

A largish snippet from the Work in Progress

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

The usual caveats apply. This is virgin (which means unread even by me) first draft. All typos and stupidities remain intact – I’ll get them on the second go-round, but right now I’m just writing. This is, in first draft, how the thing opens. **Everything** is subject to change. With that said, here are the first 1780 words of the new book.

Rule, Covenant, and Promise

Chapter 1

We went to the forest by moonlight, my brother and I. We knew we should not go – if the villagers caught us, they would take our pails from us and chase us back home, no matter if we were the headman’s children. Yet because we went by moonlight – which is always forbidden, even to adults – we discovered our father’s awful secret, a secret that only we could set right.

“We should tell the servants to take the pails and gather the sap by daylight,” Dan said. “I can hear things moving out here.”

“They don’t bring anything back,” I reminded him. “They take it for their own families, and say the trees weren’t generous. And Mama will die if we don’t get it.”

In the spring, in the hardwood forest to the west of town, the sap begins to rise. And in the ancient, deep-rooted taandu trees, magic rises with it, dark and strong and vital. The

village elders, the yerva, make medicines with it to keep the village strong, and to keep the crops healthy, and to ward evil away from people and livestock.

So once a year, the yerva go into the forest to tap the taandu trees; they harvest the sap which will be the village's magic until the next year. They harvest by day, because in the daylight the sap runs clear, and in daylight the forest is mostly safe – though not safe enough for children. Not even the yerva enter the forest by night.

"Don't you hear something?" Dan insisted.

My wooded pail banged against my left leg, and the mallet and taps in it rattled. I held my spike – which I would use to make holes in the tree's bark – tighter. The dirt road that led into the forest seemed almost to glow in the moonlight. Shadows moved across it, seemingly unconnected to anything in the real world. The chill in the air raised gooseflesh on my arms, and the soft, irregular rustling and clacking of grasses and branches made it seem we were not alone. But we could not go back to the house without at least two full buckets of sap that we could take to a yerva to have made into a healing syrup for Mama. We couldn't.

"I don't hear anything," I told Dan.

He was thirteen, two years younger than me, and already taller than me by a hand's breadth. But he hated the darkness much more than I; he slept on the floor near the hearth at night not for the warmth but for the light.

"Genny, you need not pretend. I'll not run home and leave you here alone. But I'm going to keep the sword drawn."

"You can't." I turned to glare at him. "That we go at night is bad enough, but if you step into the forest with blade drawn, you'll declare war. Bad enough you brought his sword with you!"

“And if I don’t, and the nightlings have already declared war, we’ll die, and if we die, that will be the end of Mama, too.”

“You must keep the promise. If they attack us, draw the sword. When we get to the first untapped tree, we’ll stand back to back, and I’ll hold my spike tightly, and you will keep your hand on the sword hilt. And we’ll stand like that until the moon begins to set and we have to leave.”

He gave me a look that I could see clear enough by moonlight – but I was oldest, and he would abide by rule and covenant long enough to get us well into trouble. In his eyes, though, I saw that rule, covenant, and promise would fall by the way the instant he thought us in danger, and the village would find itself at war next morning and never know why.

We live uneasily side by side with the nightlings. They hold the heart of the forest and the southern meadows, and graze their beasts by moonlight there, and even in the full dark. We hold all of Hillrush, and the meadows to the north, and the edges of the forests. Our people trade without meeting except once each tenth year; the yerva draw up a covenant with the lords of the nightlings, agreeing to a fair exchange of our goods for theirs, and the headman, who is our father, signs the covenant and he and the high lord of the nightlings renew the promise for the next ten years – that our peoples will not cross into each other’s territories with weapons bared, that we will act as neighbors, and that we will not travel at all through the heart of each other’s domains.

So we live by rule, which is father’s decree, and covenant, which is our treaty, and by promise, which is our peace. But we live nervously.

Dan swears that he hears nightlings whispering outside our windows after dark, though Father says Dan is a liar, and that nothing he says is to be heeded. So Dan stays by fire and light, and sleeps lying atop an old sword he stole from the

armory. And he does not sleep well.

