

**Quinn Stiefbold Narrative Sampler**  
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*This short story follows the origin story of two side characters from The Seventh Kingdom. A metallic shapeshifter named Squiggles finds a stranger meditating in a mysterious clearing. He becomes entranced by the being, visiting it every day. When the stranger threatens the safety of Squiggles' homeland, he must choose whether to save them or let them fade away.*

**Excerpt from *The Seventh Kingdom*** \_\_\_\_\_ 7

*After waking from a coma with no memories, Simon moves to Seattle for a fresh start. A year later, he wakes up into a world that is not his own. In this new, fantastical world, he is told the country is at war and he is their general. The people of this world are convinced that he can relearn magic and remember who he is in time to lead them to victory, but Simon just wants to return home.*

**A Moment in Between** \_\_\_\_\_ 11

*Ammie, Kor, and Marco are secret agents in a post-post-apocalyptic world. Finding themselves gifted with strange powers, they quickly become popular agents. In this short story, Ammie and Kor spend a moment together, trying to set aside their complicated past and dangerous future to just enjoy being around each other.*

**Always There for You** \_\_\_\_\_ 15

*In the same world as the previous short story, a different group of agents teleports into a hotel room where an operative has been nearly killed. The operative, gifted with the power to wipe minds, has lost control of the stories he'd woven. Remembering the secrets kept from them, Maar has to keep his feelings from interfering with his job.*

## *The Discovery*

by Quinn Stiefbold

Squiggles had never been here before. He'd been up and down this mountain since his creation, yet somehow, he'd never seen this clearing before.

It was beautiful, a world of its own. The trees bowed overhead, letting in patches of sky here and there while creating a cozy, relaxed feeling. At one end of the clearing was a pool of water, a deep expanse beneath a quiet waterfall. He wouldn't have found this place if not for that waterfall. He'd been walking by the cliff, unaware of what lay below him. He had not taken into account the current of the water when attempting a crossing. He'd quickly been carried over the edge and into the pool. Now he sat on the bank, looking at the surrounding land. Rocky land surrounded him, and past that, a mix of moss, flowers, and grass. The air felt cool and calm. It filled him with a sense of wonder and awe.

He noticed something odd at the base of the tree across from him. Cautiously, he rolled forward before taking his form once more. Against a tree making up the border of the clearing sat a man with violet skin.

Or at least he thought he was male. He was shirtless and barefoot, wearing only simple pants and a heavy black cloak draped around his shoulders and pooling around his legs. Strangely, although he was sitting against the tree, he was not in a relaxed position. He sat up straight, cross-legged, hands facing upward on his thighs, with only the lowest part of his back resting against the tree. Eyes closed, chest rising and falling in a steady pattern, he looked as if he were deep in a meditative state.

Squiggles crept closer, reaching a hand towards the man.

His arm tingled and he snatched it back.

There was a thick, dense cloud of magic surrounding the purple man. He'd never seen meditation this intense before. At the back of his head, a small voice wondered how long the man had been there. Another voice wondered how long he would stay there.

For hours he sat at a safe distance from the man, watching his chest rise and fall slowly. There was something fascinating about him. It could simply have been that he'd never seen a different species so close to his community without it being a threat.

Did he need food? Squiggles wondered. What about water?

When the sky began to darken, he stretched until he was standing. He had to go back home now. The tricky part was getting out of the clearing. He could push through the trees and look for a way back up. Or he could stretch back up the cliff. That seemed like the quickest and most fun option, so he stretched up the cliff like a slinky in reverse.

He wasn't able to return for two days, but when he did, nothing had changed. The clearing was still breathtaking, the man still meditated, the thick cloud of magic remained. Once again, he sat across from the man, imitating his position and studying his features. Neither man moved for hours. Today, he noticed the texture in the purple man's skin. It was different from other skin he'd seen – rougher and more regular, the same tiny shapes repeating over and over. There were raised areas of skin down his cheekbones, around his head, across his chest. Some

were a light, softer purple. Others were far darker. They didn't seem to be scar tissue, but rather part of his species design. He wondered why.

This time he stayed well into the next day before leaving. At night, the magic around the purple man was so dense it could be seen, giving him a warm, lilac glow.

On the fifth day, it began to rain. A soft, gentle rain the trees would have stopped, which may have been why the purple man had chosen this location. But this rain was hard and fast, wind ripping at trees, lightning tearing at the sky, thunder cracking above. Even the trees that towered protectively overhead were no match for the wind and rain.

