

Excerpt from
Zilcemi's Healer: Fire's Mistress
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With copyedits and notes from Milo Sanders

The parts and pieces of one of the most intricate clocks Marcus had ever stumbled upon lay strewn across his workstation. He had examined every bit as he meticulously disassembled the masterpiece, and he would look for ways to improve upon it once he began to puzzle it back to its original form. His study was full of inventions, those he built himself and those acquired from others for additional study. He would only be able to further the advancement of current society and provide aid to those in need through constant learning, after all.

His special project had been in the works for a few years now, and it was nearing completion. A surge of pride filled him every time he thought about this creation and all the many ways it could benefit the world, even if now he had to keep it covered.

"Son."

Marcus whirled from the table, his magnifying helmet with many different scopes of varying intensity making him look a bit like a mad scientist. He lifted the piece of glass that currently was bringing his father's disapproving expression into much too vivid detail away from his captivating, blue eyes.

"Yes?"

His father's brows furrowed all the more. The man was of average height and a bit rotund. Everything about him was average except his family name, his family money, and his exceedingly strong desire to advance the two. Unfortunately, Marcus had been blessed with exceptional looks that both his parents had realized could be used to great advantage, and it had caused him more than a bit of grief. Since he turned eighteen last month, their efforts had become even more demanding.

"You do have tea today with Miss Bateema at three, correct?"

Marcus nodded, glancing at his candle clock, lantern clock, water clock, and grandfather clock in turn. "It's just now half past one."

"Would it not be prudent to begin preparing your appearance now and arrive early? Miss Bateema is your best prospect in Minisett, and it would not do for her to lose interest."

Marcus's brows drew together in consideration. "Exactly how early are you expecting me to arrive? It'll take a mere ten minutes to ready myself, and her home is not far from here."

His father's frown intensified as he looked around the room. "I know how engrossed you get when working on these broken contraptions, so it's best for you to leave off your tinkering for now."

Marcus's face fell. "Right. Allow me to clean up a bit."

His father nodded with a satisfied smile. "I have made inquiries with some acquaintances in Haultown and have been quite fortunate in securing an invitation to a ball this coming weekend. Many eligible young women will be there, and I expect you to do your part in elevating our family status. Having an in with the elite in Haultown would be quite the boon."

"I thought you had your mind set on Bateema," Marcus replied with a sigh said. "And don't you wish me to follow in your footsteps here? Were I to marry someone from Haultown, odds are in favor of me being required to remain there."

Commented [JES1]: Using the same word but in different ways in the same sentence is confusing. Consider rewording.

His father waved a dismissive hand. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. The advantages would outweigh the costs, I'm sure, and that is precisely why your mother and I ultimately decided to have a backup."

Marcus felt his jaw tighten. "*Julian is your son, not a backup.*"

"Yes, yes. Just clean up this mess and your appearance and make certain to arrive early and lavish the silly lass with compliments this afternoon."

"Did you not just say that you wished me to attend a ball to find a wife from Haultown? Flirting with Bateema would get her hopes up."

His father shrugged. "She is bound to have a political marriage regardless. She just likes your handsome face, as do all the girls, so it won't be too disappointing for her if it falls apart. Just make certain you do *not* under any circumstances let them know about...," he gestured to the room, "...this nonsense. I have tolerated it up to now, but if you make me regret that, it will be gone in an instant."

Marcus bowed his head. "Of course, fFather."

With that, the man turned on his heel and marched away down the hall. Marcus closed the door, leaning against it with a sigh. He had planned to work for another hour...he pondered a moment. Another half hour wouldn't hurt, and he would still get to Bateema's early.

A knock on the glass of his second story window startled him.

Perched on the small ledge was Fia, her grin mischievous as she gestured for him to open the window. He chuckled as he walked over to do as she requested.

"And what brings you here, Miss Fia?"

She was instantly wandering around the room, picking up this, examining that, spinning and flicking one mechanism after another. Her eyes, like living flame, lit up as she took in everything.

"I was bored."

Marcus leaned over the windowsill to look down at the lawn below. Sure enough, Burk stood there with an expression of parental indulgence. He gave Marcus a wave.

"I tried to get her to use the back door," he called up.

