

Red Branch

by S.L. Viehl

I didn't like waking up with a three hundred pound merc sitting on me and holding a knife to my throat. Even if I had foreseen it the night before.

"Got yer tension now, do we?" The weighty, smelly human tucked the edge of his blade a little higher up under my chin, scraping off some skin in the process. "Be gibbin us 'at web we bin wannin, eh?"

One of Ferboil Danu's men. They never bathed, and wore badly-cured skins of animals over their tunicas. This one appeared uniformly coated with dirt and sported the furs from a dozen snow rabbits. The poor things had probably smelled him approaching and expired on the spot.

Still, he *had* captured my attention, and I was in the mood to be charitable. "Get off, rot breath, and I'll let you live."

Blood ran down the sides of my neck as the blade bit deeper. "I gots the steel here, spinner."

He was too dumb to be a messenger, really, but Ferboil must have figured on me killing whoever he sent. "You have five seconds." I yawned. "Four."

He lifted up, angling the knife so that the point rested against my pulse vein. "Marsta Danu wans a web."

"Three." I glanced at the window. It was barely dawn. I might have to hunt down Ferboil just for waking me up before noon. "Two."

"I said - "

"Time's up." I spit in his eyes and slammed my cupped palms against his ears. At the same time, I hit his hand with my chin and drove my knee up into his groin. He screamed, fell back, and the knife slipped onto the bed.

The root I'd chewed before going to sleep lent a temporary acidity to my saliva, which had no effect on me but was quite corrosive to the merc's human eyes. It also saved me from wasting my poisons on a moron. I kicked him to the floor, stretched, and then retrieved the knife. It was as filthy as my attacker, so I'd have to remember to clean my neck wound well. I tucked it in my armband and went to the fireplace to start brewing my morning tea.

"Whaddaya done?" the behemoth shrieked, clawing at his eyes with both hands. "Blinded me! Yer blinded me!"

Someone pounded at the door. "Spinner?"

It was Kerdup, the innkeeper. I sighed as I went over and saw that my latest victim had practically hacked the door latch to pieces getting in.

Humans. I tugged at the remnants. "Yes?"

Kerdup looked a bit like a nest weasel, minus the handsome parts. "What's all this noise about, then?" He was about as shrill, too.

I drew the dirty knife, swiveled, and threw it. The shrieking became a thick, brief gurgle. I turned back to Kerdup. "What noise?"

He shook his head. "I run a clean place here. You'll have to go." He eyed the door. "And pay for the damages and the burial."

"Fair enough." I tossed him a kinspiece. "Have my ride saddled and ready in an hour."

He bit the coin and grinned at the taste of pure silver. "On second thought, missus, maybe we could work something out." He looked at my hands. "I heard about your kind – "

"Not interested. And I'll take care of the body." I slammed the ruined door in Kerdup's face.

The merc's blood had been sprayed over the bed and the floor, so I skirted around him and the mess and had my tea. It gave me time to clear my thoughts and focus on the job the Orb had given me.

Find the son of Tal, she'd said, when I'd returned from my last hunt. The jagged mark of her lineage glowed crimson against her black skin. Find him and bring him to me.

I had never tracked or taken a human before – but then, I didn't really like them. Kerdup was right, they made too much noise. *Alive?*

The Orb had smiled. *Oh, yes.*

#

As I prepared for the final leg of my journey, I wondered again why I had been given this task. It seemed a case of severe overkill, to send me after a human, even if his father had offended the Orb. An offense that had sat unanswered for nigh on twenty years, in fact.

Tal Bronif was a legend among humans, for the usual ridiculous reasons. As part of some idiot warrior-test, his people had sent him into our territory to capture a spinner and bring her back alive. According to the humans' bards, Tal had lured three of my sisters from the Garnet itself, then had crippled and captured them. Stories circulated for years after that among the outer settlements. Some humans said the three died of their injuries, others said they were tortured to death. There were whispers that they were still alive, and were

being forced to spin at Tal's will. The thought of a human prevailing over a spinner was what created all the excitement. That had never happened before.

None of it was true, which helped.

In reality three of my sisters had found Tal, bloodied and dying, and had dragged his body out of the Garne. Human blood made the ground stink for months. Along the way they were attacked by something genuinely dangerous – a pack of feral wasp cats – and repelled them only to succumb to the numbing venom. Tal's men had evidently come upon the four of them on the edge of the forest and transported their unconscious bodies back to Bronif Keepe.

Two of the sisters had found their way back to the Garne within a few days, as soon as they had purged themselves of the venom. The pair had nearly died of the monotony, if anything, but they recalled enough threads on the wasp pack for my mother to use for tracking. She'd hunted and slaughtered the cats the following day. Only the third, Gesa, did not return. For two seasons we assumed her dead, until she walked in to the Garnet one morning and prostrated herself before the Orb.

Our Queen summoned Gesa into council with the eldest of the Branches. At the time I was too young to attend, but my mother spoke of it later, along with a promise to gut me herself if I ever did such a thing.

Gesa admitted that shame had kept her long separated from us. She had nearly died from the venom, but that wasn't the shameful part. During her recovery among the humans, she had gotten so bored that she had mated with Tal. If that wasn't disgusting enough, she had conceived and delivered a halfling. As it was mostly human and male, she left it behind with Tal.

It was a pink, and it squalled, she had told the council. It could not hold its head still, or walk, or control its bladder or bowels. Then they told me it was a male. She threw up her hands. They wouldn't let me eat it. What else could I do?

It was a delicious scandal – we spinners naturally use our stock males when we wish to reproduce – and there was some discussion of the state of Gesa's mind balance. For the sisters, the thought of voluntary coitus with a human was, well, revolting.

My mother had warned me from the day I left the nesting caverns never to trifle with humans. *Kill them, eat them if you must, Akela, but never play with those diseased, mindless things.*

Gesa cleansed herself, made contrition and was forgiven by all of us. Any spinner can fall victim to bizarre impulses, particularly when surrounded by nothing but blank-brained humans. My own mother had slaughtered two or

three villages one winter when early snow in the mountain passes had cut her off from the Garne. Butchering humans, she claimed, had been the only available form of exercise.

