\*Winter Interlude\*

Winter had come to Oregon, and as winters go, it was pretty weak. I come from a place where you have to shovel your driveway like clockwork or you can’t leave your house. Where the icy wind can snake right through your layers of clothes and bite at your skin. To be completely honest, I didn’t miss it one bit. My mom and my sister? Yeah. I missed them a lot. Even though I thought I’d done the right thing, and I know the money I sent home helped, that didn’t stop the weight of guilt and homesickness from chewing away at me. But actual Midwest winters? I’ll pass, thanks.

 Oregon actually stays green. Like, really green. And while I missed the snow, I didn’t miss shoveling it. Azzy, however, felt differently.

 “You look miserable.” I nudged the bowl of popcorn closer to her. We were having a snack and doing our homework as the evening set in. With it getting dark so early, we’d have to go to bed earlier as well, since Azzy and I had to get up with the danger chickens, so to speak. We often did homework together if we could. Azzy is younger than me, but in some of my new subjects, she’s years ahead of me. Public school does really cover things like dragon taxonomy, or why so many magical creatures live under bridges. (Instant roof and water source and easy access to their food source of choice, mostly fish and small creatures, but sometimes joggers.)

 “I just want some snow. I don’t think it’s asking too much,” Azzy said, grabbing a handful of popcorn.

 “It’s not like we’d get a snow day. We’d still have to feed the danger chickens, and we’d still have homework.”

 Azzy chewed, her eyes still staring out the window hopefully. “I don’t really care about that. Snow just has it’s own magic, you know?”

 I went back to my math. “Said by someone who has clearly never had to shovel a driveway.”

 “Exactly. I’ve never had to. I know its work. I know I probably won’t want to do it again, but I like to learn new things, experience new things.” She paused to sip her hot chocolate. “And I know you understand, because if you weren’t interested in seeing and doing new things, you wouldn’t be here.”

 “You’ve got me there.”

 “Also, you forgot to carry the one. You’re going to have to do that problem over,” she said, pointing at my paper.

 I reached for the eraser without even checking. If Azzy said it was wrong, it was. Numbers came to her a lot easier than they did to me.

 She gave me a sympathetic look. “You’ll catch up.”

 She’d told me that many times, and I’d never once believed her.

Weak winter light filtered through my window, waking me. We were milking the cockatrice today—draining their poison like you do a snake—and that had to be finished before we fed them. I dressed quickly, the wood floor cold on my bare feet, and grabbed the staff out from under my covers. Yes, I slept with it. No, I didn’t think it was that weird, but then again I’m the one dressing early to go milk the danger chickens, so my weirdness meter is way off. Once I was dressed, I padded down the stairs and made my way into the kitchen.

 Grant had made oatmeal with dried apples and cinnamon and toast, and I ate it quickly with a cup of hot tea. Grant watched me with amusement while he sipped his own tea. Lena was facedown at the table, arm curled protectively around her cup of coffee. Azzy was already rinsing her breakfast dishes and I think Granny was still in bed.

 “I think you’ve grown an inch since you got here,” Grant said as I got up to grab seconds.

 Lena groaned. “That means we’ll have to go clothes shopping soon. I hate clothes shopping.”

 I tugged my shirt down self consciously, while surreptitiously glancing at my pant cuffs. They were right—I was definitely starting to high water. “Maybe I can sew cuffs on or something.” I didn’t want to buy new clothes. I may not hate clothes shopping as much as Lena, but I didn’t want to waste any of my money that I could be sending home. “That way we don’t have to buy anything.”

 Lena looked up from the table, glaring at me. “Oh no, none of that. I don’t want anyone saying I can’t clothe my own apprentice. You represent me, Cannon Fodder. You have to look respectable.”

 I tried to not look at Lena’s own wardrobe—frayed jeans and a threadbare Led Zepplin T-shirt over long underwear. The long underwear had holes. Her glare intensified. “Not a word.”

 Grant refilled Lena’s coffee. “Respectability aside, people notice things like ill-fitting clothes and kids who look neglected. So it’s a safety issue as well. I need to pick up supplies soon anyway—things I can’t get or trade for locally. We can all go. Make a day of it.”

 Lena curled closer to her coffee. “If you’re going, why do I have to go?”

 Grant grinned over his mug. “Sharing an apprentice means sharing the duties, too.”

 Lena grumbled into her mug, but didn’t really reply.

