

## DIAMONDS ON THE SOLES OF HER SHOES

“It’s a flute,” said Verneen Halannim blankly, turning the thing over in her hands.

“Happy birthday, darling,” said her mother.

“Wear it in good health,” said her father.

“Mother, Father,” Verneen said, “thank you, very much, but I have a question.”

Professor Elek Halannim and her husband looked at her inquiringly.

“Over the past nine birthdays,” Verneen said, “you have given me, among many other nice things, a flute, two guitars, a trombone, three drums, a piano accordion and a set of six air horns mounted on a rack. Is it possible that you’re grooming me for a glittering career as a one man band?”

Her parents smiled at her.

“Enjoy the flute, darling,” her father said.

It wasn’t just musical instruments, of course. In thirteen years of travelling with her parents Verneen had accumulated enough ancient artifacts to furnish a small house, if your tastes ran to the eccentric and outré. Most of them lived in storage units, awaiting the happy day when she moved out and began at last to make her own way in life. Before that consummation, though, her mother and father would have to be satisfied that she had planned out that way thoroughly and competently. They would want to see maps, with sites of special interest clearly marked if possible.

She put the flute to her lips and blew tentatively. A clear, true note emerged from the wooden tube and hung in the air.

Her father broke into a broad grin and snapped his fingers. “You see?” he said. “She’s a natural.”

“Beginner’s luck,” Verneen said, and tried again. Again the note.

“Yes, well, if you wouldn’t mind, darling, take it away and practice,” her mother said.

“I have to finalise tomorrow’s schedule with your father and your sisters, and then we’ll have to notify the work teams. And supper is at nineteen-fifteen. Don’t be late,”

she called, as Verneen left the tent.

Purplish-grey sand crunched under her feet as she surveyed the bustling scene under the pinkish sun. Students and volunteers bent their backs digging out trenches, or crouched in them delicately teasing interesting-looking lumps of stuff out of the sandy soil. And there were her sisters, superbly cool and in control under their sun hats; Alayn strolling between the trenches, looking from one to the other, occasionally offering a word of advice or admonition, and Kaysa at the conservation table, watching as artifacts were carefully cleaned, assessed, labelled and put into boxes or bags to be shipped home.

Some youngest daughters had ugly sisters, worthless, lazy drabs who couldn't lift a finger to help themselves even if they wanted to. Verneen had Alayn and Kaysa; both beautiful, both clever and competent, both willing and able assistants to their parents. It wasn't even that Verneen wasn't herself competent. She had learned as much as the other two about forensic archaeology and the study of deep history. It was just that she wasn't needed. Four chiefs were more than enough for the number of Indians (metaphorically speaking) that the Halannims could command.

One day, perhaps, the elder girls would decide to pursue their own careers, or perhaps find partners and form their own families. By that time, though, Professor Elek and Doctor Grobin Halannim would be getting on in years themselves, and the entire enterprise would be folded up and put away. Competent she might be, Verneen thought, but she knew herself well enough to be certain that taking command would never be an option.

She slouched away, making herself small as usual, letting her hair swing forward to hide her face.

*What can I do, Mummie?*

*Just stay out of the way, darling, we're busy.*

Verneen had got very good at staying out of the way.

Her tent was pitched a little apart from the others. She untied the flap, ducked inside and retied it behind her. Her camp bed, swathed in netting to ward off the night-flying *kleks* and *naniaks*, was neatly made, and the few possessions she had brought

with her were tidily arranged on the folding table and night stand. She was an old hand at this. She could unpack and pack again in four minutes each, though she needed a hand with the tent.

It was a life, she supposed, trogging from planet to planet in her family's old Neilson Fourteen runabout, going wherever her father got wind of a promising dig site. The Halannims were freelancers, taking commissions from academic bodies, private research institutions, the occasional planetary government. They had the leeway to pick and choose if they wanted. They never seemed to, though.

