

THERE ARE NO GOODBYES

When the Windfire pulled into port, Maaya didn't want to leave. Long voyages often left her feeling at least a little worn out, if not somewhat eager to step foot on land again, but this particular voyage had been something special. Now that it was finally over, she wanted to ask to start over, to say she wasn't ready to come back, not yet. But the looks on everyone's faces told her it was done. The crew looked reminiscent and resolute, and it was not a moment to be marred by selfish desires. She could accept that she'd been lucky enough to take this trip in the first place; that would be more than enough.

"Shall we, my love?" came a warm voice from her side. She glanced up to see Adelaide walking down from the bridge to greet her as the crew lined up on deck for dismissal.

"I wouldn't wait a moment," Maaya said happily, and Adelaide kissed her on the cheek before stepping up in front of the crew.

"As always, it has been an absolute pleasure. I have to sincerely thank all of you for coming out for this special trip

and making it everything it could be and more. It means absolutely everything to me that you made it.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for anything!” came Engström’s excited voice, and the others voiced their approval, many of them nodding and smiling at Maaya as they did so. There were fewer of them now, a mere eighteen where once there stood over sixty, the ship taking with her only as much as she needed for basic operations. Times had changed, after all.

“All the same. It’s wonderful to know you’re all still available on such short notice. I would have thought that after the chaos of the years you’d just start pretending you weren’t home when I sent you messages,” Adelaide continued.

“You know, I thought about it, but I think I just kind of adapted to it after a while. In a way I actually kind of looked forward to the chaos. What do they call it? Stockholm Syndrome?” Halvar spoke next, laughing as Adelaide swatted at him with her hat.

“You’re starting to sound like our dear first commander.”

“Absolutely never, cap’n. I can prove it if you like.”

“You do every time I see you, now hush.”

Maaya stepped up next, staring at each of the crew in turn. It was easier now than before, but harder in a different sort of way. With as much time as she’d had to prepare, it was different now the moment was upon her.

“I don’t know what I can say except to add my thanks. This was an amazing trip, and I know it must have been hard, but I’m so, so grateful for all of your help. You’re all some of my favorite people in the world, I hope you know that.”

“Aw, shucks Maaya, you know we feel the same about you!” Engström said.

“I’ve never doubted it,” Maaya returned warmly. “I’m still not ready for this if I’m being honest, but I couldn’t have asked for better. I will leave feeling nothing but fulfilled.”

With this, Adelaide dismissed the crew, but it was a full hour before anyone left the ship. Everyone seemed hesitant to leave, and Maaya couldn't blame them. There was always something wonderful and freeing about sailing, and now they were safely in harbor, the urge to return to sea already was clearly infecting some of the crew.

Soon, however, as the sun began to dip low in the sky, Adelaide, Maaya, and Halvar were left alone on deck. It was quiet for some time, but as Maaya and the others headed for the dock, she paused, running her hand over the railing and taking another look at the ship she had come to know so well.

"I'm going to miss this," she said, a lump already forming in her throat.

"I know, love. All this time we've spent sailing and somehow it doesn't feel like it's been nearly enough!"

"That's because you've slowed down with age as much as we all thought you might. That is to say, not at all, cap'n," Halvar chuckled. "And you along with her, Maaya. I know she said she wanted someone who could keep up with her, but I didn't think it'd go on for this long."

"What can I say? Her energy is contagious," Maaya laughed.

"Too right. It either infects you or exhausts you. You can see what it did to me. Or maybe that was because I took on forging her paperwork."

"It must have been that, because we all know it didn't come from doing your actual job. That would mean you'd have been *working* in the first place," Adelaide shot at him with a grin. "I still can't believe you retired so early."

"My wife started seeing grey hairs and decided it was time, cap'n. Claimed it was happening too early. I'm just saying, I thought that after over fifty-some years of sailing you might have shown *some* sign of calming down a bit."

“Not a chance. Still, I’m glad you could make it out for this trip. It means a lot you’d come back.”

“I’d never miss this. It felt good to get back on the ship for a little while, even if it was only for one more trip. I miss her every day I’m not aboard even after all this time.”

“I appreciate it. It was wonderful to see you again,” Maaya said, and she stepped in to give him a hug. Halvar returned it without hesitation, patting her encouragingly on the back.

“You going to join us for dinner?” Adelaide asked, but Halvar shook his head.