When he reached the clearing, he immediately sensed that something was off. The air felt super charged, like right before lightning strikes. If he had hair, it would have been standing on end. As he neared the purple man, he noticed that he had changed. A slight frown pervaded his face, so slight that had he not spent the past few days learning this man's face, he would not have noticed. A slight downturn of the mouth. Lines between his brows. Head half a degree lower. He reached out a hand towards the cloud of magic. It didn't react violently to him this time, perhaps because it was used to his presence. But it felt uneasy and on the verge of spiraling out of control.

It made sense, that a storm this powerful could affect even the deepest of meditation. He frowned at the man. If he lost control of this amount of magic, he'd wipe the entire mountain off the face of the earth. Why hadn't he built a house or something?

Squiggles let his metallic form trickle down into a semi-liquid puddle. The cloud of magic didn't protest as he slithered through it. Carefully, he formed a ring around the man and stretched until all sides met, containing the purple man in an orb. The rain pinged against him, the sound growing duller and duller as he thickened the layers. When only a faint pattering of rain and the occasional, distant clap of thunder could be heard within the orb, he stopped growing. Beneath him, the purple man's features relaxed and the air grew less charged with the promise of explosion.

While the storm raged around him, his thoughts spun. What if this level of storm came up again but he couldn't get to the clearing? And what about when the man woke up? He seemed inclined to stay in meditation for weeks to come, but that level of energy was hard to maintain. Even if he didn't get lost in his own mind, he'd be too weak to move for weeks once he woke. He couldn't leave him out in the elements when he woke up. But he couldn't move him now – it would disturb his focus – or when he woke up – too much movement would surely kill him.

The obvious solution was to build a house around the man.

When the storm finally let up, he had to hurry home. He didn't know how to build a house. Talking to the craftsmen in town helped. Reading up on structure building helped. When he returned four days later, he was fairly certain he could build a structure that wouldn't collapse on the purple man. That would definitely disturb his concentration.

It took half a week to build a foundation, two more to build walls and a floor, three days for the roof, and another five days to finish and furnish the house. It was more of a hut or a cabin than a house, but that didn't really matter. It was short and cozy, not tiny, but small. The tree that the purple man was sitting against had been incorporated into the wall. It was an interesting design choice, but he hadn't had much of a choice – how else was he to build the house around

the man? He'd even included a chimney and was in the process of making some sort of bed. His people didn't really use beds, so the concept was somewhat foreign. All he knew was it raised a person off the ground so bugs couldn't get at them, or something along those lines. The frame he had built just barely did so.

He went on a trade route with one of their caravans and didn't return for a week. He picked up blankets, pillows, and something called a mattress. When he returned to the cabin, something felt wrong. Dumping the bought items carelessly on the bedframe, he moved to the purple man. There was a slight curve to his spine, more of his back pressed to the tree. His fingers had started to relax and curl inward. His chin dipped further down, and his shoulders were not as strong as before.

Was he getting tired? It was approaching at least two months now, plus however long he'd been there before Squiggles had found him. He reached out a hand to touch the cloud of magic. It was as quiet as usual. Nothing was wrong per se. It just looked wrong.

He climbed out to work on the roof. Parts had leaked the last time it rained. He'd marked the areas of interest with temporary patches while he was out with the caravan. Now he went over each area with painstaking attention. The work was calming, and he fell into a steady rhythm. Around him, the air cooled and an evening chill set in. He ignored the dimming sky until he could no longer see his hands. He set down his tools with a sigh. Not even half the holes had been patched. He let himself sink into a resting state and settled down to sleep. The tress above shut out most of the stars and he found that he missed them. Small patches were visible through the occasional gap in the trees, and some moonlight drifted through.

Not for the first time, he thought on the man beneath him. Who was he? Why was he there? What was he doing? What was his name? How long had he been there? Would he ever come out? Mind rolling, he eventually drifted off.

He woke with the dawn, watching the patches of sky turn purple, then red, then pink, then orange, then blue. His movements were slow as he gathered himself together. Not the most comfortable sleeping position, and he always got a little stiff when holding one position for too long in cool air. Before starting work on the roof, he stretched himself out. He mimicked the shapes of the trees, forming himself into abstract patterns. He grew extra legs and heads for the fun of it. He practiced manipulating light to reflect different colors. By the time he reformed into his preferred form, he was thoroughly warmed up.

It took him most of the day to finish the roof. He figured then that he should return home and let his people know he was alive. Poking his head into the cabin confirmed that the purple man was still there and still meditating.