She parted the netting and sat down on the bed, which gave a little under her. She might need a new one soon. She put the flute to her lips again, and again produced a true note. Maybe Father was right, maybe she was a natural. It would be nice to be a natural at something.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried with the other instruments. Guitars were going to be a mystery to her for ever. How anyone could manage with their hands so far apart and doing completely different things she would never know. She could get a note out of the trombone, but only for a moment before the giggles exploded out of her. The accordion...no. Just no. It had been really nice of her parents to give them all to her, but she would just have to pass them on to someone who would get real use out of them.

She found the holes with her fingers and tried a scale. It sounded nice. Presumably there would be a book somewhere on how to play the flute; there had been for all the others. This might be something she could get good at.

Her tent flap shook, and someone said something outside. Verneen stopped playing, got up and untied the flap.

A figure—a boy, she assumed—in the flowing cotton robe of the native volunteers tumbled in. He looked to be about her age. He had his hand across his lips, and for a moment Verneen could not tell what he was saying.

“No, you must not!” he said, in an urgent whisper. “You must not!”

“What?” Verneen was half supporting him, paralysed between wanting to let go and not knowing if he would fall.

“It is...” He sought for the word. The people here spoke some English, as did the human inhabitants of most planets in the galaxy (and that in itself, along with the origin of the language, was a puzzle that her father had often declared himself eager to solve), but they preferred their own tongue. “It is a god thing.”

“Playing the flute?” Verneen said, releasing him as he regained his footing.

“In the day,” the boy said, waving his hand at the sky. “In the night, yes, the flute, but not in the day.”

“Why is that?”

The boy was nonplussed. “It is as it is,” he said helplessly. “Musics for day, musics for night. For the day, the harp, the drum, the *tepolak*. For the night, the flute, the *enkeri*, the *trikash*. For the sacred time, the—”

“I’m very sorry,” Verneen said. “I didn’t know.” Religion was another thing of which she had never quite got the hang. Her parents never bothered with it, and saw no reason why anyone else should. Occasionally this viewpoint had led to some hasty departures, and it also meant that anything the Halannims encountered that seemed to them useless or unpleasant was quickly categorised as “probably religious” and dismissed as of no further interest.

“Where did you find?” the boy said, picking up the flute and holding it reverently.

“It was given to me.” And it was probably something only a shaman or an archdeacon or somebody would be allowed to touch. Oh well, there were always the air horns. She had once managed to blat out the first few lines of “Come Down Sweet Sally,” but her nose had been sore for a day afterwards.

“Then it is yours,” the boy said, and handed it to her with the same reverential air.

“Only please not to play in the day.”

“I’ll remember,” Verneen promised. “May I know your name?” Names were not taboo here, she knew that much.

“My name is Tananna,” the boy said.

“I’m Verneen,” said Verneen. “It’s very nice to meet you, Tananna.” She offered her hand, and the boy took it and pressed it to his own heart. “Would you...” Verneen

went on shyly, “would you tell me more about your religion?”

“My...?”

“Your god things,” Verneen explained.

“Professor and Doctor said, no need to know.”

“Oh, there’s no need,” Verneen said. “I’m just interested.”

“Verneen!” It was Kaysa’s voice, her one unattractive feature, but very useful when calling someone from maybe a mile or two away. Tananna looked round, startled and a little afraid.

“Another time?” Verneen said quickly, putting the flute down on the nightstand, neatly in line with the edge of it. “Please?”

“I will come,” Tananna said. “But you must not tell.”

“Why?”

“Ver-neeen!”

“I won’t tell,” Verneen said. “I promise.” She smiled reassuringly, and Tananna ducked out of the tent. Verneen followed, and tied up the flap as Alayn came striding up.

“Who was that?” she demanded.

“One of the volunteers,” Verneen said. “He just wanted to ask me about something he’d found.”