Marcus raised a brow. "And when has she ever done that? Come on up, Burk. I have to get ready to leave in half an hour, but you are welcome to keep me company until then."

Burk nodded, disappearing around the side of the house as Marcus closed the window. He flipped his magnifying glass back in front of his eye and sat down at his desk. He would reassemble the clock later and focus on a more important task since his time had been cut short.

Not a moment later, Fia was ~~leaning to peek at his work~~ **peeking** over his shoulder.

"What is this project?" she asked.

With screwdriver in hand, Marcus started fiddling. "When I dropped you off at the orphanage a few days back, I noticed a small lass with a wooden prosthetic and thought of a few ways that I might improve upon it. She did appear to be having a bit of trouble with the joint at the knee."

"Oh. Maisy will appreciate that, I'm sure. She's weak and sickly, so any advantage would be helpful. You are brilliant when it comes to this kind of thing."

His eyes darted briefly up to her. "If you intend to watch me, at least pull up a chair as opposed to hovering."

The door opened, and Burk entered the room.

"Fi, stop pestering Marcus."

“Curiosity is a good thing, Burk,” Marcus replied. “Although, Fia, I must ask. You were aware that I was to have tea with Bateema at three, so why choose to visit now when you knew our time would be cut short?”

“No reason.”

The mischievous look on her face said otherwise. Marcus turned to Burk for an explanation.

“She ran into Bateema in town just a moment ago.”

Marcus paused a moment. “Did she invite you to join us for tea then?”

Fia sniffed. “As if.”

“It’s more a one-upmanship, I believe,” Burk said.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.” Marcus shook his head. “However, it is rather nice to spend time with those that acknowledge my interests, especially after a rather trying encounter with my father.”

Fia snapped her teeth together angrily. “He didn’t threaten to throw out your stuff again, did he?”

Marcus paused for the barest of moments before giving her a smile. “As long as I attend to Bateema appropriately, my workshop is safe.”

Fia began spinning a wheel sitting on a shelf on the other side of the room. “Your family owns the mines, which employs over half the town and brings in three-fourths of the legitimate revenue, and your dad’s the mayor. Why is he so determined to marry you off to *Bateema*?”

Burk leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. “Because she’s the daughter of the only banking family that also owns the only railroad.”

“So? She’s a ridiculous girl that will only make ~~him~~ **you** miserable.”

Burk smirked at her. “Then who would you suggest?”

Marcus turned back to the task at hand. “Only my father’s opinion matters, I’m afraid. My mother’s to a lesser degree, I suppose. Although, he has decided to parade me around a ball in Haultown next weekend in the hopes of scoring an even greater conquest.”

Fia chuckled. “Poor Bateema. Her little, shriveled heart will be broken.”

“Be nice, Fia,” Marcus chastised absent-mindedly. “I do feel a bit sorry for her. She is in the same predicament as I am. And while I’m quite certain that she is just as put out as I am with having to cater to our parents’ ambitions, I feel guilty for leading her on if my father intends to change his focus.”

Marcus sighed. “This tea is going to be stressful.”

“She isn’t put out, you know. She wants to get her greedy little claws into you so she can brag to all the other girls about her gorgeous and rich husband,” Fia ~~commented~~ **said**.

Marcus laughed. “You do know exactly what to say to cheer me up, Fia, though I’m certain you are incorrect. She is not nearly that shallow, and my charms are not much to brag about. She would actually be disappointed in me were she to discover my interests here.”

“I believe she would capitalize on them,” Burk stated. “She’s as business minded as her father.”

Marcus shook his head. “That wouldn’t do. Often, it’s the poor that need my inventions more than the rich. I couldn’t possibly deny them simply because they hadn’t the funds to acquire them.”

“You’re too nice,” Fia stated flatly. “That’s why all these other humans are able to take advantage of you. I would be more than happy to put them in their place on your behalf.”

Commented [JES2]: Most of the time “said” is perfectly adequate and doesn’t distract from the dialogue.

"Ah, there." Marcus held up the metal prosthetic and tested the knee joint, frowning a bit upon noticing a slight catch. "Well, almost anyway."

Burk walked over to take a look as Marcus replied. "Fia, the townspeople barely tolerate you as it is, though I haven't the slightest understanding of their reticence in accepting you, and were you to become my violent champion, I imagine their disdain for you would grow to the point that you would no longer feel the slightest bit of safety."