It was Gesa's halfling that now seemed to concern the Orb, but she had not explained why. Since our Queen was pure Red Branch – the largest and deadliest of our kind, with enough strength and poisons to wipe out most of the sisterhood single-handedly – she didn't have to. I was the first Black Branch tracker, sworn to obey and defend the Orb to the death. Even so, it wasn't my place to question anything.

I wouldn't have, had I been among my sisters. We all knew each other's minds within the Garnet, and the Orb kept the threads in order. Only out here, away from the enclave of my kind, did my thoughts wander.

Why send me after a male?

Before I left the inn for Bronif Keepe, I took care of the merc's body. One of the advantages of being Black Branch was the variety of poisons my mouth and body glands produced. I coated the corpse with raze fluid from my abdominal glands, which quickly broke down the tissues and bones and reduced it to ash. All the innkeeper would have to do was sweep up the floor.

My ride was waiting for me when I stepped outside, and the humans passing by the inn gave her a wide berth. Like all darkmares, Neleh was lean, powerful, and had a vicious temper, so we got along perfectly. I mounted up and touched her sides with my boot heels, and she took off.

#

Summer heat rolled over the day, and Neleh needed watering, so I stopped at a pitiful-looking creek halfway to Bronif. I dismounted and checked the stream (Goddess knew humans dumped all manner of waste into their aquifers) before I clipped on her hobble, removed my saddle and let her drink. I crouched under the shade of a scraggly witheroak and used the interval to tighten my stirrup straps, which had stretched, and check my weapons.

I wore forty-two daggers of various sizes on four blade straps, two across my chest and one on each thigh. I had fashioned each myself, from bloodwood resin and my own binding fluid. More than most trackers carried, but I like being prepared.

My poisons were lethal to anything that breathed, but I was still young, and my sacs emptied quickly. One reason I had been considering reproducing was that pregnancy would enlarge my glands; that and I wouldn't fully mature until I did. But breeding was such a dreary business – an entire year stuck in the

nesting caverns, nursing and teaching my daughter to spin and hunt. I wasn't ready for that kind of commitment or drudgery.

You were an obnoxious youngling, my mother had told me often, always with a certain amount of annoyed pride. *Goddess knows I nearly devoured you a dozen times.*

The other reason was too many of our young were born with deformed minds, and had to be destroyed. I did not want to give birth only to be ordered to destroy my own daughter.

As I sharpened my palm blades, something intruded on my proximity sense. Neleh lifted her muzzle out of the water and sniffed the air. Her stubby ears flared, and she bared pointed teeth as she released a low, warning hiss.

I could smell them now, too. Humans. Many humans. *Oh, good. Something to kill.*

"Finish, you lazy nag, the road waits." I made no sign of my discovery as I fastened my chest straps and went to her. Under her short-haired hide her muscles were tensed, her limbs trembling. They were moving in those idiot lines they affected – I smelled at least three dozen, strung out like half-baked kebabs – but the humans had brought something with them that terrified my darkmare.

Which meant it could probably kill her – and me. *Something that will give me a fight. Even better.*

I stepped on her hobble clip to release it while I pretended to stroke her muscular neck. She gave me a hard nip. "I've never ridden such an unpleasant bitch," I murmured as I caught her jaw and slipped the halter from her head. "I will miss you." I swatted her rump, and Neleh jumped the creek before galloping off toward Bronif.

They emerged from the trees as I watched her, but I kept my back to them a few more seconds so I could draw the daggers I wanted. Then I turned, and skimmed the hungry, dirty faces of the mercs until I reached the oldest and ugliest.

"Ferboil Danu." I flicked a bit of leaf rot from my sleeve. "What a surprise."

"Spinner." He tugged at the edge of his tunica, evidently to draw attention to how purple it was and how many glittery gemstone bobbles hung from it. Human leaders coveted colored stones; wearing them made them feel important or something. I liked them because the weight slowed them down. "Ain't yer gettin' our message?"

"A message? Let me think." I pretended to while I looked for what had spooked Neleh. "I slit the throat of the first little skink you sent before he could speak. The second annoyed my ride and got himself trampled before he could

provide any details. The third muttered something about a web before I reduced him to a pile of ash." I regarded the three columns of mercs he'd brought with him. *Child's play.* "Do you have anyone who can talk a little faster?"

When a couple of the brave ones surged forward, cursing and wagging their little swords at me, Ferboil lifted a pudgy hand. "We respects and fears the spinners."

"Then why are you stinking up my air?"

"We be needin' yer talent, spinner." He tossed a little drawstring bag at me, but I stepped back and let it hit the ground. Golden weyrpieces spilled out of one end. Not many, but enough to make a couple of his own men lick their lips. "We be payin' handsomely for it."

"I don't work for humans." I couldn't see anything to concern me, but I smelled something odd now. Something like a spinner's sweat under extreme stress. *A sister who was wounded?* "Have you something else with which to bargain?" My neck sacs swelled, and my cribellum bulged under the laces of my vest.

Ferboil nodded toward the gold. "Tha's it. What else yer want?"

My chelicerae extruded down over my lips. "Bring forth the sssissster." It was hard to speak human with my fangs out and dripping poison. "Now."

"We gots none." He looked confused. "Tha's why we came to yer."

I opened my mind, seeking the thread of hers as I filled my lungs with the scent. No one, nothing in site. *Was she already dead?* I'd build her burial mound out of their bones if Ferboil had harmed one of mine.

I am not dead. I am here.

The voice was not that of a sister, nor did the glittering mind-thread lead me to one of my kind. It had come from something bigger and darker and not female at all. My mind rejected that at once – if it was not female, it could not spin.