Alayn tched. “They’re supposed to come to us, not go bothering you,” she said. “Oh well. It’ll turn up among the specimens.” Her voice was deeper and huskier than Kaysa’s, but Verneen didn’t like it much better. “Supper’s been on the table for five minutes. Mother is livid. Do come on.”

Alayn always exaggerated. Mother would not be livid, just tired and disappointed as usual. The sun was dipping towards the horizon. After supper she would be able to have a proper go on the flute.

The meal passed with glacial slowness. Verneen did not bother to try to intrude on the four-way conversation, which proceeded at its usual just-too-fast-to-get-into-without-interrupting-somebody pace. She ate quietly and listened while her parents

and her sisters discussed the day's finds.

This world, Merere, had been a First Spacing colony, and its history had followed the usual up-and-down course of such worlds in this region; colonised early by a group of people barely equipped to survive, chasing a dream of freedom or something; gradually worked up from mere survival to a degree of comfort as the planet grudgingly yielded up its resources; blasted flat and conquered by the Last Empire, which imposed its own monolithic culture and banned everything else; gradually let slip as the Empire crumbled under its own weight; now tentatively rediscovering its roots in the relatively new freedom of the Sagittarian Age. The people enjoyed advanced technology and a unified government, and had been lucky enough to be spared a huge influx of "relocated" subjects from other parts of the Empire. On other planets this had led to division, sometimes Balkanisation, and fierce strife as two incompatible cultures decided they really did not like each other's faces. Merere was not yet Affiliated, but Verneen privately thought it would not be long before they applied.

None of this, of course, prevented the four elder Halannims from talking about them as if they were primitive nomads scratching a living out of the unpromising soil and casting magic spells to bring the rain. Verneen knew that after the weekend the volunteers would cast off their desert robes, get into their groundcars and drive back to the cities and towns, to their jobs or their classes, their homes and their families, their holovids and their computers. Somehow, though, the worldview of the travelling archaeologist never seemed to vary; these damned natives ought to be jolly grateful we were here to tell them all about themselves.

It didn't help that so many of this lot spoke English in that silly white-man-come-from-sky-in-great-silver-bird way. Their own language had no gender words at all, not even pronouns; just I, you, we and they, and something whose only English equivalent was "it." They also didn't seem to have an indefinite or definite article, though Tananna had mastered the English one, more or less.

Verneen finished her food, excused herself more or less unnoticed, and returned to her tent. It was dark now and quite cold, the students and volunteers all bedded down for the night. She untied the flap of her tent, went in and turned on the small

lamp on the nightstand. It gave a soft, warm glow that helped to banish the chill.

Verneen put a chocolate tablet in her mug, added water from a canteen and pressed the switch to heat it. It wasn't as nice as real chocolate, but it would take away the taste of the spices her mother insisted on adding to every meal when they were on a dig in a hot climate. She said they promoted healthy perspiration. Verneen could believe it. She sat on the bed, sipped her chocolate, and waited.

She heard Tananna's voice before he plucked at the flap. She held it wide for him, and he came in.

"Goodnight, Verneen," he said hesitantly.

She couldn't help smiling. "We usually say 'good evening' when we're meeting," she said.

"We do not have evening," Tananna said. "There is day and there is night. It is a...religious thing." He smiled back at her.

"Please, sit down," she said, patting the bed beside her, and he did so.

"Tell me about your religion," Verneen said.

He spoke, haltingly at first, then with increasing fluency as his passion took over. Verneen listened as he talked about the world of day and the world of night, and the unnamed—and, of course, ungendered—gods who ruled over each.

"Dayworld," he said, holding up one cupped hand, "and nightworld." He held up the other, juggled with them a little. "The same, but different. We also, different, but the same."

Everyone, Tananna said, had a dayself and a nightself. The god of the day guided the dayself by means of experiences and sensations, while the god of the night taught the nightself through dreams and intuitions.

"Are you saying you become a different person at night?" Verneen broke in.