“I need to get back, but don’t worry. I won’t be a stranger! I’m staying in town a while yet and I’ll drop by sometime this week. See you both soon!”

Halvar tipped his hat to them, then started off toward town, whistling merrily as he went.

“What are you feeling?” Adelaide asked, but she trailed off as she noticed the look on Maaya’s face.

The young woman stared at the Windfire, trying to take in every small detail of it that she could. As they so often did, her memories of her time aboard overlaid themselves onto the present. She saw herself stealing aboard for the first time to escape Selenthia; she saw herself walking the deck with Saber, her best friend from her childhood who’d helped her save the world; she saw the hull marked with damage from a battle with the Selenthian navy, and then marauders a few times after that; she saw the crew gathered together after sundown to tell ghost stories and share memories of their favorite voyages.

She saw the changes that had happened over the years, too. The ceremony Halvar and Gunnar had gotten when they’d both retired years ago. The decorations from when Maaya and Adelaide had been officially married. The way the crew grew smaller and smaller as time went on and the Windfire traveled less far and less often. The day it had been

marked a historic site by the Krethan government and the day people had started taking tours of it when it sat in the harbor as it did much more often. The day the Windfire had stopped docking in Levien and instead found a new home in a small-town port near where Adelaide and Maaya had bought their home.

The Windfire herself hadn't changed much, but even that made her different. With the advent of the steam engine that Adelaide had unintentionally helped invent, the age of sail was coming to an end. The Windfire was no longer one of the fastest ships on the seas, and most of the items and systems aboard, once cutting edge, were now considered antiques. With most of the crew having left and Adelaide settling down more into her work on land, there were no more grand adventures, no great battles at sea. While watching the Windfire become a relic made Maaya feel melancholic, she did appreciate the lack of "excitement" this new era of calm brought with it.

Maaya had changed with the years as well, and for the most part she had done so easily. Change was easier when she got to meet it on her own terms rather than being caught in its wake regardless of her desire. She had been able to take each individual event in stride even if it made her occasionally sad to say goodbye to old people and old ways. But now she was staring back at all of them at once like a photo album of her entire life, and it was harder for her to deal with now.

Especially with what had yet to come.

"Maaya?" Adelaide said softly, and Maaya blinked, then glanced up at her, smiling.

"Sorry. I'm just remembering. A lot happened here, didn't it?"

"A whole lifetime's worth of memories. And mostly good ones, I'd like to think. Besides, you know she's not done adven-

turing yet! Somehow she'll keep the seas familiar for years yet."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

After another few minutes spent in silence, the two women made their way toward town, Maaya already looking forward to dinner. Still, she grimaced as she walked. For all Halvar said she had managed to keep up with Adelaide all this time, she knew he was being kind. For much of her life that had certainly been the case, but it wasn't as much anymore.

"Pasta!" Adelaide said suddenly, causing Maaya to jump. "Sorry. But pasta! That's the thing I've been craving. I figured it out. A giant pile of noodles with red sauce and spices, maybe a few *enormous* meatballs, and plenty of bread to clean it all up with. And then a nice giant sundae drenched in hot fudge. And sprinkles!"

Maaya laughed at the sheer joy and delight in the older woman's voice.

"And you'll manage to eat every bite of it as always. I still haven't figured out how you manage it."

"I think it just burns up the instant it hits my stomach. The day I finally feel full is the day you'll know something is seriously wrong."

"I sincerely don't think you'll change a single bit, not even on your last living day," Maaya teased.

"Ugh, I hope not. Can you imagine? I plan to live to a hundred, and when I'm on my deathbed I hope I have one hand on the helm of a beautiful ship and the other on a tasty bread loaf. Or something like that. That's still far off so I haven't planned it out too much yet."

"Please, you'll still be going at a hundred and ten," Maaya snorted.

Adelaide beamed.

"I'm going to give time herself a run for her money. Sure

she might have dominion over clocks, and also the universe and stuff, but I've been known to run pretty fast when I want to."

"Oh, yes. I'm not sure time will ever catch up," Maaya teased, though even as she spoke she felt her heart sink somewhat. She'd slowly gotten used to this, but there were certain moments when the pain still managed to worm its way into her mind.

