

"Dragon guts!" Ava grumbled as Clara hummed at the stovetop. Clara's cooking experiments were legend, both for the great outcomes and the horrible ones. You never knew which you were going to get.

"Don't curse," Clara gently chided her friend. Ava was usually the quiet one, but when you got to know, Ava could be very talkative. When it was just Clara and Ava, they could talk all day or just enjoy each other's presence silently.

"You have no idea what kind of day it's been and now you're experimenting in the kitchen. It's completely okay to curse. A nice standard meal would be great today instead of playing a game of chance." Ava hung up her bag and duster coat on the coat rack, brushing off stray sand as best she could. She entered the kitchen with a sigh.

"It's not that bad. I think you'll like it." Clara didn't stress over Ava's complaints. It took a lot of failures to make a great recipe, that's how the world worked. No use being upset when people complain about failures. It just helped her figure out what to do the next time. Sometimes she even got it right the first time.

"After dealing with a broken water main, the stuck-up Hunter's guild again, and a slurry of sudden emergencies around town – I just wanted something I could count on when I came home," Ava explained. Her work in the town maintenance was often a game of not only fixing things but juggling the politics of all the other sections of the town between each other.

"What was wrong with the Hunter's this time?" Clara asked as she took the dish out of the oven. It smelled okay, looked right. Ava was worrying over nothing.

“Some kind of big announcement tonight in the town square and they want to be front and center and not happy that we won’t change the normal setup.” Ava collapsed into the dining room chair and rested her head in her hands. “When we said no, they started trying to do the changes themselves and we had to call in the town security to stop them. Then they tried to claim it was their Hunter rights and a big shouting match in the middle of the street occurred. Well, more of a shout down as they did all the shouting and wouldn’t hear anything anyone said, regardless of the volume we spoke.”

Clara set the dish on the table next to the already prepared plates and forks. She nodded in agreement as she scooped up the new casserole onto the plates. “Sounds exhausting.”

Ava accepted the plate and poked at the food dubiously with her fork. “It was. And it seems like everyone else decided that if the Hunter’s could make a big fuss, they should too. I haven’t seen so many work orders arrive in ages.”

Clara patted her on the back in sympathy before sitting in her own chair. “Grace?” Ava sighed but pulled her hands up. They both clapped twice over the food and chanted, “Thanks be to Resparta.”

Excited, Clara took a bite of her new recipe. She froze, then scrambled for her napkin to spit it back out. Ava knew better than trying it first and chuckled at her friend. Clara grasped her drink, gulping it to wash the taste out of her mouth.

“No!” Clara wailed. “It looks great! It smells great! What did I do wrong? Was there not enough salt to offset the sugar? It’s like vomited candy.”

Ava shook her head. “Maybe it’s because chocolate should not be combined with vegetables – ever.”

“But chocolate is awesome! It goes with fruit, and even chicken! Why can’t it go with vegetables?” Clara mourned the loss perfection of the vegetable chocolate casserole.

Ava prodded her in the side. “Come on. Let’s see what the tavern has. You can clean this up later.” Clara sighed and made sure the stovetop was turned off before joining Ava at the coat rack. Slinging her own dust jacket on she followed her friend out into town.

The streets were a bit more crowded than normal and they slowed down before they could reach the main plaza. “Ah. I forgot about the big announcement tonight. That won’t be for an hour but it looks like everyone’s already out. It’s going to be a pain to get to the tavern. Let’s go the long route around.”

Clara nodded and skipped along as they turned around to go back a few blocks and then looped around the central plaza. The tavern was packed, but the staff knew them well. It wasn’t the first time Clara’s creation hadn’t worked out and they needed a meal on the fly. They got their meal to go and headed back towards the plaza.

“Any idea what it’s about?” Clara asked her friend between bites of the cactus chips she snacked on as they approached the crowded part of the street. Everyone was told of the announcement to be made tonight, but it wasn’t mandatory to attend. Clara hadn’t planned to before, but Ava suggested they check it out on their way home.

“No clue. It’s territory level and they don’t really give out many details,” Ava responded between her own bites of chips.

Clara hummed again as they squeezed through a few groups and found their own place to stand near the edge of the plaza. The two friends didn't talk a lot while they ate their dinner and watched everyone else. The town didn't seem any different than normal.

Same groups, same stories being told, same little quarrels here and there.

The loudspeaker device flickered on. There were the standard three puffs of air to test it was working and warn people the speech was about to begin. A voice she didn't recognize started to read an announcement in a very sterilized manner. It was really hard to focus in on until the taboo word came through loud and clear.

