

Towhee

by Emily Michel

THE GRIMALKIN ALMOST broke Towhee's neck. The goddess-forsaken cat wound its way between her legs as she snuck out of the cottage in the middle of the night. She could be forgiven for thinking Zol had it out for her—this was a near daily occurrence since the fur ball took up residence almost a year ago.

“Bad kitty,” Towhee hissed, and got a hiss back.

She reached for the cat, but Zol was having none of it. The creature swatted at Towhee's hand and darted under the bed, where Wren and Curlew slept. Towhee held her breath, but neither of her sisters stirred. She tiptoed the last few paces, quietly opened the door, and slipped out into the moonless night.

In the blink of an eye, she was a handspan tall and zipping through the Argent Forest like a cave bear chased her. A fire-breathing cave bear.

Towhee was late. Her sisters had shown up unexpectedly with some lovely blackthorn wine, and she'd fallen asleep after having one glass too many. She'd promised Gita to be there shortly after sunset, but she'd bet her life it was much closer to dawn than dusk.

She zigged and zagged through the trees, taking a much more direct route than usual to make up for lost time. A good league away, she spotted the hill, the fire outside Gita's cave only red embers this late at night. The boulders outside the cave shuddered and turned toward her, wide mouths open and dark eyes gleaming.

The wide-mouthed dragons blinked at her before curling up and settling in again.

“Hello, Pyn. Hello, Pob.”

Pyn snorted as she whizzed by, but neither tried to stop her. Towhee changed into her full size as she passed the threshold of the cave. She paused, allowing her eyes to adjust to the near-blackness of the cave. At the far end, a small, thin figure rested on a straw pallet, his back to her.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” he said, his voice harsh and accusatory.

“I’m sorry, Gita. My sisters showed up.” Towhee clasped her hands in front of her, squeezing them fiercely while trying desperately not to throw herself at Gita’s feet.

“You should tell them. No more of this sneaking.” He turned around and sat up, eyes gleaming in the dim light, reflecting the dying embers of the fire outside the cave.

“They wouldn’t understand,” she protested.

He rose from the pallet and grabbed the cane leaning against the wall. Gita hobbled toward her, his injured knee stiffer than normal. In the three years since his injury, he usually moved well with the cane. That he wasn’t now told Towhee he’d gone far afield looking for her before retiring for the evening.

He stood in front of her, half a handspan shorter than her, his moss-like hair tangled from a restless sleep. Gita cupped her cheek, his bark-like skin rough yet oddly soothing.

“You don’t give them a chance to understand, Tee,” he said.

She couldn’t help herself—she leaned into his touch. “I’m scared. What if—”

Gita moved his thumb so it pressed against her lips. “You can what if this until the day you die, or you can take a chance on me. On us. It’s been three years. I’ve done as you asked and will continue to do so. You’ve taught me much. You deserve happiness, and you’ve made me see I do, too.”

She’d found him here after his altercation with Nevar of Otero, who had finally married Rane last year. Gita’s knee had been shattered and was healing poorly, in large part due to his marracos, who in their confusion over their companion’s pain, kept away any who would help him. Towhee had snuck by and tended to Gita.

Thorny at first, he gradually warmed to her. And over time, their friendship deepened into something more. Now Towhee faced telling her sisters that the hobgoblin who had once been

their enemy, who had once threatened travelers through the Argent Forest, especially humans, might become part of their family.

The next to youngest sister, Towhee was known for her strength and bravery. Both failed her when it came to her family and Gita.

His thumb lingered on her lips and the gleam in his eyes changed, heated.

“I can make you happy now, if you want,” Towhee said, her usually firm, deep voice breathy.

He smiled, showing all his sharp teeth. “Promise me you will tell your sisters before we see each other again, and I’ll consider it.”

She sucked in a breath. They were fairies—a promise meant so much more than a simple declaration. It was a holy vow, and one broke it at one’s own risk. The consequences could be dire. But she loved him, and he was worth it.

“I promise I will tell my sisters before we see each other again.”

A shiver passed through her as the vow settled in her bones.

“Good girl,” Gita rumbled.

She shoved at his shoulder. “Shut it and kiss me.”

He chuckled as he stood on his toes and did so. Though his skin was rough, like the bark of an alligator pine, his lips were surprisingly soft. They pressed on hers, and she opened. His tongue darted in, stroking hers, and the desire in her belly grew. So did his, and the hard length of him pressed against her center.

Carefully, Gita led her by the hand back to his pallet. He propped his cane against the cave wall and dropped his loincloth. Towhee quickly worked the laces of her leather vest, tossing it aside and freeing her full breasts. Gita closed those supple lips around her nipple and sucked, careful with his sharp teeth. Though Towhee wouldn’t mind terribly if he lost himself in the moment.