After dinner, Maaya and Adelaide took a leisurely stroll around town, taking the long way back home as they often liked to do. It was that beautiful sort of comfort where Maaya knew home was ready and waiting, which made her feel better about spending a little more time away. Everywhere she went, she tried as hard as she could to remember everything she saw. Her memories were precious to her, and she wanted to keep as many as she could. Though she was starting to feel the effects of age, her mind was still sharp as ever.

As Maaya visibly began to tire, Adelaide led the way over to a nearby bench looking out over the sea, and they both sat upon it. A few people passed by, some walking their dogs, some clearly on their way to or from a dinner date. Maaya watched them go, remembering a time when she had been so young. At sixty-eight she wasn't old by any means, but she occasionally missed the days she lived decades ago when she could still do something like save the world if she pushed herself hard enough. Now it was tough enough just making it home from dinner. Then again, as Adelaide proved often these days, age wasn't the issue.

"Rial for your thoughts, my dear?" Adelaide said, toying with a strand of Maaya's hair.

"Oh, just thinking, as usual. I've been doing that a lot lately."

"Can you teach me sometime?"

“Hush.” Maaya playfully swatted at Adelaide’s shoulder, and the taller woman laughed. “Nothing I haven’t mentioned already. I guess now I’m coming up on it I’ve been doing it a lot more. I feel like I’m procrastinating on a big project if I’m not just *thinking* about it all the time.”

“It’ being your life?”

“Yeah. I just like remembering everything we’ve been through. And you know, I still think about how lucky I am. I’m living the life I always dreamed about when I was a child. I wish I could go back and tell her. But it makes me happy. I’ve had it good so far, and sometimes it’s nice to just... be satisfied. To sit and appreciate the moment.”

“I understand! I do that sometimes, too. Mostly because of you.” Adelaide planted a quick kiss on Maaya’s forehead. “For all you say I saved you by taking you across the world, I’m pretty sure you saved me, too. I always struggled to feel whole, and I eventually achieved that, and I think that’s one reason I fell so madly in love with you. I didn’t feel the need to be completed by any person, but you stole my heart anyway, and that made it all the more special.”

Maaya smiled.

“You once told me that fate would never waste its time on temptation, and I didn’t believe you for a while. Eventually I knew you were right. And it wasn’t our marriage, it wasn’t us saving the world... it was a morning years and years ago when I woke up and you made me pancakes.”

Adelaide looked at her with amused disbelief.

“That was your big moment of revelation? Pancakes?”

“Yes! It was just so completely and utterly... normal. It was just a completely ordinary thing to happen on an ordinary day. That was when it hit me. The time for temptation had passed. This was my life now. It was actually my life, the one I was living and would continue to live. Those big moments in

life, as grand and special as they all were, they ended eventually. The big things always do. But that morning... that was what told me I had made it.”

“You’re beautiful when you get all sappy like this,” Adelaide said warmly, her hands seeking Maaya’s. Maaya took them happily, and they stared out at the sea together in silence for a short while before Adelaide spoke again. “You know... you sound like you’re feeling a lot better about all this. As good as you can be, I mean.”

“I’m... trying. I’m definitely doing better than I was at first, but even if it feels almost normal now, sometimes I still just... I still can’t believe it. Or maybe I just don’t want to. There’s still part of me that feels like it means I gave up.”

“You didn’t, not at all. You’ve been through so much in your life already, and you are taking this with strength and grace most would find enviable. Of all the things anyone could ever accuse you of, giving up is not one of them. The world still exists today because of you, and that wasn’t you setting a standard for yourself you had to strive to meet for the rest of your life. That was you showing the world who you really were. It just shows itself in different ways now.”

“I suppose. At the end of the day, I...” Maaya stared at the waves that glittered with the reflection of nearby lamps, the moon that hung overhead, the flowers that swayed lightly in the breeze. It was a beautiful world. To think it was still here because of her was something special indeed, but she had no lack of confidence about that. “I’m going to miss all this.”

“I know.” Adelaide put an arm around her and held her close, and Maaya did not resist. “There’s only so much I can say and only so much comfort I can give, but I want to remind you that I will be with you the whole time. I will not leave your side for a single moment. This, like everything else we’ve ever done, we do together.”

Maaya nodded, fighting the tears that threatened to drip down her cheeks. She'd done enough of that. Adelaide's strength was not limitless, and Maaya tried to be strong for her, too. This was a new challenge, but Adelaide was right: they were going to do it together, and for that, Maaya was going to do her part, too.

