

“I called her ‘Nan,’” Sig told Allee as he carved a sewing needle out of bone for the girl sleeping at their feet, nearer the fire. “The Wiseheart, back in the Slum. She was like that to me.”

Allee smiled at him, encouraging, “She was special to you.”

Sig polished the needle, started carving another. “Told me her real name, too. Lena. Said it had been decades since she’d spoken it, let alone heard it spoken from someone else. She made medicine; that was part of her position, and she was teaching me. Not just formulas and recipes, but manners too. For different situations, different people. Always said that it was half of the medicine itself...one’s manner.”

“I like that. She sounds wonderful.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Gone now, though. Rungspore. A real bad death, but she didn’t die badly.”

“I’m sorry, Sig.”

There was something in her voice that compelled him to continue. “Nan gave blessings and such to warriors, craftsmen, adventurers, new parents, Roacher victims, Husks...all types. There were loads of them. She had ancient books of them. Poems and chants. Songs. Ceremonies. Prayers, even.”

“Did they work?”

“They were all shit.”

Allee frowned slightly at him, but still listened; a quiet, gentle attention that he seemed to crave the more she gave it. He needed to explain himself. “The extra stuff about it – the nonsense and the made up deities and powers – that’s all shit. That ain’t the real part. The real part is how it makes you feel. Better. Braver. Like you can do something; like you are worthy enough. Maybe that’s all it really is.”

Her smile widened. Took on an impishness that, so far, he’d only really seen in another face.

Voe really was a bad influence.

“What?” he prompted; half annoyed, half amused.

“You can say what you like, but you love the singing and the stories just as much as the rest of us, Sig. You don’t fool me.”