

THE ROAD TO JOBS

By Wendy L. Anderson

Nathaniel hurried through the dirty streets of lower Skogur to beat the rain that was threatening above. He pulled his collar up against his face which gave him a little relief from the stench wafting up from the gutters. He stepped around the human filth rolling down the streets in putrid streams and tried hard not to gag from the smell. Up ahead he could see the lights of the tavern spilling out from an open door. He rushed towards it and heard the sound of laughter and music just as the skies split open and rain began to pour down.

The tavern was full of men drinking and carousing. The sound of a wooden whistle rang out in the background where a young boy played for any pennies the drunken patrons would part with. The place was so crowded it was standing room only. The stale air was filled with pipe smoke and the smell of sweating, unwashed bodies. The ale flowed freely, and plates of bread and cheese were easily obtained, though there was no meat.

Nathaniel pushed through the press of human flesh holding his satchel tightly against his body to avoid the light touch of a thief. He was much taller than many in the room and was able to see over everyone's heads but still could not locate the object of his search. Focusing for a moment and tuning his senses, he cast them wide and located the person he was looking for.

In a far corner, a small, hooded figure stood in the shadows and Nathaniel made a huff deep in his throat as he headed straight there. Moments later he found her. A small girl stood huddled in the corner covered head to toe in a ragged black cloak trying to look inconspicuous.

"Grace! I've finally found you! I've been looking everywhere!"

"I'm sorry!" the girl spoke quietly and huddled closer to him searching for the familiar warmth of his body. Her voice was full of shame. "There are too many people here and I couldn't..."

"It's alright, Grace, my Love." Nathaniel pulled her close, ducked under her hood quickly, and kissed her.

When the girl lowered her head in remorse, he put a finger under her chin and forced her to look up at him. "I'm sorry I had to leave you in the first place," he explained, "but I needed to find an Inn with an available room."

"Did you find somewhere?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, but it costs more coin than we have. Do you think you can do it one more time?"

The small girl hesitated briefly, but then nodded her head slowly and said, "I will do it."

“That’s my girl! After your done we’ll get out of here and sleep in a real bed and have a hot meal with meat and fresh bread. Come, I’ll get everyone’s attention. Only dance until we have enough coin and we’ll be done.” Grace nodded her head.

Sitting unnoticed at a nearby table a young soldier in a Skorian uniform watched the conversation between the tall young man and the cloaked figure. His eyes followed them curiously as they moved to the center of the room.

Nathaniel nudged through the crowd which wasn’t difficult due to his large size, he went to the center of the room. Leaping onto a tabletop, he was careful not to step in anyone’s food. The patrons sitting at the table were none too happy with the man now standing on their table, but he was so large, none of them did anything more than grumble.

“My good Sirs!” It took some shouting and waving, but after a few moments, Nathaniel gained everyone’s attention. “HO! May I have your attention! My good Sirs!” Finally, the place quieted enough that Nathaniel could be heard over the grumblers upset at the interruption. With a sweeping gesture, he flung back his cloak and motioned with his hands for the men to gather close and listen.

“My good Sirs! Who among you would like to see a lovely young beauty dance for your viewing pleasure? She’ll beguile you with her swaying hips and flying feet, her glittering eyes will hold you spellbound and tonight in your dreams...” He paused with a mischievous grin for the suggestive effect, and the crowd hushed to hear what he would promise. “Who knows? Good Sirs, move back your chairs and tables, make room, and watch the lovely, graceful dancer.”

Men started shoving chairs and tables and shoving each other out of the way and made a small open space. The small girl in the black cloak came forward. With a practiced flick, she dramatically undid the clasp on her cloak and slowly drew down her hood. The men surrounding her leaned forward shoving and struggling to see.

The Skogur soldier pushed his way toward the front of the crowd of men and took the best spot to watch the entertainment.

“If you are entertained, the lovely dancer would appreciate a token of your appreciation.” He grabbed an empty tankard and placed it on the floor out of the way of the dancer, but still close enough to catch any tossed coins.

Dropping her hood and removing her cloak the lovely dancer stepped lightly forward. Some of the men gasped, some made rude comments, others just stood with their mouths gaping as a young girl took her place in the center of the cleared space.

Slim and lithe, the strikingly beautiful girl readied herself to dance. The multi-colored skirt she wore hung in folds around her bare feet. She was wrapped tightly in a long scarf that accentuated her breasts and revealed her long slender arms. She was clean, fair of skin, very

beautiful, and delicate, like a rare flower blooming amongst weeds. Reaching up, she pulled a smooth wooden pick from her hair and let fall the loose bun on the back of her head to reveal long beautiful red-gold hair.

The men watching her every move gasped, swore, gulped loudly, and exclaimed as a cascade of hair fell down her back. It wasn't just red hair it was colored as they had never seen before. The crest of her head was golden and as the long locks traveled down, the gold-streaked and blended and shimmered turning deep red like the flames of a fire.

The Skorian soldier's eyes narrowed as he watched the girl take her place.

Nathaniel jumped down from the table then he pulled a wooden flute from his coat and began to play. As the strains of the music began so did the girl. She unfolded a single slim white foot from beneath her skirt and drew an imaginary line around her on the ale-splattered floor. The music began and she began.

Swaying with the music her arms came up and moved in time with the song. Her hips began to sway, and her belly undulated. Spinning once she came to a quick halt. Bending backward her arms fluttered above her in the air. As she moved the men watching trained their eyes on her slim waist and the flash of her white thighs, and they all seemed to lean forward in unison, eyes glued to the revealing costume the girl wore.

Suddenly, she leaped and gracefully touched down upon one foot. She stopped, then the other leg unfolded, and she pulled it straight up alongside her body. Her long dancer's leg came slowly down, and she leaped again and then began to spin. Pirouetting in the small space she flickered like a flame, setting light a fire in every man's veins.

The men watching stood spellbound and drooling over the dancer and the coins flew through the air to land at her feet. After the two songs were finished, Nathaniel played on, but Grace picked up the tankard and danced gracefully around the circle of men collecting coins. She expertly dodged their grasping hands without looking at any of them, only tried to smile shyly, and spin away to the next hand holding out a coin for her.

A tall soldier dressed in a Skorian uniform stepped toward her and grabbed her free hand. He was gentle, but Grace gasped and tried to pull back looking at him with fear in her eyes, but all he did was drop a gold coin in her hand and then let her go. Collecting her wits, Grace thanked the soldier without looking directly at him and moved on.

Once the tankard was half full and the coins gathered from the floor, Nathaniel deftly scooped up any loose coins and dumped them into the large satchel that held their meager belongings. Grace quickly gathered her cloak and once again hid from the leering eyes of the men who had just watched her dance. Many yelled and some begged for more dancing, and some

became rude, some demanding and many groveled at her feet begging for the favor of one more dance.

Nathaniel suppressed a scowl at them and smiled instead while he promised she would return the following evening. They quickly made for the door and Nathaniel led the tiny dancer down the street toward the Inn where they would be staying, now that they had the coin to pay. Nathaniel and Grace hastily left disappearing into the falling rain.

Behind them, the soldier followed at a distance. He watched the two enter a small Inn. He waited in the shadows of a doorway for an hour before he too went into the Inn and procured a room.

They ate a warm meal complete with bread and meat. Nathaniel splurged on ale for himself and cider for Grace. After their dinner, they made their way up to the rented room. Once safely inside with the door locked, Nathaniel dropped his satchel to the floor and ran his hands over his face while Grace took off her cloak, sat on the one chair in the room, and rubbed her cold muddy feet.

"I *hate* it that you have to do that! If it weren't for the money we need, I wouldn't let you do it. I hate seeing the men leer and paw at you!"

"I know, my Love, I hate it too, but we have to eat, and we've come such a long way, our journey is almost over. We just need to know the way through the Violent Mountains to Jior and then we will be free!" Grace stood and walked over to him. Taking his hand, she led him over to the one chair in the room and made him sit down.

Nathaniel sat looking despondent while Grace began to undress.

"Could you help me please?" Grace turned her back to Nathaniel and pulling her hair aside, Nathaniel began to unwind the tightly wrapped material from around her slim body and uncovered what lay underneath. There revealed on smooth white skin was an intricate drawing of wings as if an artist had used a fine brush and painted in silver and the beautiful picture was revealed.

Nathaniel set aside the washing things and turned Grace in his arms. He pulled her close and buried his face between her bare breasts. He stilled and just took in the sweet scent of her skin and ran his hands up her back lovingly. Then he ran his hands down into the long flowing skirt and pushed it off of her. Grace stood naked before him now and Nathaniel rose and picked her up. He gave her a long, sweet kiss as he walked toward the bed and laid her down.

Turning he went and built up the fire to warm the room against the cold and dampness caused by the rain falling outside. After undressing he joined her in the bed. The sheets were cold, and Grace shivered but Nathaniel was warm and pulled her close. Laying on his side he stared into her eyes while running his hands down her slender form. Grace's white skin flushed pink as she began to warm and gave a sigh of pleasure.

“Not much longer now my Love and we’ll be in a place we can call our own. You’ll never have to dance for our supper again.” Nathaniel’s brow drew together and he swore, his voice full of passion, “I promise!”

Nathaniel scooped her underneath him and she opened to him. When they joined, he kissed her long and lovingly and began to move slowly. Their rhythmic movements were in perfect harmony. As they made love, Grace ran her long fingers up his back and traced the dark silver lines that were the masculine mirror copy of wing just like hers.

As her pleasure mounted, she called his name “Nathaniel!”

“No!” he growled back at her, stopping to stare into her eyes, “I want to hear you cry my *real* name when I make love to you!”

Grace gasped again as he plunged and she exploded, pulsing around him gripping him, and pulling him in deeper, “Night Wind!” she exclaimed while her passion took her, and shook with the feelings that drove her to new heights of pleasure.

Night Wind plunged once again, and his body went rigid. He thrust and shuddered while his seed emptied into her warmth and she pulsed around him, he breathed heavily and kissed her while she clung to him.

Placing his cheek next to hers, he whispered, “My Love, my Wild Fire!”

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In the hallway, outside the lover’s room, the Skorian soldier who had followed them from the Tavern stood with his back against the wall. Next to the door, he tilted his head and listened intently. He could just make out their quiet conversation through the thin walls. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, picturing what was happening inside the room. His breathing increased and he flushed with envy, his body tightened with his desire. When he heard the man cry out in ecstasy and shout what sounded like ‘*Wild Fire*’ his eyes flew open and he knew he had been right about her all along. She was Ny-Failen! Silently, he slipped away.

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Night Wind, also called Nathaniel, rose from his warm bed where Grace stirred and stared sleepily at him. She made to rise as well but he gently pushed her back.

“Stay in bed, my Love, I’ll go and see if I can find a map maker. Perhaps he will have a map to Jior, and we can leave this miserable place. I will try not to be gone long. Wait for me here.”

When she didn’t answer, Night Wind leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “Wild Fire did you hear me? I’m going to buy a map to Jior. You need to come and lock the door behind me.”

Wild Fire smiled slightly and nodded that she understood. Night Wind rose and donned his cloak. Looking back, he watched as Wild Fire rose from the bed and, draped in her long red-gold mane of hair, she took the key and followed him to the door. He slipped out and listened while she turned the key in the lock. Once he was satisfied that she was safe, he left on his errand.

An hour later Wild Fire rose from sleep and went to the washstand. Using cold water, she scrubbed her face with a clean cloth. She dressed quickly in her dancing costume. She wound the long material around her and crossed it over her breasts, making sure her back was covered. It was the only thing she had to wear, and she resolutely made do. After she was ready, all she could do was sit and wait for what felt like hours, for Night Wind to return. Her stomach growled loudly, and she could swear that the smell of baking bread wafted through the wooden floorboards. Her mouth was dry, and she was desperate for something to drink. She put her hair up in a loose bun and slipped in her smooth wooden pick to hold it in place. Then she wrapped a long scarf around her head concealing her red-gold hair. Grabbing her key to the room, and throwing her cloak on, she slipped out and went down to the main room looking for something to eat.

It was late morning and the room was mostly empty, there was a woman in an apron clearing away dishes from an empty table. She smiled broadly as Wild Fire entered the room and quickly bustled over.

“Mornin Miss!” the woman smiled broadly, “Would ya like something to eat this fine day?”

Wild Fire nodded, “If it's no trouble, I am hungry.”

“Ah, no trouble at all! I'll bring ya something lovely to break yer fast. Take any seat you like, and I'll be back in a few minutes!” The woman had a kind face, although she looked at Wild Fire with more interest and curiosity than Wild Fire would have preferred.

“Say, ain't none of my business, but yer clothes...” the woman frowned and stared her up and down leaving the statement hanging in the air.

“Oh, my clothes and shoes were stolen and this is all I have right now.” Wild Fire looked embarrassed.

“Ah, you poor thing! I'll get you hot food and drink and that'll at least be something then.” The woman smiled headed for the kitchen.

Wild Fire picked a corner table where she could watch the door in case Night Wind came back. She sat down and waited until minutes later the woman returned with a tray and a steaming mug. Setting the implements down, the woman began to serve Wild Fire. Then she sat down on a chair at the table and began to gossip about life back in the kitchens and her problems with her husband. All the while she stared intently at Wild Fire as if searching for something.

The insistent scrutiny the woman gave Wild Fire made her very nervous although she tried to be polite and listen. She nodded her head sympathizing with everything the woman said while she buttered a slice of warm bread. Finally, the woman rose from her seat and excused herself saying she had better get back to the kitchens because the noon folks would be wanting their luncheon soon. She rushed back to the kitchens casting frequent glances over her shoulder at Wild Fire.

Wild Fire looked at the trencher of food in front of her and tried to eat slow. She spooned warm porridge sweetened with honey into her mouth while adding a few berries. She ate more bread with jam this time and when she was almost satisfied, she reached for the steaming mug.

Looking over the rim of the mug she saw a brownish milky liquid swirling in her cup. It smelled better than it looked and so she ventured a sip. The warm spicy drink tasted like nothing she ever had drunk before. She sipped more and closed her eyes sighing with pleasure. When she opened her eyes, it was to discover that she was not alone.

Standing by her table was a tall man dressed in the uniform of a soldier. Wild Fire's eyes went wide with fear and her eyes darted around as if she were looking for help or escape. She suddenly realized what a poor choice of a table she made because she was literally cornered.

"May I join you?" The soldier did not wait for her to invite him but sat down directly without being invited.

"Mmmmy husband will be here any minute." Wild Fire tried hard to sound confident instead of scared. Still holding her mug, she held it in front of her as if it were a shield.

"I'm sure he will." He frowned and said disapprovingly. "But I have to say, I'd not have left such a beauty like you alone if you were my wife." The soldier asked, "what's your name?" When she did not answer right away, he added, "I saw you dance last night in the tavern."

It suddenly dawned on Wild Fire that she had seen this man before.

"The gold coin," she nodded warily, "I remember."

The conversation flagged as the soldier just stared at her with large brown adoring eyes that traveled over her and seemed to devour every detail of her.

"I had better go." Wild Fire blushed and tried to rise, but the soldier sat back in his chair and stretched his long legs out, placing his booted feet in front of her as if relaxing, but also blocking the way.

"Stay, just a moment." He said softly, "I don't mean any trouble. I just want to talk to you. Tell me, what is your name?"

Wild Fire was trapped by the man's long legs and boots, and so she settled back down to her chair and pressed back. Looking a little afraid she blinked and looked toward the kitchens hoping the woman would return. Then she looked toward the door praying Night Wind would appear.

The soldier made no move to leave and continued to stare at her.

"Here, if it is easier on you, I'll start. My name is Captain Braiden Torno. I am from Skoria, visiting Skogur on a diplomatic mission. I saw you dance in the tavern last night and when I saw you in here this morning, I wanted to meet you. Now, you tell me your name and we can have a friendly conversation."

After a continued pause, Wild Fire realized she had no choice.

"I am Grace." Wild Fire gave him her false name and spoke haltingly in a lilting accent as if repeating something she memorized. "My husband and I have come a long way. We are heading for Krickgold." She spoke a little more confidently. "He has gone to buy a map and will be back any moment now. He won't like finding you here with me."

She stopped talking and with shaking hands placed her cup back on the table.

"Is that so?" He smiled, "As I said, I am harmless. You've nothing to fear from me. There are many other men in Skogur you should be worried about. *I* would not have left you alone and vulnerable if I were your husband."

Looking him over Wild Fire decided this soldier probably was most likely harmless. His brown eyes were kind and he was moderately handsome, with sun-browed skin and dark brown wavy hair that curled a little at the ends. Wild Fire had no doubt those eyes, fringed in long black lashes, would have made most girls swoon with envy, but when he looked at her; Wild Fire knew the man had more on his mind than simple conversation.