It’s really difficult to do chores while carrying a staff. We’d cut off some of the smaller branches from the wood the magical tree gifted me, so it was now essentially a long wooden staff. I wasn’t allowed to carve it yet. Grant said it would take time—the wood had to get to know me, and somehow the design would “come to me.” He was vague on that bit. Was it a vision? Would the design show up in the mail? Also, I’d never whittled or carved or whatever before—what if I screwed up the bow? I was a bundle of nerves over the whole thing, and Grant wasn’t really reassuring me. I couldn’t tell if he was being vague because he was still mad about me going into the forbidden woods or what.

 I had tried to rig several ways to carry the staff with me, but ultimately nothing was very workable. The staff was too long, and I didn’t want it to drag. So I had to carry it along with me, setting it down when I needed both hands. I hoped the design would come to me soon—I would really like the use of both my hands on a consistent basis.

 Grant and I bundled up and headed out to the hen house. Milking a cockatrice is not an easy endeavor. One, you can’t look at them, which means you have to wear safety goggles. You also have to be bundled up, your arms and legs covered so an irritated cockatrice doesn’t bite you. They don’t particularly like getting milked. Their venom had several medicinal and magical uses, all of which Azzy could likely tell you. Grant sold the venom to reputable people to help offset the upkeep of the farm.

 Grant handled the actual milking, while I held the receptacle. He needed two hands to hold the cockatrice--one to hold the body and one position the head. I held a glass cup, as the glass wouldn’t react to the venom the way plastic would. Grant took his time. He didn’t want to rush and make a mistake. Even though I was just holding a cup, I had to pay close attention. If my mind wandered at the wrong moment—a moment when I needed to react quickly—it could be dangerous.

 Once that was done, I went about doing other necessary chores. I fed the cockatrice and the regular chickens, cleaned out the cerberi kennels, and checked the automatic watering system in the greenhouse. I brushed out Steve the unicorn and made sure there was fresh water in the barn in case the temperature dropped and he didn’t want to venture out. I gave Wuf a treat—baked sweet potatoes and fish oil for his coat. He had a lot of hair to regrow still. Then I brushed him out, too, lavishing him with a little attention. Brushing Wuf was a mindless task, one I’d done countless times, so it was easy to let my mind wander. After all, he wasn’t dangerous to me like the cockatrice.

 I know I should be thinking about my bow, or other important things, or even my mom and sister—and I was doing all of those things, but mostly, I thought about Azzy. I’d sent every penny home to my mom and sister, except the emergency twenty I kept at all times. Which means I couldn’t exactly get them any holiday gifts. Anything I gifted, I had to make or get on the cheap. I’d found an old Star Trek shirt at a local thrift shop for Lena. I’d infused oil for Steve’s mane. I’d helped a farmer down the road paint his shed in trade for some ground beef that I was making into biscuits for Wuf and the cerberi pups. Azzy and I were sewing up new potholders for Granny Mae out of fabric scraps. They didn’t look half bad, actually. All the mending I’d had to do for Lena during our travels meant that I wasn’t that bad with a needle and thread. I’d found a mug for Grant at the same thrift store where I’d found Lena’s shirt. It had a really cutesy cherub on it and it was all hideous pastels and gold outlining and he would love it.

 But I’d come up blank when I’d tried to think of something for Azzy. As I brushed Wuf, I finally thought of something. Azzy really wanted a snow day, and we were going to give it to her. I scratched behind Wuf’s ear. “What do you think? Can you do it?” Wuf huffed in response, a definite yes.

Azzy and I walked down along the orchard fence, the cerberi pups nipping at our heels with Wuf doing his best to herd them along. I wanted to be out of sight from the house since I wasn’t sure whether or not Lena and Grant would approve of my idea. I didn’t think we were doing anything wrong, but it still seemed like a good idea to keep it to ourselves.

 “Okay,” I said leaning my staff against the fence and grabbing Azzy’s arms. I moved her to a clear patch on the ground. “Now close your eyes.” Azzy gave me a wary look, but did as I asked. “Okay, Wuf. Now.”

 Wuf let loose a long, low howl, the pups joining in and making a chorus. The temperature dropped, frost rippling out from where we stood. Startled, Azzy’s eyes snapped open just as the first flakes began to fall. Wuf wouldn’t be able to keep it up forever, and the effect was localized around us, but at least this way Azzy got a little snow.

She grinned wide and let out a whoop, dancing around and trying to catch flakes on her tongue. The pups snapped at the snow, their tales wagging like mad. Wuf managed light dusting on the ground, enough for Azzy to attempt snow angels, and to scrape together some snowballs to throw. The cerberi pups chased after each snowball, fumbling over each other as they went, making us all laugh.