"He's not wrong," Burk agreed **said**. He picked up the prosthetic and examined the joint closely.

"We weren't planning on staying here anyway, so what does it matter?"

"We aren't ready to leave yet," Burk said. "Change this gear to $\frac{1}{2}$ **a half inch**, and it should fix the problem."

"Right you are!" Marcus exclaimed after careful analysis. He tinkered for a minute or so before turning to face them. "Besides, I would be most disappointed if the two of you couldn't come to visit me periodically, so try to keep out of trouble."

Fia sighed dramatically. "I keep telling you to just come with us."

"My parents would be very put-out with that decision."

"Pfft. You don't like them anyway."

"~~Fi~~," Burk gave her a stern look. "**Fi**."

"What? All they care about is how best to use him, and he is far too good for all the other people in this town. You want to go and see the world, right? Learn new things so you can build even greater inventions? How are you going to succeed if you're stuck here in the middle of nowhere?"

Marcus gave her a small smile. "I have my duties here, and I will most likely be living in Haultown or visiting regularly, so I can learn quite a bit there. It is a hub of commerce and attracts a variety of individuals. Speaking of which, I plan to make discrete inquiries about the kinz when I go there this coming weekend for the ball. Perhaps I will be able to glean a snippet or two of helpful information for you."

Fia bounced a bit happily. "That would be wonderful. Right, Burk?"

He nodded.

"See? This is why we need you with us. You are accepted everywhere, and humans instinctively like you. We would be so much more successful if you just came with us." She cut her eyes over to Burk. "We're going to kidnap him when we leave."

Burk looked to the ceiling. "Of course."

Marcus turned back to his work to finish one last tweak. "I shall have my bag packed and ready. And it is now time for me to get changed for my afternoon tea."

Fia bounded over, her eyes yet again full of mischief. "Want a good luck charm?"

Marcus tilted his head.

"Say no," Burk advised.

Fia sent him a glare before turning back to Marcus with a sweet smile. "Don't listen to him."

"You have a dangerous look in your fiery eyes. I have a mind to agree with your brother's suggestion."

The pout he received as a result made him instantly backtrack. "But how could I possibly resist your kind offer?"

Her grin widened. "Promise to tell Bateema that you received my good luck charm?"

Marcus's eyes narrowed on her. "That seems unwise."

"It is," Burk ~~stated~~ **said**.

Fia pulled on his arm. "Come on, promise, or I won't give it to you."

Marcus sighed before giving her a nod, then regretted his acquiescence when he saw her wicked grin. Then she popped up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek, and his face warmed. With wide eyes, it took him a moment to find his voice. "Whatever was that for?"

"It's your good luck charm that you promised to mention to Bateema."

"I couldn't possibly tell Bateema that you...," Marcus cleared his throat. "Burk, you should get ahold of your sister. She can't go around kissing gentlemen as a prank."

"She doesn't."

Fia scoffed. "Humans aren't worth my time."

Marcus's brow furrowed, and he shook his head. "I simply do not understand, but you should try not to rile Miss Bateema. Now, I trust the two of you can see yourselves out?"

Fia had already made her way to the window and had slipped it open. Marcus sighed and looked to Burk as she dropped out of sight.

"I'll close it. Go get ready," Burk said.

Marcus nodded and was just about to turn to go when he paused. "How close are you now?"

The window slammed closed firmly. "Two months, and I'll give you all the information on the dealings when we leave."

"Not much time, then," Marcus said, noting that ~~he~~ **Burk** sounded a bit...forlorn?

"If you change your mind," Burk began, but Marcus cut him off.

"You know I can't make that choice."

The two men, complete opposites in appearance but similar in mind, stared at one another.

"Enjoy your tea, then."

Burk left the room, and Marcus stood listening as his footsteps faded down the stairs. Though always surrounded by people, Marcus had never felt a connection until he met those two, and now he was facing an ever-nearing future without them.

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"Cat, the table in the corner needs refills."

Fia nodded silently and slinked over to do the tavern owner's bidding. She did not particularly enjoy working in a tavern, but her options were severely limited, not just because she was one of Frayn's orphans, but even more so because she was a kinz. In the minds of the townspeople, she was not trustworthy, which ruled out working in little shops or helping out in homes or with children. Had she been a burly man, she could have gone to work with Burk hauling stone, coal, and gems from the mines. However, the managers of any occupations requiring manual labor took one look at her admittedly slight frame and shook their heads.