"... retiring at the end of the season..." the voice continued to drone on, but Clara wasn't really paying attention. From the roar of the crowd, not many others were listening until the end. Retiring was not a word anyone used. Even when you stopped working and lived off the younger generations, they never called it retiring. Only the Gods used that term for when they were tired of the constant wars and left the desert land for their own. And the only reason the whole town would be called for a retiring announcement is if their own God of the territory was retiring.

This was bad. When a God retired, the territory was unclaimed. Any God could come in and take over – and many will try. With battles fought until one came out victorious. It didn't matter who did. The land and the people in the territory were always devastated by the time victory was found. No one ever survived completely. There was always some kind of damage. And if you wanted to leave to preserve your life, you left your home and land behind for anyone to take it as they pleased.

“Clara!” Ava’s voice finally penetrated Clara’s distressed thoughts. Her friend was tugging at her arm to get her attention. The last bit of their dinner was on the ground, dropped when the shock of the announcement hit.

“Clara! Come on. Snap out of it.” Clara focused on Ava’s face, and the relieved sigh that crossed her friend’s lips. Ava must not have taken it so badly. Ava’s mother had no family and passed away several years ago. Clara was her only real relationship. But Clara had a large family in the territory. They had a family farm in the lands, businesses in the main city, and a lot of lives to be responsible for. Clara worked in the town storehouse to get more experience so she could help her own family in the city later.

“Let’s get home and out of all this chaos,” Ava suggested, pulling Clara along. The people around them were shouting at each other, a few hunched down and crying. Others rushed from the plaza to spread the news or take care of their own affairs. The streets were horrible to navigate through. More and more townsfolk came out of their homes to find out what the fuss was about. Then they joined in and made more chaos as the news of the God’s future retirement hit.

“The storehouse!” Clara yelled at Ava over the babbling crowds. Ava nodded and turned towards the warehouse right next to the plaza. The street entrance was as busy as the rest of the streets, but the employee entrance down the side alley was clear. Clara swiped her gem on the entry door lock, and it allowed them to enter.

The quiet, once the door was closed, was relieving. The two just stood and breathed for a bit. “You okay?” Ava asked.

“Not really. It’s been over a hundred years since the last territory war. A lot of people are going to die. Our family!” Clara was getting shrill. Ava wasn’t blood related, but her best friend had been a part of her family for so long they were as good as sisters. All her relatives treated Ava like family. Why was this not affecting Ava the same way?

Ava simply hugged Clara, clutching her back through Clara’s dark curls. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

Clara hugged back as her thoughts whirled. Her family farm had the biggest oasis and controlled a lot of the water used in the territory. It was a prime target for any war. And the businesses in the capital – those were all at risk while other gods came to try and claim the city for their own. Even if they could abandon the city, no one would give up the farm. It was their home.

“What are you doing back here Thompson? You don’t have a shift until tomorrow.”

Clara’s boss broke their hug up as Clara took a deep breath to help her stay calm.

“Did you hear the news?” Clara asked back.

“I know the whole town’s going crazy over it. I’m glad the shutters are down out front. That’s a whole lot of noise and a few have tried to come in, even if they know better. We’re never open after supper.”

“Resparta’s retiring,” Ava bluntly stated. Clara’s boss jerked back, physically hit by that simple announcement.

“What? No.” Clara’s boss shook his head slowly, not wanting to trust the information.

“Truth. I didn’t catch the details; the crowd went insane. But they said he’s going to leave,” Clara confirmed.

“Crud,” boss swore. His whole body shook as he straightened up. “That’s going to be a mess. Thanks for coming in Clara – we’re going to need to be ready for tomorrow. Everyone’s going to panic and want more supplies than they are allotted. And they’ll all get as much as they can, which is going to wipe us out as we’re not used to everyone getting their allotment all at once.”

Her boss started muttering as he walked back towards his office. Clara shook her head. He only thought of work. One of the reasons her family liked him. It was enough to send her to train here during her time away from the family. All her family took apprenticeships outside of the family business to gain experience and independence.

“Thompson! Head out to the hunter’s guild to hire some security. We’ll take whoever can come right now and we’ll work out shifts for them later. Have them bill the storehouse directly,” Clara sighed after hearing her boss’s call.

But the instructions helped. She could focus on her task and not the overwhelming feeling of doom the announcement had given. It was too big for her. She couldn’t think of it.

Ava helped her navigate the streets to the hunter’s guild.

“Back again minion?” a snooty voice called as soon as they entered the building.

