

CHAPTER TWO

Alone in the village square, I shook off my heartcracking thoughts and ran back home. Granda was still asleep. I mucked out Dance, the camel, and the goats as fast as I could while it was still cool enough to rush around without getting sweat soaked. Nana, mother to two kids, was happy enough for me to milk her at this early hour once her nose was in a bucket of feed. I let out the chickens, collected eggs and cleaned the henhouse, deciding to have breakfast after Granda woke up.

Unable to get near the Node since Mother's mouthwhacking, I wanted a go at it. I crept through the Waiting Area, almost on tiptoe. If only Granda would sleep in this morning... He'd taught me so much about the Node - but now I needed to Facs-mine solo, especially as his tapping and grunting was so roaching *slow*.

I whispered Mother's over-ride code into the speaklock. She was always changing it to try and keep me out. But I'd planted a pickup under her flower table - and I was in.

It was getting worse - the Nodery now looked more like a roaching forest. Only thing that boosted me was that the organi-pacs seemed healthy enough, as they bubbled, glowing in their transparent drawers. However, rank vegetable smells prickled my nose; an alarm chirped; red light strobed around the room. A vine twined across the ceiling and the floor was cluttered with vases crammed with flowers. Fruit and vegetables were even piled around the base of the Nodetable. Humidity slagged the Node - hence the alarm and red light.

But Mother had taken it into her vac-brained skull that the Node *liked* her flowers. And she was now encouraging enquirers to bring plants as 'a thanksgiving' to the Node. I hadn't needed Granda's grunts and thumps to explain the dangers connected with *that* idea. My constant fear was that by the time I was in a position to inherit the post of Brarian, Mother's wilt-wittedness would already have our Family deNamed.

I sat at the Nodetable, swearing at the moisture filming the infopad and wiping it dry with my work shirt. As soon as I used Mother's log-on code, I activated the air scrubbers to reduce the humidity. Ideally her crippling weeds should be removed to dry out the room. But she'd know exactly where every leaf and flower went and I'd never get them back just so.

I wanted more Facs on Reseda. Once I was the Brarian, I'd need to visit the provincial capital regularly and my current fear of the place made that impossible. Fighting my instinct to think of anything other than Reseda Market, I tried to work through my phobia. Because the panic I felt at the very name of Reseda Market gave Mother a victory I no longer wanted her to enjoy.

I hate you...

Wiping my sweaty palms on my trousers, I accessed the Node's first layer. In no time flat I found a street map of Reseda. Not a single flower petal had been flung in the air - yet here it was. I was good at this!

Just as well - my farming skills were crippling terrible, as Mother never tired of telling me. I wanted a copy of the map. But she'd confiscated my datatab last month with some snaketalk about how I hadn't properly looked after it. I tapped in her override code for the Nodery Stores, blessing her for never bothering to change it.

Maybe she can't prog more than one code at a time. Nah, surely even Mother isn't as unskilled as that - is she?

The Store snapped open. I stared at the stacked 'tabs in disbelief. What were they doing here? Every household was supposed to have a datatab preloaded with

vital Facs. Like emergency first-aid; basic animal husbandry; lists of poisonous plants and dangerous animals; the emergency codings to call for Council help in the event of life threatening events. Cnicus would be *roachbait* if we were hit by a flash flood next rainy season.

What would The Council say, if they knew what was going on?

When had she rounded up all the datatabs? It had to be a recent move – they weren't here the last time I'd looked. Why...? I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think, shivering in the cooling air. And opened them when I remembered.

Most villagers liked Mother. But Felina Keeper, the village Storesperson was an exception. Mother's slackness in harvesting our crops hackled her shard-sharp attention to detail. Mother refused to either give up her inherited lands to one of the farming families, as she should have done when becoming Brarian – or allow the village to harvest her crops for her. It gave her a useful excuse to keep me away from the Node. Otherwise the other village Elders might start asking questions about how my Apprenticeship was progressing.

She was so good at playing the helpless widow on the edge of being hoed flat while caring for her crippled father and shiftless son, that few people ever raised the fact she was one of the wealthiest people in Cnicus. Felina Keeper, however, was one of those people.

Felina's Family claimed to have kept the Keeper Name in Cnicus since Arcadia's Foundation. Records didn't go back that far, so no one knew if this was a straightline Fac. But without doubt, they were the longest established Family in the village.