You are like my mother. The thread grew rich with amusement. *Don't kill too many of them.*

For a moment I was so shocked to experience mindshare with one not my own but my own – that was the only way to put it – that wonder and fear nearly strangled me. The thread was so alien and yet so strong that it physically tugged me toward him, yet gave me nothing of the one who spun it – except that it was . . .

The thread snapped as one of Ferboil's oversized oafs blocked me path. "Yer can't – "

I seized him, sank my fangs into his face and let him drop. He was dead before he landed. Two more got in my way, and went down gargling around my blades.

Stop killing them or they will all attack you.

I whipped around, trying to snatch up the elusive thread. *SHOW YOURSELF.*

"She's smelling one o' her own," I heard Ferboil shout. "Hold her and find it!"

As battles went, it was unnecessary and messy. The unwise ones who tried to stop me all died, faster than they should have, but I was in a hurry. What summoned me was outside anything I had ever mindshared, and I had to get to it. Finally the humans maddened me to the point of recklessness.

I gathered my energy and tore open my vest. My cribellum splayed in half, shooting out multiple dark strands that I quickly wove into a wide oval in front and behind me.

Spinners rarely used killing webs against humans. Spinning them rendered us vulnerable until our bodies could produce more silk fluid, which took a day or two. Still, they knew what it was. Most of them backed away at once, but three couldn't stop in time or were too stupid to know what my webs would do to them. They were caught, held, and screamed as acid droplets coating my silk burned into their soft flesh. Absently I repaired the holes as they fell away, smoldering and shrieking.

"This ain't the finish," Ferboil shouted at me as he and what was left of his men retreated. "Not by far, spinner!"

I hardly heard him. I was still seeking the one who had touched my mind, the one who was not female, who had done what was not possible.

Anything is possible, tracker, but come and see for yourself. Take care not to trip over the bodies.

As a Black Branch, my foresight was limited – I was more in tune with the physical world than those realms beyond it. Yet something inside me wanted to curl up and hide, for there was something coming that promised to change everything. There was no form to the vision, only a certainty that went down to my bones.

The spinner came into the narrowing slit of my vision, a gray-eyed, tall creature dressed in human garments.

The garments of a human *male*.

You cannot be. A chill chased the length of my backbone. *You are not female.*

He inclined his head. *I am not.*

He had their colored hair – his was black – and their pale skin. Yet beneath the humble garments, the contours of his body were that of a fully mature spinner: four long, multi-jointed limbs, a treble-sectioned torso, the triangular clypeus groove on his brow. He smiled, and I saw the glint of cheliceran fangs in his mouth.

Yet our males did not spin, or roam freely, or think. They were soft, fat, mindless things made for mounting and eating, kept in the nesting caverns. I dropped my webs to get a better look at him.

Closer. I will not harm you.

I circled him, this spinner/male thing, trying to understand. *How is it that you are?*

I am Jalon, the child of Tal and Gesa. He tugged open his tunica to show me his human chest. In the center of it was a spinner's cribellum, upon which was an uneven jagged mark as red as blood. *I am human and spinner.*

The son of Tal was not just a halfling male who could spin, and mindshare. He was a Red Branch.

Jalon was a *Queen*.

#

Instinct drove me to my knees to empty my sacs onto the ground, as I would have in the presence of the Orb. No sister swelled with poison around our Queen unless she wanted to die an unpleasant death. Yet this was not the Orb but a complete paradox. A male who thought. A spinner wrapped in human flesh.

A *second* Red Branch.

Purging myself so quickly was foolish; I knew I would black out from the shock of it. But I wanted oblivion, I wanted darkness to fill my eyes and obliterate the sight of him.

This is why the Orb sent me, my errant curiosity whispered inside my head just before I lost consciousness. *To bring this thing back her.*

I woke in twilight to find myself comfortably arranged by a modest fire. Neleh had returned and stood a few feet away, snuffling as she fed on the carcass of some small dead animal she had caught and brought back.

Worthless nag. I felt pleased that she had returned on her own; darkmares were not known for their loyalty. *You must have a death wish.* Which reminded me of him, the impossible one, and I sat up to look for him.

Jalon was sitting down by the water, casting stones at it, watching them skim the surface with little hops before they sank with a final plunk. His actions had no meaning but one did not question a Red Branch.

I rose but I did not approach him. With a Queen, one waited until one was invited.

"Of course you can come over here," he said without looking at me, his voice mild and very human-sounding. "I have said I will not harm you."

I should have prostrated myself; I should have spouted honorifics in the manner of the Green Branch preeners who cared for the needs of the Orb. But flattery was not my gift; I couldn't recall a single aria of praise. And how did one praise a male spinner, a male who was Queen? *I vow I will not mate with you or eat you, oh Deadliest One Who Should Not Exist?*

He threw another stone. "That would be nice – not eating me, I mean."

Nice. Dear Goddess, he could read every thought in my head – just as she could. Had I any doubt of what he was, it vanished forever. I walked down to the water and lowered myself to sit a few feet from him.

"You are feeling better?"

I nodded, and then I shook my head and stared at the stunted stream.

"Do you still wish to kill me?"

"No." He should have known I could not do that. Perhaps he had suffered some sort of brain illness – he had been around humans long enough to drive any spinner completely insane. To cover my confusion, I said, "I am frightened. I do not know what to do." He was a Queen; he would have to tell me.

Jalon tossed another flat stone at the water. "She sent you to capture me, to bring me to the Garne, didn't she? Your Queen. She has been plotting it for months."

"You feel the Orb?" None of the sisters could do that.

"Every day, every night." He reached out and picked up my hand. My black flesh was harder and shinier than his, my fingers longer and thinner. "I felt you as soon as you entered the town. I heard your yawn when that fool merc cut you." His fingers tightened for a moment before he released me. "I came down from Bronif today to meet you."

I eyed the faint outlines of his neck sacs under his human skin; like the Orb he had two more than I did and the smallest was five times the size of mine. I did not doubt their contents; he bore the mark. I might be able to move faster, but a single nip from him would end me – and I could not fight back.

