

## **Plotting -- Spoiler Alert**

### **by Wen Spencer**

I'm horrible at plotting. Usually I let the characters have their head and off they run until they run out of steam and I try to figure out what shape the story was trying to take. Sequels, I'm finding, a different critters - more difficult because the world is preset and limits their action in more way than I suspected it would.

For example, Tinker has a cousin Oilcan, its set up in book one and he's very important to her throughout book one. As I let Tinker rampage through book two, though, he's been on the other side of town with no reason to surface. So I find myself with a problem. If Oilcan was so important to Tinker in book one, how can he not show up until Chapter 5 or 10, yet at the same time, there's no good reason for him to show up.

Working in character pieces for Pony to reestablish his character has been difficult too, especially since there are now other bodyguards to consider.

I initially had Tinker decide to start work into building the gate, and then realized that I couldn't let the story focus on THAT again. So I had her scrap yard robbed. But this presented all sorts of plotting problems, the worse of which was the splintering of storyline. Chapter One was about Turtle Creek. Chapter Two was the building the gate, the robbery and Nathan. Chapter Three started another set of storylines and Tinker started to resemble a power ball, madly bouncing around.

So instead I decided that the black willow found in Chapter One would become a thread that sewed parts together. While the chapters hold the start of wildly different story threads, the continuing problem of the black willow makes them seem like they're all part of one story.

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A flat bed semi-trailer sat parked in front of Lain's stately Victorian mansion. A yellow canvas tarp covered something lumpy. The xenobiologist stood on the trailer, leaning on her crutch, watching Tinker park the Rolls. Something about Lain's face made her suspect that somehow the trailer was her fault.

"I thought you might turn up today." Lain said.

"Yeah."

"So you had an exciting day yesterday. I want to hear about this monster of yours."

"It's not mine. It's Riki's."

Lain grunted at the name. Riki originally claimed to be the son of a fellow

astronaut killed in the training exercise that crippled Lain. It had gained him instant acceptance to Tinker's circle of friends.

"I suppose I should thank you for your present."

"Present?" Tinker eyed the trailer apprehensively. What had she done now without realizing it?

Lain flipped up one corner of tarp to reveal limp willowy branches. "They told me that you sent it."

She did? She turned to Pony. "Did I.?" She remembered to switch back to elvish. "Did I order the black willow brought here?"

"Yes, damae."

Tinker really had to keep in mind that the elves now took her word as law. One of her escort must have remembered- better than she did herself - her comment that Lain would love to have the carnivorous tree to study. While she had been smothered in attention, the elves had bound up the long limp branches and sturdy trunk-feet and hauled it to the Observatory hill. Once there, however, the elves had apparently abandoned it - trailer and all.

Lain had warned her once about elves bearing gifts. Tinker winced, realizing that she had become one of said elves.

"Sorry Lain. I'll get a truck and move it."

"It's a matter of gift horses and teeth, I suppose." Laying her crutch down, Lain nimbly swung down off the trailer, her upper body muscles cording to make up for the weakened legs. On the ground, she reached down the crutch to support herself with it again, then turned to rap Tinker smartly on the head with her knuckles. "Learn to think before you open that mouth of yours."

"Ow!" Tinker winced. "I'm bruised there."

"You are?" Lain tilted Tinker's head to examine her scalp, combing aside her short hair with gentle fingertips. "What from? Yesterday?"

"Yeah."

Lain smelt as always of fresh earth and crushed herbs and greens. "Ah, you'll live." She rubbed the sore area lightly. "Give the nerve receptors something else to think about."

Tinker mewed out a noise of protest and minor pain at the treatment.

"I'm glad you're here." Lain motioned toward the black willow. "I'm not totally convinced that it's dead. It might be just dormant after a massive system shock. I'd rather not have it reviving on my doorstep."

"Yes, that would be bad. I can get a truck and move the trailer."

"What would be best is storing it at near freezing temperatures. If it doesn't revive, it's going to start to decompose."

Tinker eyed the fifty-three foot semi-trailer and the shimmer of heat coming off the pavement. "Yeah, right. Getting it off the trailer wouldn't be hard - we can get a crane to do that - but shoving it into something refrigerated - that's going to be hard."

"I have faith." Lain limped toward her house, calling back. "I know you'll be able to figure it out."

Ah, the disadvantages of being well known.