"No, no," Tananna said quickly. "I am still Tananna, still me."

"Then what's the difference?" Verneen persisted. "How do you distinguish between the two?" But she thought she knew what he meant. She had felt it, sometimes,

outside on her own under the moon or the stars, the feeling that she could be someone else. Quicker, braver, more assertive. Less crushed by the weight of parents and sisters and the knowledge of her own inutility.

Tananna quickly confirmed her supposition. "Is a feeling," he said. "I am still me, but I feel different. I am here." He said the last as if offering proof.

"You were here before," Verneen pointed out.

"I was afraid for you," Tananna said, "so I did that which otherwise I could not. This is your sleeping space."

"Er...yes?"

He looked around. "And yet you have things of the day here as well. Is strange."

Verneen must have looked perplexed, because Tananna embarked on an explanation.

"Among us, the day-self and the night-self are separate but equal. The day-self can never interfere with the night-self, or else the night-god will not be heard. So we have a separate space in which we sleep, in which no thing of the day can be allowed, nor any other person. I came in before because I had to stop you playing the flute."

"You all sleep alone?" Verneen said, her eyes turning to the tent flap, beyond which the rest of the volunteers lay asleep in their bedrolls under the stars.

Tananna guessed her thought. "There is a set distance between. So that the night-god may speak to each alone." He looked around the room again. "But with you it is different. You do not know your night-self. You have never met. Even when you sleep the things of the day are with you. How can you grow?"

"I manage," Verneen said, a little sharply. "I notice you're wide awake."

"Once we are of age, the priests of the night-god test. To see if our night-selves are fully grown. Once they have tested, we are allowed to be awake at night, to set our night-selves free." He looked into her eyes. "Have you never simply slept? With no things of the day to distract you?"

"Probably not since I was a baby." Verneen found herself gazing at the contours of his face in the lamplight. It caught the very fine down on his cheek and made a halo out of it.

“Then your night-self is still a baby,” Tananna declared. “Still very young, anyway. You should try our way, Verneen. Is not too late to let the night-god teach you.”

“What, you mean...clear everything out of here except the bed and just sleep?”

Tananna nodded gravely.

“I’d go crackers,” Verneen said.

“Your day-self has grown accustomed to ruling you in the night as well. You have dreams?”

Verneen nodded.

“Your day-self sends you those dreams, which is why they teach you nothing. You should listen for the voice of the night-god.”

“Well,” Verneen said, “maybe another night. I’m tired, and you should be sleeping too. The night-god’ll be giving you a ticking-off for missing lessons.”

Tananna grinned, absorbing the demurrals. “Will you perhaps play the flute for me a little?”

She felt herself blushing, and ducked her head, letting her hair hide her face in the habitual gesture. “I don’t know how yet,” she muttered.

“You know enough to begin,” Tananna said firmly. “See, I brought my *enkeri*.” He reached into his robes and produced a small box with three thick strings across a diamond-shaped sound-hole. There were frets under one end. “I do not play very well neither,” he admitted. “We will learn together, and the night-god will be pleased.”

Verneen picked up the flute, put it to her lips and played a note. Tananna matched it on the *enkeri*, two octaves lower; the box produced a deep, resonant thrum, hardly credible from such a small instrument. He played two more notes, and Verneen followed him, and soon they were trading phrases. Verneen found herself, a little to her surprise, having fun.

Tananna set up a repeating pattern of bass notes, and Verneen followed him for a while and then began to experiment. She knew the basics of harmony. She knew the basics of more things than she cared to number. Her education had been haphazard, obscure and eclectic, but she had taken it all in, and been surprised to learn, in her

occasional encounters with other children her age, that they were all used to going to schools and being taught systematically, subject by subject, with books and tests and scheduled rest periods. Her spelling was eccentric, though she worked hard to improve it; on the other hand, she was skilled in the ancient Mostolavian art of lassoing a wild gadumf around the foreclaws and gaining its attention with a swift rap just below the serrated crest, and she doubted whether any of the boys and girls she had met could say the same.

