



Excerpt

S N Renva

Chapter 5

As Sketch was led out of the dark garden, distance between her and the only gate home grew deep. She struggled to define the peculiar consciousness that came over her as they entered this unknown world. It was the meeting place between exhilaration and fear.

The garden had been silent, with the noise of their footsteps and the wind against the foliage providing the only audible sounds. However, all that changed as they turned the corner around the large stonewall. Noise bellowed and blew from every direction and the world that had just been so silent was now filled with sound.

Sketch's breath caught in her throat as she beheld a bewildering maze of brick and stone buildings, lined with green vines and sprawling patches of emerald moss. Every turn introduced a new set of small businesses and buildings, each with their own unique style, shape, and smell.

"Stay close." Said Beck as he grabbed Sketch's arm, pulling her off of the grass and onto the town's stone road.

There was a dizzying array of shops. A rail lined a raised path for what appeared to be a second level--like a second story to the whole town.

People, or what looked like people, hustled along the balcony walking into various rooms above the shops, carrying bags and assorted items to their homes above the stores.

The town was packed tight, and their little group had to maneuver as people pushed past them in a hurry, ducking and dodging through the streets. One or two particularly rushed individuals collided right into Sketch. The scene reminded Sketch of open window shopping at Christmas.

In this bustling town, not everyone was so eager to join in the fray; there were some who sat on steps playing chess, not even remotely responsive to their surroundings. Others sat on window sills, talking with cups of steaming liquid grasped in their hands.

The town was lit by the many intricate iron torches mounted on lampposts along the road and by the doors of every shop.

White lights decorated the trees that staggered along the street line giving the town a warm glow. Roots rose above the ground, painting the ground with its unique texture of broken stone.

"Careful" Beck caught her elbows, as she tripped over one of the roots. "Do I need to carry you through here too?"

Sketch scowled and shook her elbows free, almost tripping over another root.

"You sure?"

Radar hit Beck on the back of his head, "She'll figure things out."

As she moved forward and took in a breath of this new air, it seemed different than the air she was used to breathing back home. It might have been the bakery across the street, where she could smell the fragrance of fresh baked pastries and of sweet wines. Breathing felt more valuable; and the air felt rich in her lungs.

"Sketch." Beck caught her hand.

"I'm fine" She pulled away, "I can walk."

"No, no, come here. You need to see this." Reluctantly, Sketch let him lead her across the street to where a small crowd had gathered. Beck pulled her closer so she could get a better view.

In the middle of the circle of people, painting a small section of the sidewalk, was an old man.

A street performer.

Sketch was used to seeing street performers. After all, they were everywhere on street corners and the boardwalks back home.

She had never seen one who worked with such fluidity. This old man's painting resembled a dance; his brushes moved like streamers, leaving a trail behind them as paint covered the sidewalk. Sketch was fully engrossed in his rhythm and movement.

Beck's interest didn't lie with the artist, but with the girl standing beside him. He watched Sketch become more and more enchanted by the painting. Her eyes grew large in excitement and anticipation as she awaited the finish. This was the moment Beck had been waiting for; he watched her closely.

Swift yet sure, the artist brought his painting into shape. The sidewalk canvas revealed three blue birds, eyes sharp, feathers in uncanny detail, wings spread--poised as if ready to take flight. Each bird similar, yet totally unique in expression. Sketch was awed by their beauty as the old man put the finishing touches on his work. Finally, he dropped his paintbrush and stood back to view his finished creation.

Sketch was struck by the depth of detail in the work, how even from the ground the painting seemed to be in motion. The old man closed his eyes and took a deep, intentional breath. He stood there motionless for only a moment, but the time was enough to catch the breath of his audience. The man's hands descended to the ground. Sketch's eyes went wide as she watched, the artist reach into the sidewalk, cupping around the biggest bird.

As lifelike as the birds appeared, Sketch still couldn't believe what she was seeing. She shook her head to clear her vision and looked back at the man kneeling beside his art. With a joyful cry he threw his hands above his head and the bird, no longer trapped in the sidewalk, flew swiftly upwards into the night sky. After the first bird was released, the rest of them followed in quick succession; three very beautiful and very real birds flying out of the ground and disappearing in the distance, mirroring the stars they flew under.