"It is not Nathaniel's fault. I was supposed to stay in our room." Wild Fire confessed. "I just got hungry, and I came down to get something to eat."

"Why Krickgold?" Captain Braiden slipped his question into the conversation and looked away casually as if he were not truly interested in the answer.

"Um, Krickgold is said to be a fair city, with golden pillars and streets of silver. A wonderful place to live and start a family." She tried to sound just as casual. "Why not Krickgold?"

"I would think one of your kind would be heading to Jior." His eyes suddenly burned into hers with all seriousness and he leaned forward slightly, intently watching for her reaction.

Wild Fire pressed back in her chair and stared at him with wide eyes. She was even more terrified of this man now. He smiled and patted the air in front of her as if that gesture would be enough to calm her.

“Do not worry, my tiny dancer, I will keep your secrets. Is your husband Ny-Failen as well? I do have to say neither one of you look of demon-kind, though he certainly has the size and you are very comely as those women always are. You, Lady Grace, are definitely Ny-Failen. It is the red-gold color of your hair that threw me off, like gold on fire, but the dancing, the way you move, the very air about you.” He tilted his head and smiled. “I will be silent about who and what you are. Do not fear.”

Wild Fire stared at him, afraid of what he would do.

“Did you know, it could mean your death to be Ny-Failen in the city of Skogur? They would love to get their hands on you. I will help you leave the city undiscovered. If it would keep *you* safe. I could take you to Skoria.” He gave her a smile that would have charmed most women but only left Wild Fire feeling cold.

Wild Fire’s eyes brimmed with tears as she listened to Braiden reveal her secrets and she began to tremble slightly. She knew that in Skogur they called those of her kind Ny-Failen, but she also knew that, should she and Night Wind be found out, it could mean their deaths. Looking toward the door, she silently prayed that Night Wind would come, and quickly.

Braiden held out his hand, palm upward in supplication, “Where are you really from? I know you are headed to Jior, so do not lie to me. We from Skoria do not hold such animosity toward the Ny-Failen as do those in Skogur. You should also know, in Jior, they frown on Ny-Failen mating with humans, so your husband will not be as welcome as you.”

A tear slowly fell down Wild Fire’s cheek and she shook her head realizing he thought Night Wind was human. “We are from Celtica. I am called a Ghost Wing there. We only learned when we came here that they called me Ny-Failen.”

“Thank you, Grace, for your honesty, it’s just...” he leaned closer and lowered his voice and softly said, “if you were *mine*, I’d never leave you alone unprotected.”

Wild Fire stared at Captain Braiden Torno with undisguised horror not knowing if there was a hidden threat in his words or if he truly was concerned for her safety. So it was, that she didn’t notice when someone else approached her table. Night Wind’s large hand fell on Braiden’s shoulder, and he straightened in his chair.

“Nathaniel!” She jumped to her feet looking guilty and quickly skirted around Captain Braiden Torno and went to Night Wind’s side.

“Grace, what are you doing out of our room? I told you to stay put.” Night Wind sounded panicked and quite perturbed at the same time, though he put a protective arm around her and pulled her close.

Braiden rose to his feet and turned to face the large man who stood staring menacingly at him. Nathaniel was a huge young man with long black hair. He wore a linen shirt that could not hide the broad muscles of his chest and arms. He was fair of skin and had a face that would make women beg for his favors.

Standing straight and confident Captain Braiden Torno lightly placed his hand on the sword at his hip and bowed to Night Wind.

“Nathaniel is it? I was just protecting the lady while she had her morning meal. You’d do well not to leave her alone here in Skogur without a protector.”

“What is a soldier from Skoria doing in Skogur?” Night Wind looked him over and ignored his censure. “And she wouldn’t have needed protection if she would have done as she was told and stayed in our room.”

“That’s an interesting accent you have. Where are you from?” Captain Braiden changed the subject.

Night Wind hesitated but did not want to invite suspicion by being rude. “*My Wife* and I are from Celtica, we are headed to Krickgold. Now we must be going.”

The woman came out from the kitchen having heard voices and stood with her hands on her hips glaring at the three as if warning them not to start anything. Night Wind ignored her, grabbed the two packages, he had brought with him and took Wild Fire by the hand. They escaped up the stairs.

Captain Braiden Torno’s eyes followed Wild Fire as she fled with Nathaniel.

When they were back in their room Night Wind closed and locked the door placed his packages on the small table in the room and turned to Wild Fire who rushed into his arms. He held her close for a few minutes breathing in her scent and relieved that she was safe back in his arms.

“Are you alright? What were you thinking leaving the room? What did that soldier want? Who else did you speak with? Tell me everything!”

Wild Fire related everything that she had done and said starting with the woman from the kitchen and the curious looks she gave her. Then she told him of her conversation with Captain Braiden Torno and that he knew what she was but did not suspect Night Wind.

“He said he wouldn’t tell and that he would even help us leave the city. I am so sorry Night Wind I shouldn’t have left the room. Please forgive me.”

Night Wind kissed her on the forehead and held her close.

“Don’t worry my Love. We will leave the city tonight and head toward Jior. I found a map and once we are in the Violent Mountains, we will be safe again. Now, come see what I brought you.” He kissed her again and let her know with his smile that he was not angry at her.

Unwrapping the packages, Wild Fire found a new cloak, a pair of dark blue britches, a new tunic and bodice, and last, a soft pair of dove grey boots. Wild Fire would not go barefoot any longer.

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While Wild Fire dressed in the new garments, Night Wind consulted the map he had bought. It was crudely drawn but had the basic layout of the entire continent of Vedt. A compass rose drawn in the bottom corner gave the direction for north, south, east, and west. Night Wind noted directly west from Skogur, written in scrolling letters the words, ‘*Jior*’ and a warning, ‘*Here be those of demon-kind.*’ Night Wind smiled and rolled the map up tying it with a leather cord.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of his neck pricked and instinct drove him toward the one shuttered window in the room. He peaked through the cracks in the warped wood and looked down. The woman from the kitchens was speaking excitedly to two soldiers dressed in maroon and yellow uniforms. They were Skogur soldiers and they looked up toward the window where Night Wind stood in the shadows watching them. He didn’t wait to see what they would do next, he turned to Wild Fire.

“We’ve got to go! The Landlady has called the Watch. Hurry, grab your things.” While Wild Fire pulled on her last boot, Night Wind grabbed the map and stuffed it in his coat, and turned to her. Suddenly, there came a muted knocking on the door.

“Grace, Nathaniel!” It was Captain Braiden Torno and he was whispering loudly and knocking insistently on the door.

Night Wind cracked opened the door and looked out at Captain Braiden Torno.

“Hurry, the Landlady called the watch, they’ll be here any minute. They are coming for Grace! Come! Quickly, we have to get her out of here!” Captain Braiden was speaking quickly.

Night Wind didn’t hesitate. He grabbed Wild Fire by the hand and they slipped out of the room. They followed Captain Braiden down the back stairs and they rushed out of the Inn. Nathaniel didn’t know the streets very well and realized he had no choice but to follow where Captain Braiden led. They fled through dirty alleyways and as soon as they were sure they were not being pursued, they stopped to take their bearings.

“You’re a fool for bringing her here!” Captain Braiden turned and confronted Night Wind angrily.

“We didn’t know what it was like in Skogur!” Night Wind answered the accusation but at the same time did not admit to what Captain Braiden was insinuating. “And you can leave us now, we’ll make our way just fine.”

“Don’t continue to be stupid! I’m only trying to help. I can get her to safety.”

“We don’t need your help!” Night Wind stepped menacingly toward Captain Braiden.

“Please don’t fight!” Wild Fire begged, looking around, fearing that at any moment the Skogur soldiers would come around the corner and find them.

“Look, I know of an abandoned building you can hide in until nightfall, then we can get her out of the city. You’ll just have to trust me that I have her best interests in mind.”

Night Wind hesitated noting that Captain Braiden only had Wild Fire’s best interests in mind. He stepped close to the Captain and looked down at him. He was a head and shoulders taller and much broader and more muscular than the man and he used his size to intimidate him.

“Betray us and I’ll snap your neck like a twig.” Night Wind snarled quietly and glared at him with fierce blue eyes.

Captain Braiden smirked at the threat and then turned. “Follow me if you want then and I’ll take you to a safe place.”

They hurried down an adjacent alleyway and in no time were confronting an abandoned building. It looked more like a hovel and appeared to be standing only at the whim of fate. Night Wind feared if a strong wind came up the building would collapse, but Captain Braiden produced a large iron key and they followed him in. The place was completely dark which did not prove a deterrent to Night Wind and Wild Fire, who walked right in. The place was empty but for a table with a lamp on it and one chair. Night Wind watched out of a crack in the door while Captain Braiden lit the lamp.

“She will be safe here until nightfall. I can go out and get food and drink and help you out of the city tonight.”

Night Wind looked at him suspiciously, but Wild Fire thanked him and Captain Braiden disappeared out the door.

Wild Fire spent the rest of the day sewing slits in the back of her new clothes. She was a master with the needle and cleverly hid the slits so that they looked like folds in the material. Captain Braiden returned once with food and drink for them and stayed watching Wild Fire as she worked. Night Wind hovered and glared at Captain Braiden who did not bother to hide his attraction to his wife.

Eventually, night fell and it was time to go. They gathered their few belongings and left at a time in the evening when the streets were thronging with people and revelers. There was some sort of Skogur festival going on and it offered them the perfect opportunity to flee unnoticed.

Sifting through the crowds, they wound their way toward the open gates where they slipped out unnoticed. The guards upon the walls being in a half-drunk state did not care about anyone leaving, only those attempting to enter. Outside the walls, they stopped, and Captain Braiden bade Wild Fire goodbye.

“My Lady Grace, I wish you a safe journey and only wish we had more time...well.” Turning to Night Wind he pointed. “Jior is straight west and many miles into the Violent Mountains. You’ll have to traverse this road out in the open for a few miles, but it is dark enough you shouldn’t have any trouble making it to the safety of the forest. Good luck and keep Lady Grace safe!”

“Have no worry on that account.” Then he begrudgingly added not very convincingly, “thank you for all you’ve done for us.”

“I didn’t do it for you.” Captain Braiden said meaningfully, and then turned to Wild Fire, he took her hand and kissed the back of her fingers. Then, because he had no choice, he had to let her go. He turned and disappeared back into the busy streets of Skogur.

Night Wind and Wild Fire began walking down the rutted road heading west for Jior. As soon as they reached the forest, they spread their wings and flew into the night!

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When morning dawned bright the next day Night Wind and Wild Fire spread their great white wings and rose into the sky after half a night’s rest. They headed west toward the deep mountains in the direction the map said Jior was located. They flew until early afternoon. Night Wind swooped around and yelled to Wild Fire to land so that he could consult the map. They had been flying over the path of a winding road and now that the road below split into two. He felt it wise to consult the map and see if it designated which fork to take.

They landed near a stream and Wild Fire put her wings away and washed as it had been many days since she had been able to bathe properly. Night Wind stayed winged while he studied the map. He shot up back up into the sky, took their bearings, and then marked in his mind the direction they needed to go. The road that they had been following, split going toward the south and the direction Jior lay in was along the northwest road. They decided to hunt for some food before taking to the skies again.

While they walked along into the deep forest skirting huge boulders and then following along a cliffside that towered above them, Wild Fire asked Night Wind to tell her again about where they were going to live.

“Tell me again Night Wind. Tell me of Jior.”

Night Wind smiled indulgently, “Well, the tales say Jior is ruled by the Ghost Wings. As we have learned, here on Vedt they call them Ny-Failen. I suppose we will have to get used to calling them, and ourselves, by that name. Jior has become a haven for those of our kind and it is said they would welcome us with open arms. We will be accepted there and no longer have to hide. It is not like in Celtica where we were enslaved and not like in Skogur where they wanted to kill us. Ny-Failen are revered and loved. The castle they live in is made of crystal and the walls glitter like diamonds. They walk freely with their wings spread, free to be who they are, living among marble halls and high towers. Tall windows with real glass in them, let in the sunlight and they are a happy, prosperous people living in harmony with the humankind. If we chose, we can stay in Jior or go on to a Heavenly place called Everclearing and live without fear, without hunger or pain, and without hiding.”

Wild Fire walked along and listened to Night Wind talk about Jior, and felt hope blossom in her heart. After all the miles they had traveled, countless dangers, and the fear of being captured, it was almost over. She no longer had to dance for their food and survival. They were so close to Jior and safety, and joy filled her heart that she and Night Wind would finally be someplace they could call home.

#

“See! I told you I seen one of them winged-people!”

The harsh whisper emanated from the thick bushes at the top of a low cliff. Below them, Night Wind and Wild Fire walked along the forest path below.

“Alright, alright, so you was right.” A second voice whispered harshly.

“What you suppose he’s doin to that human girl?”

“What do you think he’s trying to do to her? He’s tryin to have his way with her!”

“I suppose.” He paused briefly. “I’d like to have *my* way with her. She looks very beautiful from up here.”

“Yea, them winged people always get the pretty ones.” There was another short pause in the discussion as they watched.

“You suppose she’s one of em too?” The first voice inquired as the two crawled stealthily through the bushes.

“Na! She ain’t got no wings!” The second voice informed.

“Let’s use our bear net and nab 'em before they run off.” Then the second voice whispered impatiently.

The other man hesitated. “We is supposed to be huntin a magic bear seen in these forests.”

“The Master will be more than pleased to have those two instead.” Both men grinned and slunk forward.

#

Night Wind glanced at Wild Fire and saw the hopeful smile that spread on her beautiful face when he finished his story. He loved the tales about Jior as much as she did and he could not help but step in and wrap his arms around her holding her and offering comfort. Wild Fire rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. It was a relief that their journey was almost over and the familiar comfort of his arms made her so happy, she felt like she could burst.

“Come!” Night Wind spoke confidently and gave her a confident grin. “Let us take to the blue skies and head for Jior.”

He took two steps back and raised his face to the sky. The wind caressed his handsome features and combed through the riot of his long black hair. The sky was still, clear and perfect for flying.

The two men who had been watching them slunk along the top of a cliff staying concealed within the bushes. Reaching the overhang of the cliff, they waited until their prey was directly below them. As Night Wind and Wild Fire walked past suddenly something huge and heavy fell on them. A metal net enclosed them both. Night Wind roared as his wings became entangled. Wild Fire screamed. As they fell, he grabbed Wild Fire and clutched her tightly to his chest. The net pulled them down and they crashed heavily onto the steep ground and rolled down. Sheltering her with his body, Night Wind managed to land on his back with her safe in his arms, but he struck his head on a large rock during their tumble. The air rushed from Wild Fire’s lungs and she felt him go still. Locked in the protection of his arms she struggled to try and get free of the net and help Night Wind, but she was too badly tangled. Her struggling made their situation worse. Then she heard someone coming. Two strangely dressed men approached.

“Now just go holdin still pretty one!” The smaller of the two bent down and got so close she could smell his rank breath. Wild Fire was trying to suck the air back into her lungs as the two men untangled her from the net. Then they pulled her out of the messy tangle. She tried to get to Night Wind but the biggest one grabbed her and held her firmly. Struggling against the man who held her, he squeezed so tightly that she couldn’t breathe.

“Quick! Get the collar on im!” The man holding her shouted in her ear and the other smaller man flung the net off Night Wind. Grabbing a handful of Night Wind’s long hair, the man pulled something out of his pocket and wrestled it over Night Wind’s head then let it fall back to the

ground. The man holding Wild Fire squeezed tightly and yelled at her, “Hold still! You’re safe now, we’ve rescued you!”

Wild Fire twisted around to look at the man who held her tightly.

“Whaaa...” She hadn’t quite regained her breath yet and could barely speak.

The man let her go and she staggered a little and gained her feet gasping for air.

“Are you alright Miss?” The other man said quickly, then enthusiastically went on without waiting for her answer. “It’s a good thing we come along when we did! That winged-man was about to try and have his way with you!”

“He was about destroying your virtue he was.” The other man quickly added.

Wild Fire looked at them like they were mad. She was shaken from their fall and was just getting her breath back when the other man quickly went on.

“Now don’t you go worryin, we’ll take care of im. He can’t harm you no more!”

“Yea,” The other man drawled out quickly. “Right good timing on our part! I’d say you owe us a debt of gratitude you do!”

“What are you...” Wild Fire gasped.

“Ah! No Clem! She ain’t owe us nothin!” He quickly moved towards Wild Fire and took her by the arm firmly leading her away from where Night Wind lay unconscious. Not letting her get a word in else wise, he babbled on quickly.