He had tracked me – a Queen, tracking like a common Black Branch. Nothing stirred the Orb from the Medius unless it would provide her some personal pleasure. “Why do I still breathe?”

“I must risk everything to have everything, I suppose.” He rested his forehead against his knees.

Loneliness radiated from him, something no spinner had to endure and no Queen would have tolerated – or revealed. I was muddled all over again. “The Orb said to bring you alive.” Perhaps he missed his mother. “You dam also awaits.”

“She did not want me.”

“Gesa would not have left you behind if you had shown your color.” At his blank look, I gestured toward his chest. “The mark of the Red Branch.”

“Ah.” He rubbed a hand against his tunic. “That did not appear until the middle of my boyhood.”

I understood now why the Orb had sent me to track him. His awareness of her meant her awareness of him. She would never tolerate the existence of a second Queen, even one who evidently had been hiding away from her.

But why had he come to me?

“I was not hiding, and I wanted to meet you.” He rose to his feet and offered me his hand. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

He nodded in the direction of Bronif Keepe. “To see the parent who did not abandon me.”

#

Bronif Keepe appeared well tended, prosperous and largely deserted, except for some guards walking the battlements and flanking the great door in the wall surrounding the ugly structure. The human predilection for houses of stone block always reminded me of snails curling up in their shells. Surely protection for their flimsy bodies was the only reason they dwelled in the cold, ugly things.

“There is my father,” Jalon said as we entered the great hall, nodding toward an old man sitting close to a fire.

Tal Bronif was nothing like the stuff of his legends. He was little and wrinkled, and barely able to rise from his divan. Still, he did so as soon as he saw me.

“My son.” He had a weak, whiny voice. “You should have slain her.”

"There was no reason to do so, Father." Jalon actually bowed to the dried up elderly man. "Akela, may I present my sire, Tal Bronif, leader of the western territories. Father, this is Akela, spinner and tracker of the Black Branch."

I would not bow to a human, particularly one who wanted me dead. "Greetings, Queen's sire."

Filmy eyes widened. "What did you call me?"

Before I could respond Jalon said, "It is a long story, father."

"I cannot believe you brought her here." Tal sat back down and rested his face against his gnarled hands. "She will return and tell them of you. She will bring back an army."

"An army, to take this tiny little place?" He was as conceited and stupid as Gesa had said, and yet he had sired a Queen on her – or had he? I glanced at Jalon. "Exalted One, are you sure *this* is your sire?"

"I'm quite certain." Jalon went over and pressed his mouth to the top of the old man's bald head, but for some reason didn't bite him. "You must allow me to handle this, Father." He turned to me. "Akela, we must speak privately. Will you come with me?"

He was asking? "Of course."

The chamber he took me to was sparsely furnished but clean. "A pleasant room. You treat your servants well."

"This is my chamber." He removed his cloak and hung it on a hook.

The Orb would have slaughtered anyone who presumed to give her such humble accommodations, but Jalon seemed quite unconcerned. I hovered just inside the door, waiting for orders.

He pushed a metal hook with a pot attached to it over the hearth fire. "I am not going to tell you what to do, Akela."

"I am Black Branch." When he said nothing, I realized he had no declaration of my loyalty, and went down on one knee and offered my finest blade. "I am yours to command, The Jalon. You speak, I obey. You do not speak, I wait to obey. My life is yours." I had pledged as much to her, which put me squarely in the center of this wretched mess.

He took the blade. "*The* Jalon?"

"It is proper address for a Queen." Who should never have been permitted to draw air, and yet he seemed completely unconcerned by his dilemma. Why? I would have to go carefully; perhaps my declaration was not enough. I rose to my feet. *What would a Green say?* "Oh Exalted One, have these humans prevented you from taking your place among us?"

"No, and stop calling me Exalted One." He set aside my knife, and then used a cloth to remove the pot from the hook and began preparing some sort of beverage in a pottery cup. Like a servant. Automatically I went to take the pot from him, then went still as he handed me the cup.

I took it and held it. "Forgive me, but I do not understand."

"I am well-acquainted with the feeling myself." He gestured toward the cup. "Drink."

I looked down into the cup and surreptitiously sniffed. No poison, only herbs. "I wish to understand, Oh – I mean, if The Jalon would be so gracious as to bestow understanding upon me" –I remembered the drink and quickly sipped from it– "I would better be able to serve – "

"My name is Jalon. Just Jalon." He picked up my knife and went to sit on a little bench next to the fire. "And you don't serve me."

"But I do." I did not mean to contradict him, but did he doubt me? "The – Jalon, I am sworn to protect and defend the Red Branch with my life."

"Ballocks." He made a chopping gesture, and I braced myself for a blow. "Stop that, I'm not going to strike you. I order you to stop treating me like her. Treat me as you would any other human."

"I cannot." I grimaced. "You've seen what I do to them."

"True." He thought for a moment. "Very well – then I order you to speak to me and treat me as you would another of your kind."

That I could do. "Have you brain fever, to be inviting me to regard you as equal?"

He uttered a short, human laugh. "We are not equals, no."

"Do you not recognize my thread?" Surely not, he had shared my mind more thoroughly than the Queen ever had. "I am the first and best of the Black Branch. The Orb only sends me when she wants no mistakes made."

His smile faded. "So you are accomplished at what you do."

My jaw sagged a little. "I am *Death*, Jalon. Had you not shown me your thread or your mark, I would have gutted you, then come here and wiped the life from this fortress." And in regard to the latter, perhaps I still would. I set the cup aside. "Why do you not know these things?"

"I only know what she thinks and now, what you think." Before that shock sank in, he added another. "Until last summer I couldn't feel any of you. I have always lived here, with my father and his people. They are the only family I know."

A Red Branch who had no knowledge of our kind. The strength went out of my legs, and I sat down on the floor. "Jalon, you are *not* human, nor are you merely a spinner. You are a Queen."

"Queens are female."