"I love you so much," Maaya murmured, taking in every part of this moment she possibly could. The touch of Adelaide's hands, the warmth of her breath against her cheek, the faint smell of shampoo in her hair mixed with the salt of the sea. All of it. It was another moment she'd treasure for the rest of her life.

Adelaide hugged her tighter still, then gave her a smile.

"I love you, too."

A week later, Maaya lay in bed on a comfortable sunny morning, taking her time getting up as usual. She still appreciated the feel of a comfortable mattress beneath her and the utter lack of daily responsibilities that meant she could simply lounge about all day if she so desired. These were her favorite days. The windows were open, letting bright sunlight and fresh ocean air into the bedroom as birds chirped outside.

Still, she felt eager to move. She had spent a lot of time in bed lately, and that comfort only meant so much when it came partially at the expense of her freedom.

She got slowly to her feet, one hand on the bed frame for support as she fought the mild dizziness that came with her movement. When it passed, she shuffled toward the door and out toward the kitchen. Something amazing was cooking, and she was determined to take part in its consumption.

"Morning, my love! Here, let me help," came Adelaide's voice from nearby, and Maaya waved her off.

"I've got it. I think I'd like to get warm on the porch."

“Breakfast in the sun, huh? Say no more. I’ll be right out with plates!”

Maaya took her last few steps with difficulty, then sat back with a sigh of relief into one of the porch chairs. It took her a moment to realize someone else was already sitting nearby.

“Good morning,” Inga said pleasantly, and Maaya smiled.

“Morning! Sleep well?”

“Comfortably, as always. As much as I’ve gotten used to sleeping through noise after years serving on a crowded ship, the seclusion still does me well. Did you rest well?”

“Likewise. I’ll never get over just how amazing a good bed can be. How can anyone be expected to go to work any time before noon when they’re coming from things like *that*? It’s a form of torture.”

Inga smiled. The woman’s hair had begun to whiten, and the effects of the years showed themselves on her face, but she seemed otherwise untouched by time. She was still the tall, imposing, and wonderfully friendly person she had always been. Maaya had always liked her, and the fact that she was now living with Maaya and Adelaide only increased Maaya’s appreciation for her. The older woman had come at her own insistence, aided by the fact that her own daughter had moved out of the home they’d shared together years prior, which left Inga otherwise alone. Maaya had met her daughter several times and thought she took after her mother quite well. Inga herself was determined to help around the house now that Maaya no longer could, and as embarrassed as Maaya felt about this, she also genuinely enjoyed having her around. With Inga constantly at home with her, it made her feel almost as if she were living with one of the parents she’d never had, though she would never admit this aloud.

“I’m going to the store this afternoon. Would you like me to pick up anything for you?”

“Oh, goodness, let’s see... you know what, I could use a good chocolate muffin.”

“I will bring you several. I... believe I should also pick up pancake mix,” Inga continued as Adelaide came to join them, carrying two plates stacked high with pancakes topped with butter and syrup.

“Yes, probably. Double that order, too; for some reason I can’t stop eating these lately,” Adelaide said happily, already tearing into one of the pancakes.

“And I’m not complaining at all,” Maaya added as she took one for herself. Her appetite had decreased lately, and she knew she’d only make it about halfway through a single one before having to give up, but it was the thought that counted, and Adelaide seemed ever willing to indulge by still making as many as she could carry.

“Before I forget, I also wanted to remind you that Halvar and his wife are coming by this afternoon, and Annayet has confirmed her visit for tomorrow,” Inga continued placidly even as she watched Adelaide devour her breakfast.

“Oh, good! I’m glad Annayet can make it after all. What a trip that is,” Maaya said.

“Easier than it used to be, huh? You know she’d move heaven and earth to come over anyway,” Adelaide said.

Several friends had come by in the past week to visit. Some brought gifts and some brought letters and cards and flowers, and all came with well wishes and love. Among others, Maaya had seen Gunnar and his wife, Marit Sol and her husband, Felix Sol, Cymreiges Baughan, Engström, David, Roshan and Amoli, and even Emil. At first Maaya had been overwhelmed by the sheer number of people coming by, but then something clicked and she suddenly felt better. She appreciated that she had so many people in her life who loved her that she was having a hard time keeping track.