“We saw you being ensorcelled by that evil winged-man! We knew right away that you was in trouble and we decided to rescue you. Now, we’ll take care of him, don’t you worry and you can run along and get yer-self back home.”

Rushed along, Wild Fire was baffled by the man’s words as he continued his tirade about rescuing her and telling her, she had been in distress. She was finally able to stop enough to look at her two would-be rescuers. Their clothing was brightly colored and patched almost like a jester’s clothing, but they were very dirty and now that she was noticing, she could tell by their smell they hadn’t bathed in many days. One of the men had some white mud or paste on the side of his neck. Rather than be distracted by their appearance and the smell, she held a hand up and stopped the man from going on. She took a deep breath.

“Wait! You misunderstand he is my...”

“Abductor!” The smaller man intoned speaking over her, “We saw that right away! Didn’t we Jobben! We’ve rescued you and now you can go on home.” Jobben, who was standing far too close to her turned her and gently pushed her away like an errant child.

“It’s best you stay far away from his kind Miss. They have evil spells and will de-flower a pretty little thing like you and leave you after he takes your virtue.”

“But he is not my abductor!” She finally managed to gasp out interrupting. The two men looked at each other incredulously.

“It’s worse than we feared,” Clem said to Jobben who nodded sagely.

“She’s still under his spell!” Jobben gasped theatrically and Clem hung his head and sighed sadly.

“Well, we’ve no choice, but to take her with us to the Master! He can rid her of the spell and then she can go on home.”

“BUT he is my *husband*! I’m not his prisoner!” Wild Fire pleaded with the two and tried to go to Night Wind’s side, but Jobben stepped in front of her blocking her from going to him. “Please let me help him!”

Night Wind was still unconscious she could smell the tangy rusty scent of blood where he must have struck his head on a rock. She tried to get closer to him but was blocked by the large man called Jobben.

“Right!” Clem huffed, “We’ll take you to the Master and he’ll rid you of the spell. It is the only choice, Miss. You’ll be right kindly towards us for doin you such a good turn.”

Before she could argue further, Night Wind moaned and stirred on the ground. His body slowly lifted and rocked as he shapeshifted and his wings were suddenly gone, hidden in the silver drawings of wings on his back. Then he lay still. Wild Fire knew when one of their kind injured a wing that the wings would shift automatically so that they could heal. She surmised that Night Wind had been badly injured in the fall.

Clem squatted next to Night Wind and slapped him roughly on the face trying to bring him around. Night Wind moaned and sat up. Clem grasped his large arm and helped him to his feet. Night Wind’s hand gripped his head and he moaned in pain.

“Alright, you?” Clem spoke authoritatively up to the tall man. “Now you had a bad fall and hit your head, Big Man! I think you should come with us and we’ll take you to the Master! He can fix you right up!”

Night Wind finally looked around confused and his dark blue eyes were pain-filled and unfocused. He looked down at Clem as if he was completely lost. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing but a rasp came out.

Jobben once again took Wild Fire by the arm and guided her away. She could hear Clem behind her talking to Night Wind who was confused and seemed lost. Wild Fire feared when he

hit his head on the rock when he fell that he broke something in his head. She was terrified that he was badly hurt and indeed saw bright red blood flowing down the side of his face and a huge swollen bruise growing on his temple.

Pushed along, the man called Jobben was keeping up a stream of conversation in which he instructed them that his Master was a great healer and that, where they were going, she could get help. He continued the litany that she had been rescued and spared a fate worse than death. Wild Fire repeatedly glanced behind her and saw that Clem and Night Wind were right behind them. As long as Night Wind was behind her, she went along hoping that wherever these men were taking her, this 'Master' would be able to help him. Wild Fire tried to tell him Night Wind was her husband, but he wouldn't listen to her and finally, he squeezed her arm painfully and rasped angrily in her ear.

"No more from you! We'll not listen to that creature's evil spell talking. One more word and I'll cut your tongue out. You're possessed and only the Master can help you now."

They had not traveled far when they stepped out of the forest and into a large clearing. Wild Fire gasped as she saw colorful tents, brightly painted wagons, large cages on wheels, exotic animals, and a huge red and white tent occupying the center. People in bright costumes milled around, practicing juggling and acrobatics. There was even a knife thrower and a man who appeared to be swallowing fire, numerous little people, and workers. It was a traveling group of performers, and she and Night Wind were being dragged right toward it.

As she approached, Wild Fire was aware of a sweet sickly smell of burning refuse. Looking around she saw small fires in braziers everywhere that created a hazy fog all around the camp giving it a haunted, dark appearance.

Wild Fire was taken along and the performers stopped to stare at her and Night Wind who stumbled along silently in a daze. Many of the curious onlookers gazed at her with curiosity, some with pity, some with greed, and many with lust. She could hear their comments speculating on who the two newcomers were. As they passed a huge cage with a black leopard in it, she heard someone snicker, 'a new pretty one for the whore's tent.'

Wild Fire balked suddenly alarmed when she heard that, but Jobben pulled her along, reminding her, "Want to keep that tongue in your pretty mouth?"

The black leopard hissed as they passed and then gave off a long sorrowful yowl.

After passing through the city of tents and wagons they reached the largest wagon that looked like a small house on wheels. It was brightly painted with purple and yellow paint. The wheels were faded red and green and the roof of the structure was made of dirty blue painted slates. Underneath the structure was a humongous orange and black tiger. It had a thick leather collar around its neck. One of its huge paws also had a chain around it and a thick iron stake driven in

the ground next to the wagon kept the tiger captive. The tiger growled at her as they approached, but the growl quickly turned into a soulful whine as it turned over, dropped its head on its huge paws, and closed its eyes to nap in the meager shade.

Night Wind had followed silently and obedient, stunned from the fall. Jobben stepped up to the purple wagon house and rapped smartly on the door. After a few moments the door opened and a small old woman peeked out.

“Eh?” She inquired and sucked at blackened teeth.

“We’ve got a couple of guests for the Master. Is he in? I think he’ll be pleased with what we’ve brought him.”

While Jobben inquired at the door Wild Fire covertly inspected the necklace the little man had put around Night Wind’s neck. It was made of thick heavy squared links of tarnished silver decorated in intricate scrollwork. Each square link had a large, faceted stone set in it. No two stones seemed to be alike, and she could tell that they were all precious gems. A large sapphire was set beside a deep red ruby, an amethyst, a center diamond, and many others that were set in each of the links. Night Wind shook his head irritated and scratched at the links and every time he touched it Clem would reach up and smack his hand away.

Finally, after waiting for many minutes a man in a brilliant blue robe appeared and stepped slowly down the stairs of the wagon house. Wild Fire looked up into the piercing black eyes of a Sorcerer!

#

The Sorcerer had long black hair with dramatic white streaks at his temples. His long goatee was manicured, and it too had long white streaks of hair in it framed with a coal-black mustache. He was fairly handsome for a human and his black eyes glittered as he stared at her. His long-fingered hand had sharp blackened nails that stroked his pointing beard. His lips were blood red. As he devoured Wild Fire with his cold stare, he licked his lips that were so red they looked painted. He gestured sharply at the shadowed door behind him and a young, half-naked girl darted down the stairs pulling a robe over her bare white shoulders. She ran off as if she were being chased by demons.

Wild Fire could almost hear the Sorcerer’s breath quicken as he slowly looked her up and down. When his eyes rested on her breasts, though she was fully clothed, she had the urge to cover herself as if she were naked.

“Jobben?” The man purred in a deep voice that made Wild Fire’s flesh crawl. “What have you brought me?”

“Master Vain! We were in the forest, Clem and me, and we happened upon this man trying to take the virginal virtue from this lovely young girl. We rescued her from certain ruination! Big Man here took a bit of a tumble and hit his head real bad like. Now this lovely girly here has been claimin that Big Man here is some *relation* to her and so...” Jobben, who paused for dramatic effect, looking sad and remorseful down at his muddy shoes, took a deep breath. “So, we-Clem and me-seein how we knew you had some mighty good healin arts and thought you could fix this big guy up and let these two get on their merry way.” Jobben stopped his story and looked pleased with himself. Behind him, Clem nodded sagely confirming the story.

Master Vain moved towards Wild Fire his eyes burning a path down her slim figure. He spoke to Jobben without looking at him, keeping his stare on Wild Fire.

“You did right to bring him to me. I can surely fix his wound.” Master Vain reached out a black-nailed hand and plucked at a strand of Wild Fire’s red-gold hair. “And what is your name, my lovely child?”

“Gggrace” Wild Fire gave her false name. Her flesh crawled as Master Vain continued to survey her figure and pet her long hair. She knew instinctually that she should not reveal her true name or her true nature to this man.

Jobben leaned in and whispered to his master. “He’s a winged-man.”

Master Vain’s black eyebrow raised but he otherwise ignored Jobben’s words and took one of Wild Fire’s hands. He gallantly leaned over and kissed the back of her fingers. His cold lips touched her skin briefly and the gesture was over quickly, but Wild Fire could have sworn his tongue had flicked out and tasted her. She shuddered with revulsion. Gaining courage, she spoke up quickly before anyone else could say a word.

“If you are a healer, please see to my husband quickly so that we may be going as soon as possible.”

“My sweet Grace!” Master Vain said expansively. “I will do my utmost best for your large friend. I feel responsible as it was my men that caused this harm.” He looked down sadly and slowly shook his head and went on with a heavy sigh. “I do fear that, with head injuries, they take time to heal. In the meantime, you are most welcome to stay with my humble carnival.”

“You are kind but...” Wild Fire began to say, but Master Vain cut her off with another heavy sigh as he moved off to examine Night Wind’s wound. After a quick glimpse of the blood drying in Night Wind’s black hair and down his face, he turned back towards her with eyes struck full of sadness and intoned loudly.

“Oh, my stars! It is as I feared! He has a terrible head wound. It will take many days, maybe even months to heal.” He approached her. “I’m afraid my dear, he will have to be in my constant care for at least a month’s time, but I know I can help him.” Moving back to her side, he stood

very close to her and intoned suggestively, “My fee will be very steep. You do have some way of paying for my services, don’t you?”

Wild Fire paled and looked for a long time at Night Wind. He swayed on his feet and clutched his head while his face reflected how much pain he was in. Her heart broke for him and worry filled her eyes as she realized she had no way of paying this man for his help. Her pack with their meager belongings was back in the woods where they found them.

“I have nothing to pay you, so we’ll be going and I will take care of him.” Master Vain’s eyes flashed and turned hard as she moved toward Night Wind to leave. He spoke up quickly.

“You are surely free to leave of course but he may die of his wound. Because I am of a generous sort, I believe that we can come to another arrangement.” He breathed deep as if smelling her scent.

Wild Fire looked crestfallen and stood motionless with fear.

“I have an alternative suggestion.” He grinned at her showing large, sharp, yellow teeth. “Have you any talents? While the Big Man here heals under my highly skilled treatment, you can work for my fee, and we can have an *exchange* of services.”

Wild Fire’s thoughts whirled and she looked at Night Wind fear and trepidation haunting her blue eyes. While they spoke, the big tiger rose to its feet, yawned expansively, and padded slowly over to Night Wind. The large beast brushed against his legs begging to be petted. Night Wind looked down at the animal and calmly reached down to scratch it behind the ears.

Everyone watched in complete surprise as the beast nuzzled and rubbed against Night Wind. The Sorcerer’s eyes glimmered with interest. Before she could say anything, Jobben interrupted with a loud clearing of his throat.

“Um, perhaps the lovely Miss could work in the *lady’s* tent? I’m sure Jicksie can use another girl. And I for one wouldn’t mind havin the little Miss here show me and Clem her gratitude for saving the life of her big friend here.”

Wild Fire paled. On the way in she had heard the whispers about the whore’s tent on the way into this horrible place and surmised quickly that was what Jobben was talking about.

“I can dance! I’ve danced my whole life. In Skogur and Skoria, I’ve danced all over Vedt.” She told the half-lie. “Surely, you have dancers here. I can dance to earn your fee.”

Master Vain smiled at her again and his eyes flickered as he thought quickly. Then his grin grew wider. “Then dance you shall my Lovely and Big Man here can perform manual labor while I treat his head wound. In fact,” He whirled theatrically toward Night Wind. “In my professional opinion, I believe that my treatments can heal his wound quickly and you two can be on your way in no time.”

Wild Fire stared at Night Wind a stricken look on her face. She had no idea why but since meeting these men she felt so unsure of herself like a helpless child. She bit her lip and worried if she should make such a bargain with this man and was about to refuse and try and take him and leave when once again Jobben answered for her.

“Well! That’s a rightly kind offer of you Master Vain! I think we have an agreement then! Don’t you Clem?” Clem nodded emphatically.

“Excellent!” Master Vain proclaimed joyfully. “Take the lovely Grace to the dancer’s tent and I will get started right away on treating Big Man here. We won’t waste a moment so that he can be quickly healed and these two can be on their way as soon as possible.”

Then he whirled and retreated into the darkness of the wagon slamming the door behind him. Jobben took Wild Fire by the arm again and led her away while Clem whispered to Night Wind.

She overheard a little bit of what Clem was saying and what instructions he was giving Night Wind.

“Now...” Clem began as Jobben steered her away. “That’s a right pretty necklace you have on you there. If I was you, I don’t let anyone take that necklace off of you. You keep that on you forever and don’t let no one take it for no reason. You keep that necklace on no matter what! Right, Big Man? Keep the necklace on! Never take it off! *Never* take it off!”

As Wild Fire was led away, Clem kept up the mesmerizing litany, ‘never take it off, never take it off!’ Wild Fire had no choice as she was forcefully separated from Night Wind, she decided to do whatever it took to get to him and leave as soon as possible.

#

As Wild Fire was led away, she observed this carnival where she found herself and lamented in her heart that she had ever mentioned she could dance. The other people wore old tattered and worn costumes and stared at her menacingly. The paint on the wagons was dull, faded, and chipping, the tents were torn, frayed, and patched. Jobben guided her with a strong hand and left Wild Fire at a large tent with twelve other girls. Under her feet, the trampled grass was littered with slippers, scarves, fabrics, belts, and jangles. Costumes of every color and description hung from ropes strung across the tent middle making a maze of sheer finery. Glass beads and imitation jewels strewn across small tables and glittered in the light of multiple lamps hung throughout the tent. The other girls in the room, the other dancers she suspected, stared at her with uncompassionate faces and tired frightened eyes. She stood at the tent’s entrance and looked around more lost than she had ever been. She mourned for the new life she and Night Wind dreamed of in Jior. The ever-present braziers with cloying incense burned in the tent and made Wild Fire’s eyes sting.

A tall thin woman dressed head to toe in a black flowing gown with black hair pulled back severely in a tight bun, approached her and raked her with a cold assessment. Jobben whispered in the woman's ear and her eyes turned even colder. She paced around her in a circle and tisked at Wild Fire's lithe figure pronouncing her too thin. She lifted a lock of her red-gold hair and suddenly twisted it in her fist and yanked Wild Fire roughly towards her.

"Master Vain is a magnificent man and you will do well to remember that. You better pray to whatever gods you know that you are a skilled dancer or you will end up in the whore's tent. Do I make myself clear?"

Wild Fire hissed with pain as the woman finally released her hair and she stepped back and nodded obediently.

"Good! Now, for your instruction, I am Madam Maze and you are *nothing*. I don't care where you come from or what your sad story is. I don't care why you are here; I just care that you can dance and bring in money for Master Vain. There is no time to teach you the routines the other girls already know and so you will have to go on solo for your first time then you must learn the steps to dance with the others. Pray there is something you can do."

Madam Maze turned towards one of the other dancers and snapped.

"Darla, get this creature a costume and teach her how to make up her face. You go on at dusk. Dance well and you may stay. Dance poorly and you will go to the whore's tent. Is that understood?" Before she could answer the woman turned her back to Wild Fire and stalked away. A disgruntled Darla, yanked on her arm and led her away.

#

Clem shoved at Night Wind and waved at him to follow. Night Wind was confused and his thoughts were foggy. His head hurt badly, his vision was blurry and when he tried to speak, he could only rasp as if he had forgotten how to speak. He followed Clem not knowing what else to do. As he paced behind Clem, he revealed many things to Night Wind. He kept calling him, "Big Man" and told him he had lived in the carnival his whole life. That didn't sound right to Night Wind, but he couldn't center his mind on why. When he tried to focus his thoughts and remember something, his head pained him and the heavy necklace around his neck grew hot. Though the name Big Man felt foreign to him, he supposed that was his name as he could not remember. Clem explained how he was a laborer in the animal tent and would do as he was told at all times. Instructing him on a long list of chores Big Man would do, he took him to a tent filled with exotic animals. Stepping around mounds of animal droppings and ignoring the stench, Clem handed him a long-handled shovel and explained that he should clean up the pens and throw the droppings outside in a huge dung heap. The last thing he told Big Man was that he was to stay away from the girls, stay away from Master Vain, and never, never to take off his most prized possession, the

valuable necklace. Big Man nodded his head that he understood. Clem warned him again to stay away from the girls working at the carnival and never to take off the valuable necklace.