But this was a new thrill. The flute flew over the regular *pad,pad* of the *enkeri*, and she made it soar and dip, playing faster as her fingers learned their way around the holes. She was a fledgling hawk, shadowing a pacing tiger through the forests of some untamed world, watching the striped form as it appeared and disappeared through the darker stripes of branches and the clouds of leaves, and sometimes it seemed that the tiger was her own shadow, rising and falling as she passed over a sunlit cloudscape. For this brief while, she was nobody's third daughter, nobody's tag-along younger sister. She was herself. She was Verneen. She was free.

The flute faltered as her lips lost their place, and she fell to earth with a bump. Tananna was watching her, eyes huge and shining. He had nice eyes, she noticed irrelevantly.

"I was wrong," he said. "You are not an infant in the night. Your night-soul is full-grown, and she is—" He stopped, and his colour deepened.

"What?" Verneen realised as she spoke that she was breathless. She felt as if she had run all the way around the camp.

"I must go," Tananna said, standing up and replacing the *enkeri* inside his robes. He hesitated. "May I come again?"

"Of course you may," Verneen said, startled by her own forcefulness. "I want to do that again. Thank you, Tananna." She wanted to hug him, but didn't quite dare. Instead she seized his hand and kissed it.

He half-smiled, made to say something, stopped.

"Good night, Verneen," he said, turned and slipped out of the tent.

Verneen stood for what seemed a long time, hugging the flute to her, gazing after him.

Something had changed.

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“Good news,” said Elek Halannim, dusting her hands as she entered the main tent. “We’ve found the outer wall of a building of some sort. Probably a dwelling.”

“Excellent!” Her husband rubbed his hands in exaggerated glee. “Pay dirt at last.” He raised them in a warding gesture. “I know, I know, you don’t have to say it. ‘I am a mercenary swine.’”

“I wasn’t going to say anything of the kind,” the professor protested, smiling.

“You didn’t have to,” he responded, strewing invisible ashes on his head. “Guilty as charged.”

It was an old argument, any real heat it might once have had long cooled, now more of a running joke than anything else. They were comfortable together, these two, fitting as snugly as the proverbial old sock into its old shoe; their relationship had begun at university and had survived twenty-eight years, five children, two miscarriages, four really serious rows and more planets than either of them cared to count. Elek was the pure scientist, Grobin the business manager who kept the whole ramshackle enterprise afloat, exchanging saleable relics for fuel, supplies and repairs to the ship while his wife published papers and took them parsecs out of their way to attend conferences and symposia.

Imperial and pre-Imperial artifacts were in great demand among academic institutions, wealthy dilettantes, and hapless cranks who were convinced that with just a little bit of creative tinkering they could get the things to go again. On the rare occasions when they succeeded, there was usually not enough left of the intrepid experimenters to scrape off the walls, but that didn’t seem to stop others trying.

“Where’s Verneen?” the professor said, looking vaguely around as if she expected to find her errant daughter hanging from the ceiling, or hiding under the table.

The doctor went through exactly the same futile pantomime. “Oh, out on the site,” he

said, remembering. "She said she, erm..." He tried for a moment to remember what Verneen had in fact said, failed, and shrugged. "Out on the site," he repeated.

"Well, as long as she's out of mischief," Elek Halannim said, and dismissed the question from her mind. "Now, do you have the sonar charts from yesterday?"

Verneen was in fact working in trench number five, somewhat to the surprise of Tananna, who was next to her. At first he seemed oddly formal, and she was a little hurt, till she realised; this was his day-self, talking to her day-self. The previous night, that whole delirious musical ride, had literally happened to different people as far as he was concerned. The last thing this Tananna had done was burst into her tent, her night-space, to stop her committing a worse sacrilege. He had good reason, by his own lights, to feel nervous.