The man smiled upwards toward his creation, left with only a blank sidewalk and his paints at his feet.

Beck was incredibly pleased with Sketch's reaction. He had watched her face light up as the birds took flight. She gave him a huge smile that practically screamed, "I want to try!"

"Come on, you'll get your chance.", he said with a smile.

They walked away from the scene but Sketch couldn't help peeking over her shoulder, glancing back at the man standing on the sidewalk, his head still gazing up at the sky, unmoved. A few young children were watching him as well; they all whispered and giggled to each other. Sketch felt like her reaction matched that of the children.

"What happened to the birds?" Sketch looked up to the sky, searching for the faintest glimmer of the new creations.

"They're, there," Beck said without looking up. "Once you bring a painting to life, you can't undo it without

destroying it, killing it, or just waiting for it to fade. unless it's manipulated, then it last longer though."
"What's the difference?"

"Inspiring is starting from scratch and creating a piece with every detail you want it to have, along with personality and meaning. It's taking a paintbrush, or pencil, or whatever it is you use and drawing then making it live and breathe. Manipulation is taking something already made, like a statue, or a Sculpture, something already in three dimensional form, made by someone else who intended it to be different and making it believe it's alive and can live and breathe. Manipulations tend to last a really long time. They usually break or shatter before they fade."

Sketch pondered this new information as she looked around, taking her eyes off the architecture and making eye contact with several people as they passed. She began to notice a few deformities in some of them. Among the regular passersby, there were people with one eye larger than the other, uneven faces, disproportioned bodies; hidden in plain sight and all bearing clear signs of the powers that Beck was describing. Above them a family of stone people walked across the street. Sketch also caught a glimpse of a woman without a mouth or ears. Some didn't even look human; they passed one man who was nothing more than a silhouette--a walking shadow.

Beck sighed, seeing her horror at the fading creations.

"Nothing's perfect, Sketch. A Spiritus isn't God; nothing comes out perfect, nothing's stable, and nothing lasts."

As a small group of men walked past them, a chill ran up the back of Sketch's neck and a few of the art pieces shrank away to the shadows. The group were all tall, dressed in attractive black coats with their heads held high as they talked to each other quietly. Sketch involuntarily stumbled back.

"Nothing to worry about, dear; those are just council members," Radar whispered.

Beck didn't respond like anything was wrong, he just took her by the shoulders and nonchalantly guided her around the corner.

"Here we are," he said, smiling.

He took a turn into a small tea shop with a twisted sign out front shaped like a teacup that read, "Emily's Essence".

A warm comforting scent surrounded them as they entered the small shop; the noise and busyness of the outside streets vanished. Beautiful round wooden tables lined the walls and were also scattered haphazardly around the room. Various types of couches and chairs held a variety of chatting groups of people or quiet readers buried in their books. Shelves laden with books encased in old leather bindings covered an entire wall. The scent of brewed tea gave the sepia-toned room a homey feel, completely leaving the packed town outside behind.

A menu hung above, stretching the length of the counter. Sketch began to read and realized that that what was written on the menu was not flavors and sizes of teas. Instead, different types of emotions.

Joy, Serenity, Sorrow, Optimism, Contempt, and Bravery were all available.

Radar saw Sketch was perplexed, so he leaned in to give her some help.

"You see, the Cantionis enchant the tea with music; giving it the properties to affect your mood according to whichever emotion you pick."

"Any emotion?", Sketch asked, reading the long list of feelings, which included a few she had never even

heard of.

"Actually, a few are illegal. Anything that could or would affect your judgment is strictly forbidden. Emotions such as love, trust, anger, or submission, to name a few."

Beck moved up to the counter where the eponymous Emily of "Emily's Essence" was working. She was a lovely old lady with long burgundy hair and wrinkled, smiling eyes.