Before he moved away, he stopped and returned to Night Wind.

“By the way Big Man. You don’t need that fine coat you’re wearin because you’ll be workin hard in the shit and won’t want to soil it. So, just you be givin it to me, won’t you.”

Big Man obediently removed his coat and stood only in his linen shirt. Frowning, he was just about to remember something when Clem cleared his throat loudly, smacked him on the arm holding his hand out expectantly. Reluctantly, Big Man handed his things to Clem, including the map tucked in the inside pocket of his coat. Clem smiled grandly, told him to have fun shoveling the shit, and left. Big Man grabbed the shovel and began to scoop up the manure while around him the animals roared and howled in their cages.

#

It was almost time for Wild Fire to go on and she had no idea what to do. Earlier, Darla and other dancers had left her with a pile of colorful costumes to choose from and had given her hasty instructions on how to make up her face. They helped her apply the white face powder and rouge on her cheeks and lips. After pawing through the pile of costumes she hid behind a sheet that had been hung for privacy and quickly dressed. She knew she had to hide the wings on her back from these people, lest they find out what she was, and so she tried finding a costume that would cover her back. Most of them were too skimpy, torn, and frayed, but she searched through the spangled mass of materials until she pulled out a sheer blue and green iridescent costume. The previous owner had skillfully sewn on a cape and painted it with silver lines to look like four hanging dragonfly wings. It had ribbons that tied around her arms and wrists to make it look like she was flying. Wild Fire closed her eyes in sorrow as she realized if she but had the courage, she could spread her real wings and fly away from this awful place and go get help somewhere, but had no idea to where she would go. If it were not for Night Wind and his wounded head and the healing Master Vain promised, she might just do that. She feared leaving Night Wind with these people and she feared Master Vain, but most of all she feared for Night Wind’s health.

The threat of the whore’s tent and winding up there loomed in the back of her mind. So, she resolved to be the courageous girl Night Wind always said she could be. All she could do was her best until Night Wind was well and they could leave together as soon as Master Vain healed him and he was well enough. Trying to content herself that Master Vain was helping Night Wind, she donned the skimpy dragonfly costume. She slipped into a bodice decorated with green, blue, and purple glass jewels and scowled down at the way her breasts were pushed up and almost completely revealed. She dug further in the mass of fabrics and pulled out a sheer white scarf that she tucked into the bodice trying to hide her breasts and wrapped one around her waist to cover her belly. The sheer skirts of the costume rested low on her hips and did little to hide her long legs

but as she searched for something else less revealing, Madam Maze approached her dressing room and ripped the hanging sheet away.

She regarded Wild Fire with steely angry eyes. "What is your name?"

"Grace."

The woman's hand flew out and slapped her in the face. Wild Fire gasped as her cheek stung from the blow.

"You will address me as Madam Maze at all times. Now, what is your name?"

"Grace, Madam Maze."

"That's better. Now, it is your time to go on. Do not fail to dance well. You must entertain the audience so magically that they throw coins at your feet. You will not take any of the coins for yourself they all belong to Master Vain. I've been informed you are working off debt to the Master. Pay off your debt dancing on your feet or you will pay off your debt lying on your back! Now go with the other girls and make sure your performance is perfection."

Wild Fire followed the other girls to what they called the 'Big Tent' and once again she was overwhelmed by the worn, faded, and shabby look of the place. Inside the big tent wooden stands had been set up in a large circle and the small crowd oohed and awed at a huge grey creature with a long nose that performed in the middle of the tent. Large mirrors reflecting lamplight lit the show up brilliantly along with numerous other enclosed lamps. Massive barrels of water were placed here and there in the event of a fire and burly men in dirty red and white costumes stood by, closely monitoring the fire in the lamps. Overhead a man and a woman swung from bars on ropes hanging from the massive peaked tent top and they performed leaps, flips, and twirls from bar to bar. Wild Fire had to look away. The audience looked on in awe and wonder. Their smiles and laughter filled the tent. Another stand had about five musicians playing music on drums, flutes, and stringed and wooden instruments of the likes as she had never seen before. Behind them, a massive organ made of tarnished brass pipes puffed out metallic sounds under the expert hands of a hunched balding man. His long fingers flew over a board of white and black keys while his feet pumped a billow that shot air into pipes. It made an eerie haunting echo.

As the huge animal in the center of the tent finished his performance, he was led away out of the other side of the tent. An expectant hush descended. Suddenly, Master Vain stepped grandly into the center of the ring. He was dressed lavishly in flowing robes of multi-colored silks decorated with huge jewels along the collar. His black hair sparkled as if he had raindrops on it and his cheeks were slightly reddened with rouge, his already black eyes outlined with kohl and his lips were blood red. His welcoming smile greeted the people and he waved a hand heavy with jeweled rings at the audience's applause. He took a breath and boomed out.

“Lovely Ladies and Gentle Sirs! Welcome to Master Vain’s Carnival-Circus Extraordinary Extravaganza!” More applause greeted this announcement and the people cheered. “I, Master Vain welcome you! Tonight’s entertainment will enchant and amaze you! Feast your eyes on my exotic animals from all over the world, death-defying acrobats and tight rope walkers, flame eaters, and knife throwers!” He was greeted with more applause. “Laugh gaily at our hilarious clowns and envy our lithe and wonderful dancers.” More applause and shouts of “*hurrah*” rang out loudly.

The Sorcerer bowed deeply and as he came up sweeping his arms wide, he threw sparkling dust into the air in a huge ark around him. He strode purposefully, whirling theatrically and throwing hands full of the fine, pale dust into the air and it rose as if on a gentle breeze, swirled as if by magic, and filled the air with sparkling wonder. It seemed to multiply and hung thickly in the air. A sickly-sweet scent rose with the dust and, as Wild Fire stood staring in awe, the scent overpowered her. Suddenly her eyes fogged and her senses swam and she grew dizzy. A female voice behind her whispered seductively, “Breathe deep! It makes everything better.”

Shaking her head, Wild Fire tried to clear away the fog she was in. She felt drunk like she had too much wine. She shivered and looked around awestruck. Through her blurry vision, she beheld the wonder and magic of the carnival circus. Suddenly, everything seemed bigger, brighter, and the sand beneath her feet sparkled white like diamonds. Everything surrounding her was clean and new, gleaming freshly painted, and luxurious. The big tent now appeared brilliant red with crisp white stripes instead of drab, torn, and dirty. The massive pipe instrument gleamed shiny, golden, and polished. Animals in their cages and on leashes all at once seemed strong, young, and healthy roaring with sharp white teeth, glistening coats, and vibrant with life. Everything was an exhilarating marvel! The aging and tired dancers next to her were transformed into beautiful young girls in shining seductive, jeweled costumes with lithe muscular bodies that moved and undulated to the music which now sounded so beautiful she could swear she had never heard anything so wonderful.

As the music swelled, Master Vain bellowed out in a loud voice and waving his arms with a flourish toward the tent entrance he pronounced.

“And now! For your entertainment, the beautiful! The seductive Dancers of the Night!” Master Vain gestured and the other dancers skipped forward and took their places. Wild Fire watched as the girls undulated to the music and swayed their hips. She memorized their leaps and gyrations hoping to copy some of the movements when her time came. Too soon Master Vain was shooing the dancers away and gesturing for Wild Fire. His eyes raked over her lithe form taking in her costume and he licked his reddened lips.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! A special treat this evening! From the far corners of the world, the most beautiful girl you’ve ever seen. Lithe and seductive, she has danced for kings and princes and now for your pleasure! I give you the Dragonfly Dancer!” Someone shoved Wild Fire from behind and she stumbled forward. She felt strange and woozy, but fear kicked in and she caught

herself trying to look graceful. Looking down at her arms the painted material of her costume appeared like real iridescent wings. Feeling drunk she twirled with wonder as she looked down at herself, clothed in diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and dark amethysts. The sparkling dust hovered around her and sparkled in her hair and on her skin. She heard the audience gasp as she came to a stop in the middle of the tent, the white diamond sand sparkled around her as she took her place. A hush fell. The music swelled slowly in a beautifully eerie waltz. In a drugged haze she raised her arms and began to dance.

Wild Fire's delicate foot appeared from under her skirts and drew a line in the diamond white sand around her in a wide arching circle as if she had dipped a foot into warm water. Her arms flowed up and her dragonfly wings spread as she slowly spun and shimmered in the swirling dust around her. The music swelled and she lost herself in the dance as if she were flying among the white clouds of the blue sky. Swaying and leaping, spinning, she undulated in the familiar moves. Her dragonfly wings fluttering iridescent behind her. The dance took over her will, and she flickered like a delicate dragonfly hovering over a Wild Fire. Everyone watching was spellbound. The other dancer's drugged eyes saw the flitting and flying dragonfly gracefully alighting on the diamond grains of sand and even they were awed.

Madam Maze watched from the flap of the big tent and her fury rose with each leap and twist of Grace's sinuous body. Holding a dark cloth over her nose and mouth to protect her from the magic dust's effects, she seethed with jealousy as Grace danced. Then her eyes flew to where Master Vain stood watching eyes blazing with lust, tongue licking his lips with hunger for the beautiful Grace.

When the music finished the dragonfly dancer curtsied gracefully and the crowd erupted with applause, shouts of "More! More!" and "Hurrah! Dragonfly Dancer!" They threw coins that glittered in the lamplight as they hurtled through the air and landed at her feet. Tiny people in colorful costumes appeared out of nowhere and scooped up the coins into velvet pouches. Suddenly, Master Vain was at her side. He theatrically raised her hand to his cold lips and kissed the back of her hand in a grand gesture of admiration. He growled at her to smile through a clenched toothy grin. She swayed back as far as he would allow. He hissed at her out of the side of his mouth again to smile, as he held her hand up towards the audience. Then he led her out of the tent while the other dancers gracefully skipped into the center circle and the music played a lively tune as they danced in unison once again.

Outside in the crisp fresh air, the drug expelled from Wild Fire's lungs, and the fog slowly cleared from her mind. As if just waking from a dream she didn't quite know where she was and her head ached. Staggering a bit, she felt Master Vain's presence beside her, still grasping her hand possessively. The music played on behind them and she looked around confused. The brilliance she had seen only moments ago faded and now she saw the carnival for what it was, old, worn, broken down, faded, and false. She shook her head and breathed deeply of the crisp night air realizing what she had just done.

Master Vain had been steadying her and now he clutched her close and whispered in her ear.

“My lovely Grace, you are going to make me a very rich man! And when I take you to my bed tonight I will...” His whispered words were cut off suddenly when Madam Maze stepped out of the blackness of the night.

“Master Vain!” She interrupted, “I see you are pleased with our new dancer.” She stopped in front of Grace and glared at her. Jealously was pouring off her in waves and she fairly quivered with rage.

“Mazie! My Love!” The Sorcerer bowed slightly and released Grace. “She did quite well for her first time I think.”

Master Vain stepped away and turned toward Madam Maze acknowledging her words. Repeating himself almost nervously, “Yes, Madam Maze she is quite pleasing and a *very* good dancer too. I propose she shall have top billing. I will make her the *star* of my circus.”

Madam Maze grabbed Grace’s arm and pulled her away. “Do what you will. Now our new *star* must rest. Go to the tent girl, NOW!”

“How dare you! I was not finished with her.” Master Vain whirled on Madam Maze and struck her an open-handed blow across the face. Madam Maze’s eyes glared at Grace as she rushed away, but then she turned back to Master Vain.

Wild Fire took her chance and hurried away quickly trying not to hear the heated conversation Master Vain and Madam Maze were having.

“You will pay for that when I come to you tonight!” Hissed Madam Maze.

Grace heard the warning rise in Master Vain’s voice. “No, Mazie, my mistress, I believe tonight *you* shall pay dearly for your insolence. I had plans for our lovely new dancer, but I suppose you shall have to suffice. For now.”

#

Big Man did as he was told and cleared the isles between the tents of animal dung with a long-handled shovel. His head ached and he felt sick, tired, and hungry. The heavy linked necklace around his neck chaffed and was warm and remembering what Clem had said, he tucked it securely under his shirt so that no one could take his prized possession. Deciding he would go in search of food and water; he left the tent. People eyed him warily and whispered about how tall he was and about his massive, broad shoulders. Not knowing where to go he wandered. Off in the distance, he heard strange music and people cheering. He followed the sounds until he found himself at a huge red and white striped tent. Staring through a rip in the side, Big Man peeked in and saw a huge

grey animal balancing on one foot over a massive ball. People were swinging from bars tied to ropes in the ceiling and clowns in face paint tumbled about. Big Man stared in amazement.

Then Master Vain suddenly appeared, Big Man moved his face closer to the tear and watched as he flung sparkling dust in the air like magic. He heard as the Master loudly shouted.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! A special treat this evening! From the far corners of the world, the most beautiful girl you’ve ever seen. Lithe and seductive, she has danced for kings and princes and now for your pleasure! I give you the Dragonfly Dancer!”

Big Man stared wide-eyed as a girl he felt he should know, stumbled into the light, and began to dance. He watched spellbound as she drew a circle around her in the sand then swirled and undulated in front of the audience. He gasped in wonder as she spun and leaped in time to the music. Her dragonfly wings lightly beat behind her with her arm movements. Big Man’s blood heated and he grew hard within his britches. His hands gripped the hole in the tent as he watched the dance and although he did not think he knew this girl, he was drawn to her and knew he *desired* her. When her dance ended Big Man followed her with his eyes as the Master took her hand and led her from the tent. Stepping away he turned and walked toward where she had disappeared out the other side, intent on finding this lovely dancer.

Suddenly, Clem yelled at him from the darkness behind him. He was dressed in a colorful costume and his face was painted with white, huge unsmiling red lips and black circled eyes. Big Man knew him despite the costume and paint.

“Hey! Big Man!” He stormed over to him. He was carrying a long switch and struck Big Man smartly across the shoulder. “What are you doin out ‘ere? Whatchin eh? I thought I told you to stay away from them girls. Can’t say as I blame you, they is lovely and nice to poke, but you got work to do you hear?”

Big Man nodded and allowed himself to be shoved by the smaller man. They headed back towards the animal tent while Clem berated him. They passed a wagon that was open along the side and a fat man in a dingy white apron was shoveling food onto wooden plates. Big Man stopped and breathed in the smells.

“Hungry are ya?” Clem nodded. “I tell you what, you fetch food and water for all them animals and bring new hay to them and then you can have something to eat. They just dumb animals and need to be fed first. That sound alright?”

Big Man nodded and left to fetch water. His stomach growled loudly as he walked away. Clem sat down on a nearby stool and waved at the cook to bring him his supper.

#

During the next week, Grace danced in every performance put on by the carnival circus. Learning the synchronized routines surprisingly quickly, she danced effortlessly with the other girls. They went on at high noon in the hot shade of the big tent and at dusk when the coolness of the evening settled in. After a quick costume change, she hurried back in her dragonfly costume and danced her solo, mesmerizing the drugged audiences with leaps, spins, and undulations. She performed under the influence of the magic dust in the Big Tent's air, to absolute perfection. The drug made her feel as if she were flying. Each time it was her turn to perform she was threatened and terrified by the threat of the whore's tent if she did not do well, but glittering coins flew through the air with each one of her performances.

Madam Maze instructed her on how to more suggestively move her pelvis to fill the men with lust and make the women's eyes shine with envy. Each time her dance finished the glittering coins rained down and landed at her feet, little men in colorful costumes would leap out and scoop them into velvet pouches never missing a one. Madame Maze was always there to whisk her away before Master Vain could get to her after each performance. Essentially, Grace owed her a debt of gratitude because she knew what Master Vain wanted from her, and Madame Maze protected her even if it was only out of jealousy toward Grace. Still, his hungry eyes followed her and she could hear his breath panting with lust when he watched her perform.

Grace caught glimpses of Night Wind, now called Big Man, in the distance as he worked. He was strong and did the work of three men. He seemed to have a way with the exotic animals, working hard caring for them. Grace knew it was because he was a Ghost Wing and the animals were soothed and tamed by his presence. He wrestled playfully with the black leopard and the huge grey animal often nuzzled him with his long nose. The long-necked ostriches bowed and spread their wings towards him and the dogs whined and wagged their tails for his attention. The slithering reptiles he stayed away from completely and could not be made to feed or care for them no matter how much the other caretakers yelled at him or beat him. He gave the snakes wide-berth.