"I know, I mean, I don't know. There has never been a male Red Branch, or more than one Queen at a time." I was tempted to draw a dagger and stab myself now, to save myself from being torn between the Orb and this odd sibling of hers. Yet my instinct to protect spoke for me instead. "Do you even know how to fight as a spinner?"

He shook his head. "I have only trained in the human ways of battle."

"Oh Bitch Goddess, that you would do this to me." I thumped my head back against the stone wall a couple of times.

"What will she do, when you take me to her?"

I stopped trying to crack my skull open. "The Orb will challenge you in front of the sisterhood. She will fight you, not in human ways. And she will win."

He nodded. "What happens if I lose?"

"If? When, Jalon. When. She will hang you to be bled." Everything inside me wanted to come up through my mouth. "It takes a spinner days to die that way."

"I bleed faster than that, I think." He tested the edge of my blade with his fingertip and watched blood well in the small cut. "So you think I would be spared much suffering if I ended it now?"

He was worse than a youngling; full grown, utterly lethal and yet wholly unaware of his power – and proposing to take his own life in front of me, when I had been bred to keep him alive.

"I could strangle your dam for not teaching you." I might just do that when I returned to the Garne.

He licked the blood from his finger. "Teach me what?"

"How to fight in spinner ways." I gestured toward his neck sacs. "How to use your poisons and your webs. Had she fulfilled her duties, you would at least have a chance."

"You could teach me."

My eyes bulged for a moment. "Me? I could, but . . ." The Orb had told me to bring him back, not train him in our ways. She had not forbidden me to train him, either.

"Never mind. It would serve no purpose anyway."

"There is no never mind, Jalon. You command. I obey." I rose and went to him, and seized the hand in which he held my blade. I guided the tip to my throat and stared down the edge, down into his strange gray eyes. "If you do not believe me, open my veins now and spare me this, I beg you."

"Which of us will you serve, Akela, when we reach the Garne?"

I had to speak honestly. "Whoever survives."

"Very well." He slowly drew back the blade. "Teach me."

#

Jalon did not know how to fight a spinner, but he knew how to purge. I watched as he filled a wooden bucket with a nearly continuous stream of poison from his hollow chelicerae. A manservant appeared to take away the deadly stuff, yet did not seem perturbed by it.

"Does he not know one drop can finish him?"

"Yes. It is a daily task for me," he told me as he carefully rinsed and wiped his mouth. "Our soldiers use it to tip their arrows."

"No wonder your sire has triumphed over the western territories. He has been cheating." I inspected his garments. "You can wear the trousers, but remove your tunic and footwear. You should shave your head before we leave for the Garne, too."

"Why?" He touched the long, thick black mass. "I like my hair."

"She can use it to pull off your head."

"Hmmm. I don't like it that much."

He led me down to the lists, where his father's men practiced their silly sword play. Several were there play fighting but retreated the moment they saw us, and the looks they gave Jalon made me draw my daggers.

"What is wrong?"

I eyed the one closest, selecting what part of him to hack off. "They show no respect."

"You can't stab a man for disliking me." He saw my expression and sighed. "All right, you can, but I order you not to."

"Then we will need disposables."

"Disposables?"

"People you don't need." Which seemed to be everyone in this place. "So you can practice the techniques I teach you."

"My people are not disposable." He pointed to a straw-stuffed form hanging from a rope. "We will use those."

"I will need to spin." I eyed the structures around us. "I need some ropes as anchors."

"For what?"

"A web. Spinners do not fight each other on the ground."

Three days later, the grounds of the lists were covered with bits of smoldering straw and sacking, and every soldier in the fortress had gathered to watch us from beneath. Jalon and I circled each other on the web I had spun between the guard tower and the hall. Both of us were soaked in sweat, his torso covered in bruises and my body armor dented by bite marks in a dozen places.

For a full-grown youngling, he learned very fast.

"Feel the strand," I muttered as I doubled back from the center of the weave. "What am I going to do?"

"Feint right, then turn and trip me." He avoided the move as he said it and reversed, catching my arms from behind. "I have you, spinner."

I dropped and rolled between his legs, then fastened him in a rib-cracking hold. "You had me." I held him with some difficulty, for he had twice my bulk and had picked up the evasive moves I had taught him on the first day. "If she gets you in such a hold, she will bite you here." I pressed my mouth to the side of his neck. "So how do you counter?"

He tried to break my hold, but my hands were locked. "I do not know."

"Kick back and up, drive your heel into her crotch and both of your elbows into her cribellum. That will drives the air from the lungs and make her close her thighs in reflex." I felt a twinge of foresight, a single thought thread: *He will never fight the Orb* – and it made my voice turn harsh. "Why are you reluctant to counter-attack? This is your life you defend."

"I – " he thought for a moment. "I can't do that to a woman."

"I keep telling you, we're not women. Now, she will not release you, but for a few seconds she will be distracted. That is when you knock her to the ground, like this." I deliberately pulled both of us from the web and fell to the ground. Even braced for the weight of him, he nearly knocked the breath out of me. "This breaks the hold." I showed him what to do with his arms. "Now, you pin me." When he did, I nodded. "Well done."

Instead of rising, he remained on top of me and held me there. "Do you believe I have a chance against her?"

I thought of the few times I had seen the Orb fight. Foreseeing it was impossible, all I could envision was Jalon refusing to fight, and yet he was no coward. "You are quick to learn, but she has much experience. Truly, I cannot say."

He gave me an odd look. "Perhaps I will surprise you."

Someone shouted something from the front gate, drawing the attention of the guardsmen watching us. When Jalon would have turned his head to see what it was, I caught his chin. "Use the thread, not your eyes."

He concentrated, and I felt that same, odd stream of thought brush past my mind and reach for whatever was approaching Bronif Keepe. "Men from the south. Mercenaries. Like those at the creek – the ones who seek you, Akela."

"Ah, some disposables." I followed his strand to the perimeter beyond the wall. Ferboil had grown tired of waiting for me to emerge, apparently. "How many do you sense?"