It was hard not to think about how time had changed them as well. With as many people as she'd lost over the years, she hadn't thought at first that she could meet so many more people she'd come to love, but the pain of those losses never truly faded. Sometimes her heart still ached for her loved ones from her childhood, the ones who died far too early.

Then there were those that happened gradually over the years that came. And for all those who were determined to stay forever, like Emil, there were those among the dead who were gone now, too. Skarin had come to them eighteen years prior, saying that his heart was no longer in this world. The wars were over and the seas were unfamiliar, and after his desire for vengeance slowly faded, he realized there was little else keeping him there save for living friends he'd see again someday. Maaya had never quite come to adore the man, but she still missed him all the same.

Styx had passed nine years ago, but it had been peaceful, and he'd been surrounded by friends. Now Maaya's life had stabilized, death happened more often that way: slowly, peacefully, and giving everyone time to say goodbye. That was something Maaya had been deprived of for many years and many losses, and she was grateful for these moments that left her only with the pain of loss, not of regret.

Above all, she thought of Saber. Even though several decades had passed since the day she had been forced to say goodbye to a friend she thought she'd have forever, Maaya still felt a longing she couldn't describe when she thought of her, one so strong she had mistaken it for grief until her grief itself faded. They had been as close as it was possible for friends to be. They'd had something she hadn't found with anyone else, and as the days wore on, she remembered Adelaide telling her long ago that some wounds to the heart were those that scarred, not those that healed. For many years the pain of

those scars was mild at worst, a gentle reminder of times that no longer were. As she grew older still, however, the scars hurt more and more, returning like an injury of war many years after the end of conflict. She supposed there had been a war. But her opponent had been grief. And though she had won, it had left its mark in ways that would never truly fade.

A few more days passed. By now Maaya felt like half the world's population had come by to visit. Roshan had come back several times on his own, and he was the one person outside her immediate household that Maaya still had the energy to see. He had been her first real friend, and that friendship had withstood many trials. He was still as cheerful and optimistic as ever, and this helped her greatly.

Still, she tired more quickly now, and their visits became shorter. Maaya regretfully had to refuse many visitors; most of her time was spent in bed now, and much of that time was spent sleeping. She would drift in and out of consciousness, waking sometimes to day, sometimes to night. This surreal passage of time unnerved her, but Adelaide was ever at her side no matter what time it was. She was an anchor of sorts for Maaya, a precious moment of her own that kept Maaya steady in the current of time that stirred ever more as the hours and days passed.

Late one morning, Maaya awoke feeling better than she had in days. She stretched comfortably and yawned, and as she stretched she felt for Adelaide in the bed next to her, but she felt nothing.

Maaya opened her eyes. Adelaide was in the room, but standing near one of their wardrobes. Her back was turned, but Maaya heard what sounded like breaths, quick and shallow.

“Adelaide?” Maaya asked worriedly. Adelaide started, then

quickly rubbed her eyes and turned out, her smile just slightly too late to be convincing.

“Good morning, my love. You’re looking well. How’d you sleep? Want me to make you something to eat?”

“No, no. I mean... not yet, anyway. Are you all right? Your eyes are red.”

Adelaide paused, suddenly looking self-conscious.

“I’m fine! I left the window open and some dust blew in and I got a face full of—”

“Adelaide,” Maaya said somewhat more sternly. Adelaide stammered, and then her shoulders fell guiltily.

“Okay. I’m struggling a little today. But it's really nothing.”

“It’s not nothing if you’re crying. Talk to me?” Maaya pleaded. She hated to see Adelaide cry, and hated even more that Adelaide might think she was no longer strong enough to be there for her.

Adelaide took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling for a moment, pursing her lips. Maaya knew what was coming, but she was ready to listen anyway. Sometimes these conversations had to happen more than once. Especially now.

“I just... I’ve been thinking too. I remember all the dangerous things we went through. I remember how I felt in those moments. Every single time, all I could think about was keeping you safe. More than anything I wanted you to be safe and happy, and I was ready to give everything I had to protect you.” Tears glistened in her eyes, and one rolled down her cheek, but she ignored it. “All my life I’ve tried to do the same. And I did it, you know? I would face down any enemy, I would fight any battle, I would take on entire armies of the living and the dead at once if I had to. No matter what enemy we came across, I was ready to fight. But this, I...” She let out a quiet sob, putting her hand quickly to her lips as she regained her composure. “I can’t... I can’t protect you from this! I want to

help, I want to do anything at all, but I can't protect you this time. I feel completely helpless, like I'm such an utter failure. It wasn't supposed to be like this! This is something I can't fight, something I can't keep you safe from, so all I can do is... is just *watch*."

