

SOMETHING CLOSE TO HOME

by ellerean

for nelfes

I... I tried to leave him behind.... We found each other again after the war, in Daein. In the back alleys of Nevassa, where we first met. When I told him why I'd disappeared, he got so angry. I'd never seen him get so emotional before.

Sometimes, Sothe still didn't look at her.

The old routine was familiar—Micaiah found a place for them to stay; Sothe scavenged for food. At times, it was like the war never happened, falling into a silence that was more necessary than comfortable. But the streets were louder than they were used to, more crowded. Nevassa, once shining with gold and velvet, the pride of Daein. But it didn't matter now, as they sat across the small firepit in the building without a roof. Micaiah couldn't tell what the building had once been—too small to be someone's home, but with no visible signs of commerce, either. Like the rest, it had been picked clean, but miraculously had a door with a working bolt.

Micaiah had spread her battered cloak across her lap, but had stopped pretending to mend it long ago. She watched Sothe with her head lowered instead, as he bent over something she couldn't see in the dark. She tried to see a difference in him. Maybe he sat taller, was more confident. Maybe he was leaner, more muscular in the shoulders. He definitely frowned more, even when he didn't look at her.

Because he'd been alone all that time, too. People changed when they spent too much time alone.

But he wasn't alone, she remembered, lowering her eyes. Sothe fought in the war. He'd had allies.

Somehow, it didn't make her feel better.

There had been no reason for her return to Nevassa. The shell of Daein's capital was cold and barren, even if it was supposed to be spring. It was a city long abandoned by its king, its military deserted or dead. Sothe had found so many new things in places he would never reveal to her, in those places people once called home. Micaiah tried to be glad for the extra blankets and new boots; she tried to be glad that he was preparing dinner for them both, spearing chunks of game with the knife he'd only recently used on people.

"Do you need any help?" she asked, hating the smallness of her voice.

He didn't look up. "No."

"Do you understand what I am?"

"I'm not a stupid kid anymore, Micaiah."

"I- I never thought you were stupid, Sothe."

Before Nevassa, places never really had names. They were places to sleep, places to forage, places to ignore the people who stared at her. But Nevassa had been a nice place to hide. Micaiah hadn't been the only child on the cold streets, just another urchin stealing bread from the market. She could pretend she belonged, walking the

busy streets like she had somewhere to be. She'd pull the cloak tight under her chin like everyone else did, hands hidden in her gloves because that's what the old woman had told her to do.

This is proof that the blood of both beorc and laguꝛ course through your veins.

Micaiah turned her hand over in her lap, massaging the soft fabric gloves. She had thought it pretty, once. She remembered little of her childhood, but remembered staring at her hand, even as the old woman had forcibly pulled her first pair of elbow-length gloves over it. *It's very cold in Daein*, she had said. No one would be foolish enough to argue that point—as a child, it always seemed to be winter in Nevassa, with its biting winds and snow-capped mountains that never melted.

Nevassa had been beautiful, too.

She'd been prepared to leave, after the woman had died. Micaiah could hide in the streets for only so long before people noticed, as the other urchins grew out of ill-fitting clothes, avoiding the girl who didn't.

Save for one.

"I thought it would be safer for you. People like me... we don't belong anywhere."

"Do you think I care about something like that? We made a promise, Micaiah. If you didn't mean it, tell me right now."

"No, that's not... please. Don't leave."

The fire burned away as they ate. The lingering chill of winter sank into her bones, the waning sunlight teasing at a spring that would not come for several weeks. Sothe tossed another log onto the fire, an act she tried not to interpret as anything more than the need for warmth. It didn't necessarily mean he wanted to stay up with her. It didn't mean he wanted to *see* her, that he desired her comfort more than his own, like the old days. The orange glow of a rekindled flame reflected in Sothe's eyes, much like she imagined King Ashnard would have looked in battle. She didn't know, of course. Sothe hadn't shared anything about *any* battle. He only sat back down across the fire, picking up his bowl. He ate like a man starved, bent over and shoveling the steaming stew.

"It's very good," Micaiah said. It was true; she'd always enjoyed his stew, and it was packed with more vegetables than she'd eaten in weeks. But the praise sounded false even to her own ears; she was trying too hard. She stirred the chunks of meat and potatoes, its steam warming the underside of her chin.

Sothe didn't look up. "Thank you."

She inwardly sighed. Sothe scraped the bottom of his bowl with the spoon, the steel on steel mildly grating. *She* hadn't been the one at war, but imagined it was like the sound of beorc weapons, so familiar to him now that he didn't flinch. It was a sound she would've reprimanded him for, in the old days—*you'll give us away*; or *try to be a little quieter*—but there wasn't anyone to find them, or, anyone that would care. Crimea would come in soon, of course, the victors of war staking claim to this remote land. There were whispers of it in the street, nothing more than speculations. But it would be a long time before they reached Nevassa. So they waited, sitting across a fire that was starting to wane again, staring into their empty bowls rather than each other.