Wild Fire decided that they should leave as soon as she could get to Night Wind, she was watched closely in the dancer's tent and could not get away. The punishment for fraternizing with the other performers and circus workers was terrible and the threat of ending up in the whore's tent was always dangled before her. During the rare free time she had, Jobben or Clem was there watching her and following her and she didn't even get the chance to shapeshift and fly to Night Wind. Knowing the sight of her wings would result in disaster for her and Night Wind, she did not even get the chance to try.

The carnival circus moved to a new location every few weeks and teamed with action during the long days. The performers practiced their routines, the clowns rolled and tumbled and the fire-eater spit flames into the sky from his dripping mouth. All the while the laborers worked non-stop moving tents, driving stakes into the ground, and endlessly fetching and carrying. The strong man lifted heavy stones exercising his large muscles and the whore's tent had a constant

flow of customers. Grace shied away from that tent and tried not to think about it, but Madam Maze never let her forget that she could end up there at any time.

Wild Fire was also kept away from Night Wind. Either Jobben or Clem constantly lurked around her and kept her under tight surveillance. Every time she approached one of them and inquired about 'Big Man's progress and about his healing she was roughly turned away and told he was coming along fine. She was afraid to approach Master Vain about the treatment and so all she could do was hope that it went well. Her interest in Big Man was noted by everyone in the carnival circus and so it seemed to Grace that everyone conspired to keep him from her and ignored her inquiries about him.

One day she glimpsed him working off in the distance with the horses. His back was turned toward her but as he turned to the side, she could see that the blood from his wound was still caked in his hair and dried on his face and the front of his torn and dirty shirt. Feeling like a fool, Wild Fire realized that Master Vain had not even cleaned the wound nor examined him. The realization dawned on her that she was being played for a fool as well and that they were both being held captive though they were told repeatedly they could leave at any time. In reality, she knew she and Night Wind had been manipulated into working in the carnival circus like slaves, kept there under pressure to pay a debt that was never owed. Wild Fire decided it was long past time to leave. She would get Night Wind and continue to Jior as soon as possible which is what she should have done in the first place. Night Wind had been acting so strange right after the fall that she feared for the worst.

Big Man worked hard non-stop. He slept in the hay with the animals and often had to resort to stealing food. Each performance when the dragonfly dancer's music called him away from his duties, he stole away to watch Grace dance through the tear in the big tent. His blood boiled when he saw her and his heart thundered in his chest. He wanted her, but Clem had warned him repeatedly to stay away from the girls and so he only watched her with eyes burning with desire and his heart aching with forgotten familiarity.

At night when he slept, he dreamt of flying through the sky. He soared through the clouds and rode the winds flapping great white wings. His pulse quickened and he yearned to be free to fly. Many nights he dreamed he was making love to the dragonfly dancer. When he woke from these dreams, he heard the moaning of the tiger and the barking of the dogs and not the call of the winds inviting him to go fly.

One morning waking from his strange dreams, Big Man rolled over in the dirty hay and the stench of his body and filthy clothes overwhelmed him. He decided that he badly needed a bath. After feeding the animals and giving them water, he slipped away into the forest and headed away from the carnival circus. Following the sound of rushing water, he found a deep slow-moving river and dove in fully clothed. He swam in the cool waters of the river and let the accumulated

filth rinse away. As he approached the sloping riverbank and rose refreshed from the cool waters, he heard noises.

Coming through the trees, three of the women from the whore's tent walked toward him carrying baskets of clothes, bars of soap, laughing, and passing around a wineskin. Big Man had been told to stay away from the girls and so he rose from the water and made to slink away, afraid that they would report he had left his animals. He did not get far away before they spotted him and called to him. Their musical voices rang out and begged him not to leave. Big Man backed into the river when they blocked his path. He wanted to tell them to stay away, but the fog that was always covering his mind like a stifling blanket made his tongue freeze and he could not speak. He looked longingly towards his boots on the shore and wanted to run away.

The girls called him by name and taunted him, inviting him to stay. Big Man stood unsure in the slow-flowing waters and watched helplessly as the girls undressed in front of him and before he knew what was happening, they had joined him in the water and surrounded him. Their drunken slurred voices cooed as they began to pet him, rub against him, and stroke his muscular arms. Trapping him in a circle of round breasts, supple arms, and curving hips, Big Man grew hard and achy looking from one girl to the next and he was suddenly filled with desire and need. As the girls laughed and caressed him, he tentatively reached out and caressed back, breathing hard, eyes filled with wonder at the softness of their breasts and their swaying hips, their skin wet with river water. They kissed him and pulled at his clothing begging him to take them off and calling him handsome, strong, and Big Man. One of the girls said she had long been admiring him, the other said she wanted his cock inside her, the other gasped his name over and over, begging him to take her.

They managed to get his wet shirt off of him and tossed it to the shore next to his boots. They gasped when they saw the huge muscles of his chest and they purred with wonder over the silvery lines of wings on his back. Big Man did not know what they were talking about although thinking about the silvery lines made his head throb painfully. Something else was throbbing and one of the girls loosened his trousers and reached her hand and stroked him. Her musical voice gasped and she said he really was a big man. Closing his eyes, the girl stroked him as the other girls kissed and caressed him, rubbing him, combing their fingers through his long hair, kissing him, pressing his hands to their breasts, and pleasuring him in ways he had not known existed. One girl pushed him to his knees and as he knelt in the water, she rubbed her large breasts against his face. They begged him to pleasure them and whispered their desires in his ears. They took turns kissing and stroking him until he was about to burst right there in the water as the girls took turns touching his hard shaft and tugging on him.

Big Man was drawn into the web of the girl's seduction and licked the firm breast of one of the girls as she slipped her nipple into his mouth and he grasped her bottom and pulled her closer. As he opened his eyes to look at what he was holding, he glanced up towards the bank of the river. There standing staring wide-eyed was the Dragonfly Dancer! The basket of soap,

clothing, and towels fell from her hands as she watched Big Man with the other women. Her wide eyes filled with tears and she turned with a cry and fled into the forest.

Big Man was horrified as he realized the Dragonfly Dancer had seen him with the other girls. He also realized it was her he wanted to be with. Filled with embarrassment and shame, he pushed away the girl he was clutching and he threw off the other two who landed in the water and he bolted towards the shore. Grabbing his boots and shirt, he ran after the Dragonfly Dancer. He wanted to cry out and explain, but no words would come from his mouth only rasping chokes.

Wild Fire's long legs had carried her swiftly away, but Big Man was faster and he soon caught up to her. Grabbing her arm, he spun her around and stopped her running. Even in the shade of the forest trees, he could see she was crying, long streaks of tears flowing down her red face. '*How could you!*' Her eyes accused him. She was breathing hard struggling in his grasp, not willing to look at him.

Big Man opened his mouth to say something to try and explain, but words would not come. His mind was befuddled, and his body was left unsatisfied. Holding her arms, he opened his mouth and struggled to speak to her, to explain what had happened and beg her forgiveness, but all that would come out was a garble of unintelligible sounds. He thought it was the first time he had ever touched her or been this close, but he could not deny the feeling of familiarity when she was so near. He felt like she meant something important to him.

The Dragonfly Dancer stared at him horrified by his inability to speak. Her eyes were fixed on his mouth as the sounds came out but made no sense. She stopped struggling. Big Man fought with his mind and squeezed his eyes closed trying to say what was in his heart, that he desired *her* and not those others! Suddenly, she stepped into his embrace and placed her head against his chest her arms clasping him around his waist. His arms went around her and they held each other tightly. Feelings of familiarity again swamped him and warmth flooded him. Flashes of memory struck through his mind like lightning. Memories of wings unfolding behind the Dragonfly Dancer and of him kissing her, making love to *her*, but then the necklace around his neck began to burn painfully and he staggered back clutching at his most prized possession that was burning hot against his skin.

"Night Wind!" the Dragonfly Dancer gasped. "We do not belong here! This is not our life! We must escape from here! We have to get to Jior! Remember?"

Big Man's mind roared and his hearing clashed loudly like the symbols the musicians banged. He grew agitated and did not understand what she called him, *Night Wind*? He looked at her, pain assailing his senses and though he tried to make sense of what she was telling him, he shook his head in frustration. Flashes of memory assailed him, strange places and faces of people he thought he should know, memories of flying struck him with longing and despair.

“Well, well, what have we here?” Jobben and Clem stepped out of the trees and found them together. “What’s goin on with you two?”

“I thought I told you to stay away from the girls, eh Big Man!” Clem strode forward with a switch in hand and whipped him across the shoulders. Big Man hunched away from the switch and took the abuse he knew he had coming because he had disobeyed. Jobben stepped forward and grabbed Wild Fire by the arms tearing her away.

“Stop! It was my fault! I sought him out! Stop hitting him! Please!” Wild Fire pleaded as red welts rose on Night Wind’s back and arms.

“That’s what you get for ignoring orders Big Man!” Clem shouted angrily.

“And you!” Jobben growled at her. “If you’re going play the whore perhaps you should be in the whore’s tents where girls like you get what they got coming to em!” He began to drag her away. Saying how he would just have to speak to Master Vain about her behavior.

Wild Fire looked back at Night Wind where he stood taking the stinging blows of Clem’s switch. Her eyes pleaded with him for help, but he did nothing, just stood and took the beating, watching her being pulled away. In his heart he burned with anger, not because of the abuse he was taking, but because the other man was touching his heart’s desire. After he watched the Dragonfly Dancer disappear into the trees, Big Man turned and walked away going in the other direction, calmly stepping away from Clem’s beating.

Clem, who was as smart as he was cruel, didn’t bother to call him back. He knew when he had pushed the big man too far and when to quit.

#

When they arrived back at the carnival circus, Grace was dragged back to the dancer’s tent. It was almost high noon and she was due to go on soon. Jobben left her there but cast a final warning at her. He moved off and she could hear him grumbling about her lack of virtue and how he would enjoy her when she was cast into the whore’s tent. Shivering with fear she ran to quickly get dressed for her performance, fearing Madam Maze more than Jobben’s threats. She knew her dancing drew too many patrons to the tent and the coins she earned as the Dragonfly Dancer were more than Master Vain was willing to give up. At least, she hoped. Donning her costume, she left the tent and raced after the other girls who were already making their way to the noon performances.

Big Man returned to his animals. He poured a cool bucket of water over his head and washed the blood from the welts Clem had drawn when he whipped him. When he stopped fighting the fog in his mind, the necklace stopped burning. He pulled his shirt over his head and hid the necklace under it, giving it a final possessive pat and once again hearing Clem’s voice telling him never to take the precious necklace off. Then he heard the distant music begin and the whine of

the brass pipes called to him. Big Man dared not go watch this afternoon because he knew Clem and Jobben were close by watching him, so he stayed with his animals and shoveled the dung in the large pile growing out behind the tent. As the music played, he thought again about the Dragonfly Dancer in his arms and calling him *Night Wind*, but what could it mean? He shook his head and wanted to shout out his frustration, but no words would come. As the distant music reached its crescendo, he stopped and turned, eyes burning with determination he silently vowed he would see her again, if only to watch her dance. He turned back to his animals who needed him.

Master Vain's Carnival-Circus Extraordinary Extravaganza moved on the next day. The carnival-circus stay was timed in direct proportion to the size and stench of the animal's dung heap. When it grew to alarming proportions the tents were taken down and hastily packed, the wagons filled and provisions stored. The carnival circus left the clearing where they had been squatting and left dung and litter from their stay. They moved on.

Wild Fire sat in the dancer's wagon with the other girls. They swayed with the motion of the wheels and the other girls laughed and joked with each other. Wild Fire, however, kept to herself. Her long red-gold hair baked in the sunlight and she searched the long wagon train for signs of the animal cages and signs of Night Wind.

Master Vain was not healing Night Wind she knew, and she fretted over what was wrong with him. Thinking that the fall had damaged his mind somehow and he could no longer talk or remember anything, she knew the only place he could get real healing was in Jior. She had heard that the Queen of Jior could heal the sick. As the carnival circus trundled further away from the Violent Mountains she dreaded how far away they were being taken from the northwest where Jior was. No one seemed to know where the carnival circus was headed, but rumors were whispered that they were going towards Skoria. Grace shuddered dreading such a far destination and knew they had to escape before they reached the rolling hills of Skoria. They trundled further in a direction away from Jior and healing for Night Wind.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice when Master Vain rode up to her on a sleek black horse. She was in the back of the wagon and was startled when he suddenly appeared in front of her. His black eyes swept over her as if he were undressing her with his eyes. She huddled back away from his stare.

"Beautiful Grace! You're looking well today. Are you enjoying the fine weather?"

"I, I, it is fine." She stuttered, her fear of him reflected in her voice, but then she remembered Night Wind and found the courage to ask. "How is my husband? How goes the healing treatments? You've been at it a long time and I should think he should be almost well by now."

Master Vain narrowed his eyes at her just slightly and then after a moment of contemplation, bowed his head sorrowfully.

"I'm afraid that our Big Man is not faring too well. His wound was worse than I had originally thought. However," he perked up happier now. "I have a new treatment I believe he will benefit from greatly. So, all hope is not lost yet. Never fear my Dear, I am confident he will be well in no time."

"How much longer will you keep us? I mean, how much longer till you know if this new treatment will work." Wild Fire hated herself for showing such timidity in front of this terrible man who she knew lied to her with every breath. Then she went on bravely.

"I, mmm-my dancing has earned you many coins. I think, healed or not I think Big Man and I should go soon! I should have more than earned your fee by now."

Master Vain looked at her with eyes glittering with anger and his mouth turned hard. He nudged his horse closer to the wagon and leaned in so that only she could hear.

"I told you my fee was steep. You have not earned enough to satisfy what you owe me. Word of your dancing has spread across Vedt and you will continue to dance until I say so!" He was hissing angrily now then he reached a black-nailed handout and grabbed her arm jerking her hard toward him. "Now, I have a new dance I want you to perform for me and me alone. Tonight, you *will* come to my wagon after dark and I will instruct you. Do *not* let Madam Maze know you come to me. Avoid her at all costs. If you do not come, I will stop my healing treatments for your husband, and he will die from his wound and you will regret it all the more!"

He released her arm and kicked his black horse forward riding ahead of the wagon train. Wild Fire knew what Master Vain wanted from her and dreaded going to his wagon that night. She had heard rumors of what he did to girls when they disappeared into the dark recesses of his wagon and she shuddered with fear trying desperately to think of a way to avoid having to go to him.

Big Man sat next to the driver of the black leopard's cage. He could hear the animal's panting behind him as it tried to cool itself in the summer heat. Big Man tried to cool his anger as he watched Master Vain approach the dancer's wagon and speak to the Dragonfly Dancer. He saw the fear in her face and the pain he inflicted when he grabbed her arm. Big Man wanted to snarl and leap from the wagon and pummel the Master for touching his Dragonfly Dancer, but he could not make a sound. Only ride along and watch. Then he saw her look of terror as the Master spoke his last words to her and Big Man decided he would keep a close watch on the Dragonfly Dancer.

Wild Fire's mind whirled for the rest of the day. She couldn't understand what was wrong with Night Wind. Was it just the head wound? Or was it something else? Did Master Vain have a new treatment for him and would he truly stop treating Night Wind if she did not go to him later that night? Knowing they were all lies; she bit her lip and dreaded the coming night.

#

The carnival circus drew to a halt and all the performers and workers helped set up camp for the night. Dusk had fallen and Wild Fire was terrified. She looked around desperately for Madam Maze and wondered if she should follow Master Vain's instructions as she was told and avoid the woman or if she should seek her protection.

Wild Fire had learned that Madam Maze was Master Vain's wife and that she had some hold over him, but even she barely kept him in line. However, Madam Maze lived separately from him, and often her cries and laughter, and the crack of a lash could be heard emanating from his wagon. Many of the dancers were ordered to Master Vain's wagon at night and returned with welts and whip lashes on their arms, legs, and other parts. They would limp to their bunks and cry while the others cared for their injuries with sympathetic tenderness. Now, it seemed it was Wild Fire's turn. Why Madam Maze had seemed to protect Wild Fire from her husband was so far a mystery.

Resolved not to go Master Vain's wagon, Wild Fire would tell him later that Madam Maze had caught her and stopped her, but that was not meant to be. Clem appeared and disappeared into Madam Maze's wagon and soon it was rocking rhythmically and moans ushered from the closed drapes. Then Jobben suddenly appeared.

"The Master requests your presence Miss Grace and I'm told to escort you, so you don't *accidentally* lose your way."