"Oh, my love. Come here."

Adelaide stepped hesitantly over to the bed and sat at Maaya's side, and soon she was sobbing uncontrollably. Maaya held her as she cried. This hasn't been the first time, though now it was especially visceral. But Maaya could handle this. She could be strong for her. Maaya stroked her back and whispered words of comfort as they braved the moment together.

When Adelaide's crying subsided into sniffles and deep shuddering breaths, Maaya spoke again.

"You are absolutely not a failure. You are brave, you are strong, you are my hero, and you are the love of my life. You helped give me a reason to live when I needed it most, and then you helped me create the life I'd always dreamed of. I'm living what I once thought to be impossible, and it's all because of you."

"Still, I... I'm not used to this. I'm not used to not being able to help, I don't..."

"You have, though, don't you see? Look at me now. I'm in a beautiful home sitting in bed with my loving wife who has made my entire life an absolute joy. I get to say that I spent every single minute of these entire decades of my life loving every second of it. Because of you. When I became weak, you helped me walk. When I was afraid, you held my hand. When I had nightmares, you woke me to free me from them. You went to war against a navy fleet and then against an *entire town* because you didn't like how one man there treated me. That doesn't even include you going into battle with marauders and telling off all sorts of government officials if they so much as

looked at me funny. You have been at my side for all of it, and you are even now. You are succeeding just by the fact that you are here, right now, with me. You've won battles you didn't even know you were fighting, and you did it all for me."

Adelaide let out a quiet sob, then sniffled again.

"If that's how you feel, then I have done my job. I'm sorry. This is selfish of me. It's just hard not to think that maybe I could have done more, or... I don't know. I just don't... I don't want you to go. But if you feel safe, if you feel happy, then... then maybe I can feel like I've done okay after all. And for what it's worth, you've done the same for me."

"I've certainly tried. There's no one more deserving of all the effort than you, my love." Maaya kissed her softly and placed her palm against Adelaide's cheek, brushing it gently. "And it's going to be okay. I know it will. It will hurt, but you will be okay, and you will have many, many more years of a beautiful life still to come and plenty of amazing people to share it with."

"I'll do my best. It's hard to imagine living those years without you by my side. Every time I try to think about how I'll do it, it's like I hit a brick wall, like my brain won't even consider it."

"It will happen. It might take time, but it will. And you're going to live to a hundred and ten! Those are all years you'll enjoy. You'd *better* enjoy them. I'll know if you don't."

Despite herself, Adelaide chuckled.

"I can't argue with that. I don't want to get scolded for doing otherwise."

"I'll tell Inga to keep an eye on you, and if you misbehave..."

"Hey, let's not get drastic. Don't tattle on me," Adelaide laughed, finally wiping away the tears that remained. "You're right. I know you're right. And I promise I'll make you proud."

“I know. I’m not worried at all, and that helps me too. It actually—” Maaya broke off suddenly as a wave of dizziness hit her, and at the same time her heart pounded in her chest. She felt like it might burst if it beat any harder, but then it passed as suddenly as it came, and as she blinked, the room came into focus.

“You okay?” Adelaide asked concernedly. Maaya realized Adelaide was holding her, preventing her from what would have otherwise been a nasty fall.

“Yep. It went away already, don't worry,” Maaya said in what she hoped was an encouraging tone. This was happening more often now, and she viewed it as little more than a frustrating inconvenience, but it was another sign of what was to come. Still, she smiled. She still felt strong in plenty of ways, and that was something. “Now... I believe you mentioned food?”

As rewarding a life as Maaya had lived, and with as much that changed for the better, the ramifications of her early life proved difficult to escape. Living on the streets with hardly enough to eat until she was a young woman had effects that had lasted until even now. She noticed them whenever she was in a group, always the smallest, never having quite grown with the rest of those her age. She noticed them when she tired quickly and when her heart fluttered suddenly and randomly. She noticed them in her dizzy spells and the aches and pains that persisted through any healing card Adelaide used. As they worsened with time, visible and constant enough that it became obvious these were not random and isolated symptoms, they’d sought the help of doctors, who had eventually given Maaya the worst news of her life.

