

The Liminalis

Chapter 46: Piedmont's Best

With a lighter heart, I go home, fix a meal, and sit in the backyard to eat. Hover is sniffing around the garden. I worry that she'll wander away, but then remind myself that I don't own her. I want her with me as long as she wants to stay.

Memories return, and with them, a parade of conflicting feelings. *BECK*—my first communication with the liminalis. The freedom I felt when I finally moved in here with Kanith's help. A menacing Skeet walking through the gate. Bolyn and I exploring the possibility that there was something significant to the liminalis' habit of hanging out near the viact vines.

"So much that we still don't know," I whisper. *Should I go home and finish my studies? Is Oriel right that I'd be of more use if I do that first?* I search for an intuition about whether to go or stay, but I'm no help to myself.

The doorbell buzzes, and fear rises in me. It only takes a second to remind myself that Skeet has bigger problems than me, but even so, I walk as soundlessly as possible to the door and look out the peephole.

I gasp, not believing my eyes.

I throw open the door and throw my arms out. "Dell! Dell, Dell, Dell!" I squeal. Our feet move in a happy dance as we hug. After we calm down, I get her inside and show her around.

We finally settle on my bed.

"I can only stay a couple of days," she says with an exaggerated frown.

"Way better than nothing! Gemisse set this up?"

"Yes, we've been working on it for weeks—ever since you almost got deported."

I ask about her life and Piedmont. She gives me a quick run-down of her classes, the gal in her Astronomy class she's interested in but hasn't had the nerve to approach yet, and a gossipy report of a minor, but viral scandal concerning the boy band we were obsessed with in our younger days.

I'm on my side rolling with glee by the time she's done.

When this subsides, she says, "I am sorry I missed seeing the cabin. That sounded lovely."

"I'll show you. It was nice, but—" I look around. "I'm so glad to be back in my little house!"

"Of course. It was your dad's."

"Right." I nudge her in the leg with my bare foot. "I can't believe you and Mother kept this a secret. How fabulous it is to lay eyes on you. You look great." She does. She wears her dark hair cropped super short on the sides and back, but with a froth of curls on top. Her light brown skin seems to glow. Well, that was always true of Dell. It's just been so long since I've seen her. The longest we've been apart since we met our first year of school.

She smiles, and I realize I'm staring.

"No wonder you haven't answered my recent messages! You are clearly in love," I say.

Her face colors, and she takes a turn at hitting my leg with her foot.

"No. Seriously. It's a good thing you came because now we'll have time to make a foolproof plan to move that relationship along."

"So, what's happening in Colony Arroyo now?" she asks, clearly wanting to change the subject. "Is Skeet... okay?"

I shrug. "No word. His people are keeping a tight lid on any information, but Mother's returned to work, so she'll know more soon."

"Does it ever amaze you how much you've been through since you left home?"

"Every damned day. Hey, we have no time to waste. I have so many things to show you!"

While Dell's freshening up from her journey, I contact Gemisse. "Dell's here! Thank you so much!"

She laughs. "Wonderful. She was pretty brave to come after what happened to you on the way to Royo."

"True. I didn't think about that. Hey, is there any chance you'd let me borrow your car so I can show her around?"

"Look outside. In front."

"What? Why?"

"Because I have another surprise for you."

I open the door and sitting on the street in front of 622 is a blue hovercar. It looks brand new. "I— Is it rented?"

"I bought it for you. Don't be mad. It's time you have a way to move around the colony on your own."

"Mother. I'm blown away. Are you sure? Is the one you bought me blue?"

"Yes, you bird. Look in your mailbox for everything you'll need. Now go enjoy your friend. And let's have dinner together tomorrow night, okay? I'll send you a time and place when I've decided. Take her by my house too. It's a nice view. And bring her here."

I laugh. "I will, I will. I promise she'll get the full spectrum Arroyo has to offer."

We do pack it in. I take her to every district, including Copernicus, which I have never even seen before.

The second day, we go to Plastic City.

"Being under my own steam, so to speak, with my own vehicle, is incredibly freeing."