All things considered, Fia should be grateful to have been given a job at Lionin's. The boss paid fairly, wasn't overly demanding, and didn't let patrons get away with poor behavior toward his employees, even though one of them was a kinz. She knew that the only reason she had gotten this job was because of Burk, but somehow, her frank and occasionally playful nature meshed well with the drunken human jokes and insults, which yielded a truce between her and the patrons that she ~~found nonexistent~~ **couldn't find** outside the establishment. She also needed the money.

Fia glanced around the large, wooden structure filled to the brim with rough, round tables and chairs. A large fireplace adorned the back wall, though in the heat of summer it resembled a grumpy, old man squatting in the shadows and judging everyone with an imposing presence. There were no frills in this place.

In the early morning, they passed out crusts of bread and packaged lunches to those on their way to work. At mid-day, men with the more prestigious jobs would stop by to fill their bellies. She worked in the kitchen away from the humans for those shifts. And while they made a decent profit for their earlier services, it was the evening crowd that kept the place alive. This was the watering hole where all the day-laborers came to rest their weary bones for a loud evening filled with that oh-so-wonderful substance guaranteed to help them forget their troubles. It didn't matter that the chairs were uncomfortable or that the space was often overly crowded. The food was good, and the beverages were even better.

Fia glided from table to table, swapping insults with customers and occasionally tapping them on a shoulder with her tail as she passed, causing them to whirl around to confront air. As per usual, Fia made sure to keep her ears open for any interesting gossip, but while more people filled the room, it seemed that daily life was the same as usual.

Laden with a tray full of empty mugs, she weaved her way over to the bar. Marcus sat in a corner with his cloak hood up to cover his face. They had an understanding to limit their interaction **in public**, for it wouldn't do if the townsfolk recognized the son of the most prestigious man in town here in this poor tavern. She felt sorry for him in that thick cloak, though. It was quite stuffy this evening. She brushed her vibrant, red hair back and fluffed the jet-black fur on her cheeks.

"Doing alright, Fi?" a soft voice whispered from behind her.

A corner of her lips curled happily before she whirled around with a raised brow and a frown.

"You are later than usual, and you know better than to bother me at the bar. Go to your table, and I'll have you a mug in a moment."

Burk grimaced as he looked into her tired face before blowing out a breath and sharing a small smile. "Earn your tips."

Fia stuck her tongue out at him before turning back to her tasks.

A roar grew from the room behind her as the patrons greeted Burk heartily. Though he was the silent type, everyone seemed to like him—probably because he was always willing to lend a hand, an ear, and sound judgment.

"Burk must have worked hard today," Lionin commented as he filled up several mugs. "He's late."

"Haven't had a chance to ask him yet," Fia replied.

Lionin eyed her. "Deliver these drinks then take a short break. You haven't stopped since you got here this morning. There are some leftover sandwiches in the back. Grab one for each of you."

Fia gave a curt nod.

In just a matter of minutes, she plopped down beside Burk at the small table in the corner.

"And now, we feast," she said sardonically.

Burk eyed her and dug in. "Did you thank Lionin?"

"What for?" Fia asked around a mouthful. "I deserve more than this after the work I put in today."

"Work you are paid to do. Thank him before you leave."

Fia *humphed*.

“So what’ll it be tonight?” Burk asked.

“Our friend is here, so let’s do his favorite.”

“That one wears you out.”

“Then we’ll do it last. You pick the first one, and we’ll ask the patrons for suggestions for the others.”

Burk nodded as he reached for his eight-stringed musellica for tuning. Its curved body was a rich, chestnut wood, and because Burk had a hand in crafting it with the local artisan, the size fit his frame perfectly. He adjusted the instrument so the neck casually gripped his left shoulder, swooped gracefully downward, and the base gently rested against his thigh. Jutting from the neck and positioned comfortably before Burk’s lips was a thin, hollow reed with several holes to create different, hauntingly sweet pitches that sounded through the drum to mingle with the stringed melody plucked out by his right hand. His left hand manipulated the strings at the neck to create each different chord. It was a beautiful instrument both visually and audibly, and Burk was quite skilled at playing this rather challenging musical device.