It had been difficult for the two of them after that, but of all her worries, Maaya never once thought that Adelaide

might leave her or give up on her. If anything, the news brought them closer than ever before. Adelaide proved her love and dedication with no hesitation at all, and her persistence, confidence, optimism, and earnestness shone through even their worst moments of weakness. It wasn't a front or an act or something she pretended to be because she thought it was what Maaya wanted. It was just who she was, and Maaya thought she might fall in love all over again, so great was her admiration for the person her wife was and always had been.

To her surprise, things had gotten easier over time, and Maaya realized that what they were dealing with was just another kind of grief. They were familiar enough with that to know how it worked even if it still hurt. It was one thing to grieve those who had already passed, and another thing to grieve a loss before it came, but they were not wholly separate. Maaya became oddly grateful for it as she came to accept what was happening. There would be no unpleasant surprises. They both knew what was happening. And it gave them both one of the most precious things of all: time.

If she had to think about it, she realized she wasn't as afraid and disappointed as she thought she might be. She'd still had many decades of joy and love and happiness. She'd had many more years of life than many people who deserved them as well, and they had all been wonderful and fulfilling years. When she was young she had resolved to try to live without regrets, to appreciate what she had before it was gone, and to never hesitate lest she miss a chance at something she wanted. And in the end, she had succeeded on all counts. There was nothing behind her to mourn, and only the lost desire for more years ahead of her to contend with.

In the evening two days later, just an hour after sunset, Maaya lay in bed, relaxing contentedly. She felt better than she had in a while. Her pain was mostly letting her be, she wasn't dizzy, and her

heart, while weak, was mostly behaving itself. Some naive part of herself told her this meant things were getting better after all, that she was finally on the mend, but she knew what it really meant. As good as she felt in all other ways, she still felt utterly exhausted, so much so that she couldn't lift her head from her pillows without assistance. She knew that strength wasn't coming back.

In the room with her were Adelaide, Inga, and Roshan. It was a small gathering, but comfortable. It made things more personal that way. The room was brightly lit, and Maaya liked it that way. She wasn't sure why, but when she imagined this moment, the room had always been dark. This was much better.

Adelaide sat in a chair at her side. She'd been holding Maaya's hand for an hour now, not letting go for anything. Roshan and Inga sat at the foot of the bed, looking content outside of occasionally struggling to keep their composure.

"And remember when you brought me that sword? I thought you were absolutely insane carrying that thing through town, it was almost as tall as you were," Roshan said, and Maaya laughed quietly.

"I do. It ruined my coat, too. That was before Saber and I were friends, but she did make up for the trouble by getting me a new one. And an apple!"

"You and your apples. You've traveled the world and had food from almost every major city in the world and still there's nothing that makes your eyes light up like a big red apple," Roshan teased.

"Old habits die hard I suppose! Oh, and remember when Skarin started trashing the town when we came back? I still remember Rahu's expression perfectly. To see that fear etched all over his stupid smug face, oh that still brings me joy after all this time."

“It was a thing of beauty, that’s for sure,” Adelaide agreed. “Skarin and Vanhanen had an absolute blast during that fight. I was almost afraid to bring the latter along; I thought he might be a little *too* excited, but he behaved himself well enough.”

“And good riddance to Rahu. I feel some satisfaction that he saw the end of his days in the same cell we built for him so long ago,” Inga added.

“I just know that if Saber were still around she’d make an annual visit to Sark just to mess with him,” Roshan chuckled. “It’s too bad he’s gone to hell, otherwise she’d be having fun with him as we speak.”

“Speaking of surprises, however, I recall pulling off quite the surprise back then myself, and I am equally surprised that Halvar didn’t manage to spoil the secret before it was revealed,” Inga said mischievously.

“Ha! Yes!” Adelaide cackled. “Oh, Maaya. I wish good cameras were around back then, because the look on your face when you realized we were bringing a fleet back to Sark is something I wish I could save and share with everyone.”

“You told me I was cute when I was surprised, and I have to say you put some serious effort into giving me the biggest surprises imaginable,” Maaya answered, smiling. “You had me in awe so many times. That was when I still couldn’t believe you were in love with me. Here you were captaining a ship, summoning entire fleets of Blackfins, making two warring countries talk to each other... and what did I do! I stumbled my way aboard your ship and saved the world only because my dead best friend happened to have some magic jewelry and a strange dad.”