“Beorc call it Branded. Laguz call it parentless.”

“Who cares about that? You’re just Micaiah.”

Sothe was now cleaning under his nails with the tip of his knife. He hadn’t always been good with that knife. She remembered the scars on his hands from when he’d learned to use it; she’d watched him slice off his fingernails doing the very thing he was doing now. But he’d become expert, sliding the knife tip beneath each crusted nail, avoiding the delicate skin beneath. The Mad King’s War hadn’t been so long, in the end. But one year was long enough to learn how to wield a weapon, to learn the many things that weapon could do, from preparing a meal to killing a sub-human. It was long enough to gain muscle, to move on, to harden a heart.

Perhaps that was why she stood, throwing the tattered cloak over her shoulders. It made him look up, eyes wide like she’d always known them, a flicker of surprise when she moved around the fire. She hadn’t intended to pry, but Sothe had been so *open* before, this new coldness so very *wrong*. She knew the warmth still glowed in his belly, as she sat beside him on the ground. She could *feel* that gentle tug of *need*, the same need of an orphaned boy with small hands, the hands exposed to the bitterest cold but still so warm when he’d grasped hers. That day may have seemed long ago to Sothe, but not to her.

Now, they didn’t touch. She didn’t dare, but he radiated that warmth, her knee warm where they almost touched. It wasn’t yet spring in Nevassa, after all; any warmth would thaw even the most frozen of hearts, the promise of an outstretched hand or a smile she hoped was not gone forever.

“You don’t care, then?”

“When will you start believing me? It doesn’t matter what other people think. You’re my family! You promised not to leave me behind. You promised. But the second you thought I might be like those other people, you left. You abandoned me, Micaiah! I loved you and you abandoned me! Of all the selfish—”

“Stop! Please, Sothe, just stop!”

The old woman had made the gloves by hand. They felt very fancy at the time, pulled up over her elbows, long enough that her arms were never cold even without her cloak. So it took some time to remove them, as Micaiah carefully unfastened the buckle one-handed, then rolled the old fabric down her arm. Sothe seemed to hold his breath, knife tip beneath a clean thumbnail, as Micaiah neatly folded the glove on the ground.

She had tried to explain, when they’d found each other again. She’d used all the words she’d heard on her travels, the words the old woman had said people would say, those same words Sothe had probably heard in the war—*Branded. Parentness. Cursed.*

Micaiah had claimed modesty, before. It had been easy when caring for a young boy, convincing him that he had to turn his back even when she washed her hands. She had become expert at making sure he never saw it, so she still hid her bare hand beneath her cloak now. She almost regretted it, clenching her fist where he couldn’t see it; she hated how Sothe slowly set down the knife, even if that had been her intention. It was her turn to avert her gaze when he turned toward her, a knee knocking her knee, as she focused instead on the discarded glove.

“Show me,” he said.

Her hand was cold, *so cold*, as she slipped it out of the cloak.

He didn’t look at her.

Not right away.

Once, it had seemed easier to rid herself of the imprint, rather than conceal it. The skin didn’t scar. She *knew* it didn’t scar; she’d learned the mark came right back when the skin was maimed or burned, when nails gouged the back of her hand. She flinched when Sothe held her wrist. The fire was nearly gone, but she still prayed a stray ember would pop, scorching her hand, even if it would just repair itself again.

When she looked up, Sothe’s eyes weren’t the eyes she remembered. Those big, soft eyes had been hardened, perhaps for good. By the war. By Daein. By her.

Still, she wondered if he felt that spark of warmth—like the parting of a curtain, his newly-calloused thumb traced the curved lines on the back of her hand. Her Brand. Her *curse*.

“Forgive me,” she whispered. “You were right, Sothe. We made a promise, and I... I thought only of myself. I thought I knew what was best for you.”

Sothe plucked the discarded glove from the dusty floor. It seemed strange in someone else’s hand, when he carefully unfolded it, running those war-hardened hands over the old fabric. Micaiah couldn’t help but smile when he lifted her marked hand, trying his best to slide the glove over her fingers. He knew nothing of gloves like these, how the stiff fabric was hard to pull over the elbow, the fingers slightly askew as he fastened the high buckle. She would fix the seam later, allowing him this moment to smooth

over the back of her hand, over the very Brand she'd tried so hard to conceal from him.

"You're safe with me, Micaiah."

Sothe *had* grown, in how easily he slipped an arm around her shoulders. She wondered how long Nevassa could be their home, how long until they would have to move on to the next town, then the next. But she closed her eyes as Sothe held her marked hand, as she pressed her cheek to the growing warmth of Sothe's heart.