He'd forgotten that it was the celebration of Mother Ore. A five-day festival of many cultural activities: dancing, music, epic poetry readings, slam poetry, theatrical performances, competitive writing, and of course, the so-called war games. As always, he was roped into doing a number of activities. Not that he didn't enjoy it. His troupe spent each day learning a new production to be performed at sunset. At midday he joined in theater games for public viewing – usually improvisational exercises. Somehow, he ended up in war games, demonstrating his light manipulation, form-shifting, and strategical skills. He enjoyed it. He really did. Like any other, he worshipped and thanked the Mother Ore and loved his culture.

But he couldn't stop thinking about the purple man, alone in his mind in the cabin he'd built. Was he okay? He hadn't looked so good the last time he'd been there. He'd seemed not just exhausted, but a little sad. Lost? Alone.

Was he worried about him?

By the end of five days, Squiggles had determined that, yes, he was worried about him.

He snuck out before the festival was technically over. Tradition stated that the festival lasted through the night, but as soon as numbers began to dwindle, he slipped away.

The early morning rays were rising by the time he reached the clearing. He paused beside the pool and observed. Everything was still. The trees didn't stir, the leaves didn't whisper. The air was heavy and silent. Beside him, the waterfall was frozen – not ice, but not moving. It was as if someone had pulled the moment out of time. A twinge of fear shot through him. Inside, the cabin was as still as the surrounding land. He moved with a slowness that matched the atmosphere to where the purple man was sitting.

Something was wrong. His spine curved, his back rested on the tree. He seemed to struggle to keep his head up. His fingers had drifted apart and curled inwards. Most alarmingly, there was black blood slowly sliding from his nose and his body was slightly translucent.

He must have been here long before he'd found him. That was the only explanation.

He would fade sometime between the next minute and the next week. Once he faded, he'd be gone forever. The magic wouldn't explode; it would slowly dissipate into the stream of magic once more. There was no threat in letting the man fade. He wasn't obligated to help him.

Even so, he seated himself in front of the man, so close that their knees touched. Imitating the man's initial posture, he reached out and clasped the purple man's upturned hands in his. He closed his eyes, opened his mind, and started to meditate.

His inner eye opened to nothing. The world around him was dark, silent, and nonexistent. His body drifted aimlessly, nowhere to go but nowhere to stay. He forced his mind to focus on every point of contact he had with the purple man. The slight pressure where their knees touched. His limp hands in his strong grip. A line of lilac light appeared in his mind, growing stronger every second. The light pulsated like a faint, fading heartbeat, gradually slowing. He grabbed the rope of lilac and pulled himself along it, hand after hand.

Technically, shared meditation was an intimate act performed by only the most trusting of lovers. One never knew what thought would come floating by. In some species it was the highest level of intimacy that could be reached. For it to work, both parties needed to be aware of the other and accept their influence.

Right now, he was basically breaking into the purple man's inner mind. He would be able to see him, but unable to influence him unless the purple man acknowledged and accepted his presence. He hadn't quite figured out how he would accomplish that.

He passed through a barrier and a world built itself around him. Rooms, doors, buildings, idle bits of words, and random swaths of magic. He'd entered the purple man's mind. The rope of light began to twist and turn around the clutter. He made an effort to focus on the light and ignore the man's thoughts. He was intruding as it was; no need to further violate the purple man's mind.

After what felt like days, he hit a different kind of barrier. The lilac rope turned gray and he could not move forward. The purple man was facing him, eyes closed. Different ropes of magic connected to him, draining him ever so slowly. He took in the perfectly sculpted naked figure in front of him, marveling at the raw beauty and power it suggested. A question bubbled beneath his lips. "I've been misgendering you," he murmured. "How do you identify?"

The purple being's eyes flew open, revealing tiny fires within each socket. Catching sight of the other man, a delicate crease appeared in their brow. They seemed to be surprised by the question and confused by Squiggles' presence. They may have even been weighing the consequences of answering. "I don't," they said finally, voice cool and flat.

The gray rope between them flared to life in an explosion of color and sensation. When he grabbed it to pull himself forward, he felt a flood of exhaustion hit him. Each grasp brought more and more feelings that weren't his and were impossible to decipher. He stopped in front of the purple figure. "You're lost," he said. "Let me take you back."

They didn't offer a response, staring at him with soulful, fiery eyes. He didn't want to pull them out without their permission. He also didn't want them to fade.