“Not on your life, Crawler,” Ava shot back. “Just escorting Clara. It’s crazy out there.”

A snort was the only response as the two made their way to the reception desk. It wasn't anything fancy, but it was big. The hunters liked to show off how important they were. A young man sneered at them as a greeting.

“Storehouse needs security. Who's available?” Clara knew to get right to the point with the hunters. They'd do their job, but they were never happy about it. They preferred hunting and only hunting. Being called on to do duties as a warrior were always looked down on.

“How many you need?”

“Standard two should do. Boss wants them as soon as possible to hold down the fort and keep any crazies out, but he wants to work out a standard rotation for the next while.” Clara sighed as she spoke. It was going to be a long night.

“Need some help!” called a voice farther back in the warehouse.

“Coming!” Clara yelled. The night had been long and this day was worse. Ava left her after they got security, reassuring her friend she’d clean up the failed chocolate veggie casserole. Besides a few hours of sleep on the breakroom couch, Clara hasn’t been able to rest since the announcement.

“Over here!” Clara rushed to the voice, watching as the pile of goods in her co-workers hands threatened to topple over.

“I got you,” she called when she grabbed some of the sacks her co-worker was carrying. Her boss was completely right. As soon as the door opened, everyone in town was asking for their full allotment of goods. If Clara and the boss hadn’t gone over the numbers yesterday and calculated exactly how many they could give of each type to all citizens if everyone came in – it would have been horrible.

There was a poster outside and inside showing exactly how much each citizen could take in a single day. Until the restocking later this week occurred, that was all they had. Not everyone believed them. Security from the Hunter’s guild had been needed several times when citizens felt that the limits placed on orders should not apply to them.

The standard two Hunters doubled after the first hour they were open. One pair inside to control anyone getting rowdy. One pair outside to control how many entered the store. Even with limits, every worker was running crazy trying to fulfill allotments as fast as they could. The line was through the whole town. As soon as word of people getting larger orders and the limits was out, everyone got into line.

<Need scene where the young hunter helps Clara out and they start to become friends.>

“Thomspom!” Her boss called out. The even-tempered man had been sorely pushed to his limits the past week. Their warehouse had been nearly emptied before the restock arrived. The delivery person warned them the next one might be a little late but couldn’t say how late. That did not make Boss happy at all. He liked plans and was okay with late deliveries, as long as he knew the new shipment arrival date.

Still, he kept everyone’s spirits up and work through the craziness of the town and overworked employees. Clara always liked her boss, but this made her really respect him. How many could have survived a whole week like this without snapping at anyone?

But now he was calling her name with an edge of anger that hadn’t really tainted his voice even during the worst of the near riots.

“Yes boss?” Clara answered when she was in the door of his office.

“Get in and shut the door,” he ordered. No please. Clara had no idea if she had done something or yet another crisis was piled onto their plate. Whatever it was, Boss was beyond unhappy.

Closing the door, Clara sat gingerly on the seat near Boss’s desk. Boss ruffled through a few papers before pulling on near the top out and waving at her.

“Any idea why I just got a prairie dog message from the Flagans, requesting your immediate leave of absence for family business?” At least he sounded less angry and more wry.

Clara wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say. She thought her true last name of Flagan wasn’t ever going to be told to her boss until her training was done. The family

might like him, but it was tradition to hide their connection during the time away from the family. Not only to prevent anyone from trying to use their connections, but to keep those away from the family safer. The territory may have been peaceful the last 100 years or so, but Flagan was a powerful name. A lone Flagan could be targeted by territory folk just as much as foreigners.

“Surprise?” she settled on replying.

Boss snorted and put down the note. “I should have known. You came in and already knew half the stuff I usually need to teach newbies. Picked up on the rest quick as a lick. Flagan. Heh.”

Okay, now boss was chuckling. The immediate danger was over and Clara relaxed in her seat a little. She really wasn’t sure what she would have done if he was angry.

“I don’t normally get prairie dog messages. Surprised for sure. Had the seal for private information only. I got back here worried the territory was going to lower our town allotments or cut us loose. We wouldn’t be critical for any war efforts, but I didn’t expect notice so soon when Resparta hasn’t even gone yet,” Boss ran a hand through his hair as he rambled.

“Then I get the courage to open it up only to get a short cryptic message that Clara Thompson is needed immediately for family business. Didn’t even know it was from the Flagans until I got to the signature lines, but the whole note was so military like I wondered if it was sent to the wrong department.”