She set herself out to be polite and friendly, and little by little he relaxed. It was a complex thing, this religion of Merere, but no more so than many others she had encountered. She could cope.

At one point she squinched round on her knees to put a promising-looking lump of something into a specimen bucket, and caught him looking at her feet.

"What are those?" he said, pointing.

Verneen twisted round to look. "Oh," she said. "Carbon crystals. Formed by great heat and pressure. You find them all over the place, especially where the Empire's been. I gather they make nice jewellery if you cut them right." She turned herself back. "On old Earth they used to be quite rare—they were called diamonds—and only rich people could afford them. That was before fusion bombs and high-yield orbital blasters."

"You are very rich, then," Tananna said, with a smile.

"I don't wear jewellery," she said, smiling back at him.

"Only on the soles of your shoes," he answered. "But you are rich in other ways, Verneen. You have been to many worlds like this. I only know this one."

"I could tell you about them," she said, greatly daring.

"I should like that," he said.

“We could do that tonight,” Verneen went on.

Tananna hesitated in the act of teasing out a curved piece of ceramic from the dense sand. “Will your tales be true?” he said.

“Of course,” Verneen said, a little nettled.

“Would be better to tell them now,” he said seriously. “Tales of truth are for the day. The night is for tales of fancy.”

“Is there anything your people do that isn’t either a day thing or a night thing?” Verneen asked. A couple of the other volunteers, working nearby, turned to look; one of them laughed, and Tananna blushed.

“One thing,” he admitted, and turned his full attention to his work.

So Verneen talked, while they systematically plundered the sand of its secrets. She told him about Sateiro, where the circle and the sphere were regarded as the perfect shapes, and the holiest priests were so fat they had to be carried around in spherical palanquins; of Maboleen, where right angles and parallel lines were anathema and a city of square houses, built on the grid plan by occupying Imperial forces, had been burned to the ground, not because the Empire was oppressive, but simply because the shapes were blasphemous; of Keriang, the silent world, where loud noises had been believed to summon demons, and everyone carried around with them a box of silent flares, to let off in case of distress. She spoke of all the dead civilisations her parents had explored, and the living authorities with whom they had negotiated for the right to grub around in a planet’s subsoil; of the living people she had met, and the far more numerous ones she had only encountered long after their deaths. By the end of the day she had gathered quite an audience, and work had slowed to a crawl; and Alayn and Kaysa rather crossly surveyed the meagre pickings from trench number five, and recommended to the professor that Verneen be kept off the diggings from now on, as she was “getting to be a distraction to the others.” Verneen took her reassignment to the conservation table with equanimity, hardly hearing; her mind was full of the night to come, and the music, and the native boy of whom she was growing, she knew, quite inadvisably fond.

It didn’t hurt at all that he was, as she put it to herself, not unhandsome. He was a bit

skinny, but his bone structure was fine—Verneen was something of a connoisseuse of skeletons—and there was a wiry strength there that she had felt when she was holding him up. He was intelligent, polite, obviously washed regularly, and she enjoyed his company. What was not to like?

Only that, in a few weeks' time, the Halannim Travelling Archaeological Circus would be moving on, to the temples of Nowhere Planet or the ash pits of Spotonthelens or some other forgotten wilderness, and it would not do to be entangled. Verneen remembered her sister Deesho. Deesho had got entangled with a Veskani civil servant, who worked in the Department Of Really Old Stuff, and had had to leave under circumstances of which, at five, she had had only an imperfect understanding; but she remembered fighting and shouting and tears, and it had left her with a very clear impression that having her mother and father's undivided attention for any length of time was a Bad Thing. She had avoided that ever since.

Their brother, Ayvell, had left of his own accord, and was now a scientist of some other kind, doing something very secret in the Plekhanid sector. Verneen was hoping for something more along those lines. But to do that, she would have to avoid getting entangled.

