death and everything to do with love. It is like – rapture.” She hesitated and then looked at Starshadow directly, coming out of her memories and talking to him, “I did not understand it at the time – when the Guild bound us like handmaidens to Him. I saw as a child, through a glass darkly-”

“You’re frightening me,” Starshadow said quietly.

“I’m frightened of myself,” she rubbed her head as Starshadow pulled the curtains open.

As well you should be, he thought. He knew what it was like to hate and fear himself as much as those whose lives he had to take to assuage his tormented spirit.

“I have never spoken a word of it,” she continued. “I was foolish enough to think I could lock it away and let it disappear with all routes to my homeland. And yet, here we are. Rodin Rae Bellock, bound to her homeland.”

“You left that person when you came into our Clan,” Starshadow reminded her, as he sat down beside her and poured her some water.

“Yes, I did, when I thought it was impossible to return to my homeland. But

yet here we are, en route, and we will find anchor there in two days time. So what has really changed?”

“You have, you are different now, Rodin Rae.”

Rodin Rae shook her head. “No, humans change, but the elves, the elves stay the same for centuries.”

“I disagree. Maybe the elves who have no outside contact stay the same. But elves who touch the outside world cannot help but change. The Cataclysm has made sure of that. The elves in Crystalmyst *have* changed tremendously. And I am sure that they have also changed in Sheldon.”

“But what if they are just the same?” And this time it was the fear in her voice that caught his attention. He intuited what she meant, “It is the assassins you fear,” he said.

“It is myself that I fear. And whom I used to be. E’Atara has given a new persona to me, it has let me forget my past and disappear into the magic of another life. But when I return to Sheldon – New Sheldon as it calls itself, what will I be then?”

Starshadow lowered his voice and took on a softer tone. “You will be Rodin Rae Duana Cordelia, our sister.”

“Yes, but I will *also* be Rodin Rae Bellock, daughter of Elanie and Sir Rae Bellock, tied to all of the misery that was my former self. I will be the murderer of Mia Harlow, the betrayer, the mistress to death. Those names, too, will once again be mine to own.”

“You don’t have to be that person again. Drink.”

She sipped, “But I am that person, and when I return you will understand.”

“Will I? Can’t you see that you *have* changed? Even in the few years that I have known you? More than just your name is different, Rodin Rae.”

“Nothing has changed. I have simply found a way to idle away my time. To divert myself when I should have been seeking Lenardo’s murderer and taking my revenge.” Her voice was bitter, but not half as cold as Starshadow’s.

“Oh really?” In one swift movement, his pale hand reached out across the table and lifted the wooden disc holding her Moonstone. “Does *this* mean nothing to you?”

She put her hand over his, “It means everything. You know that.”

“Then why do you betray it with these thoughts? You owe something to us, Rodin Rae. You owe something to me. No one owns you, and you don’t sit on any throne. These people you call your family gave up any right to claim a hold on you long ago, but we do not. You bound yourself to our clan-kin and I am not going to stand by and watch you throw your life away while you dabble with hunting *Assassins*,” he spit the word like it were venom. “I am going to hold you to your oath, because I care about you more than they do!” Contempt made him shake as he jerked his head in the direction of the ship’s prow. “Why the hell else would I be on this oversized piece of driftwood?”

She laughed. How could she not? It was a feat that Starshadow *and* Areanna had managed to even agree to this voyage, never mind actually take it.

“Now come up top, and break bread with your family. They’ve been worried about you.”

She agreed, and sent him out so that she could change. But her heart was not convinced and the landing in Sheldon in two days time weighed heavily upon her, though no one spoke a word of it, or her absence, over dinner.

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Rodin Rae kept her silk hood up over her ears, conscious of the way she walked, offended by every sight and smell that was this *New Sheldon*, and yet so much her homeland. She was grateful for the hand that Kyara occasionally held out to her – a link, which continually brought her back to the moment. She wondered at the faces, so strange and yet so like her own, that watched their procession through the Capital of Canis, down the main street of the city, to the Guild of Merchants.

The Guards that escorted the E'Atara entourage were dressed in a newfangled way that made Rodin Rae think things *had* changed here in Sheldon. The men wore long, bright red robes and white capes draped casually over one shoulder. They held bright silver shields with the crest of the Guild stamped in the center. In some ways, she felt that her party was as much captives, as they were being protected by the Guild Guards. She made a silent prayer to the Lady, again grateful for her own intuitiveness. She had made a plan, should this diplomatic meeting go awry and, though they had come on the *Emerald Lady*, they could quickly depart on the much faster *Darkmyst*, should the need arise.