One particular snowball went wide, flying over the orchard fence. Before I could stop them, the pups ran after it, tripping over their feet in their enthusiasm. One of them, Stooge, went down face first into the ground, skidding through what was left of the snow. Spock rammed into him, and Hercules flopped over them both and slammed into the fence. Azzy and I held our breath as the unmistakable crack of splintering wood filled the air. We both rushed over, Azzy checking on the pups while I examined the fence. The wood appeared to have begun to rot in the middle of the top rail, softening so that it cracked easily when Hercules rammed it. Fortunately, the wood was still intact, just cracked and splintered. Yes, it would need to be replaced, but it wasn’t the worst that could have happened.

 “Anyone hurt?” I asked.

 “We’re all good here,” Azzy said as Spock licked her face. With the cerberi pups you got three licks for the price of one, so it could be a little…gross.

 “Is the fence okay?” Azzy asked.

 “I think so. It’s just cracked. We’ll tell Grant when we get back, and I’ll help him fix it.” He might be mad, but there was nothing I could do about that now. I just had to do what I could to make up for the accident.

 We gathered up the pups and I grabbed my staff and we made our way back to the house.

 Grant wasn’t home when we got there—he’d run Granny Mae into town to pick up some of the library books she’d been waiting for, and they didn’t get back until dark.

 Azzy and I were reading by the fire when they came in, and I slipped a bookmark between the pages and put the book down so I could help get plates for the pizza they’d picked up in town. As I set the table, I told Grant about the fence, omitting the part about the snow and Wuf, playing it off as a game of fetch gone awry.

 He looked longingly at the pizza. “We better go and replace the plank now. The longer we leave a weakness in the fence, the more potential for danger. Come on, Jonah—you and Azzy both. It will go faster with one of you to hold the flashlight, and the other to help hold the wood in place.”

 “Now?” Azzy asked. She, too, was looking at the pizza with longing. Nothing delivered to the farm, so any take out was a real treat.

 “Now,” Grant said firmly. We put on our coats, grabbed the tools and the replacement plank for the new rail before we climbed into the truck.

 We moved quickly, Azzy holding the light as Grant and I removed the rotted rail and nailed the new one in. He checked the other rails for rot, which was difficult to do in the beam of the flashlight.

 “We’ll have to come back and check it during daylight hours, but that will have do for now.” Grant gave it a final pat before gathering up his tools. We climbed back into the truck, heading back to house. Granny Mae had popped the pizza into the oven to keep it warm, but neither Azzy nor I would have complained if it had been stone cold. We were lucky to avoid a lecture and we both knew it.

 Despite the extra work, and having to fix the fence in the cold and dark, it had been worth it. I’d managed to get Azzy some snow. Wuf and I had pulled off a little miracle, and it felt great. I curled up as best as I could with the staff and went to sleep.

 I woke up the next morning, Grant and Lena standing over me. Both of them had their stern faces on, their arms crossed, the universal symbol for *you’re in big trouble.*

 “Good morning?” I asked hopefully.

 “Did you leave out part of the story last night?” Grant asked.

 “Any little tidbit you felt you didn’t have to share?” Lena added.

 “No?” I pulled the blanket up to my chin. They continued to glare. I didn’t take long to break. “Oh, you mean the part where Wuf made it snow? That part?”

 Grant groaned and rand a hand over his face.

 “You see?” Lena threw her hands in the air. “You see why I call him Cannon Fodder?”

 Grant waved her off. “And did any of this magical snow go over the fence?”

 I pulled the blanket over my head. “One of the snowballs flew over the fence and the dogs chased it and that’s why they ran into the rail and split it.”

 Silence. I peeked out from the blanket. Grant stared at the ceiling, seeking patience. Lena stared out my window. “You better come look at this, Jonah.”

 I crawled out of bed, taking my comforter with me. The winter sun was weaker than usual, the light filtering through clouds and thick flurries of snow. A good foot of snow covered the ground around the farm.

 “The weather forecast called for clear skies,” Grant said.

 “Freak storm?” I asked.

 “Not unless it’s a very localized freak storm. Really localized. Like to this farm,” he said.

 I looked out and sure enough, the snow seemed to be just around us, and it was piling up quick.

 “This isn’t natural,” Lena said, “just in case you hadn’t figured that out.”

 “Better bundle up and grab your staff,” Grant said. “We’re going to need to go out and get Wuf and investigate.”

 My stomach grumbled.

 “And that is going to have to wait,” Lena said. “No time for food, Cannon Fodder.”

 I sighed and went to my dresser, digging out my warmest clothes. Looks like I wasn’t going to get out of shoveling snow this year after all.