Over the days that followed, she considered the matter. Tananna came to her tent each night, and they talked and made music. It was enjoyable enough, and he showed no sign of wanting to take it further, which was fine with Verneen. She was really getting the hang of the flute. It felt natural in her hands, right. Alayn and Kaysa must have found her work at the conservation table unexceptionable, since there were no further complaints. She carried out her tasks efficiently, and when she happened to see Tananna, as he brought a specimen bucket to the table or came to pick up a replacement trowel, they exchanged quick smiles and nothing more. Family meals went on as always, the conversation passing over and under and around and through her as she sat there, safe in her own private cloaking field. All was well.

And then, one evening, Tananna came empty-handed to the conservation table and dropped his bombshell.

"My holiday is finished," he said. "Tomorrow I must return to the city."

Verneen stared. Here she had been worrying about how to break it to him that she would have to leave, and now he had got in first, the sneaky ratbag.

“What is it you do?” she said, hiding her disappointment.

“I work in an office. I make designs for machine pieces. I do not actually start again till the day after tomorrow, but there are day-things I must do before then.” He hesitated. “I was wondering myself...if you would wish to come and visit me.”

“You’re a bit young to be working, aren’t you? I thought you were my age.”

He gestured at the table. “You are working, no?”

He had her there.

“Yes,” she said, taking herself by surprise. “Yes, I would love to visit you. I don’t have any transport, though.”

“I could take you with me,” Tananna said. “And I could bring you back the next morning. I do not start till quite late.” He hesitated. “I...have come to be fond of you, Verneen. I would like to see you more. Will you come?”

“If it wouldn’t put you to any trouble,” Verneen said, a little breathlessly.

“This is worth trouble to me,” Tananna said earnestly.

“It’s worth trouble to me too,” she assured him. “Yes, Tananna, I would love to come.”

The smile that broke over his face warmed her through and through.

“I will have to miss you tonight,” he said. “I must get ready to go home. But I will see you in the morning. Will you play the flute anyway?”

“Of course I will,” Verneen said. “Shall I bring it with me?”

Tananna looked down at the table. “I was thinking we might do other things,” he admitted.

Verneen’s heart lurched, and she felt the blush sweeping up from somewhere around her shoes. So this was what being entangled felt like.

“There are museums in the city,” Tananna went on, from somewhere in the distance, “and a very beautiful park, and sometimes in the night my friends and I go dancing. Is

something wrong?”

“No,” Verneen said, fighting for composure. The urge to laugh at herself was almost overwhelming, but he would misunderstand. “The park sounds lovely, but I think I’ve seen enough old things for one lifetime.”

“And...dancing?”

Verneen took a firm grip on herself. “I would love it if you would take me dancing, Tananna,” she said, meeting his wondering gaze with her own. “I’ll have to ask my parents, but I’m sure they won’t mind.”

This was more than a smile. This was a positive grin. Verneen found herself grinning too. “I will pick you up tomorrow morning,” Tananna said. “Early.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Verneen said, and watched him walk away, almost dancing. She found she didn’t really mind whether she got entangled or not.

The formality of parental consent was swiftly circumvented. During a momentary lull in the dinnertime logomachy she mentioned that she had been invited to the city to see some ancient artifacts in one of the museums there, and that it would probably involve an overnight stay, but that she had found accommodation with the help of one of the volunteers. Her mother mumbled something vaguely maternal about remembering to pack her, um, er, and Alayn added waspishly that she was not to talk to strange men. Deesho’s desertion was clearly still fresh in the older girl’s mind. And that, effectively, was that. Her father resumed quoting a lengthy passage from the Protolects of Morshi Dontogula about the battle of Kreeyak Plains, her mother continued to pour scorn on the ancient scribe’s grasp of military tactics, Alayn and Kaysa joined in with conflicting opinions, and all unseen among them, Verneen hugged herself and glowed. She had a date.

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