Pony checked them on the wide wraparound porch so he could first search the house for hidden dangers. Stormsong took up watch by the front door. Tinker supposed it was a sign that she was growing used to the life of being guarded when she didn't notice her sheska's actions until she noticed Lain's sigh of impatience. After yesterday, though, Tinker was more than willing to idle a moment on the porch swing.

"Can I have the willow cut up?" she said to distract Lain, fairly sure of the answer.

"No."

She didn't think so. That would make life too simple. It would be easiest if they could simply keep the tree on the trailer and put it all into one large refrigerator. While it wouldn't be difficult to build one, making it quickly would be a problem. Was there any large freezer units in the area? "There's Reinholds."

"The ice cream factory?"

"Yeah. They're not using all their freezers anymore." The nearly two hundred year old company continued to produce ice cream that it sold to the elves. Their top seller was chocolate and peanut butter with chunks of peanut butter cups mixed inside, catering to the elfin love of peanut butter.

"If they don't find a way to ship in large amounts of fresh milk, they're not going to using any of them." Lain pointed out.

And it's all my fault. Tinker sighed.

Pony reappeared at the door, and indicated with a nod and hand sign that the house was clean of menace.

It had been two months since Tinker last been in Lain's house, the longest time in her life between visits. It was comforting to find it unchanged - large high ceiling rooms full of leather furniture, stained wood, leaded glass and shadows.

Lain made a call to Reinholds to check on their freezer capacity, and was shuffled through various departments trying to deal with the odd question. Tinker helped herself to strawberries. There was fresh whipped cream, so Lain was not kidding when she said that she expected Tinker to arrive. The call ended with Lain hanging up with a sigh.

"They have one large unit that has been shut down for some time. They're going to see if it still works and call me back." Lain settled across the table from her. "Now, tell me about Riki's monster. Was it avian, mammal or reptile?"

"I'm not sure. It had scales, but it also had some sort weird mane. It was long, and lean, with big square jaw." Tinker put her hands up to approximate the size of the head. "Short legs with big claws that it could pick things up with."

Lain made a slight amused sound. "Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!"

It took Tinker a moment to identify the quote, a poem out of Alice through the Looking Glass.

"We fell down the hole and through the looking glass."

The sudden connection with her dream was like a slap. The woman's face jolted into her mind again, as vivid as it had been yesterday. With the addition of the book title, though, she remembered where she seen the woman before.

"You know, I had the weirdest dream about Boo-boo Knees."

Lain whipped around to face her. "Boo?"

"At least, I think it was Boo-boo."

"H-h-how do you know about Boo's nickname?"

"The picture. It has her name on the back of it."

"Which picture?"

"The one in the book." When Lain continued to stare at her in confusion, Tinker

went to the bookcase and found the one in question.

She went to scan the bookcases until she found Lain's book, The Annotated Alice. Complete in one book was both Alice in Wonderland and Alice through the Looking Glass and What She Found There with copious footnotes that explained what seemed to be a odd little children's story to have layer upon layers of meaning. She'd discovered the book the one time she actually stayed with Lain - when her Grandfather had gone to Boston for to her cousin, Oilcan. Since Pittsburgh was isolated from Earth for 29 out of 30 days, he had to leave on Shutdown and return an entire month later. Lain apparently forgotten the photo tucked into the book, but Tinker hadn't.

It was an old two-dimensional color photo, a young woman with short purple hair. She hovered in mid-air, the earth a brilliant blue moon behind her. She challenged the camera with a level brown-eyed gaze and a set jaw, as if she was annoyed with its presence. On her right temple was a sterile adhesive bandage. Written on the back was "Even in zero gravity, I find things to bang myself on. Love. Boo-boo Knees."

At the point she found it, she'd never seen a two-dimensional photograph; neither her grandfather or Lain were ones for personal pictures. From its limited perspective to the name of Boo-boo Knees, she'd found it fascinating. She stared at it until - ten years later - she could have drawn it from memory.

The picture was where she carefully returned it, marking the place where one story ended and another started.

"Oh!" Lain took the photo. "I've forgotten about that."

"Who is she?" Why did I dream about her? Tinker flipped through the book, remembering now nearly forgotten passages echoing back from the dream. The checkerboard layout that they flown over. The flight itself, so like the picture of furious race to stay in place, Alice and the Red Queen, hand in hand.

"This is my sister."