Fia frowned as he began tuning. “Why were you so late today?”

He glanced her way. “The engine for the drill blew. The engineer was sick, so Boss called me to fix it. And Master had a last-minute order.”

“Everyone uses you.”

Burk shrugged.

“Give us some music!” came a shout from the room.

Fia sent a frustrated glance at Burk.

“Stop pretending like you don’t enjoy their fawning.”

Fia smirked. It was fun to see the humans giving her their undivided attention and begging for more songs. It had been a fluke that started this gig. Burk had been playing here since his musellica was built—in fact, Lionin had helped cover a portion of its cost in exchange for entertainment twice a week. Burk had definitely come out ahead with the deal, and he had convinced Lionin to hire her as a waitress to boot.

She hadn’t started to sing until several months later.

Burk had been struggling with a particularly difficult piece of music, an unusual occurrence for him, and while at home, Fia had helped him keep the ~~timing~~ **time** by singing the words. She had sung that song so many times in the space of a few weeks that she must have gotten conditioned to immediately sing for Burk when he began to play. She had been wiping down a table near him when he started the song, and she had been moving on autopilot for the last hour after an incredibly busy day. It wasn’t surprising that she began to sing along, though she was singing softly. What had been surprising was the gradual and complete hush that fell over the room to allow everyone to hear her.

While she would ordinarily have been disinclined to cater to these people, the tip money was too much to ignore, so she had agreed to sing each time Burk played. She also couldn’t deny that she had a tendency to get enthralled in the music, and she did occasionally have a flair for the dramatic. She jumped atop the table. “Any requests?”

Several old favorites were suggested, and Fia performed them all with Burk accompanying, receiving raucous applause. While these humans may **have** ~~refused~~ to accept her in the course of their ordinary lives, she was always capable of breaking down their barriers when she sang. Her voice had a special quality that humans simply couldn’t replicate, and she

sometimes wondered if all kinz possessed that unique, rumbling vibration that created a richer and more soulful sound.

When it came time for the last song, which was Marcus's favorite, she did send a glance and small smile his way. This was the first song he ever heard her sing, and it was precisely why they had become friends. Two buddies of his had managed to coerce him into checking out the "poor-folk tavern". All three of them had stood out quite a bit, and of course, once his father found out, he-Marcus was banned from ever returning. However, he had been captivated by her voice and made a point to speak with her at the end of the evening.

Marcus was already acquainted with Burk—his father did own the mine that employed her brother, after all—and Burk had a way of inadvertently standing out with everything he did. However, Marcus had been unaware of Burk's connection to the only kinz in town and was very much intrigued by their relationship. Fia had liked his lack of guile and genuine acceptance of her, something that she had only experienced with Burk. It was not long before a bond was forged between the three of them.

With the final song of the night finished, Fia curtsied, somewhat mockingly, and hopped from the table. She had sung three more songs than usual, and her voice was giving out. She quickly finished off her mug of water and moved to get a refill. She felt completely drained, which wasn't surprising since it was nearly midnight.

Lionin started kicking out grumbling patrons while Fia's other two ~~co-workers~~ coworkers cleared tables. As she refilled her glass for the third time, Marcus slipped up beside her and pushed some gold coins her way.

"For your travel fund," he whispered. "You did well, as usual. Thank you for singing my favorite."

"I've got to keep my best patron happy, don't haven't I?" she smirked at him as she pocketed the coins. "Are you coming Fiftday?"

Marcus shook his head with a sigh. "Unfortunately not. We will be leaving for Haulstown on Forsday, since the ball is Fiftday evening. I won't be returning until late Sevenday."

Fia pouted. "Sad. Travel safely, and don't break too many girls' hearts."

"I'll do my best," Marcus replied with a chuckle. "And I'll try to get you some information on kinz."

"Much appreciated. Now, you'd better scram. I don't think Lionin's face could handle a glare of any additional intensity."

"Have a pleasant evening."

Marcus tipped his head at her, sent a wave to Burk as he finished packing up his musellica, and then left the tavern. Burk and Fia were not long behind him, pleased with the tips made that evening. It wouldn't be long before they had enough money saved to realize their dream.