"Two hundred sixteen men." He frowned. "And one woman."

Dispatching them would serve as a nice finishing exercise. "Armed with?"

"Swords, spears, war hammers." He looked at me. "Nets?"

"He thinks to catch me like a fish. What is the female for, bait?" I prodded his arm. "Come, we will deal with them."

"We will not attack them, Akela." He pushed himself up and dusted off his trousers.

"They come here to attack me. I don't wish to send them home disappointed."

"There are other ways." He motioned to a guard, who brought a tunica and some form-fitted metal plates. Jalon pulled on the garment and strapped the metal to the front and back of his upper torso.

"That blocks your cribellum," I pointed out.

"It is customary for men of position to wear armor for protection."

I barely avoided making a rude sound. "You are not a man, and I protect you."

"Indulge me this once."

We went to the front gates, where I saw Ferboil Danu and his reinforcements, all mounted and heavily armed, lined up in siege formation. Ferboil had done me the favor of distinguishing himself from his hirelings by wearing new armor studded with gemstones.

"The glittery one is the leader, Danu."

"I recognize his strand." At my glance, Jalon smiled. "Yes, Akela, even humans have their own threads."

"Threads, no. Lint, perhaps." I stepped outside the gate, placing myself in front of Jalon, and regarded the assembled troops. "Easy to collect, hard to brush off."

"Spinner." Ferboil urged his mount forward. "This be yer last chance."

"Or what? You'll butcher everyone and burn this place to the ground?" I folded my arms. "Danu, I'd be more likely to *help* you do that. Choose another threat, please."

He straightened in his saddle. "That's yer final answer?"

"That was my final answer a week ago. Now I'm getting annoyed." I let my fangs extrude. "And hungry."

"Why do you persist in pursuing her?" Jalon asked. "What is it that you want?"

"He wants killing," I muttered.

"A web." Ferboil jabbed his finger toward me. "A web only her kind can spin."

"Surely there are easier weapons to obtain, Chieftain."

"Not for warrin'." He gestured, and some men brought forth a litter and set it down beside his mount. "For healin'."

The barest brush of a delicate thought thread made me approach the litter. I ignored the swords the carriers drew and peered inside. A young human female with a grossly swollen belly lay inside, her skin leached of color, her stick-thin limbs twitching. The linens swaddling her lower body bore pinkish wet stains.

None of that would have concerned me, had I not seen the scars on her cheek. Twin marks, made by two short, curved fangs.

She opened her sunken eyes and met mine. "Help me."

If she could speak, she still had a chance. I tore back the linens, saw another scar on her belly, and slid my hand between her thighs. One of the guards reached in to stop me, and I used my free arm to shove him away.

As soon as I felt her maidenhead I drew back and turned to Danu. "How long has she been in the throes?"

"Sevenday now."

"You dolt, why did you not say before?" I pushed the curtains aside and climbed in to straddle her shins. "Her name."

"Lalassa, my daughter."

"Lalassa, look at me." I placed my hands on her belly and felt the position of the mass within. "Have you shown any bright red blood?" She shook her head as Jalon appeared at the side of the litter. "She is very near the time. I cannot do this out here, we must take her inside."

One of his guards peered in. "We have a midwife here, she can deliver her."

I shook my head. "She doesn't carry a human child."

#

I had never done this, nor had I ever expected to for anyone but myself – we took care of our own needs. Anger made me snap out my orders to the servants as I prepared the young female for her ordeal. Ferboil and Jalon insisted on being in the room.

“How did this happen to her?” I heard Jalon ask the Chieftain.

“She snuck out to pick berries, never came back. My men found her cocooned to a tree threeday later.” He removed his ornamented helm. “Never guessed more ‘til she swelled.”

“Akela?”

I ignored them and touched the girl’s cheek. “Open your eyes, child. Yes, I know it hurts, but look at me.”

“Eating me,” Lalassa whispered. “Inside.”

“No.” Not yet, anyway. I tore open my tunic. “I want you to keeping look at me, look at my eyes. I have pretty eyes, do I not?” I kept my tone soothing as I pulled back the linens to bare her belly. “Pretty and dark and deep.”

She fell under the gazespell almost at once. “Like the night.”

“Yes, like the night. I want you to go there now, into the quiet, into the night.” I braced myself and centered my mind. “It is safe there. Safe and soft and warm, is it not?”

“So soft . . .” Awareness left her eyes as she stared past me at nothing in particular.

“Goddess keep her there.” I placed my hands against her bulging abdomen to check the undulating mass inside before I glanced at the men watching us. “Jalon, I need that blood and flesh, placed in a secure chamber. Danu, you should leave.”

Jalon left to check on the servants. Ferboil shook his head. “She be my only child.”

“Then do not interfere, or I will bury you together with her.” Lalassa’s body convulsed under me. “It is time.”

I had already chewed the roots I needed to alter my sac fluid, and their bitter taste was strong in my throat as I spun a cradle web of tiny strands and anchored it to the canopy above the bed. Once it was secure, I wove a tight cable, coated it with birthing fluid, and then attached it to my palms.

Carefully I applied it to the lower half of Lalassa’s belly, and watched the flesh part. I went slowly, for If I misjudged the depth I might severe her body in half. Distantly I heard Ferboil retching as my fluid cauterized the opened flesh

on either side, preventing bleeding. Finally I had penetrated down to the inner cavity, where the swollen pink mass of her uterus rippled and flexed.

What was inside wanted out.

I tossed aside the cable and spun a much shorter one, then used it to open the uterus. A tiny blue hand reached out, blindly seeking, and as soon as the aperture was wide enough, I cast aside the second strand and reached it with my own hand.

The babe emerged intact, bright blue and physically perfect, its fangs bared as it looked into my face. It made no sound, but battered my mind with the intensity of its first worded thought.

Hungry.

I lifted it into the cradle web and spun holding strands to keep it from escaping, and then returned my attention to the girl's gaping abdomen. I thinned the holding strand and stitched together Lalassa's uterus and abdomen before I checked her eyes. The gazespell kept her far away from what had happened to her body, but I could not keep her there much longer or she might never return.