"I'm surprised she didn't give you transportation before now."

"She would have, but I was so physically unreliable for so long, and then when I got better, we weren't exactly friendly."

"I'm thrilled that you've made progress. It did not look good. I didn't think you'd even like each other, much less be growing toward closeness."

"You and me both."

I show her the communal dining hall where I saw my first denizens. I take her to Nilajah's house.

"It looks the same," I say, "as if it's waiting for her to walk back in any minute."

"There's a lot of sadness here, huh?"

"Oh yes. Nilajah's death is still so fresh. On the other hand, people here are remarkably resilient—have been for generations. That's what Plastic City is to me."

"Will it change now? For these people?"

"It must. It's weird though. I haven't given this community much thought since the scene the on the mesa. Gods. It's just been a jumble of reactions, and checking on people, and so much unknowing."

"But it's more hopeful, now?"

I grin at her. "I can count on you to cut through the fog that I tend to produce around me. Yes. There is hope that there is a future for Royo that does not include ostracizing many of its own citizens. But what happens to this little special community? I don't know. I hope it doesn't cease to exist. There's a lot of camaraderie here."

I take her to Tig's house and introduce her.

Before we move on, I ask, "How's everyone doing here?"

He snorts and says, "Why does everyone think I know everything about this place?"

I put my hand on my hip and give him a look.

"Okay, okay," he says. "I can only tell you that while we are our usual fractious bunch of uber-individualists, there is an undercurrent of mild optimism."

"Excellent."

Dell asks, "Will you continue to live here?"

"I will. This is home."

"I hope most people feel that way," I say.

"With changes, yes, me too. Hopefully, more of us will be able to find work, and we can get some improvements made. Perhaps you can put in a word with your influential friends about that kind of thing?"

I give him a friendly shove. "Whatever I can do, I will."

On our way back to the car, Dell says, "So the liminalis have been quiet?"

I nod. "It worries me."

"They're probably traumatized."

"Of course. Nothing to do but wait and see." I look at her. "Have I exhausted you?"

"Me? No. I have a long list of places you have to show me. Let's climb a tree!"

I squeal. "I love you!"

We explore the javalis for hours. I show her the symbols and the ways the Attractors figured out how to navigate the colony through the forest. We see many clusters of liminalis in the upper levels hanging out near the vines. I try, but they don't talk to me.

Later, we have fala at an outdoor bar.

Afterward, with a buzz on, we find ourselves at a salon having our faces decorated with Arroyon line art. Dell gets a graceful smattering of black abstract arabesque swirls. I choose blue festoons of viact vines.

The next morning, we arrive at the Breeding Grounds at dawn.

"Kanith brought me here at this time of day," I say, "so I wanted you to be introduced to it the way I was."

She's bathed in golden light as she looks out across the wetlands.

I gaze at the rainbow of creatures below us and shudder at how close we came to losing them.

Dell puts an arm around my shoulders. "I think you can relax now. I know that life will still have all kinds of challenges, but I have watched you every place we've been and you're a bit... haunted by what's happened."

"I am, aren't I?"

She nods. "I want you to know that you are not in charge of fixing everything."

"No? Well, thank gods for that."

"I'm going to keep reminding you to let go of some of the angst you've accumulated. Keep breathing. Have some fun. Be okay with yourself and your life. Find someone to have sex with—if you like that sort of thing, that is."

She's trying to crack me up, but I take her words seriously. I breathe in her serenity and her wisdom. "I agree with all that. Thank you. I will appreciate gentle reminders. I think I'll need them."

The three-day visit is over in a flash. I drive Dell to the port and watch with some anxiety as she boards. I don't remember the pilot or the crash—and that's good, I think—but it's *with* me. In my body. She's right. I really do need to work on letting go of some of this tension. I message her.

—*Thank you for being my mirror.*

I'm half-way home before she responds.

—*Your mirror?*

—*You reflect back at me who I really am. My essence. I need that in the worst way. Thank you for coming. Thank you for being my friend. Thanks for keeping me in your heart. I will always return the same to you.*

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