Boss offered the letter over to Clara to read. He was right about it being cryptic. All it mentioned was she needed to leave right away and report as Clara Thompson to the

main hunter's guild in the capital. A message would be waiting for her there. She was to bring an escort of at least two hunters for her travel and payment would be waiting for them at the main hunter's guild. A token was included in the message for proof of payment.

"Looks like I'll be down my main assistant for a while. Can you at least let me know when you get more details when you'll be coming back?" Boss didn't even ask her if she wanted to come back. That was a compliment if she ever heard one. Boss wouldn't care if she returned if he didn't value her.

<need to show her getting the young hunter and his arrogant mentor as escorts and Ava demanding to join before they head on the road>

Their world was desert and more desert, but the types of desert were very different. She heard tales of places covered in sand, with shifting mountains as the wind blew one down and built up another.

But in Resparta's territory, the deserts were vast plains of cracked earth with cactus and spiny brush. And in the center was a large plateau. It was a vast red monolith of rock you could see in the distance from everywhere in the territory.

The capitol was carved into the side of the plateau. The capitol never rested. The sunrise would crest and fill the main city with light until noon when shadows started to take over. Orbs of captured Dragon Fire lit the streets and tunnels and glowed throughout the night.

Clara's town had been to the east of the capitol. As they traveled, the great plateau cast a shadow over them in the afternoon, giving them relief from the heat of the late day. It took 3 days by horseback to reach the capitol.

The whole time the arrogant hunter continued to rant and rave about how he was doing them a huge favor by taking this quest. He ran the young hunter ragged with chores every time they stopped for the night or packed up for the start of the day. The young hunter didn't seem to mind, and carried out his duties with soft smiles and gentle jokes. How the pair of them worked together for so many years seemed to be a testament of the young hunter's personality more than the arrogant one.

Checking into the capital was easy enough. Clara was startled with the amount of outgoing traffic more than anything. Usually there was a longer line to enter than exit.

“It’s the upcoming war. Those that want to get out before anything even starts are going now,” Ava commented when she saw what Clara was watching.

<they enter the city and find the hunter’s guild>

<Clara gets a message from her family while the arrogant hunter puts his foot into it with a higher up in the main guild when he insults Clara. The higher up is related to Clara and a Flagan, but he can't let on that Clara is his relation. Still takes the arrogant hunter to task and then lets the younger hunter test out for his apprenticeship so he's a new journeyman hunter now.>

“Clara!” Her mother’s hugs were still the best. The younger hunter looked confused as Ava chuckled at the duo’s embrace.

“Mom. Glad you’re still doing alright,” Clara muttered into her mom’s shoulder. Backing away for a moment, she gestured to the young hunter. “This is Sam. He’s been helping at the warehouse and was one of the escorts I had to come to the capitol.”

The young hunter stepped forward and extended his hand for a greeting. Mom grabbed his hand and pulled him in for another hug. The startled expression on his face was perfect. “Don’t worry about Mom. She’s very tactile.”

“That okay. I don’t mind. It just isn’t typical. It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Oh!” Mom stepped back while keeping her hands on Sam’s shoulders. “None of that. Besides, it’s Flagan, not Thompson. That’s just one of our pseudonyms for when we’re away from the family. You can call me Lena.”

<Need to move them through the family farm and to the oasis. Cool scenes like the prairie dog messenger division. Sam marvels at the tour but both Sam and Ava are not allowed in at the oasis. The oasis is near the south side of the plateau. A cave to an underwater lake. There a smaller cave off the side where running water make a shallow pool of clear reflection. This is the mirror of truth. When a person looks in, it shows their true potential. It works well to find spies before they are given higher positions, but was also used in the beginning of the territory to find people of talent to use. The family elder explains that Resparta has half-human children in the territory but never kept record of which of his lovers had children. They only know a few of them and need those who are currently unattached to the family to check on them. If there are any offspring, they need

to be brought to the Mirror of Truth so they can be seen if they have dragon potential.

Resparta has agreed to unlock their powers to allow them to take over the territory when he retires at the end of the season. If they don't find one, they are on their own.>

Clara is distressed over the mission given to her. Sam and Ava are going with her, but it just seems so big. And how is she supposed to convince kids or young adults to come back with her without being able to tell them why. It sounded more like kidnapping than anything else. She wasn't a kidnapper!

Ava reassures her that it's going to be okay. It isn't like they have to take someone unwilling. And they can make something up – like a free vacation at the Flagan Farmland. They were famous for how much they were able to grow, and not everyone could come and see it from inside the border walls.