Hungry hungry hungry

Patience, little one. I bent down, sank my fangs into Lalassa's shoulder, and let the paralyzing fluid from my nasal sacs flow into her body.

"What are you doing?" Danu cried.

"Sparing her pain. Lalassa, look at me." I coaxed her back to the real world with my voice and my mind. "You will not be able to move for several hours. This will give your body time to heal." Or die an easy death, if her body rejected my repairs.

The dazed girl focused on my face. "Alive?"

"Yes." I gathered the squirming infant's cradle web and held it close to my chest. "Jalon?"

He was there, waiting. "It's in the next room."

I carried the youngling into the adjoining chamber, where two servants stood waiting over a freshly-slaughtered carcass of a young calf. "They have to go."

"Why?"

"She may attack them first." The little blue didn't seem insane, but it was so hard to tell these days.

Jalon sent the servants away and secured the door, while I snapped the holding strands to release my new little sister.

The infant spinner shook off the web and regarded me with her bright blue eyes. *Hungry*. She inspected me, then Jalon, then the carcass. *Mine?*

Her mental discipline impressed me – the young who were not born insane still remained essentially mindless until a few days after birth. *Yes, child*. Watching her take her first lunge and sink her tiny fangs into the carcass nearly made me wish for one of my own again.

“Why does she not attack us?”

“A spinner always recognizes the mind of another.”

“And Lalassa?”

“She is young, and strong. She may live.” Not wishing to disturb the youngling, I moved away. “A blue will be most welcome in the Garne; we do not have many story tellers.”

“How did this happen? Did a spinner rape her?”

“Lalassa was not raped. As it happens, she is still a virgin. She was used as a vessel by a Garne spider. It does not happen often anymore.” I leaned back against the wall. “There are so few of them left in the forest.”

“A spider did this to her?”

I told him of the giant Garne spiders, which had once dominated the forests thousands of years ago, and how they used the bodies of their prey as vessels to incubate their younglings. “No one knows when the first human female was taken, but the results were different. Our story spinners say that one youngling emerged from that female, having consumed the rest in the womb, and its form was different – larger, with only four long limbs, an altered torso, and human-like features. It had taken some of itself from its vessel.”

He seemed very absorbed by what I said. “So a spinner is a half-human Garne spider. That explains much.”

“Perhaps. No one knows for certain.” I shrugged. “When enough were born, they gathered and formed the Sisterhood.” The little blue had already devoured a quarter of the carcass, and she paused to digest it and clean herself. “The human female was fortunate. Most spinners born thusly eat their way out of the womb.”

“It was kind of you to help Lalassa.”

I nodded toward the youngling. “I was saving our sister. Had you not provided adequate food, I would have allowed her to devour the girl.”

He gave me one of his mysterious smiles. “As you say.”

#

There was no more time to remain at Bronif Keepe and teach Jalon spinner ways; the birth of the blue made it imperative for us to leave at once for

the Garne. I placed the little one in a sling web and carried her on my back, which did not please Neleh but then very little did anyway. Since Danu's daughter was still recovering, Tal Bronif permitted him and his troops to remain at the keepe.

Both men were waiting for us at the gates, and Danu offered me a packet of jewels. "For saving my daughter."

"I have ample reward," I said, adjusting the sling. "Save them for Lalassa." I turned to the old man, and watched as Jalon dismounted and embraced his sire. Their bewildering affection for each other prompted me to make a farewell remark. "I will send word of the outcome, old one."

"Take good care, my son." Tal kissed him, then frowned at me. "You keep him alive, spinner, or I will hunt you down and kill you myself."

I nodded. "Perhaps you are his true sire."

The journey to the Garne would have taken me only a fortnight on my own; having Jalon and the youngling as companions slowed my pace. That, and I was reluctant to reach our destination. The closer we came, the larger the knot of dread in my belly swelled.

As was our custom, the blue chose a name for herself a few days into the trip. I released her from the sling to hunt with us, and she brought down small game on her own without much difficulty. After she dragged a spotted hare back into camp on night, she dropped the carcass by the fire and came to me. *I know who I am now.*

Do you? Recalling my own moment of name pride as a youngling, I dropped down on one knee. *Tell me, sister.*

I am Kabla, the-unexpected-one.

Jalon joined us and caught the thread. *A beautiful name.*

Kabla preened for a moment before she returned to the business of eating her kill. Jalon handed me a cup of the tea he insisted on brewing, and I sat with him to watch her.

He seemed to admire her greatly. "She is incredible, isn't she? So nimble and bright."

I sipped the herbal drink, which was starting to grow on me. "She is efficient and disciplined; a worthy candidate for the Garne."

"Candidate?"

"The Orb decides if she joins us or dies." I felt the strong thread of his disapproval. "Those are decisions you will make, if you prevail."

"She does not deserve to die."

"More and more spinners are born wrongly of late. Many are insane; they never attain mindshare and will kill anything and anyone." I thought of the younglings I had been ordered to dispatch, and projected those memories to Jalon. "The Queen decides in order to protect all life, not just the sisterhood."

"So you slaughter your own as well as humans." He didn't sound too happy about it.

I finished the tea. "It is what I do."

"I wonder why she did not simply order you to kill me."

"I can't do that, not to a Red Branch." I met his gaze. "Even if I could, she would not permit it."

"Why?"

"Killing a Queen is a Queen's pleasure alone."

#

We reached the edge of the Garne a week later, and as soon as we touched spinner ground, I felt the Orb's thread reaching out to us.

"She knows we're here." As I told Jalon that, I kept my mind carefully blank. "She is not pleased."

"By me, you, or Kabla?"

"All three, I think." I met the gathering, curious strands of my sisters and accepted their greetings, while I felt Kabla grow very still against my back. *Do not be frightened, small sister.*

So many. She was more excited than scared. *And only three like me.*

The Blue Branch is thin now. You will be much admired. If she was permitted to live. I felt a surge of frustration at the thought of losing Kabla at the Orb's whim. She was a delightful youngling who could bring much to the Garne.

