

Well, it's Friday

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

I've had a couple of good writing days, took off yesterday completely to celebrate Valentine's Day and play my Valentine's Day present, **Majesty** ... oh, boy ... talk about a game that will keep you glued to the computer.

Today I'm going to take a run at between 1500 and 2000 words on the proposal. And because I like what I'm getting so far, I'll toss in a sneak preview.

First bit of the first scene from Chapter One of **Talyn**

Pada and I stepped out of the Shields Building at twenty past the Dog on the last day of Madrigas, to find shreds of the moon peering out from behind scattered clouds offering the only light on the dock. The air bit into me – my light uniform had been enough when I went in, but while I worked, early spring had given way to tenacious winter, and I was not more than three steps from the warmth than I wished I had my cloak.

“Lamplighters are late again,” Pada said. Pada has a great gift for stating the obvious. Conversations with her ever include such statements as, “Ah, the tide is high,” and “Well, the streets are certainly crowded today,” which makes her wearing company to keep.

The whores who ever clustered by the front door late at night, hoping for safer custom than the sailors in port, gave us good even, and we nodded acknowledgement – for we in Shields guard all the taak, and the lands beyond, and we thus represent all.

When we were past them, Pada picked up the thread of her

previous narrative in mid-sentence. "... and then he said, 'I would that you would, with me, just once, for I dream even waking of knowing the pleasure of you,' and offered me whole bolts of fine ribbed velvet in red and purple, like I was some street tart who'd flop on my back for his bedamned rags."

I watched Pada from the corner of my eye. Even in the dark, I could see her fury. She's prettier than me – delicate and blonde and fair, with huge blue eyes and the features that gather men's glances like flowers attract bees. She takes all such adulation as her birthright – as her due. But she thinks they should all just admire her from afar, and give her things. "If you don't want him to make such offers, stop leading around by the nose."

Pada stopped dead on the dock and stared at me as if I'd slapped her. I was watching the whores behind us, and the dark cluster of bones-players before us, and movement at the mouth of the alley just beyond that, and I thought perhaps, whether we were in uniform or not, we might keep moving. But no, she was going to have her dramatic piece.

"I?! Leading him around by his nose?! He clings to me like a motherless calf. And for this, I should take his cloth and bed him?!"

I decided to get moving again; unlike Pada, I do not trust the Shielders uniform to keep away all evil, any more than I trust my looks to turn all men to pudding. I'm tall, with nice eyes, and features that people either call strong or angular – or sometimes handsome. My mother was a great beauty in her day, but all I got from her is good thick auburn hair. The rest of me is a female version of my father.

"Talyn, do not walk off and leave me when I'm speaking with you," Pada shouted from behind me.

I kept walking, and after a moment, heard her short, clipped steps hurrying to catch up. Good. I wanted to get off the dock

and into the safer, lighted part of Beyltaak.

Pada caught up with me as we passed the gamblers. They paused to touch fingers to forehead, and again we nodded acknowledgement, and kept moving.

Under her breath, Pada hissed, "Think you I should bed him for his cloth. That I should let him value me so lightly?"

"Not what I was saying at all," I told her. "I think you should have pugged him months ago, without any gifts or bribes. If you have a fine bull in your corral, don't cry ruin when he won't pretend he's a steer for you."

"Cloth!" she said. "It's insulting. Some of the Shielders get gold and diamonds and bolts of silk and apartments on the Bay from their lovers."

I'd been hearing this part of the refrain for at least two months now – so often I think I could have done it work for word as the whole complaint spilled from Pada's lips. I knew what was coming next – and indeed, it came.

"He could sell his bedamned ribbed velvet and get me that little place on Short Street if he really loved me."

I have the patience of the Five Saints, mostly, and have learned the art of keeping my tongue still in my head when around Pada, who has all the discretion of the wind. But at that moment a long day fighting heavy attacks while waiting for replacements who arrived late and dealing with a new commander brought in from Havartaak who must have been sent to us to keep his previous command from killing themselves, added to sheer weariness at Pada's endless complaining, overcame me, and I said what I really thought.

"And then the difference between you and the working girls waiting back at the Shields door would be ...?"

In most instances, I've found it a poor idea to tell a friend

what you really think – and I've generally found this out by doing it, and living to regret it. This time was no different. I heard the words hit the night, and cringed, and Pada leapt into me.

"How dare you?! How dare?! To suggest that I could be compared in any way to a ... a whore ..."

In for the whisper, in for the shout. "Because it's true," I said. "You are offended not because he tried to bribe you to bed him, but because you didn't think his bribe was good enough. You say if he loved you, he would give you something bigger and better – but if you loved him, you would not want silks or diamonds or apartments. You would want only him. As you set this up, Pada, your virtue isn't an issue – only your price."

I think had she carried a blade, she would have run me through in that instant, the murder in her eyes shone so clear. But she had her tongue with her, and in a pinch that always seemed to serve. "You're a fine one to talk of virtue," she snarled. "You'd bed a man because you liked the color of his eyes."

I smiled a little. "I have pugged a man because I liked the color of his eyes. And enjoyed every minute of it, too. And got nothing from it but the pleasure of the business and a wonderful week with him a year later, when he took his week's leave in Beyltaak just so we could be together."

"And you haven't heard from him again, have you?"

"I have not."

"Because no man can respect a woman who does not guard her virtue."

"Because he got killed in the mountains when the line moved and the Shielders in his unit got separated from the Senders."

This set Pada still for a moment. I hoped it might embarrass

her enough that she would put her nattering to bed for the night, but I do not have this sort of good fortune. She started up quick enough again – but at least on a subject other than poor nose-ringed Dosil the velvet merchant.

“What happened with you and that broacher? I thought sure you’d missed it entirely and was moving to intercept it when at the last instant you blocked it.”

So our new topic was to be my inadequacy. Joy. Friends from work rarely become friends in the true sense – in all the years I’d been in the Shielders, I had yet to make a friend I thought I would want to see if ever the war ended and the Joint Forces released me from duty. Proximity demands that we get along, but most of us eye each other warily and wish we could pick our own companions.

“The Eastils have a new sender on our detail,” I said. “He bring a different approach. I could not recognize the spell when it first came at the shield, and so could not figure out how to counter it until almost the last instant. It could well have come through on me – and if he has any more surprises like that, he may succeed.”

“Something different?”

“He’s subtle. I suspect if we cannot backtrail him and have our senders take him out, he’s going to be trouble.”

“Not for me,” Pada said, looking smug.

“Oh? You learn some new magic I need to know about?”

We came even with that dark alley I’d been watching – and out of the shadows stepped two men, both big, both armed with long knives, both staring at the two of us unblinking. They reeked of cheap wine and salban smoke, and they wove from side to side as they stood.

I braced myself and ran personal defense and attack spells

through my head and tried to remember who had last been court-martialed for use of magic against civilians, and how that had gone.

The bigger of the two – Mountain Left, I thought – said, “You’re ... shuh ... shuh ... Shielders, aren’t you?”

“We are,” I said, praying under my breath that those two would suddenly get scared and run away. If I remembered correctly, that last court-martial had ended in a permanent placement in eternally-frozen Gavas Base.

“We juh ... juh .. jusht wanted to thank you. Good work.” They raised their daggers to their foreheads, and bowed, and I could envision sliced foreheads or one of them losing his balance and sprawling forward and running me through by accident. But they survived the salute, and so did we. They faded into the shadows, we hurried on our way, and my heart moved out of the back of my mouth and down into my chest where it belonged.

I am daily grateful for the Shielders uniform, and for the men and women who have fought so long and hard to make it a symbol of good.

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