Their body flickered for a moment and the space around both of them shook. The purple being closed their eyes, an expression of pain clear on their face.

"Alright, that's it," he told them. "I'm getting you out of here." He hoped he wasn't imagining the relief that passed across their face. He snaked an arm around their waist, pulling their bodies together. His other hand still rested on the rope that would take them back to the beginning. The purple being slipped their arms around his neck and the two began to rise through the levels. It was far quicker going up than down, and it wasn't long before they were back in the space of nothingness. He reached out to his physical form, focusing once more on the points of contact between him and the purple being. Knees brushing. Limp hands in his strong grip.

He opened his eyes.

The person across from him was no longer translucent. But they weren't awake yet. He released their hands to lean forward and check for a pulse. Slow but steady. He frowned. Why weren't they waking up? He cupped their face between his hands and studied it for any sign of activity. More blood had come from their nose, and he wiped it away gently, discovering in the process that the blood was not black, but an impossibly dark shade of purple.

Heavy eyelids struggled open and fiery eyes met blank metal eyes. Belatedly, he realized he'd forgotten to manipulate light. He did so then, hurriedly adding color to his features.

He pulled his hands away from their face, realizing it was a bit of an odd way to treat a stranger. As he did, they leaned forward, following his touch.

Their eyes met once more before the purple being's eyes flickered closed, and they slumped forward, collapsing against his chest.

He scooped them up, walked the ten steps to the bed, and set them down gently. After fetching a bit of water for when they woke, he settled down to watch over them.

## Excerpt from *The Seventh Kingdom*

by Quinn Stiefbold

They reached the courtyard just as one of the gates opened. Michael said nothing, just pushed Simon towards the stables. They approached their horses and began to saddle them. Michael had probably never been so grateful that Simon knew how to ride.

Amy had loved riding. She'd told Simon about the job she'd had in high school, working in a stable outside the city. In her free time there, she got to ride the horses. She took him there many times, revisiting the place she grew up. Until he had an attack while riding and fallen from his horse. Without discussing it, they agreed that riding was out of the question.

Pushing the memory away, Simon listened to hoofbeats against cobblestone, followed by a voice crying out, "Doc! Michael! Naya! Help! Someone, please help!"

Simon smothered a gasp. That was Amy's voice, he'd recognize it anywhere.

Michael glanced at him. "Amara. I should go see what's wrong. Finish getting my horse ready once you've finished yours."

He ran into the courtyard before Simon had the chance to say anything. "Amara, what's happened? Who's hurt?" Simon quickly finished his horse and moved on to Michael's.

"We were surrounded," Amy's voice said. "I split us up. Took seven with me, some of our best since the path was so clogged. Zika and Al'haryt are dead. We don't know what happened to Storm, she disappeared. Lucifer's concussed. Lysander and Squiggles will be fine, I'm just scraped, but. Will..." her voice broke on the word. "Where's Doc? We need Doc!"

"Here," came Doc's gravelly voice. "Let me see her. Michael, help Amara down."

Finished with both horses, Simon moved to the front of the stable to watch what was happening.

A man made entirely of metal was helping someone off a horse. His skin was red and there were thick horns nestled in curly black hair. There was a cut across his forehead that oozed black blood into his eyes. Probably Lucifer, the concussed one. Someone came over to help the metal man. They were humanoid, seemingly genderless. Their body was dark violet, draped in a dark cloak and nothing else. Their eye sockets were empty except for fire. Instead of eyes, they had little burning fires in their eye sockets.

Simon congratulated himself on not freaking out. He wasn't used to seeing this, that was for sure.

The purple person's cloak was torn, but they seemed uninjured. One of the metal man's arms looked partially melted. Lucifer had a rag tied around his forearm. The three limped together into the building.

Michael was supporting Amara, who swayed unsteadily on her feet. Simon frowned. She was familiar, she was so familiar. Sure, her ears were pointed, and large ivory wings stirred behind her. But when she pulled off her helmet, he saw short black hair falling into dark eyes. There was a cut across her cheek, oozing gold blood, but. It was Amy. It was Amy, with wings and pointy ears and gold blood and short hair, but it was Amy.

He forced himself to look away and take in the rest of the scene. Doc was bent over a stretcher that had been set on the cobblestones. A young woman lay on it, probably only a couple

years younger than Amara. Her body was unnaturally still, and there was so much blood. Doc climbed stiffly to his feet, giving Simon a better view of the ugly gash down the center of her chest. The bleeding was slow, but that couldn't be a good thing, not with a wound like that.