His spindly fingers worked the buttons on her breeches and slid down the soft rolls of her belly to find the nub slick. She groaned in pleasure.

“You are always wet for me, my dearest. What did I ever do to deserve you in my bed?” he asked with a sly grin.

“That,” she said with a laugh.

“Lie down, Tee. Let me worship you.”

She pulled her breeches all the way off and they joined her vest and his loincloth. Sinking to the pallet, she shivered in anticipation.

“Are you cold?” Gita asked as he settled between her legs, wincing as his stiff knee gave him a pang.

Towhee shook her head, about to protest and offer to switch places to help with his pain. But all words left her as his tongue found that nub. She lifted her hips and he hummed in pleasure. Sliding her fingers into his hair, she held him close as he worked his magic.

His hair felt and smelled like moss, too, but softer, and Towhee had come to associate the fragrance with desire and pleasure. Tonight was no different. The languid warmth built and spread until it exploded, and the cave lit up with the rainbow light of her rapture.

Gita entered her, the rough texture of his skin sending a different kind of desire through her. No longer languid, the heat was sharp and hovered near pain, but a pain so sweet and fine that she craved it more than she wanted air to breathe and food to eat.

He moved within her, slowly thrusting and retreating, the tension building, building, until white hot. She hovered on that edge as his pace picked up. Faster and harder, until he grunted and spilled himself inside her. Only then did she allow herself to plummet into the abyss, and the cave was lit up with his emerald magic and her multicolored glow.

Gita rested his head on her ample breasts and toyed with a nipple until they both fell asleep.

The sun hit her eyelids, and Towhee knew she was in trouble. Dawn was long past, and Pyn and Pob were grumbling outside the cave. Gita was still nestled at her side, his arm dangling over her belly. He blinked awake as she tried to move without disturbing him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to go.”

He sat and rubbed his eyes. “Do you?”

Towhee planted a kiss on his cheek. “Yes. Apparently, I made a promise to tell my sisters about us before I could come back. And after last night, I don’t want to wait another minute.”

Gita grabbed her hand. “I love you, Tee.”

She leaned her forehead against his. "I love you too. And soon the whole world will know."

"I do not need the entire world to know. Just your sisters."

Towhee laughed as he let go. She pulled on her breeches and vest as Gita watched, a blanket draped over his lap.

"I will return as soon as I can," she said before changing into her tiny form once more.

She darted out of the cave, past the marracos, and flew home swiftly. Landing in the clearing, she strode to the cottage, now typical fairy size. But she didn't have a chance to burst into her home. The door was flung open as she approached, and Zol darted out, headed straight for the forest.

"Oh, good morning, Towhee," Curlew said, blinking in surprise.

Wren poked her head out the door. "Where did you vanish to this morning?"

"I have something I need to tell you," she said.

"Well, come in and tell us. I just poured some tea," Wren said, ducking back inside.

Towhee plodded into the cottage and took a seat at the small rough-hewn table. Wren plonked a third mug in front of her before sitting. Curlew grabbed her misshapen mug and sipped thoughtfully.

Towhee took a deep breath. It was now or...not never. After last night, she wasn't going to give up sex with Gita for long.

"I'm in love with a hobgoblin!" she said, almost as one single word.

Her sisters shared a glance.

"And?" Curlew asked.

Towhee bit her lip. "It's Gita."

"Ha! I knew it," Wren said, thumping her mug down and splashing tea on the table. She locked eyes with Curlew. "You owe me a new set of buttons."

Towhee darted her gaze between her sisters, opening and closing her mouth a few times before blurting out, "You knew?"

Curlew shrugged. “Guessed, more like.”

Another round of open-mouthed silence.

“And you don’t have a problem with Gita?”

Curlew walked over and clapped a hand on Towhee’s shoulder. “We trust you, sister. If you feel Gita has learned his lesson, has changed his ways, then his past behavior is forgiven. He has not attacked travelers since his altercation with Nevar. And though unwarranted, the past actions of the Teruellans make his assumptions valid. He was trying to protect his companions, just as we were.”

“He has. I swear it.”

“Then that is enough for us.”

“How? How did you know?” Towhee couldn’t figure it out. She’d been careful, almost to a fault. None of her sisters had ever seen her leaving, and she’d made no mention of Gita at any point in the past two years.

Zol chose that moment to return, sauntering in like he owned the place.

“Meow,” he said.

Wren smiled at the villainous creature. “Zol smelled him on you and told me all about it.”

Towhee glared at the grimalkin. He slowly blinked at her before lifting his paw. Licking it, Zol ran it over his ears in the smuggest way Towhee had ever seen. Blasted cat.