"A tree," Jalon murmured.

We were surrounded by trees. "What about them?"

"That one." He nodded toward the Garnet. "I did not know you lived in a tree."

"It is the oldest living thing in the forest." I regarded the giant bloodwood that the Sisterhood had occupied for centuries. It was five times the size of Bronif Keepe, with a massive central trunk which supported the fourteen main branches of the sisters. Beneath its twisted roots were the dying and nesting caverns where we brought life from ourselves and returned our lives to the Garnet when we were done. Through his eyes, it must have seemed intimidating, but I only saw my home. I pointed. "I live there, at the top, with the other blacks."

"Now I understand why you call yourselves branches."

It is unexpected. Kabla peeked over my shoulder and clutched at me, her excitement streaking through her thought-thread. *Like me.*

"Yes." The Orb's thread wove around me, tugging, and I dismounted.

"Leave your weapons and your ride here, Jalon. One of the browns will attend to them." I hobbled Neleh and began removing my blade straps.

The Sisterhood had assembled in the Medius around the Queen's throne. The Orb sat waiting, every inch a Queen in her finest ceremonial robe, a flowing river of silver and black spun by the artisans of the White Branch. My skin siblings, the other Black Branches, flanked the Queen on all sides.

All minds were blank of anything save recognition of me and loyalty to the Queen.

"Stay here." I placed the little blue in Jalon's arms before I approached the Orb. Some ten feet from the hem of her robe, I dropped to the ground and prostrated myself. "Oh Exalted One, live forever."

I felt a sensation of being torn in half inside; the Orb pulling at me from one side, and my thread still anchored to Jalon on the other. I could not fully give myself to her or him, and that was something I had never experienced before. My vision doubled as both of them drew harder, and then Jalon abruptly released me.

"You are late returning to us, Akela." With a distinct note of satisfaction, the Queen wrapped her thread around me and used it to urge me to my feet. "I feared for your life."

"There were complications, my Queen." I didn't have to point out the little blue or relate the tale of delivering Lalassa, she was already plucking the memories from my head. "I apologize for causing you unnecessary distress."

"Take the youngling to the nesting cavern; I will judge her later," the Orb ordered one of her Green Branch attendants. She raised her dark face and eyed Jalon. "Son of Tal, approach me."

Jalon did not hand Kabla to the attendant as he came to stand at my side. He did not prostrate himself or make any sign of respect, either. Had he forgotten everything I had told him, the ninny? "You are not what I expected."

"I disappoint you?" The Orb rose from her throne, and shrugged out of her robe. Beneath it she wore the solid red body shroud of a fighting Queen. Her thread tightened and grew so hot I thought my flesh would smoke.

I placed a hand on his forearm. *Jalon, do not taunt her.*

Be at ease, Black Branch. "No, but your thoughts of yourself led me to expect differently," he told her. "Something more . . . omnipotent."

The Orb's fangs appeared for a moment before she forcibly retracted them. "No sister would dare speak to me thus. You are indeed of the Red Branch, brother."

He inclined his head.

"You know why you are here, so I see no need for further delay." She gestured toward the vaulted space above us, where an intricate battle web had been constructed. "Shall we?"

I could not bear the thought of her killing him. I did not know why, and I could feel her outrage slamming into me, but everything inside me told me to protect him. I jerked my mind from the Orb's hold. *Take the little one and go. I will keep them occupied for as long as I can.*

He smiled and handed Kabla to me. "No, Akela. I'm not going to fight her."

Kabla bounced against me, excited all over again for some odd reason. *I am not the only unexpected one, elder sister.*

The Orb strode to him and tore open the front of his tunica with a single swipe of her hand. "You bear the mark of our Branch. I have felt you in my mind. There is only one Queen."

"I will not fight you because I am not a Queen." He seized her hands, and something poured out of him, something terrifying and dangerous and beyond anything I had ever experienced from mindshare. *I am a King.*

Every sister within the Garnet cried out in pain as they were forced down to the ground. Only Kabla and I remained untouched by whatever Jalon was doing. In amazement, I watched the Orb slowly drop to her knees.

I understand now, Jalon's powerful thoughts rayed out like strands spun from the sun itself. *I had to come here to be sure.*

How is it that you can do this? The Orb writhed under the mindhold with which he held her.

Human vessels allowed you evolve from the Garne spiders. A human sire created me. We need them.

You're insane!

No, elder sister. I am the first of my kind. He released the Orb, who fell flat on her face. *You can go on despising humans, and killing them, but your own inbreeding and ignorance are destroying you.* He glanced around the Garnet. *If you wish to see the spinners survive, then come with me. I will teach you how to live among humans, and how to take human mates. It is the only chance you have.*

I did not know what to do, or think, when he came to me. *Why did you not tell me? Why did you shield the power of your mind from me?*

You thought as they did. I did not hope for more until you saved Lalassa. He touched my cheek. *It was vanity, too. I did not want you because of some inbred loyalty.*

He wanted me?

I have long waited to find a suitable mate. However, I can't allow you to kill humans for sport anymore. Nor will I ever be soft or mindless.

I suppose you won't let me devour you after we mate.

No. He laughed. *But I won't devour you, either.*

That seemed fair. I saw the Orb staring at me, felt the now-familiar weight of Kabla as she scrambled from my hands to perch on my shoulder. I felt the reeling minds of my sisters, unwilling to accept what he had shown them. Part of me balked against it as well – live among humans? Mate with them? Could we spinners ever learn to do that?

The humans are just as reluctant, but we must try.

I studied the prostrate forms of my sisters. *Most of them will not come. They are afraid of what you say.* Indeed, so was I – but there was truth in everything he had said.

That, and real hope.

"I know. But in time, perhaps, they will conquer their fear." He held out his hand. "Come, Akela. Let us go home now."

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