"Amara," Doc said softly. "She's already gone."

"Can you not save anything?" Amara spat, swaying on her feet. "Can you not save anyone?"

"You know that's not fair," Michael interrupted.

All the energy drained from her body. "Can I?" she asked Michael, pointing at the ground beside the young woman. Michael helped her kneel beside what he assumed to be Will, the squire. Amara gripped Will's hand and gave it a squeeze. She glanced around the courtyard, checking to make sure it was just her, Michael, and Doc. Her eyes passed over the hidden Simon easily. "You little shit," she whispered. "I can't face this war without you. You were right." She brought a fist up to cover a sob. Doc and Michael were in the process of backing away slowly, Michael headed towards the stables

"I don't want a new squire!" Amara screamed. Then, quieter, "I don't want a new squire. I'm sorry, Will, I'm so sorry." She reached out, brushed dark hair from the woman's eyes. Covering her mouth, she began to cry quietly.

Simon felt his heart tearing in two. He needed to comfort this woman who looked and spoke like Amy. Not just because she looked like Amy. Because it felt like he should, like it was what the general would have done. But Michael had made it clear that Amara shouldn't see him yet.

It wasn't fair, this woman being dead. Death was anything but fair, he knew this. He'd give anything if, just this once, death didn't win. Her body was probably still warm to the touch. Simon clenched his fists.

"Simon. We should go now," Michael whispered in his ear.

Simon ignored him. If there was magic in this world, why couldn't they save her? What use was magic if it couldn't save the people you loved? A weight settled in Simon's feet and began to climb up his legs, up his chest, all the way to his head. Something squeezed tight around him, making him gasp for breath. Was he under attack?

His body began to glow with a strange, grayish light. And he knew, immediately, that this was magic. It wormed beneath his skin, desperate to get out. His legs began to move, and he found himself across the courtyard, standing in front of Amara and Will.

"Move," he said.

Amara scrambled away, dark eyes wide. "Who? What?" was all she could get out.

Simon was stuck, not sure what to do next. All the magic theory books had said nothing about this.

Luckily, the magic had a mind of its own. It began to form a glowing sphere above his hand. When it was the size of a tennis ball, it broke away from the glow surrounding him. "Open her mouth," he ordered, kneeling down. Amara obeyed, and the sphere flew into Will's mouth.

Immediately, her wound began to close, and color returned to her cheeks. The light around Simon faded, and he braced himself against the ground, out of breath.

"What the hell was that?" Amara demanded, drawing close. "And who the hell are you?"



Simon leaned away, pulling his hood lower, and shrugged in answer to the question. A master of deceit, truly.

Also, he couldn't get up, not kneeling like this, not with his legs as bad as they were. "Michael, bring the horses here," he called over his shoulder. Although he was shaking inside, his voice managed to come out authoritative.

What had he just done? Also, how had he just done what he'd done? Obviously, it was magic, he wasn't an idiot. But he also didn't know how he'd known to know how to do what he'd just done.

"What's going on?" Amara demanded. "Who are you? Show your face!" With a flap of her wings, she was standing, towering over Simon. Simon tried to stand tall, but he was kneeling. It didn't make him feel very strong.

Will gasped for breath. Simon gripped her hand and leaned over her. "Will? Can you hear me?" he asked.

Her eyes flickered open. They searched frantically for something to focus on before meeting Simon's gaze. Her eyes were a soft hazel that widened as she saw Simon's face.

The unique angle granted to Will from her position on the ground gave her a perfect view of Simon's face. Her lips struggled to open, and she tried to speak. "Si- Sim-?" She interrupted herself with a wave of coughs and wound up gasping for breath.

"Shh," Simon said, panicking. "It's okay. You're safe." He glanced up towards Amara. "She'll be fine. Just needs rest. Both of you do."

Amara stared at him, mouth agape. "How the fuck did you do that? She was dead. Her heart had stopped."

"I suppose her brain hadn't finished shutting down," Doc offered. "So, I suppose, he healed her and restarted her heart, although I'm not sure how."

"Who is he?"

"A traveling sorcerer," Doc said smoothly. Simon nodded, feeling dumb. He should've thought of that lie.

"We probably haven't run into each other before. Unless you were much, much younger. Much."

Amara frowned at that, but Will came to the rescue.

"General," she gasped. "Amara, it's –"

"She wants you," Simon said quickly, interrupting Will before she unrescued him.