Wild Fire could hear how Jobben's pulse raced when he was near her and he stood too close to her. His hot breath huffed on her neck as he bumped her forward with this big chest. Holding her arm in a tight painful grip, he pushed her through the dark in the direction of the purple and yellow-painted wagon. Grace was almost paralyzed with fear and revulsion. He grasped her arm painfully in the dark and as they walked, he rubbed his groin against her hand and whispered filthy things to her. She clenched her fist tightly her nails digging into her palm and tried desperately to pull her hand away, but he walked awkwardly with his pelvis pushed forward against her hand, rubbing vigorously. She tugged violently but it only seemed to please him as he panted and told her of a secret panel in the side of Master Vain's wagon. He told her how he planned to watch as the Master did unspeakable things to her in his wagon. Wild Fire was terrified and repulsed not knowing how she was going to get out of this.

Through the trees, she saw Master Vain's wagon ahead placed in a glade far from the other carnival-circus people. Two tall smoking torches were burning low outside and a cooking fire smoldered feebly. The old woman, who was always around Master Vain's wagon, dozen over a bowl of dark stew.

When Grace saw the wagon, she stopped in her tracks and Jobben careened into her, but that only served his purpose and he clutched her tightly, rubbed himself vigorously against her, and then suddenly grunted. A dark wet spot appeared on his pants front and he stopped panting roughly and hunched over. He held her tightly as he straightened still breathing hard. Wild Fire

wretched and violently lost the contents of her stomach into the bushes. Still holding her tightly Jobben growled in her ear.

“Next time, I be inside you when I come.” He began to chuckle, but then his laugh was suddenly cut off and he disappeared from her side.

Wild Fire straightened from where she wretched in the bushes and turned. She gasped as she saw Big Man standing behind her, his arm wrapped around Jobben’s throat, cutting off his air. A muffled crack and a gurgle issued from Jobben’s mouth as his neck snapped. Big Man let Jobben’s body slide to the ground and stepped over him as Wild Fire flew into his arms.

They held each other tightly for a long moment. Wild Fire looked up into Night Wind’s furious green eyes and felt a little safer for the first time in weeks.

“Night Wind!” She whispered frantically. “We’ve got to escape! Now! You and me! We’ve got to leave!”

Night Wind stared at her uncomprehending. Then shook his head no. He did not understand but knew he wanted the Dragonfly Dancer in his arms. He bent his head and kissed her, but she pulled away. His look turned confused.

“Come!” She tugged at his arm. “Quickly!”

Night Wind turned to follow her, but then stopped and effortlessly hefted Jobben’s dead body by the scruff of his coat. He led the way back towards the camp and Wild Fire pleaded with him that they were going the wrong way. She followed as Night Wind paced into the darkness behind the animal cages and then approached the one where the large reptiles were. He hastily opened the cage and stuffed Jobben’s body in. The large alligator who was dozing in the cool evening slowly opened one slotted eye and then lifted a heavy paw and crawled towards his dinner.

#

Big Man took Wild Fire’s hand and led her away from the reptile cages. She followed willingly but kept whispering they were going in the wrong direction and that they needed to fly, to escape. The night concealed them both as they covertly slunk away. Wild Fire tried to pull him towards the forest and escape, but he would not follow and pulled her in a different direction towards the traveling wagons.

At the far end of the camp where the other animal cages were situated, he halted at a small dark wagon. Wild Fire followed him up rickety stairs and it rocked slightly with Night Wind’s weight. He pulled her under the slatted covering where large bags of grain and feed were stored for the animals. Colorful trappings and blankets that made up the animal’s costumes were stored here among other props.

He settled her down on a stool and turned the light up in a small lamp that barely illuminated the cramped space. Then he turned towards her.

“Night Wind! You must listen to me! This is not where we belong. We need to leave now! We must get to Jior.” She pleaded. “Remember?”

Big Man slowly shook his head ‘no’ and then knelt before her and ran his hands up her thighs. Clem had told him he had lived at the carnival circus his whole life and he didn’t know anything else and could not imagine leaving his animals. All he knew was that he desired the Dragonfly Dancer more than anything else. He wanted to kiss her and have her touch him the way the other girls had touched him the day at the river. His pulse flared and his blood raged hotly for this beautiful delicate girl in front of him.

His heart soared with joy when he realized they were finally alone together and all he wanted to do was hold her. Wild Fire opened her mouth to plead with him again, but he lowered his mouth to hers and stopped her words. His tongue flicked out and tasted her lips and she gasped, “Night Wind!”

Pulling her beneath him he took off his shirt and lowered himself over her and continued to kiss her. She kissed him in return and ran her hands over his back, lighting fire to his skin where she touched him. The tarnished silver and precious gems of the necklace, his prized possession, glimmered in the soft lamplight.

Big Man shook with need and tugged at the Dragonfly Dancer’s shirt. Lifting he pulled it off of her and gazed down at her lovely, white breasts. She was soft and fit perfectly in his hand. Rubbing gently, he replaced his hand with his mouth and she gasped running her fingers through his hair and pulling him into her.

Big Man was hard and aching with need. As they kissed passionately and rubbed against each other, he let out a low growling purr, the same as the black leopard made when Big Man scratched her behind the ears. Then he stopped and ran his hands up her thigh again. Lifting her skirts and he combed his fingers through her silky curls. She arched and pushed against his hand as he caressed her. She was wet and warm, and suddenly was pushing down on the waistband of his britches. As her hand found him, he purred again as she slid her hand over his length. He was hard and wanting. She was whimpering, desperate to have him. Then suddenly his hard shaft was replacing his hand and he slid into her warm wet sheath bucking hard.

Big Man felt so right like finally, he was home. He could not remember ever feeling so good in his life. Somehow it was familiar to him. As the Dragonfly Dancer moved with his body and he kissed her, her breasts rubbing against his bare chest he purred and growled with passionate satisfaction. His mate was finally in his arms.

When Big Man's climax came, he let out a low, animalistic growl and stilled. Wild Fire gasped softly and grasped him tightly as her release came. They just held each other while their breathing stilled. Then they held their breath as they heard voices outside. Two men were walking by, talking quietly completely oblivious to the fact that Big Man was inside the wagon, making love to the Dragonfly Dancer. Their voices faded into the distance and Big Man helped her up and they quickly dressed. Leading her out of the small wagon she tried again to plead with him to escape with her, but the heavy necklace around his neck began to grow hot and he held her hand leading her back to the dancer's wagon.

The next morning the entire carnival circus was in an uproar. Jobben was missing. Master Vain was in such a fury that he shouted and screamed at everyone who came into his path. He finally made his way to the dancer's wagon to deal with Grace. As he approached his eyes roamed stealthily looking for Madame Maze, but she had not risen from her slumber just yet.

"Where is Jobben!" Master Vain demanded as he stormed up to Grace. "I sent him to fetch you last night and you never came!" She stepped back until he had her pinned up against the wagon. Suddenly, a shrill voice rang out.

"Why would you have Jobben fetch *her*?" It was Madam Maze. Master Vain whirled and faced his wife.

"That is of no importance to you! Jobben is missing and she was the last one to see him."

"I fell asleep early last night! I never saw him!" Grace spoke up quickly and moved away from the wagon fleeing a few steps until Master Vain stopped her in her tracks with his black glare. The other dancers stood by with fear and pity in their gazes. Some looked relieved the Master's attention was not on them and they shrunk away.

"You are lying!" Master Vain started towards her again but found his way barred suddenly by the massive chest of Big Man who stood glaring down at the Master, his blue eyes storming darkly. Master Vain's face flushed red with anger and he opened his mouth to scream at Big Man, but before he could get a word out two men, came rushing up.

"Master Vain!" One of the newcomers hollered.

"What is it!" Vain whirled on them fists clenched.

"Master Vain, we think we've found Jobben! Well, at least we think it was him. We found this in the alligator cage and nothin else." The man held up a bloody shoe that still had part of a foot in it.

Master Vain stood staring for a moment and then turned on Big Man pointing.

"You did this!"

Big Man stood wordlessly glaring at Master Vain and held his ground in front of the Dragonfly Dancer, protecting her. Then the other man who was one of the reptile keepers and had come running up with the man with the bloody shoe spoke up.

“Twernt Big Man. He afraid of the reptiles, won’t go near ‘em. Just looks like ol’ Jobben finally got his just deserts, teased that ol’ gator one too many times I think.”

The clearing was silent as Master Vain stood considering this new information. Then he turned, surveyed every person in the clearing, and left, ordering what was left of the body to be buried and for everyone to pack up and be ready to move on in an hour.

Madam Maze stood glaring narrow-eyed at Grace. Her face flushed red with anger. The other dancers hastily packed up their belongings just glad the attention was not on them. Madam Maze strode towards Grace and stood glaring at her. Big Man had not left her and was a solid presence, but Madam Maze did not notice nor care. Lowering her voice, she spoke to Grace with such venom that her flesh crawled.

“I know my husband sleeps with every little slut in the carnival circus and I know his machinations to have you too. There is something about you, little dragonfly, that stirs his passions beyond all the other whores. I know you want him too! I see the look in your eyes when he is near. I warn you, stay away from Master Vain or I will crush you under my foot like the little insect you are. Now pack your things and be ready to leave within the hour.” Then she whirled and stomped away in a black rage.

Spurred on by the Master’s fury the carnival circus was ready to move on in less than an hour. The other dancers angrily berated Grace for the trouble she was causing. They claimed one of them would pay for it later that night and chided her asking why she was so different from any of them in that she had Madame Maze’s protection from Master Vain’s attention. When it came time to leave, they denied her a spot in the dancer’s wagon and told her she would have to walk. Wild Fire did walk for most of the day until they stopped to rest the animals and eat a hasty lunch. Then Big Man was by her side and pulled her over to the wagon caging the black leopard. He hoisted her up to the seat between him and the driver and she rode the rest of the way with him from that point on.

Master Vain’s Carnival-Circus Extraordinary Extravaganza reached a large town about ten miles from the foot of the Violent Mountains. Grace was forced back to the dancer’s tent by Clem and they begrudgingly took her in again. There was not much time spent unpacking as word that their carnival circus was in the area had spread ahead of them and the town’s people were clamoring for entertainment. The performers hastened to prepare. Big Man was busy helping put up the big tent. Madame Maze strode around ordering the dancers and generally getting in the way of their preparations and Grace was ordered into her dragonfly costume.

The sky was just beginning to darken and the moon rose large in a clear sky. The performing dogs were center stage in the big tent. The clowns in their white face paint ran in and performed their antics with their many varied props trying to get a laugh. The elephant waited outside swinging its large head back and forth as if saying, 'NO!' it did not wish to go in and balance on the big ball that was part of its act.

The dancers received word that it was time to line up so that they could go on after the elephant. Wild Fire followed them out and stood outside in the cool air waiting for her turn. She rehearsed her steps in her mind as had become her habit before each performance and prepared her heart and mind to dance because she had no choice. As she stood waiting, she suddenly felt a presence next to her. Her arm was grabbed and she was yanked over into the shadows. Whirling around she was face to face with Master Vain.

"My little Dragonfly Dancer." He purred seductively as he stepped very close to her. "Tonight, you will not avoid me again. Directly after your dance, you will come to my wagon and I will have you, or I will see to it that your Big Man lover will be the next one to feed the alligator tonight. Do I make myself clear?"

Wild Fire looked around helplessly, but there was no one to help her. Then he shook her violently.

"Do you understand me!"

"Yes!" Grace gasped. "But Madam Maze said..."

"I don't care what that witch says. YOU will come to me tonight or I will kill that black-headed bastard you came with. I burn for you Grace and I'm sick of waiting." Master Vain clutched her roughly and dipped his mouth to try and kiss her, but she turned her head avoiding his lips. That was fine with him as his mouth pressed hard against her neck. Grace struggled in his grasp as he licked her skin and placed cold-lipped kisses on her neck. He whispered repeatedly that he would have her.

Behind them, the loud braying of the elephant distracted him and Master Vain stopped and pushed her towards the tent entrance.

"Dance well under the big top Dragonfly Dancer and then you will dance in my bed!"

With a muffled cry Wild Fire turned to make her escape.

As with every performance Master Vain appeared in a shaft of light in the center of the circle under the big tent. His voice rang out as his grand introduction proclaimed his carnival circus. He made his customary bow and his arm arched out spreading the hypnotic dust in the air. The people gasped with wonder and amazement at this small bit of magic and then everything changed.

The lights grew brighter, the colors more vibrant and everything was made new. The lamps were brilliant diamonds casting colored light everywhere and the carnival circus glittered with magic and wonder. The audience breathed deeply of the magic dust and fell under its spell. A hush of anticipation descended.

“And now! For your entertainment, the beautiful! The seductive! Dragonfly Dancer!”

Wild Fire lightly stepped forward and ran to her spot in the center of the circle. The audience gasped again in anticipation. The men leaned forward eyes large and staring, and the women and children gasped in delight and wonder. Taking a deep breath Grace closed her eyes and centered herself. As her music began and she brought her head up, she opened her eyes to see the warm brown eyes of Captain Braiden Torno staring back at her in shocked disbelief. The magic dust swirled through the air like trillions of tiny twinkling stars.

Wild Fire’s heart soared as she stared at Captain Braiden. He was clearly as shocked to see her and his face grew curious, but her music rose signaling her it was time to begin her dance. She brought her bare foot forward, pointed it in the diamond white sand, and drew the circle around her.

The dance took her over. Wild Fire opened the wings of her costume and soared. She spun and twirled weaving a magical waltz within her circle. She undulated suggestively as Madam Maze had ordered her to do to incite the men in the audience to lust. Her body rippled and her hips swayed as she knew she had to do. Spinning around she stopped her rotation and looked straight into the leering eyes of Master Vain who never missed one of her performances. She made a slight stumble remembering what awaited her when her dance was finished. Quickly righting herself she danced on.

The music crescendo rose and she knew the moment that signaled her music was about to end and her heart thundered terrified in her breast. In a frantic leap high into the air she bounded out of her circle and pirouetted across the sand toward the musicians.

“Again!” She whispered loudly to the musicians and her music played again.

Wild Fire danced a new dance this time, leaping and spinning around the entire circle of the performing area as if she were flying. The audience was silent with astonishment as she danced. She seemed to take wing, her feet barely touching the glittering diamond white sand. Sweat poured down her neck and glittered wetly on her arms and legs. The music played on and on continuing until the Dragonfly Dancer decided to alight.

The audience watched spellbound as the iridescent wings pulsed and the dancer flitted and flew around the big tent’s circle. Wild Fire danced and danced until her feet bled and left spots of blood in the white-diamond sand. She twirled and gracefully beckoned to the audience with her arms almost pleading.

Suddenly, her music stopped and the only sound under the tent was her labored breathing. Wild Fire caught a glimpse of Master Vain angrily speaking to the musicians who looked down remorseful. He had put a stop to her delay. Then he turned smiling grandly at the audience. The shaft of the spotlight followed him as he approached her.

“Take your bow.” He admonished her heatedly.

Grace curtsied low and held the position until he yanked her up. Once again, her frightened eyes met those of Captain Braiden who had watched her in open-mouthed amazement. He was one of the first in the audience on his feet and he tossed a gold coin at her feet and applauded wildly.

“You’ll not put me off this time.” Master Vain kept his grip on her hand and smiled through his angry words.

The audience was on its feet and the applause continued to thunder out. Coins gleamed in the lamplight as they flew through the air and landed at her feet. Gold, silver, and copper littered the gleaming white-diamond sand.

Master Vain bowed again and the yanked Wild Fire towards the tent exit. She tried to turn and beseech Captain Braiden for help with her eyes, but he just stood and watched her leave with confusion and worship painting his handsome face. The magic dust in the air continued to mesmerize the audience as the next act readied.

Once they were outside Master Vain spun her around and slapped her across the face.

“How dare you try and defy me once again!” His eyes were burning with anger and his black nails dug into her bare arms. “I told you I would have you and now I shall, and no one can stop me!”

Wild Fire’s eyes filled with tears of pain as her cheek stung from the blow as she struggled in his grasp, but Master Vain was strong and determined. Claspings his hand over her mouth he hauled her towards his tent and no one made a move to stop him. Wild Fire wondered desperately where Night Wind was.

Master Vain’s grip was unbreakable as he took Grace to his wagon. His mind was overwhelmed with the beauty of the dance she just performed, and he was filled with lust and rage. No girl had ever defied him before and he would make sure this one rued the day she did. Satisfied that the carnival-circus show would go on without his presence, he snickered at his cleverness. As he dragged her struggling behind him Vain related his long list of accomplishments that day

“No one will step in to rescue you today my little dragonfly. My shrew of a wife is sleeping off the drug I gave her and your big friend is busy with the black leopard who sadly, is lying sick

in her cage. Never fear, though, she will recover from the bad bit of meat I gave her. I'm not desperate enough for you that I'd risk such a valuable animal."