She stood behind an ornately carved wooden counter that doubled as a bookshelf for various assorted pieces of sheet music and was bending over a page, where she was hastily scribbling an order. "I'll be wit' ya in a moment." She said, her words spiced with a slight Irish accent.

"The service really seems to be faulty these days." Beck said, a dry rudeness in his tone.

The woman's head snapped up at the sound of his voice, her green eyes burning with anger at his statement, and she retorted, "Actually, sarvice is slo' because businesses picked up since you dun' run oft chasin'--"

"-oh c'mere you!" Beck interrupted, jumping over the counter and embracing her.

Sketch was still trying to catch up with the speed of which their exchange had happened.

"Emily and Beck go back." Radar whispered.

"How ya doin, sweetie? What can I do you for? Not gunna be orderin' the Snarky again, I hope.....you got awful smart last time, if you recall," she said to Beck with a wink.

Sketch laughed, wondering if it was possible for Beck to get any snarkier. "What happened last time?" Sketch whispered to Radar.

"It is somewhat of a long story. There is no official record that I am aware of, but the stories of what happened are something of a legend around here." he replied, grinning for the first time since Sketch had met him.

"What happened was I took one sip, blacked out and woke up in jail two weeks later. No big deal, lesson learned. I don't know what happened, I hear a different story every time." Beck grumbled, jumping back over the counter.

"My favorite is--"

"-Emily! What are the specials?!" Beck abruptly interrupted. Emily rolled her eyes and pointed to the board. Sketch decided she would ask more later, and her eyes wandered up to the board again, looking at the various emotions to drink.

She had never been very decisive....perhaps there was a tea for that? She found it on the board, but ironically she couldn't decide if it was what she wanted.

"Pick anything you'd like, it's on me. Although," Radar cautioned, "I would avoid the Bravery or Bluntness. Those tend to have a...nasty aftertaste if you know what I mean."

He ignored the mischievous grin that Beck shot him.

Radar walked up to the counter and made his order, "Focus, please. Oh, and make it light." Emily nodded and wrote the order down on a piece of paper.

Beck took his turn, "I'm gonna need some Understanding, Em. Light as well."

"Everything alright there, Beck?", Emily asked as she wrote down his order.

"Meeting with the Council."

With Becks words Emily nodded, not prying further, and then moved her attention to Sketch.

"And what'd you like, m' dear?"

Sketch hadn't exactly had a normal day, and being asked to order an emotion like a coffee was her limit. Her brain temporarily shut off, but she heard herself say: "Calm please."

"One of my favorites." Radar commented.

Beck piped in, "Hey, Em, make the Calm a heavy...she's had a pretty rough day."

They picked a small table by the window across from the large, roaring fireplace. The Tea was delivered in delicate porcelain cups with a small tray of scones. Sketch hadn't eaten since breakfast; she nibbled on a lemon scone, trying to hide her desire to just scarf it down. Beck, however, did not show the same constraint as he tore into his ravenously.

She lifted the cup for sip and for a split second wondered how the tea would work. The moment it touched her lips, her tea seemed to serenade her with a lullaby. Instantly she felt relaxed from the overwhelming events of the day. She took another sip and her heart melted in the warmth of the taste. The mix of the herbs and the slight tinge of honey sank into her veins and soothed her tight muscles. She started feeling a bit sleepy and expected that was normal when wanting to be calm.

"What do you think?" Radar asked, sipping his Focus. He watched her intently, as if his had started working as well.

"Well...I'm relaxed." Sketch was about to ask if she could live in this teashop, when a jarring noise caught her attention. Outside the window a crowd was gathering.

At first there were just a few shouts, the sound of boots, the flicker of fire against the glass; then it grew. The sound erupted in shrieks and screams. Then, piercing through the clamor, rang out one agonizing cry.

The cry was inhuman.

Radar was alerted before Sketch knew what was going on. The tea was making her slow and so she was not as startled as she should have been. She stood up and pressed her hands against the glass, trying to see over the crowd gathering in the street.

Beck snapped to his feet, "Get her away from the window!"

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