"She never calls me general," Amara said, scowling. She kneeled back beside her squire. "What's wrong, Will?"

Michael arrived with the horses and took in the situation. "Need a hand?" he asked.

Beneath the hood of his cloak, Simon grinned. "More like a lift."

"Got you." Michael grabbed Simon under the arms and hoisted him to his feet. "Can you mount by yourself?"

"Yeah. I was just stuck." Nevertheless, Michael held his horse's reins while he mounted. Once they were both seated, they turned to go.

"Michael! Where are you going?" Amara called. Seeing the horses, she jumped to her feet, anger twisting her face. "That's Simon's horse. What are you doing with it?"

“We need to go, now,” Michael hissed.

“It’s him!” Will choked out.

In the second Amara glanced down at her, Simon kicked his heels into his horse’s side and galloped out of the gate.

## *A Moment in Between*

by Quinn Stiefbold

Kor shook her awake. “Hm?” she asked groggily, sitting up. “What time is it?”

“About half an hour to your meeting with the generals,” he said softly. “How’d you sleep?”

She shrugged. “So-so My back hurts a little. How’d everyone take it?”

He perched on the armrest. “So-so. They were really confused, but your directions were very detailed, so they all know what to do. They just can’t see the bigger picture and want to know why.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“Can you see the bigger picture?”

He thought about it. “Yes. I think I can.”

“And Marco?”

“He can, too.”

“No, I know that. How mad is he? At me?”

Kor sighed, sliding off the arm and leaning his head against the side of the chair. Ammie let her head fall down to rest on the armrest so she could see him better. “He’s not mad at you.”

Ammie frowned. “No, he’s definitely mad. Upset, you know?”

“Ammie, you’re misdiagnosing his feelings,” Kor said. “He’s worried about you.”

She sighed. “Really? Why?”

He didn’t speak.

She looked down at him, memorizing his facial features, the slight upturn to his nose. His sea-blue eyes wouldn’t meet hers. He was frowning. “Are you worried too?” she asked softly.

“Yeah.”

“For all the same reasons as before or has something else come up?”

He shrugged, still not meeting her eyes.

This conversation could go one of two ways. She could press him for information, leading to a fight between them and her getting some, maybe none, of what she was looking for. Or she could be quiet and let him get uncomfortable in the silence. Maybe then he’d tell her in his own time.

While option one seemed preferable in the short run and much more fun, option two would yield the best results and bode much better for the long run. She let her eyes drift close and her mind wander from topic to topic. Nothing stressful. Nothing frustrating. Just thinking softly.

“You’re just the kind of person people worry about,” Kor finally said. She didn’t answer, waiting for him to continue. “I mean, in the whole scheme of things, the fate of this world often rests upon your shoulders, and those who care about you don’t want to see you get hurt.” She really wanted to make a biting remark about how stupid that sounded because he had tried to kill her at least twice. But she was on a roll now and so was he – better just to let him talk. “You’re changing in ways we don’t understand,” he continued. “Thinking faster, becoming smarter – it’s

bizarre and we don't understand it. And I guess we're worried that one day that brain of yours will drag you into a new kind of trouble. And you're having these mood swings and sometimes get so tired and then you're exhausted all the time. That's not normal. And occasionally you start limping again and sometimes you move so stiffly. You haven't been injured that seriously in over a year! There was that whole episode on the trip here, and I just wish you would trust me a little bit more! I care about you and I don't want you to get hurt."

"You see me get hurt every time you look into my eyes," she reminded him.

"I know," he whispered. "I do."

Ammie digested his rant, figuring out what she could say in response. "There are so many things I want to tell you," she said at last, "but I can't. I don't know the answers to some of your questions. And there are things I have sworn not to tell you and the others. There are even things you haven't noticed that I want to tell you, but I can't. Not without putting you and myself in danger. I wish I could trust you, I want to so badly, but I can't. Because of everything you've ever done to me, I can't. You know, how you've tried to kill me? And lied to me? And you don't trust me with your secrets for the exact same reason I can't trust with mine." Her throat was tight.

He reached his hand up to hers. She clasped it, hanging on to him like a lifeline. "Ammie, I promise you, everything I have ever done to hurt you or betray you has been part of a larger picture, part of guaranteeing the future. But you will always be part of that future. I promise."

His voice sounded just as tight as her. She sniffed, blinking away tears. "And what about you?" she asked. "Are you part of that future?"