Sam pointed out that to do so there would have to be official papers or at least a flyer. Clara remembers the printing press her aunt runs and they make plans to go there the next day.

The capitol has a near riot near the warehouse which is near the printing press. Sam helps them get safely into the press and Clara's aunt is almost too friendly with Clara before she remembers Clara isn't supposed to be a Flagan right now. They manage to get a "meeting" with her in the private office and her aunt uses an enchanted gem on the desk to keep eavesdroppers from hearing their conversation. When Clara explains their plan, her aunt loves the idea. It'll take a day to get the printing set up and Clara's aunt has a peregrine falcon to message the Flagan elders directly to ensure they'd respond to any inquiries about this 'official contest' if anyone bothered to ask.

Ava decides to check in on some friends and leaves Clara and Sam alone for the day to meet up later for dinner at the inn.

Clara and Sam have some fun and connect more.

Desert Dragons, by Tia Kennard – November 2024

When they reach the first town to look up Emmeline, they find her with a brood of children. They have no idea which ages would be acceptable for the time she spent with Resparta. Their god wasn't really clear on timelines that humans were. Clara successfully uses the contest ploy to get the entire family to come to the oasis so they could test all the children for the possibility of being half dragon. Emmeline was completely unaware of the reason her family was going on this trip.

The trip back was short, the town was only a days travel away, but crazy for how many little ones were running around. Sam turned out to be a great child wrangler and managed to keep them all in one group and safe from dangers. Even the one that liked to poke at the cracks and crannies where poisonous scorpions and snakes liked to hide.

<Write Emmeline's "tour" and how they figured out how to get them all to look in the pool without knowing what it really was. None turn out to be a dragon born. Clara and her team go out three more times and each time come back with a new "winner" of the contest but it turns out not to be.>

New scene where the one they are looking for turns out to be Sam's mom. Sam knows right away that they aren't alive anymore and they don't need to travel. For the first time, Sam and Ava get to come back to see the pool. Sam is not dragon born, to his relief. But while Clara is teasing Sam about it all, they bump into Ava who gets knocked towards the pool. They catch her before she crashes into the water, but she gets a face full of her reflection – a really scary dragon.

Ava is freaking out about the dragon scare and then figuring out that it was her reflection and what that implies. Resparta has been talked about for the entire book, but now the Flagans need Ava to meet the god of the territory to get her powers unlocked.

Ava runs away. Clara leaves her family in a panic and gets a subtle “Good Luck” from her mom. Clara does not tell her family she knows exactly where Ava is. Sam covers for her as she ducks out the door and off the farm. She meets Ava at their secret meeting spot they made when they were kids. An older storage building on the farm close to the hired hands. Clara just sits by Ava for a while and then asks “When do you want to go? Sam’s running cover, we can leave anytime you want.”

Ava screams into the blanket she’s clutching in her hand as Clara rubs her back. Ava just leans into her friend and Clara hugs her shoulders. “No go? I thought it might be fun to hide out with you. Sam can be our runner, most of my family never paid attention to him, they won’t figure it out. Mom will send us supplies.”

Ava just sighed and unburied her head from the crumpled blanket on her lap. She hugged her knees and used the blanket as a pillow to cradle her head on her lap as she just looked at Clara. Her friend knew the look. It’s the “I’m so tired of all this, but who else is going to fix things?” Ava was always good at organizing Chaos. Ava didn’t like talking, but people listened when she did. And Ava hated running away. She would, but she always came back with new vigor and a plan.

Becoming the territory god might kill her friend though. Clara would rather run away this time. Her family might be in danger. She wouldn’t have done the whole quest without wanting to help her family. But Ava was her family too. And Flagans were tough. They might take some damage, but Clara had a lot of faith that they’d come out on top. Ava

was her family, but Ava was alone. Her Mom had Ava's back. Some of the other relatives knew her enough to care. But most of the family didn't see Ava as family. Why would they help her when she was the new territory god who was suppose to help them?

"War is coming. I don't fancy to be in a hidey hole in the middle of the territory that everyone is going to be aiming at for the next few years."

Clara nodded. That was a problem. Both girls liked to get in the middle of things when there was trouble. And trouble was very likely to find them during a war.

"This is going to suck," Ava announced and buried her head in the blanket again.

Clara hummed in agreement and squeezed her friend's shoulder for a moment. "At least you can look really cool and scary now. The Hunter's won't mess with you the next time the town has an event."

Ava snorted into the blanket. "Clara!"

"I wonder... Would dragon flame make the chocolate veggie casserole any better?"