"Please let me go!" Grace gasped in his grasp.

"Not this time my pretty one. I'm tired of waiting for you. It will go the worse for you the more you delay!"

They reached the purple and yellow wagon that was brightly lit within. Master Vain dragged her behind him and up the three stairs. Throwing the door open and shoving her onto the floor he ordered the old woman out of the wagon. She slowly shuffled out, too old to move quickly. Vain slammed the door behind her and pulled Wild Fire up in front of him.

Wild Fire gasped in horror at what she saw. The wagon was larger on the inside than it appeared it could be on the outside and was full of implements of torture. There was a large luxurious bed covered in multi-colored silken sheets in the back. Whips of every length and type hung from the rafters of the wagon and there were ropes, leather straps, leather implements that she could not identify. Wild Fire screamed!

Whirling her around he slapped her again. "Scream if you will. I like it and no one will help you." Then he pulled her towards the center of the wagon. Grasping her arms, he tied them tightly and hoisted her arms over her head anchoring her to a hook in the wagon roof. She stood on the tips of her bleeding feet. Wild Fire found it hard to breathe in this position and could only cry, large tears streaming down her face.

Master Vain was breathing hard as he slowly walked around her as if surveying a prize. He smoothed his hair that had become messed up with all the pushing and shoving and he glared hungrily at her. He ran his gaze down her body and licked his cold lips.

"I'd like to see you get away from me this time my graceful dancer." He moved towards a shallow counter at the side of the wagon and pulled out a long-necked bottle and a small glass. Uncorking it he poured a draft of a thick, dark red liquid.

Walking around in front of her he showed her the glass, raising it in the lamplight till the light shined redly through it.

"Did you know that I am a great Sorcerer? I have learned many things in my lifetime and this..." He took a sip of the red liquid, "is one of many accomplishments. You see my Dear, this gives me a virility that will astound and amaze and pleasure you over and over again. When I drink this..." He stopped to quaff the liquid again then went on. "I will be hard for hours of long-lasting pleasure." His voice had taken on that theatrical explicit tone again. Lifting his glass, he toasted her and then emptied it. Before moving away, he grabbed her by the hair and covered her lips with his. He forced some of the liquid between her pinched lips and threw his head back and laughed. Grace spit the viscous stuff into his face.

Master Vain began to quiver with rage as he slowly wiped away the red spittle. Then he smiled and turned away. He took off his long colorful robe and shirt until he stood in just his trousers, boots, and bare chest in front of her. Then he selected a long scarf and a short whip and moved towards her. He tied the scarf around her mouth so that her screams would be muffled.

“It is a pity you’re not a bit more cooperative. We could have many hours of enjoyment without the pain.” He laughed a little and then grinned at her. “I do so enjoy the pain though, giving and taking. Let’s start by undressing you.” He reached into the laces of her bodice and ripped it open. Her bare breasts fell out exposed to glaring eyes and he stared, licking his lips. Grace cried silently and squeezed her eyes closed tightly. He started to reach forward to touch her but hesitated and turned her in her bindings so that her back was to him. She felt his body up rub up against hers as he pulled her hair aside and breathed heavily on her neck and kissed her shoulders with relish, his one hand coming around to grab her breasts. Then his other hand grasped the dragonfly wing cape and he ripped down exposing her naked back. He took a step back, raised the whip, and stopped, stunned.

Wild Fire knew what the Sorcerer was looking at. The silvery lines of wings on her back glittered in the lamplight as she hung there and now all of her secrets were exposed. Master Vain was silent for a long moment as he stared at the silver wings that revealed who she was.

“Ny-Failen!” He whispered stunned.

#

Captain Braiden watched spellbound as Grace danced. He unknowingly breathed deeply of the magical air in the big tent while he watched the show and his eyesight grew sharp and the glittering colors and fantastic beauty of the tent mesmerized him. When the beautiful Grace he remembered from Skogur skipped forward and stood directly in front of him his mouth dropped open in shock. He was stunned by the beautiful Dragonfly Dancer and looked hard making sure it truly was her who he helped escape from Skogur so many weeks ago. When she saw him a look of recognition flickered through her eyes and he was not sure it was she because she was supposed to be in Jior by now living as a Ny-Failen. Raging anger began to take hold of him as he realized somehow, she had become part of this traveling show instead, but the sweet smell of the sparkling air dulled his senses and he forgot what he was thinking about. His rage left him and wonder replaced it.

The music swelled and Captain Braiden settled down to watch the dance. He was stunned anew by Grace’s skill. The effects of the remaining dust still hung in the air continued to make his head swim. It looked as if she had real iridescent dragonfly wings that glittered as she hovered over the white-diamond sand. Captain Braiden had to shake his head, he remembered her dancing before, but this was different and he truly thought she was flying with dragonfly wings. He was confused. Seeing her like this he thought that about how wrong it seemed that she was here. Then he was entranced by her swaying breasts in the jeweled bodice, her flowing, waving arms and

undulating hips, the flash of her white thigh and slender ankle. Joy took him over when she leaped from the circle she created for her dance and the music swelled again and she danced on and on. Fear and concern filled him as he eventually spotted the small drops of red blood her bare feet left in the sand. He continued to watch her dance unable to look away, but he was also concerned for her as she was tiring. Then he was saddened, but also a little relieved when Master Vain suddenly stopped the music and ended the dance. Before he knew it, he was on his feet and was tossing gold coins at her feet. He applauded and applauded until his hands stung.

Captain Braiden had to get out of the tent and the fresh air cleared his mind. His thoughts whirled as he wondered why Grace was here with this macabre, run-down circus and not in Jior. He also wondered what happened to Night Wind. Had he tired of her? Left her? He decided to seek her out, but the circus Master had escorted her out of the big tent and Captain Braiden had taken the opposite direction. He circled trying to find her, but she was nowhere in sight. He decided to search for her in the dancer's tent and headed in that direction.

Captain Braiden was known to those in the carnival circus. When it traveled to Skoria, the Captain collected their taxes for using Skoria's roads and land. When he got there the other dancers swarmed around him recognizing him from past visits. Crowding around they pressed against him, caressed him, and ran their fingers through his wavy brown hair. He protested a little and finally, Captain Braiden gently disengaged himself from their happy greeting. As soon as he thought would not insult the other dancers, he asked about the Dragonfly Dancer.

"What do you want with her!" Darla, one of the dancers glared at him, her jealousy shining through.

"She is an old friend of mine." Captain Braiden lied. Turning on his charm, he reached forward taking Darla's hand. He held it, smiled, and said in a gentle placating tone. "I just wanted to say hello."

Darla glared and the other girls would not meet his eye. He asked again. "Where is she? Where is Grace?"

Huffing, Darla threw her long dark hair over her shoulder hesitating to answer, but before she could one of the other girls answered instead.

"Master Vain's got her. He's been after her for weeks now. Madam Maze had been able to hold him off, but she's nowhere to be found. Grace was good at avoiding him and Big Man was protected her, but now it's her turn. Vain's got her."

"Big Man? Who is he?" Captain Braiden asked them.

"Oh! He came in with her. Jobben and Clem found them both somewhere back in the Violent Mountains. Big Man had a wounded head and they brought him here for the Master to heal. We all know what that means. No healing and Grace, well...now the Master's got her."

Captain Braiden quickly guessed that “Big Man” was Night Wind, but what alarmed him was the fact that Master Vain now had Grace. Captain Braiden had glimpsed Master Vain’s purple wagon and after that, he conducted his tax collecting outside. His mouth went dry with fear for Grace thinking about her in there and if the ‘*Master’s got her*’ then Grace was in dire trouble.

“Ladies, I hate to leave you now, but I must go.” Captain Braiden quickly extricated himself from the dancer’s long arms and kisses goodbye and went to search for Master Vain’s wagon.

#

Vain backed up and stood stunned, mouth and eyes staring at Grace’s back and the beautiful intricate silver lines depicting wings on her back. His mind whirled. All this time, he had not one, but two of the Ny-Failen and he had never known. The thoughts about all the ways he had planned on taking her also streamed through his mind and he grew even harder in his trousers. The red potion he drank earlier coursed through his veins and demanded he slake his lust. Suddenly, the thought of taking one of the Ny-Failen gave him pause. It would be like cutting the horn off of a unicorn, stealing a sacred relic, plucking off the wings of a fairy, slitting the throat of the last legendary beast. Those thoughts even made him harder. He slowly gathered his wits about him and carefully laid down the whip.

Grace had been hanging there holding her breath fearing the lash and wondering what he would do with her now that he knew what she was. She was even more terrified of how he would use her. Slowly, she felt him turn her toward him and he glared at her with his black eyes shining. Her arms ached painfully where she hung and she could barely breathe. Carefully, he untied the gag and removed it from her mouth.

“You are Ny-Failen!” He whispered reverently. “What is your real name? Your Ny-Failen name?” When she shook her head and wouldn’t answer, he grabbed her by the throat and squeezed.

“Wild Fire,” she was barely able to gasp out.

“Wild Fire!” Master Vain purred then slowly, reverently caressed the outside of her breast gently raking his black nails against her soft flesh. “That is fitting.” She quivered with revulsion.

“Please, let me go!” She begged.

“Not just yet, my Wild Fire! I must figure out how best to *use* you.”

She hated the way he said her name.

“Huh!” He gasped suddenly, “And our Big Man Ny-Failen friend. What is his name?”

“No! Leave him alone!” She struggled in her bonds.

“Oh, no my dear! Did you think I have not known from the beginning he is Ny-Failen! This I know or the necklace would not keep him dumb and speechless. The animals would not be so tamed by him unless he was Ny-Failen!”

It struck Wild Fire as she realized why they did not want Night Wind to remove the necklace. It had some magic put on it by the Sorcerer that kept him submissive and took away his speech and memory. Master Vain jumped into action and untied the rope that she was strung upon and he slowly lowered her. The blood rushed back into her arms and hands and burned with relief. Wild Fire hunched into herself and covered her breasts from the staring eyes of Master Vain. When she had sufficiently recovered, she grabbed her torn dragonfly costume and covered herself up then she dove for the door. He was too quick for her and had expected her to do something like that. Vain grabbed her from behind and wrapped his arms around her, pushing his groin against her bottom and holding her tightly. He rested his forehead on her back and clutched her hard.

“This was the position I had planned on taking you in and I soon will my lovely Ny-Failen dancer, but I suddenly realized that one like you needs special treatment. I want to keep your lovely body unmarred and unspoiled, but I will savor every inch of you. I will worship you like the goddess you are!” He petted her and ran his hands over the lines on her back while she struggled under his unwanted caresses. Just as he reached under her skirts and ran his hands over her thigh a loud banging on the door of the wagon brought him to a halt.

Wild Fire lunged and gasped to scream, but Master Vain was too fast. He clamped his hand tightly over her mouth and stopped her before any sound could come out. Then he struggled with her until he got her gagged and tied again while someone banged at the door.

“Master Vain? It is Captain Braiden from Skoria. Are you in there?” Vain’s eyes gleamed as Wild Fire’s eyes grew wide with recognition.

“Ah, it is the handsome, young, Captain!”

He started as she closed her eyes and gasped under her gag.

“Do you know him?” He asked suspiciously. Wild Fire violently shook her head no.

“So, you *do* know him.” Wild Fire began to cry again. “If you make a sound or try to escape, I’ll kill him!” Vain warned and she stilled. Getting up quickly he grabbed his colorful robe and then yanked a black curtain across the short length of the wagon. Donning his robe, smoothing his mussed hair back, and calming his features, he answered the door.

“Captain Braiden! How *good* it is to see you!” Master Vain said gently. “I have no time for taxes right now. Can I ask you to return at another time? Perhaps tomorrow morning after you’ve helped yourself in the whore’s tent? Tell them it is at my expense, my gift to you!”

“Very well, I will return in the morning. We will discuss your taxes then.” Captain Braiden tried to look behind Vain into the wagon, but Vain moved to block his view, but Captain Braiden spotted a length of iridescent material laying on the floor and knew that Grace was within.

“See you in the morning Master Vain.” Captain Braiden said cheerfully, turned and left, waving and yelling behind his shoulder, “Good night to you Sir!”

Wild Fire’s eyes leaked silent tears as Master Vain returned and the sound of Captain Braiden’s footsteps retreated.

“Well done, my Dear. Perhaps you have a special affection for our young Captain Braiden. Now, I am done with delays, done with waiting and I am going to have you now if it is the last thing I ever do!” He lifted her and carried her kicking and struggling to the luxurious bed and bent her over the edge. Wild Fire buried her face in the satin sheets and screamed through her gag.

Master Vain laughed at her muffled screams as he flung off his robe and then fumbled around behind her ripping away a layer of her skirts and then ripped off her undergarments. He took a moment to caress her round bottom and admire her soft skin.

“I have dreamed of doing this to you night after night!” He growled. Then there was more fumbling as he pulled out his hard erection. Just as he was about to impale her, a loud shout rang out just outside the wagon.

“Fire! Fire!”

Fire was the one thing that Master Vain feared knowing well that it could spread and quickly burn everything up and put him out of business. He howled with rage and swore violently, jumping up. He left Wild Fire where she was, scrambled to close his trousers, and grabbed his robe. Then he turned and rushed out of the wagon.

Wild Fire struggled with her ties. The smell of burning refuse just reached her and she tried getting to her feet. She was still gagged, her arms tied behind her back and she was half-naked her skirts torn and barely covering her. Just as she was heading for the door it flew open and in stepped *Captain Braiden!*

“Quickly! That fire won’t keep him away for long as soon as he finds out nothing valuable is on fire.” Captain Braiden cut her gag his small knife.

“Captain Braiden you must go! He’ll kill you if he catches you.” Wild Fire gasped as he sawed at the leather straps tying her arms behind her back.

“Hurry!” The leather fell away. He grabbed her torn cape and helped her cover her bare breasts. They rushed out of the wagon and disappeared into the night.

Captain Braiden stopped once they reached the safety of the forest. He took his coat off and wrapped it around Wild Fire's shoulders. His warmth enveloped her. Off in the distance through the trees, they saw the glow of the refuse fire Captain Braiden had set and listened to the yells of the workers as they tried to put it out.

Suddenly, Captain Braiden grabbed her and held Wild Fire in a relieved embrace. Wild Fire stood stiff and frozen in his arms for a long moment before he finally released her and held her at arm's length.

"Thank the Creator I got you out of there! Did he..." He exhaled not able to go on. "Did Master Vain hurt you?"

"No! Your fire saved me just in time." Completely undone, she sobbed and dropped her head to his shoulder. Captain Braiden held her while she cried and then he gently disengaged his arms from her.

"Come, my horse is down in a gully just ahead. We've got to get you far away from here."

"I can't leave! Night Wind is still back there. They put this horrible necklace on him that cast a spell over him. He has no memory and can't speak. Captain Braiden, I can't leave him! I have to go back! Vain will kill him!"

"Grace, if Vain gets his hands on you again, I might not be able to stop him the next time. I hate to say it, but for your safety, we must go now!"

Wild Fire shook her head violently her heart strained back towards the carnival circus where she knew Night Wind still tended to a sick leopard.

"I can't leave him!"

"The risk to you is too great! Come with *me*! Night Wind will endure. He'll have to fend for himself. I will take better care of you!"

Wild Fire took a step back and shook her head. "No. I'm sorry Captain Braiden! I will not leave him! Thank you for what you did for me, but I must find a way to get that necklace off of him and set him free!"

"If you go back there you will never be free again!"

"I don't understand you! Why won't you help him? Do you hate him so much that you could leave him here? There must be a way!" Wild Fire fretted and turned towards the glow of the distant fire that was quickly growing smaller.

Captain Braiden walked up to her and put his arms around her. Speaking quietly in her ear he exhaled. "Alright Grace, I will help you."

“My name is Wild Fire!” She said firmly.

#

Big Man sat next to the black leopard and stroked her head, calming the ailing beast. He made purring noises soothing the savage beast. Earlier he had examined the bad meat that someone had given the big cat and he mixed special herbs he gathered into milk and held the bowl while the leopard lapped it up. Big Man feared for his beautiful friend. His hand slid over her sleek fur and Big Man noticed that the leopard had a jeweled collar much like the one around his neck. He stared at the collar and fingered his necklace which grew warm to the touch.

As he sat there, he heard the dragonfly dancer’s music echo in the distance and he wanted to go and watch her, but the leopard rested her massive head in Big Man’s lap and closed her eyes finally falling asleep. Big Man’s large hand caressed the beast’s soft fur and he contented himself with listening to the music and letting it lull him. He retreated into his memories of the night before when he had taken the dragonfly dancer into the supply wagon where he slept and had made love to her. He recalled her kisses and her sweet smell. He drifted off to sleep the music going on and on in his dream of flying and soaring with the winds.