"I'm always okay," he said softly, the same, somber way he always did. "I need you to remember that. I'm always okay."

"What does that even mean?" she demanded.

"It means I'll be fine."

"No, the way you say it," she spat. "You say it like it's a bad thing. But it's not. Because we need you. No matter how much we pick on you and tease and whatever, we need you to be here." She laughed a little. "You're smarter than you pretend to be, and stronger, too. Possibly stronger than me. Even through you can't be trusted, I can count on you to have my back."

"Ammie," Kor warned. It was the warning voice that meant he had seen something nasty in her future and they were following the path towards it. She stopped talking.

After several seconds of silence, she asked, "Actually, there is something you can help me with?"

"What?"

She tugged his hand, pulling him around to the other side of the chair. "Can you look at my foot? And do whatever it was you did before? Because it still hurts. All the time."

"Why wasn't it healed any of the other times a healer looked at you?" he asked, starting to examine the old injury.

"Some couldn't sense it. Some couldn't fix it."

He finished and sighed. "I don't know. Just keep it wrapped up, and maybe elevate and ice it when it acts up?"

She nodded, sliding off the chair to sit next to him. "What would I do without you?" she asked, resting her head on his shoulder.

He smiled. "Nothing good, that's for sure."

She smirked and elbowed him, but her smile faded almost immediately.

"Hey," Kor said, nudging her. "What's wrong?"

He was worried. Again.

"Thinking," she whispered.

"About what?"

She buried her face in his shoulder. "Don't ask. Please. Just, don't ask." He hesitated and she looked up at him. "Kor. Please. Don't ask, I can't."

"Hey, it's okay," he murmured, turning to face her. "I understand. No questions."

Ammie relaxed. "Thanks," she whispered, resting her head on his shoulder once more. "I thought you would."

He grinned half-heartedly, wrapping an arm around her. "That's one thing I'm good at. And, Ammie?"

"Hmm?" She tilted his head to see his face better.

"You know I'm always here, right? If you need anything, I'm here."

She smiled. "I know I can count on you." They fell into companionable silence.

Suddenly, Ammie realized he'd never actually answered her question. "Kor."

He stiffened. "What?"

"You never actually said. Why do you say it like it's a bad thing?"

He sighed, letting his head drop onto hers. "Ammie...the future is really messy. You can never tell what will actually happen. But there are ways to predict things pretty accurately. There are some constant events that will happen no matter what. And some things have a very high or very low probability of happening. I'm always fine. No matter what." He took a deep breath.

"But you aren't."

Ammie took a moment to gather her thoughts before speaking. "What do you mean? You said I'm always part of the future."

"You are. But not for long. I'm always fine. But no matter what path I look at, someone I love isn't fine, and you're often one of them."

"That doesn't have to happen," she promised. "I can choose my future. I can choose to live."

"You can't choose like that," he hissed. "You can't change what's going to happen."

"Yes, I can!" she cried, starting to her feet.

He grabbed her arm. "Don't leave me," he begged. "Please."

She sat back down. "It's okay," she murmured, wrapping an arm around him. "I'll never leave you."

He didn't respond, just wrapped his arm around her again and pulled her close.

Marco opened the office door and walked in. When he saw the two sitting on the ground together, both red-eyed from crying, he took a step back. "Am I interrupting something?" he asked cautiously.

The two shared a look. “No, I think we were just finished,” Kor said, standing up. He offered Ammie a hand. She accepted.

“What can we do for you?” she asked. She made to walk towards him, but her whole body was stiff again. She stumbled and would have fallen if Kor hadn’t caught her. He wrapped an arm around her waist, supporting her.

*You okay?* Marco asked through their mental connection.

*I’d say I’m fine, but that would be too obvious a lie,* she smirked. *What did you need?*

“Kor said you might get distracted so I should come in and poke you when there’s five minutes to your meeting.”

Ammie cursed. “Right. Um, okay. Thanks, Marco. Kor, you’re coming with me. Marco, return to your station, but keep your mind open. I might have instructions for you and the others. Let’s go.”

Marco ran out of the room and back towards his office. Kor helped Ammie out of the room. “I think we scared him,” she noted.

*Always There for You*

by Quinn Stiefbold

Maar clutched Fintle's arm as they appeared in the hotel room. They had to be quiet – Fintle's invisibility didn't muffle their sound. They had found that one out the hard way.