We moved under the canopy trees, into the deeper dark of the forest. Because the trees had not yet leafed out, moonlight still reached us, but the shadows grew livelier and more numerous.

Dan started looking around. "Not yet," I told him. "We have to find a big, old tree. Otherwise, we won't get enough tonight to do any good, and I don't trust that we'll be able to steal away twice without getting caught."

"It's not going to do any good anyway," Dan said. "When we take our two buckets of sap to one of the yerva, she'll see that it's dark instead of clear, and she will know what we've done. And she won't touch it."

I knew this was probably true. "We'll boil the sap down to syrup for her ourselves if we have to," I said. I had determined that my mother was going to live no matter what I had to do to make it so. Father had lately grown strange and solitary, and when he called me to bring him something, I did not like the look in his eyes as he regarded me. Mama feared nothing, and stood between the two of us; and if she died not only would I lose her, but I would have to flee our home and our village, and take my younger brothers and sisters with me, too, because I would not trust their safety to Father's care without Mama's intervention.

We went deeper into the forest, so that the arch of trees finally cut off any view of the meadow behind us. And now I clearly heard voices – whispers from the trees above us, and from the forest to either side of us. I clenched my spike so tightly my hand hurt, and my fingers felt like they would never straighten again once I let go.

Dan said nothing now, and neither did I, but we looked at each other, and could see our own fear reflected in each other's eyes.

Dan nodded to a massive old taandu tree just ahead, and we picked up our pace. He planted our white pole in the road, hammering it into the dirt with the mallet. The white pole serves two purposes – it marks the road for those who must step into the true forest, and it reminds the nightlings of covenant and promise. We are your neighbors, it says. We have your word of our safety.

We stepped off the dirt onto the pillowed, sweet-scented loam of the true forest. The sound of our footsteps faded to our own ears, and the voices grew louder. We did not look for the nightlings; we knew from stories that we would never see them unless they chose to be seen. We knew, though, that they watched us.

At the tree, we put down our buckets, and I held the spike steady with both hands. Dan hammered it in, making a hole big enough to fit one of our taps. “This is harder than I thought it would be,” he said.

“It goes in the depth of a finger,” I told him.

“It may. But the tree is made of iron, I swear.”

We kept at it, and I saw the last of the black disappear, and the white line on the spike go flush with the bark.

“Stop. This one is ready.”

We needed both of us pulling with our full weight to free the spike. Dan put the tap in, and we hooked our first bucket over it.

“Two more,” I said.

The tree fought the next two spikes just as hard, and we stood damp with sweat when sap finally started to flow into our last bucket.

We looked at the moon. It had not yet reached its midpoint in

the sky – we had a lot of darkness still before us. “Back to back,” Dan said. “And touching, so that nothing comes between us.

We leaned against the tree so that we were guarded on one side. Our backs touched, as did the backs of our heads. I could hear Dan’s breathing, as quick and nervous as my own, and I could only wish to see the moon race across the sky. Dawn could not arrive fast enough for me.

Above us and around us, the voices grew shrill. Words we did not understand, cadences alien to our ears, emotions that echoed of anger and fear – but who among the nightlings would fear us? Who would be angry with us? They didn’t know us. We weren’t anyone.

Then the forest fell silent – unnaturally silent. All the voices stopped, and with them, the breeze through the trees and the mutterings of the birds and the calls of hunting animals. All the night froze, save only Dan and me. I could hear his harsh breathing, and my own. And beside us, from three taps, dark sap dripping into wooden buckets with a hollow ringing that seemed in the terrifying stillness to be as loud as the ringing of bells.

“Don’t draw the sword,” I whispered to Dan, so low I feared he might not hear me. “Not yet.”

“I won’t,” he said. “Unless they come after us.”

A pause, and the forest seemed to breathe in. And then, a musical voice above us. “I will not come after you. I wish only to speak with you, but with my own safety guaranteed.”

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