“The Hall of the Guild of Merchants,” one of the Guards cried, first in the common tongue, and then in her native tongue. Rodin Rae found herself standing in front of a façade that looked exactly like she remembered it. White stone from the mountains of Pirth and two of the hugest bronzed doors ever crafted in Sheldon, depicting a myriad of scenes from the Endless Sea. She had to chuckle to herself. It wasn't so Endless now. Now is flowed straight to E'Atara, by a fortnight's sea voyage.

Loquitor was on point, Sabine next to him, and Starshadow at the place of honor, to his right. A half step behind them was Kyara, with Rodin Rae and Areanna. All of them were dressed in their finest and most clever of Courtly garb. Designed to allow the women to look graceful, the dresses also carefully concealed the host of weapons they carried close to their bodies. Rodin Rae alone could feel the steel of seven bodkins against her skin, not to mention the two in her boot and one buried in the most outlandish hairstyle she had worn since setting sail to this new land. Rinka Tur and Amnesia followed, wearing their weapons openly. Amnesia, of course, had Spike and Rinka carried just two small daggers on her leather bracers.

Argenta and Giles were also there, though Giles looked oddly different, since he had used the necklace Argenta had given him to make him appear human. Rodin Rae had a general sense that they might be regarded with hostility, since they were mostly a fey group, but she had no idea how the Guild might react to a full blown Faun in their midst. In the end, she thought it best he use what magic trinkets he had.

Brother Bart walked behind them, taking up the rear in full tree regalia, with Khallil to his right and E'ile to his left. His hand was planted firmly on his staff, as

Khallil's was on his bow, which everyone had agreed should not be hidden. If there were trouble, let the enemy think to fear the bow, while E'ile cleverly concealed his true weapon, a well-crafted sword, under her cloak. Thus, they came to the Hall of the Guild of Merchants, armed, apprehensive and uncertain.

The doors opened, and without even asking them to check their weapons, they were ushered inside. Rodin Rae let none of the grandeur affect her, but she felt both Kyara and Areanna squeeze her hands simultaneously. The wealth that adorned the ceiling alone could have bought most kingdoms in E'Atara. Amnesia cleared her throat, but besides that, no one uttered a word. A herald announced them, "Da tribunale di Crystalmyst, ed il Clan di Falo, il suo onore, King Starshadow Moonbeam ed Queen Areanna Moonshadow. L'illustre, Baron Loquitor Braethen di Crescentwood, e Baroness, Kyara Braethen di Forsythia." Trumpets sounded, and the Guard that had led them in turned as one, on cue, and stepped aside. They took their posts up and down the length of the hall.

Rodin Rae found she was holding her breath and had to force herself not to stand on her tippy-toes to see above the friends' heads to the end of the hall, where she could instinctively *feel* her brother stood. She finally positioned herself slightly behind Areanna, where she could catch a glimpse of her brother's face. He looked like her, only taller and with shorter hair. But his eyes were the same green she remembered and she had to bite her tongue to stifle a sob of surprise. *William.*

Sir William Rae Bellock opened his mouth to speak, perhaps to offer a greeting, or a welcome to the entourage. He quickly snapped it shut. *Does he sense me?* She wondered, watching as his demeanor changed, his brows furrowing until he looked unmistakably like her very own father. This time she did gasp, but only her immediate party heard her. And then, her friends' countenance changed, too. The guards had begun to shuffle uncertainly as Sir William approached the group. Two red robed men with gold shields fell in beside him, and Rodin Rae recognized them as the Elite Guard. The minutes stretched into an eternity as he moved toward them and then William yelled what she feared, "Guards! There is an Assassin among them!"

A Guard drew his sword and in less than the blink of an eye, her friends fell into defense as if they had been trained to do so. Somewhere, Rodin Rae heard dogs barking and wondered if they would have to fight off trained beasts as well as Elite Guard. Her friends instinctively paired off, back to back, to protect one another.