The others all laughed, and Maaya joined them. They had been reminiscing for a while now, but as the night wore on,

Maaya knew they would soon need to stop. She didn't know how she could tell, but she did.

"I knew from the moment you stepped onto the ship that there was something special about you," Inga said calmly as the night grew late and the room fell quiet. "You did not prove me wrong. I will forever be grateful to you, not just for what you did for the place I called home, but for the ones I hold dear. Adelaide most of all. I've been at her side since before the Windfire had a crew or even a name, and I watched her grow into a strong and confident young woman. But the light in her eyes was never brighter than when she talked about you. Though she was my captain, I couldn't help but feel as though I was watching a bird leave its nest for the first time after you came along. You have been a wonderful addition to my life, and I will always be so very proud to have called you my friend."

"What she said," Roshan added with a grin. "When we became friends I never imagined any of this would happen. What a life you've lived that you telling me you could see ghosts is now one of the least surprising events of my life. It was always great having you around. I hated that things were so tough for you, but you were always tough, too. And I'm so glad we've stayed friends after all this time. It's been a wild ride. I love you, I hope you know that."

"I love you too," Maaya said happily. Her voice was soft and weak now. It was difficult to speak, but she had yet more to say. "Both of you, I... my life has been unimaginably wonderful. The sights I've seen, the people I've met, the places I've gone... but it all comes back to the people I love. I never thought I'd have this many friends. I never thought I'd have a *family* like this. But here you are. Thank you so much. For everything."

Adelaide gently brushed her hair from her face, tears glim-

mering in her eyes once again. Maaya was vaguely aware of the others moving closer, comforting hands on her shoulder. The time for words was almost gone, but their presence meant everything now.

“You are the light of my life, my everything,” Adelaide murmured. “And you always will be. My first, my best, my only. I have lived the best life I possibly could because of you, and I will do the same every day from now until my last because of you. I have no regrets. Only love. So much love. You’ve made me happier than I could ever say. I am so happy to have spent all these years loving you. I know I can say goodbye and that it will be okay.”

Maaya nodded. Her eyelids felt strangely heavy. She hadn’t expected this moment to feel like falling asleep. But it was strangely beautiful. Her pain was disappearing. Everything that had ever ailed her was fading, leaving room only for the love she had still within her.

“A friend once told me that for people like us, there are no goodbyes,” Maaya said, every word taking yet more strength from her. “That makes me happy. You know? This life... was just the start. We spent so many years together, and still it pales in the face of forever. I want you to live, to live long, to live happily. I want you to make everything you can with what you have. So instead of goodbye, I just want to say... I will see you again. I love you.”

“I love you too, always. And I suppose you’re right. No goodbyes. So... until we meet again, my love,” Adelaide whispered, and Maaya felt one of her tears fall onto her cheek as they kissed.

Maaya closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She could still hear them in the room, could still feel the bed beneath her. It seemed to fade, more slowly than she’d imagined, until it all melted away and she was lost in the taste of her dreams to

come. That's what it was to pass, she remembered someone telling her, and now she was here, she appreciated that truth.

Still, the room was bright. A little too bright, now she thought of it. Maybe the room should have been dark after all.

She felt a hand in hers still, and she tried to look up to see Adelaide once more, but then she blinked in surprise.

The figure before her smiled at her, and Maaya couldn't speak for a moment. She knew that face. She hadn't gone a day in her life without thinking about it. It was the face she most longed to see again, one that had helped her accept what was happening to her by the mere knowledge that she would someday get to see it again.

It was still bright, but Maaya caught a flash of white hair, of sharp blue eyes, and long flowing robes. At their touch, Maaya realized her pain, her weakness, her exhaustion, was all gone, not like it had simply faded, but like it had never existed. She took a moment to look at herself. She looked the same as she always had, but... different somehow, as though all the things that had affected her body and mind over the years had been pulled away, leaving only what remained if time never touched her. The traumas of her life seemed far away now, as though they had happened in another world altogether.

The figure nudged her playfully. Maaya looked up at them again, the simple act of meeting their gaze making her feel as though she had just found something she lost long ago.

"Hey you. Took you long enough," the figure said warmly. They took Maaya's hand again and gently pulled her forward. "Come on. There are a lot of people who can't wait to see you again."

Maaya smiled.

And she stepped into the light.