

“GRIM HARVEST”

A Terah Short Story by Chaaya Chandra

Adido is small mountain town in the Vharkil range. It has a few terraced farms on the outskirts, but most of its economy is based on mining. In addition to a plentiful supply of iron, the area is also known for its beautiful spessartite garnet. As a blessing and a curse for the wolf nation of Vharkylia it's also one of the few places on Terah where you can find vanadium, which is used in some powerful magic spells. The surrounding human nations covet that and the other valuable minerals and ores of the region. War, usually hidden behind moral or superstitious overtones, is always a possibility. The wolf pack garrison there isn't very large, but it is active.

A pleasant breeze parted the hair of the small copper-colored vykati wielding a short wood practice sword. An adult, most likely her mother since the coloration was exactly the same, admonished her. “Dodging again, my little fox?” The youngster couldn't be more than ten years old but seemed to be doing surprisingly well. It was pretty clear the adult was holding back considerably. Her movements seemed restrained, although not slow.

The older wolf stepped back briefly before raising her practice sword high above her head and slicing down. The pup dodged the strike easily but tripped as her mother maneuvered the sword behind her legs and swept forward.

The pup landed hard on her tail and let out a subdued complaint. “Oof. Ouch.”

Her mother quickly dropped her sword and stepped forward with her hand extended. “You ok, little Sajani?” She didn't sound very worried.

The youngster took the proffered hand, rose, and said quietly. “Yes, mother.”

The adult started dusting off the leather jerkin her daughter was wearing over a green dress. “I left a huge opening for you. You could have used it as an opportunity to...” Church bells began ringing, not far from where the two were standing. The mother looked at her daughter with a deeply worried expression, but little Sajani didn't see it or hear the rest of the patient instruction intended as a distraction.

Today was the day. Her mother hadn't mentioned it. The bells this time were gathering people for the church service celebrating Tukath and Mirna, the Aspects of the onion harvest. It was too early to be picking onions in this mountain town, but other places in the country would be deep in harvest season by now.

A year ago, the bells rung for a very different reason and the celebration had been forgotten.

Sajani remembered sitting before the small coffin and weeping. The grisly details of the accident that killed her friend kept replaying over and over in

her mind and she couldn't seem to stop them. She could feel the warmth of her mother's hug on one side and the comforting presence of her friend Fita on the other, but it wasn't nearly enough to stop the memory. In her mind, the blood on the mountain flowers was still fresh and nothing could dry it or the tears that flowed from her.

"Sajani! My little fox! Don't worry. We won't be going to church today. I wanted to distract you. I'd hoped to get by today without the memory..." The child could see the worry on her mother's face. The world around her was coming back into focus. She was safe in her front yard and the memory of the improvised bout came back to her, replacing the dark moment and giving her something solid on which to concentrate. Her mother's hug was comforting and her voice, while showing a goodly portion of motherly worry was an anchor that held her in the present time.

"Must have been quite the fall," the postman, Mr. Valtise said with concern. Sajani looked over and saw the short stocky vykati with blue metallic fur and short black hair looking at the pair. "The little one going to be okay?"

Her mother gave her a reassuring look and Sajani nodded to her.

"Oh yes, Mr. Valtise." Her mother rose and started walking to the mailbox. "It'd take more than one small slip to damage my brave little fox. Isn't today a postal holiday? The military recognizes it. I gave my soldiers..."

"Military orders, Mrs. Adida," the postman said urgently. "I'll still get the day off but had to bring this over before I head to the church service."

Mr. Valtise handed the letter over quickly, turned and began a slow jog in the direction of the church bells, which were still ringing. Sajani wondered why he didn't ask if they were coming or invite them to walk with him. It was what most adults would have done.

The breeze grew faster and warmer as her mother quickly opened the letter and started reading it. She returned slowly to her daughter. Sajani ran to greet her. The older wolf seemed much more distracted than usual. Military orders arrived all the time and didn't usually require this much attention. "What is it mother?"

The voice that answered sounded distant and almost like there was pain behind it. "I'm going to Altaza. The pack is sending me to Altaza."

That meant nothing to the pup. "Where's that? Will I like it there?"

"They don't send families to Altaza. It's not a sa... It's not a place for a young pup, even one as brave as you."

Not with her mother? Was that even allowed? Take her mother away from her? What of her fencing lessons and the bedtime stories? Sure, she knew her father would read to her and even give her some fencing lessons, he did that all the time when mother was "on assignment" (whatever that meant), but it always seemed to mean a little more to her when it was done by her mother "How long will you be gone? Will it be like the last time you were away? Will you be back in time for my birthday?"

There was a long pause. “Officially, it’s for two years, but it can be longer if they need me.”

Sajani clasped her mother in a tight hug. Longer if they needed her? What was that supposed to mean? Why would the pack take her mother from her like that? What could she do to convince them to let her stay? “I don’t want you to leave mother! Don’t leave. Please don’t leave!” Yanth had left her. A year ago Yanth left. He was buried now. That’s what happened when people left. You never saw them again.

Her mother’s voice was calm and quiet. “I’ll be back. I promise. I could never leave my little fox!” The two wept on each other and held each other tightly.

In the distance, the church bells quieted. Officially, as their ringing died out, spring ended, and the summer harvest was to begin.