Rodin Rae coming out of a roll into which she had dropped, moved to position her back to Kyara, who had already notched an arrow into her bow and had it drawn and ready to fly. She was aiming at the ugliest beast she had ever seen – something that barked like a dog but smelled more feral, like a wolf with teeth twice the size that would seem normal. A Guard held the dogs on long chains, but by the way they pulled and yelped, she wondered how long it would be before they broke free and tried to tear the party to pieces. Rodin Rae looked around to see everyone in her party had pulled their weapons, but not one of them had yet to make a move. They would not attack unless they were attacked first, and so far, though the Guards approached and the dogs yelped and begged to be loosed, they were not under direct attack.

Sir William held no weapons, but the Guards along the hall had all drawn

swords and Rodin Rae counted that her small party was outnumbered two to one. *More like two hundred to one*, she thought wryly, since they were in the Merchants' Stronghold. The Elite guards beside William had drawn their bows and in a contest, they looked like they might be able to shoot as fast as Kyara and Loquitor together. Sir William disregarded the arrow that Loquitor had pointed at him and walked forward.

"Your word, Captain!" Loquitor yelled, waiting for Rodin Rae to tell him what to do. Her eyes flicked to her brother, then back to the guards. *To his credit, he didn't use my name*, she thought, but the game was up all the same. If she answered him, they would know who the true leader of this party was. She couldn't risk a confrontation that might take the lives of her friends. *Or my family*, she thought, not giving herself time to think about *which* family she might be more concerned.

"Lower your weapons!" She called, and dropped her own dagger. But no one paid attention to her and for a minute she wondered if she *was* the Captain of this party. She caught Areanna's eyes and she read her features. Apparently, her clan-kin and friends were going to protect her whether she asked them to or not.

Rodin Rae tried another approach. She lowered her hands and stepped out from beside Kyara.

"William. It is me, Rodin Rae, your sister. And I swear to you, upon the Lady Leta herself and all that she is, that I am not an Assassin."

William eyes turned to hers, yes, that was the face he had been seeking! He grabbed her, and pulled the cloak roughly from her head, so that Rodin Rae sensed even Brother Bart grab his staff tight as if it were to do double duty as a bludgeoning tool if William so much as touched a hair on her head.

"Name yourself, then," he said and Rodin Rae caught a few pairs of eyes, among her friends and the Guards, dart uncertainly. She took a breath, then straightened herself to her full height and cleared her throat.

"I have been known in the past as Rodin Rae Bellock, daughter of Sir Rae Bellock and Elani Rae Bellock, your parents, too. I have been known in another life as Assassin, the Widowmaker, the Bella Donna. I was a guild-daughter to Mia Harlow, guild-sister to Dorinda Harlow and betrothed to Degan Harlow, of your rival Guild and outcast from them. I have been the beloved of Lenardo of Elenshire, dead now nigh on four years. I was Captain of the Eastern Star, the Sea Sylph and now the Emerald Lady and the Darkmyst. I am Rodin Rae Duana Cordelia, of the Clan of Falo on E'Atara. I am the Darkpearl of the Sea. This is my true name."

William stared at her in wonder, as did most of those in her party, who may not have understood her elfin tongue. She could see Brother Bart nodding, and Areanna, too. Yes, they had understood. And even if they did not, the others intuitively grasped it when they heard Rodin Rae pronounce her name, *Rodin Rae Duana Cordelia of the Clan of Falo on E'Atara*.

William smiled, and the tension of the moment eased as weapons were sheathed. "Truly," he whispered, "I never thought I would live to see this day. For never would an Assassin name herself, if an Assassin she still be. Welcome home, sister," he said, and bowed low. Rodin Rae forgot herself and instead of bowing in

return, clasped her brother's forearm and pulled him into an embrace.

"Guards!" William announced, "These people are our guests at the Guild of the Merchants! Let us feast and make merry that my sister has returned!"

* * *

There is much more that happened in the weeks that Rodin Rae D'Cordelia spent in New Sheldon, and I have no doubt that she will chart our course there again soon, and often. But for now, I will leave that tale to her to tell, and to those who accompanied her on this maiden voyage of the Emerald Lady.

I will say this, the weather on our journey home was as fair as the good weather-witch, Rahne, promised. The seas were calm and never have I seen a ship so fine manage what little waves we did endure. And so, it was with great horror, that we, the crew of the Darkmyst, heard that Starshadow Moonbeam of Crystalmyst, mysteriously disappeared before the Emerald Lady made port again in E'Atara.