He looked around the hotel room, taking it in quickly. The plaster to one side was torn up from gunfire. He saw the assassin first, a hole in his throat. But he was still facing the door, so he hadn't shot Soco, someone else must have. His gaze was still sweeping the room but stopped on Soco. He had pulled himself into a sitting position in the corner and was leaning against the wall. His gun was freshly loaded, and he was keeping watch for someone. But his eyes were glazed and his breaths shallow. He'd been shot three times, each one landing in his upper chest. They barley had a minute.

He heard water running in the bathroom. Maar looked at Fintle, and they reappeared inside the bathroom. This man was dressed just like the other and had rested his gun against the door. He knew both Ammie and Soco would prefer to interrogate him than kill him. Carefully adjusting time, he placed the man in a chokehold. Out almost instantly. "Take care of him," Maar ordered. "Be extra careful – he passed Soco's attention. There may be something gifted about him."

Fintle nodded.

Maar turned on his heel and ran back to Soco. His breath caught in his throat when he saw that Soco was no longer sitting. He had collapsed onto the ground. There was way too much blood around him. "Soco?" he whispered, kneeling down slowly.

Soco's eyes flickered open. "Maar?" he asked softly. "But you...I..."

"You wiped my mind," he whispered fiercely. "How could you do that? To me?"

Soco shrugged and winced. "Ow. Bad idea. Ammie was adamant. You believed Kor should be killed. She needed that gone." His voice gave way and he started coughing. Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. "Oh, shit. He got a lung."

Maar fought the urge to laugh and cry. "Soco, you'll be okay," he whispered.

His friend made a scoffing sound. "You didn't bring Kathy. There's nothing she could do, anyway. My time is too short."

"Soco," he started.

"Maar, shut up. Tell Ammie I'm sorry and tell Marco to calm the hell down. And tell Kor if he ever tries to kill any of us again, I will come back from the grave and haunt him until he dies."

Maar felt tears spilling from the corners of his eyes. "Soco, stop. You aren't going to die."

"Yes, I am. You should leave now. The guy might come back."

"He's been subdued. And we're not leaving you to die."

"I don't have the time to heal properly," Soco cried. "I'm dying, goddamnit, and I'm scared. Okay? Happy? I, Soco, am scared of dying. Are you glad?"

"Oh, will you two please get a room?" Fintle muttered, walking into the room and dragging the assassin behind him.

They both glared at him.

“If you ever say something like that again,” Maar started angrily, but stopped when he saw Fintle mocking him. “Don’t make me shoot you too,” he finished.

“I feel like you aren’t taking me dying seriously enough,” Soco muttered.

“Of course we aren’t,” Fintle said. “We’re mad.”

“You made me forget everything,” Maar snapped.

“Maar,” Soco whined. “Why are you doing this to me? I don’t have time.”

“Because you aren’t going to die. I *am* time, remember?” Maar held his palms flat over Soco’s chest. “This is going to hurt. A lot.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, they were solid white. He reached out with his magic and brushed Soco’s dark brown magic to the side. Then he wrapped Soco’s entire body in purple, still holding the brown to the side. The purple was spinning clockwise, the natural forward motion of time. Tugging gently, he pulled the purple in the other direction. He heard Soco let out a cry as his skin, bones, tendons, and nerve endings knit back together, as his blood flowed back into him. The purple magic slowed and eventually flowed back to him. He returned the brown magic to Soco.

He let his muscles relax and collapsed back against the foot of the bed. Sweat poured down his face. “That was harder than I remembered.”

“That hurt more than I remembered,” Soco groaned, sitting up.

“Hey, Soco,” Fintle said slowly, “you remember how you told me that one time that if I ever remembered that conversation it meant you had lost control of everything?”

“Yeah,” Soco said, drawing the word out.

“Well I just remembered it.” Soco stared at him blankly. Fintle groaned. “Is your mind messed up or something? Right now, Ammie is in a room with Kor and Marco, and Marco is just now remembering what happened.”

Soco groaned. “You’re right. But I can’t reestablish it right now. I’m not strong enough yet.”

“What are we going to do?” Maar asked. “Marco is going to kill Kor, and Ammie is going to be freaking out because she’ll think you’re dead and her also her brother will be trying to kill her ex.”

“Should I get her?” Fintle asked, getting to his feet.

Maar shook his head. “She specifically said to wait for her to message us.”

Soco pulled a pen out of his pocket and started writing on his hand. “I’m telling her we need her now,” he explained. “We do have an assassin to interrogate.”

“Just like old times!” Fintle said happily.

“Almost,” Maar said softly.