Suddenly, someone was shouting fire! The big cat jumped, startled to its feet, and let out a fearful yowl. Big Man left his friend and went to help carry water to the fire. Numerous carnival-circus workers formed a line and threw water on the refuse before it could spread to the other wagons or one of the tents. The air was filled with acrid smoke. Someone had stacked a bunch of branches on the dung and refuse and intentionally lit it on fire. Master Vain was there shouting orders and directing the workers. Each bucket of water thrown on the fire caused it to smoke worse and the stench was horrible. The water ran through the refuse and created muddy sewage. Everyone believed that the fire would be put out quickly, but it kept burning and seemed to worsen the more water that was put on it. The only good thing was that it was contained in that one spot but it threatened to spread to the dry grass they camped on.

Master Vain was fuming inwardly that the town’s people would throw them out for the smell and mess when he remembered Wild Fire tied up and gaged in his wagon.

Quickly he grabbed Clem and ordered him to finish dealing with the fire. Then he ran back to his wagon and saw the door swinging open on its hinges. The old woman was sound asleep next to the dying campfire and he leaped up the stairs to find that it was empty. The Ny-Failen girl was gone! He screamed with outrage.

Leaping down from his wagon he went toward the old woman who was just now roused from all the commotion. Vain stomped toward her, pulled her to her feet, and slapped her!

“Where is the girl! The Dragonfly Dancer?” The woman shook her head that she didn’t know and ducked underneath the next blow. Vain shoved her to the ground and turned away. He

knew where one Ny-Failen was and surmised that they would be together. He stormed off in the direction of the leopard cage.

Big Man worked to put out the fire. Through the smoke and panic but then he looked up and spotted the Dragonfly Dancer standing at the edge of the woods. He could just make out her form in the space between two wagons. She was smiling and beckoning to him. Her long slim hand motioned for him to follow her. It was hard to see through the smoke and before she could disappear, he left the confusion. Walking around everyone he slipped through the two wagons and saw her wispy iridescent skirt disappearing into the forest. Big Man followed. The Dragonfly Dancer was almost bare to the waist and her soft skin showed through her costume. He wanted her. Following he sped up, tried calling but no words would come from his mouth. He growled in frustration. The memories of her soft breasts and firm legs taunted him and his desire for her grew.

Wild Fire raced away looking back frequently to make sure Night Wind followed. As soon as they were a good distance away, she stopped and waited for him to catch her. Finally, he was there, panting and reaching for her. Wild Fire stepped into his arms and he kissed her hungrily. His hands roamed over her body and he pulled at the torn material barely covering her breasts. He was breathing hard and pulling her down to the green grasses fumbling at the ties of his pants.

She was speaking quickly telling him things, begging him to run away with her. Interspersed between gasps and his kisses, she was pushing and pulling him away and pleading with him, but Night Wind was too filled with desire for her. He just wanted to bury himself inside her.

Wild Fire was not strong enough to push Night Wind off of her and she tried explaining the need to fly. They had to get out of there before Master Vain discovered they were both gone. He wouldn't listen. He was too intent upon taking her right there on the forest floor. Wrestling an arm free, she slapped him across the face as hard as she could.

Night Wind stopped and looked at her dismayed. Anger drew his face into a frown and he looked at her not understanding why she struck him. Then she gave him a sad smile and her musical voice soothed the savage lust in him.

"Night Wind, you can have me, my body, everything, but you must give me something in return. I want a...a gift. Will you give something to me and then you can make love to me. I'll do anything you want."

Rising to his knees, Night Wind looked around and realized he had no gift for her. His body ached painfully and demanded release. His hands longed to touch her again, but she was moving away from him. Slowly inching back just a little from where he laid her in the grass. He shrugged his shoulders and held his hands out as if to say he had nothing to give.

“You will give something now?” She licked her lips seductively and moved her hips suggestively. “I know. Give me your necklace. Give me the necklace or I will not make love with you.” To add emphasis, she caressed his hardness just enough to make him groan. She loosened him from his breeches until his shaft was out, pulsing and ready for her.

He was conflicted. Clem told him never to take the necklace off and it was his only, most valuable possession, but the Dragonfly Dancer brushed her hand over his aching shaft again, and he growled wanting her so badly it hurt. Clem was mean to him and beat him, and the Dragonfly Dancer was under him slowly pulling her skirt up and revealing her firm thighs. Higher the material rose and enticed him beyond denial. He would give *anything*.

Night Wind could not resist her. He reached up and began to lift the necklace from his chest. The hot metal burned his fingers as he quickly pulled it up and over his head, but his burning desire for the Dragonfly Dancer was greater. His eyes were trained upon the silky curls taunting him from between her legs.

A great searing pain like a vicious blow to the head hit Night Wind as he lifted the necklace off his head. As soon as it was off a veil lifted from his mind and he finally saw clearly. Below him, his wife Wild Fire lay half-naked and revealed to him. Her face was bruised from where someone had hit her and she had scratches on her soft breasts. Her eyes shone with unshed tears and she looked hopefully at him and whispered his name, questioning. Night Wind reached for her and shapeshifted at the same time. He lifted her onto his swollen shaft and impaled her. His wings lifted them and he felt her shrug and her wings unfurled and he plunged and bucked into her.

He knew her! It was Wild Fire his wife and he was loving her again. He had viciously cast the horrid necklace away and embraced his wife. He plunged into her over and over again until he finally burst. As she reached her pleasure Night Wind threw his head back and roared with fury.

Releasing Wild Fire, he looked around and the memories of the past few weeks swamped his mind in a painful rush. Grabbing his head fighting the pain, he saw everything from the moment the horrid necklace ensorcelled him into coming to the circus, the sick animals, the disgusting labor, the beatings, and Wild Fire dancing in front of an audience of humans. He remembered making love with his wife in the small, enclosed wagon. In the distant recesses of his mind, the winds began to howl.

As the magnitude of what she had been put through lashed his heart like one of Clem’s beatings, Night Wind set his wife down and staggered back. He knew everything and he knew how he had failed to protect her, he had failed. Failed her!

“Night Wind!” Wild Fire gasped afraid, “Come back to me!”

Looking at her with clear eyes for the first time Night Wind finally spoke.

“Stay here!” With one hand he yanked his laces closed and he stalked over to where he had thrown the necklace. Then he bent at the knees and burst into the air. With a flash of blinding light, he was gone!

Night Wind flew high into the air over the carnival circus. The necklace was clenched in his hand and it grew hot. He was intent on finding the cause of all his misery. He flew over the heads of the circus performers. They looked up and gasped in terror and awe. Above, a storm was gathering its strength and churned dark green and black, crackling with lightning, reflecting the fury in Night Wind’s eyes. Swelling and growing in speed, the winds gathered above and seemed to wait.

The fire had been put out and Night Wind searched for Vain. He flew directly to his wagon and dropped to his feet. Vain had the old woman by the front of her dress and was taking his frustration out on her face with the back of his hand.

“*Vaaaaiiiiinnne!*” Night Wind roared with rage and fury and charged. He was blinded by blood-red anger and wanted revenge for everything Vain had put Wild Fire through.

Vain looked up and sheer terror drained his face of all color as the huge, winged Ny-Failen landed in front of him looking for vengeance. A gust of wind lifted the wagon behind him and slammed it down into the ground. Vain’s head rang with the echo of the concussion and he barely heard the splinter of the wood as the wagon exploded behind him. Vain staggered and then he ran. Night Wind stomped after him roaring his name. His wings rested on his back and he went after Vain on foot, fury coursing through his veins and his heart pounding in his chest. Vain’s footfalls crunched over the dead leaves of the forest floor and Night Wind pursued him letting him get just ahead of him. Overhead the storm clouds churned around and around in response to his anger.

Vain’s mind reeled as he ran and ran until he finally reached where the other wagons were circled. All the performers were gathered there and they jumped when Vain came crashing into the clearing gasping for air.

“Quickly! To arms!”

Vain shouted breathlessly for the performers to gather weapons and protect him. He staggered to the edge of the smoldering dung pile and whirled back looking for Night Wind, but he didn’t look up. Night Wind had taken to the sky and now dropped down in front of Vain. Then he attacked. Faster than lightning, Night Wind grabbed Vain by the throat and wrapped the necklace around his neck. He tightened it around his large fist and began to slowly choke the life out of Vain. Vain’s face turned red, his eyes bulged, and he wriggled in Night Wind’s grip. His air was cut off and he puffed and gasped trying to breathe. Spittle flew from his lips. Night Wind lifted Vain from his feet while he tightened his grip. From the side of the clearing, Madame Maze screamed and screamed trying to get someone to help Vain. Night Wind did not spare her a glance he only continued to squeeze the jeweled noose. No one in the clearing helped Vain, they all

watched and some slowly stepped back as the furious Ny-Failen exacted his revenge upon the author of his misery and Wild Fire's torture.

Night Wind stopped just short of killing Vain. Bending at the knees he burst up into the sky and hauled Vain up with the necklace wrapped around his throat. Vain's eyes bulged alarmingly from the strangling necklace as he was flown into the sky kicking and making choking screams. Night Wind was roaring his fury and the skies were swelling and it began to rain. The thunder crashed as the lightning streaked through the sky in the swirling vortex above. They flew higher until they were drenched by the chill rain. Then he turned in the sky and Night Wind streaked toward the ground as fast as a lightning strike. They hit the ground and Night Wind went to one knee as he slammed Vain into the ground. At the same time, he loosened his grip on the necklace and Vain struggled to gasp for air.

Screeching for help Vain thrashed. His back and legs were broken, and he couldn't move. Night Wind was not done with him yet and he stood up and straddled Vain's body as blood leaked out of his mouth. The rain was pattering lightly around them promising a deluge to come.

Chest heaving, Night Wind looked around at all the performers standing frozen, staring at the angry Ny-Failen reaping his justice. They barely noticed when Wild Fire suddenly appeared in the sky above them. The iridescent material flowed about her slim body as the wind tugged at the torn costume.

"Night Wind, *please* let us be gone from here!" She pleaded from overhead.

"Wild Fire!" Night Wind cried out to her as if he were in pain. The fury had not left his handsome features and his long black hair streamed in the wind. His bare chest heaved pulling great gasps into his lungs. The storm gathering above continued to boil and the clouds began to churn in a circular motion, building in strength threatening everyone with Night Wind's wrath.

Beneath Night Wind's feet, Vain struggled to breathe as blood splattered out of his mouth. His eyes lit with fear and rolled in his head as he sought out anyone to help him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Clem creeping up behind the Night Wind with a loaded crossbow.

Wild Fire screamed as she saw Clem at the same moment and Night Wind whirled. He saw too but before Clem could lose the bolt, Night Wind pointed and a mighty gust of wind, like a giant grasping hand, blew Clem backward where he slammed into a large tree, his head and body pulverized by the impact. He slid to the ground a broken heap.

The other performers screamed and some ran. Gusts of wind hurtled them through the air and even carried some off. Others backed slowly away not wanting to suffer that fate. Some few watched as Night Wind bent, picked Vain up like a rag doll, and held him up swaying on his broken legs. Night Wind roared in fury and looked around. He found Madam Maze glaring at him from malevolent eyes. She screamed as Night Wind took Vain by one wrist and pulled. His arm

dislocated from its socket and a horrified painful scream tore from Vain's bloody maw. Madam Maze's hands flew to her mouth in terror but she could not look away. She began screaming for help, but none came. She watched as Night Wind wrapped his arm around Vain's neck and he switched his grip to grab the other arm. He yanked hard and the other arm dislocated from Vain's shoulder making him scream. Night Wind was smiling. Vain screamed again and again until finally Night Wind snapped his neck and let the body fall into the dung pile. Then he shot into the air causing the wind to swirl, fanning his long raven hair and his white wings shone starkly visible against the black swirling storm clouds.

Wild Fire was terrified by the angry wind that Night Wind was creating in his rage. Her wings beat strong but the rain was pelting her. She knew she couldn't stop Night Wind from taking his vengeance upon everyone who had caused them so much pain and sorrow these last few weeks. Suddenly, she remembered Captain Braiden and she dove down, skimming the trees, she looked for him. Chaos had taken over and the sounds of the howling wind drowned out the sound of the screaming animals and a few shouting humans running for their lives. A huge tree ripped from the ground in front of her as a gust of wind uprooted it and flung it into the sky. Wild Fire swerved careening away. As she did, she spotted movement and saw Captain Braiden pulling his frightened horse by the bridle, trying to get away from the havoc being wrought on the carnival circus. She streaked toward him and grabbed him under the arms. Captain Braiden dropped the horse's reins as she lifted him and flew him away.

#

The maelstrom whirled above the carnival-circus camp tearing everything apart. The wind overturned every wagon and spilled every cage. It picked up the big red and white tent and tossed it high into the air as if it were a small handkerchief. The seating stands were peeled apart, and the planks sent flying into splinters.

Animals leaped free from their cages and escaped into the forest. From his vantage point Night Wind saw the black leopard perched atop its cage looking around confused. He landed in front of her and swiftly lifted the jeweled collar from her neck. Instantly, the black beast began to shimmer and fade. The black of her coat shifted and lightened to purest white with ebony spots and a beautiful snow leopard stood looking up at him. She rose placing her large paws upon his shoulders and licked his face gratefully. She nuzzled him and he hugged her back stroking her white spotted fur. Landing back on all four massive paws, she nodded her thanks to Night Wind before she pranced away and vanished into the woods.

Once the circus was completely obliterated and all the people left were either dead or just barely escaped with their lives, the winds began to subside and reveal the destruction it wrought. All the women forced into prostitution by Vain fled. All but a couple of the little people managed to escape, but most of the dancers lay in broken poses among the wreckage. Madame Maze hung impaled by a heavy splinter of wood that the tornado had speared through her and pinned her to a

thick tree. Night Wind let the winds die and blow naturally. The burned, smelly remains of the dung pile swelled with water and oozed over Master Vain's body covering it completely. The rain washed away all the rest of the filth.

Night Wind, his fury spent, allowed the winds to subside when the entirety of Master Vain's Carnival-Circus Extraordinary Extravaganza was decimated. Then he went to find his wife.

#

Wild Fire had flown Captain Braiden to as safe a spot as she could find and together, they waited out the storm. When the wind died and the skies finally cleared, she shot up into the sunshine and went to search for Night Wind. She found him hovering in the skies above the spot where Vain's body now lay buried in dung. Night Wind's chest was heaving but his anger was deflated and now he just stared into nothingness.

Approaching cautiously, Wild Fire did not know what she would find. If any permanent damage had been done to Night Wind, she did not know what she was going to do. When he looked up and saw her slowly approaching, the sun making her white wings glow brilliantly, he streaked toward her. They clashed in the sky, their arms clutching, and his lips met hers in a long, passionate kiss that revealed how much he had missed her. He pulled her up into the sky above the thick white clouds and they disappeared together.

#

Captain Braiden waited for Grace to return, but when she did not, he decided he would go look for his horse and try and make it back to his home in Skoria. He shook his head as he picked his way through the torn, flattened remains of the forest and wondered at Night Wind's power over the wind. He knew the sight of Wild Fire dancing was burned into his mind forever and he ached for what he could not have. He had also glimpsed sight of her beautiful body beneath her torn costume and he stopped in his tracks. His body stirred at the thought of her. Stopping his thoughts from going any further, he resolved only to think of Wild Fire as Night Wind's wife, and one of the Ny-Failen, so very far, far beyond his reach.

#

Night Wind and Wild Fire flew northwest over the vast mountain range of the Violent Mountains. The thick evergreen foliage passed swiftly under them and soon the tall walls and towers of Jior appeared in the distance. Night Wind had been through a lot after what happened at the carnival circus. His shame over what they had been through was like a hot brand in his gut, but he was determined that it should not ruin the love between him and Wild Fire and their future together.

It was mid-day when they landed in front of Castle Jior. They had no clothes except ragged tatters, no belongings no money, and nothing to offer anyone in Jior. All they had were the wings on their backs.

Wings revealed, pulsing in the sunlight, they stood together outside the closed gates and waited to see if they would be allowed in. Night Wind clutched Wild Fire against his body shielding her from the prying eyes of soldiers dressed in black and silver.

Suddenly, there was a commotion on the other side of the gates, and it was not long until they saw what they had been waiting for. Coming toward them, dressed all in black, massive white wings extended, silver crown shining upon his head, was the King of Jior.

The gates opened. The King walked forward, hand over his heart, and tipped his head greeting them. He only said one word.

“Welcome.”

Night Wind took Wild Fire’s hand and they went inside.

The End