



Make Love, Not War

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BRIARTHORN RAN A HAND OVER HER SCALP. SHE WAS TIRED of waiting with her sisters for the prey. No matter that their teeth and claws made superior weapons. No matter that the brown-skinned little upstarts could never outstrip their speed or agility. Too long had the *Far-im* allowed them to grow bold without decisive reprisals. It must end today. Her wings twitched in agitation. Just the thought of the brownies made her shudder.

Beside her on the spiky brush perched her hatchmate Pinch-claw, sucking her teeth with impatience. Brownies had stolen away most of her first litter. Who knew what had happened to the younglings—there were a hundred stories. The brownies used the hatchlings in bizarre rituals, or ate them for supper. They climbed the impossibly high trunks of the trees, many thousand times taller than the *Far-im*, and dashed the little bodies on the roots far below, before their wings could sprout, to keep them from growing fierce and strong. Briarthorn thought, in her darker moments, that perhaps the losses were a necessary tithe. They never took all of the hatchlings. Still, they shouldn't be allowed to take *any*.

It happened whenever the *Far-im* hatched a litter. Briarthorn was lucky; her only litter so far had survived the attack, save one or two. But it seemed the brownies possessed preternatural ability to detect hatchings, for always they came, and no matter how the younger *Far-im* begged, the Elders would not allow them to post guards at laying.

"Eggs need dewfall to thrive," the Elders asserted. Even Queen Whipwillow

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insisted that the eggs must be left defenseless in the moonlight for the dew to fall unhindered, and the lifemagic to take root inside them.

’Thorn had been surprised, then, when Queen Whipwillow approved the war party. Always before, the Queen had held them back from annihilating their enemy. She told them she had her reasons, but refused to explain why the *Bro-nim* were needed. It made no sense to Briarthorn. The pests deserved extermination.

A series of clicks heralded the first of the foe. Three small, light tan creatures appeared through a gap in the hedgerow, cautiously assessing the terrain. They had wrapped their nethers in long strips of cloth. Their bare chests, arms, and legs were smooth, thinner, and less muscular than the *Far-im*. Their hands and feet ended in blunted claws. Scouts, Briarthorn decided. She flitted her wings, signalling the others to hold position. Let the brownies think their path open. Let them return and announce that they could pass without fear.

An answering signal from a pair of sail-like red wings flitted back to her from across the brush. Stonestrike, their commander, agreed with ’Thorn’s strategy. ’Strike was a season older than ’Thorn, and one of their best fighters. No one had been surprised when Queen Whipwillow announced that Stonestrike would succeed her and had begun her training in the sacred ways. ’Strike would surely lead them to victory.

But no column of brownies entered the clearing. A solid blue flag of truce appeared against the green ferns.

“They want to talk?” Pinchclaw hissed.

“It seems so,” Hedgehook said drolly. Briarthorn kept silent. How were the brownies so sure that her kin waited? Their scouts had never before sensed an ambush.

Stonestrike stood on her leaf and whistled a complicated invitation to parley. A few seconds later, two stick-thin figures entered the grove. Though most of them looked alike to ’Thorn, she thought the younger one was one of the scouts. The other had to be an Elder. He had lived long enough to turn mottled and darker than any brownie ’Thorn had ever seen. Both bore the filmy lacelike wings that were almost more decorative than useful. Almost, ’Thorn thought scornfully. They could glide over short distances, aided by the flimsy alae. How light and powerful her own wings were by comparison! As for decorative, who could ever apply that word to their excuse for wings? The drab, dusty coloration more resembled the dirt of the garden bed or the sand of a pond beach than the flower petal colors the *Far-im* sported. No wonder they had covered themselves in shame.

“Filthy little moths,” she heard Pinchclaw growl. “’Strike should have just attacked as planned.”

’Thorn flitted her wings in agreement and impetuously lifted off from her hiding place, joining ’Strike below where now the brownies had halted. As second,