Four weeks ago, there'd been a minor infestation of gum weevil in the stored crop of gumweed. A problem that could slag the village. Cnicus relied on gumweed as animal fodder during the dry season, when the grass didn't have enough nutrients to support the village herd. Felina's dataslate had a note – put there by her great-grandfather - that the Node stored the recipe for a non-toxic spray repellent to gumweevil.

I'd been scrubbing the floors when the <Emergency> bell rang just after daybreak. Mother, in the middle of her flower prayers, demanded that I tell whoever it was that she wasn't available.

When I saw it was Felina Keeper, my heart sank.

Nevertheless I bowed politely to her. "My deepest repentances, Mistress Keeper, but Mother requests that you come back later--"

"She's the roaching Brarian, isn't she? Go and tell her that I wouldn't be here if coming back later was an option. I need a recipe from the Node. Right now." Folding her arms, she frowned at me.

I fled. A tic twitched the corner of Mother's mouth when I relayed the message. Felina Keeper wanted an important Fac and *knew* it was contained within the Node. Mother's worst nightmare. If the village Keeper was dissatisfied with Mother's performance as Brarian, we could lose our Name.

I cleared my throat. She stared at me. Flensed by her look of hate-filled rage, I stepped back as if struck. My offer to help stayed lodged in my throat while I gazed at her, helpless as a jaspered chicken.

"You'd better come along, hadn't you?" She spun away, as if sickened by my presence.

I numbly followed her into the Nodery.

Felina Keeper was pacing up and down the Waiting Area as if we'd been gone an eon instead of few minutes. "At last! Come on, Mai - this is urgent."

Mother muttered into the speaklock, glaring in my direction until I'd made a point of looking away.

Felina explained what she wanted in sharp staccato sentences, jabbing at her datatab.

"Have you brought a sample of the gumweed with you? The Node prefers to see plants She has to heal," Mother reverted to her plant cant.

I stood in the corner, waiting for her signal.

"For Mother Earth's sake, Mai! No, I haven't got a sample. I don't want to spread the pumping weevil across the whole village!"

I squeaked at her crude language.

"There's no need for that kind of talk, Felina." Mother was stiffly offended.

Felina had jerked her head in my direction. "What's the boy doing here?"

"This is not a usual request. I need to ensure that the floral offerings to the Node are in the most favourable ascent, while he inputs your data."

I was unwillingly impressed at how plausible she sounded. No wonder she managed to get away with so much, knowing so little.

However, Felina hadn't shared my admiration. "Hah! Well, get on with it. If we lose this forage crop, we'll have to cut back the herds. We've only just managed to build the numbers up to pre-Turbulence Times." The short woman wobbled with passion as she'd tapped her datatab. "There's nothing on here about this flower roachbait being necessary."

Mother's lips thinned and she nodded in my direction. I scampered to the Nodetable, placing my hands onto the infopad. Using the aural option was nixed as Mother started one of her vac-brained chants, waving bits of greenery across the organi-pacs. I accessed <Gumweevil> and got a comprehensive Fac, giving its lifecycle; mating habits; the extent of the damage it caused and the speed it could spread. But nothing on any repellent spray. Inputting the words <Gumweevil Repellent> had only produced a thesaurus of alternative phrases describing just how nasty gumweevils could be.

As if I don't already know...

Felina tapped her foot on the stone floor; her hobnailed sandals making an echoing row. In response, Mother increased her crooning dirge to a howl, with the organi-pacs flaring as her damn plants thudded against their containers. I wiped my palms across my thighs, trying to blank out the racket and *think*.

She'd done this to me before. Wouldn't let me anywhere near the Node – till given a task she couldn't do. Then she shovelled the mess in my direction, expecting me to produce the necessary Fac. And after, would she be glad or grateful? No, she crippling well wouldn't! She'd be madder than a snake-bit cat because I was better at the Node than she was. This time, what with all the noise, and it being Felina Keeper – my brain lurched to a stop. I started to understand how Mother felt every time she sat at the infopad...

When it came to me.

I leaned towards Felina Keeper, raising my voice, "Can I see your datatab, please, Mistress Keeper?"

Felina had scowled at me, then turned on Mother. "Hoe that caterwaul flat, Mai. I can't hear the boy."

"He's not supposed to interrupt the Nodal Greeting." Mother's glance should have reduced me to a steaming slagheap.

"Pump your Nodal Greeting."

I tittered with nervous embarrassment at Felina's filthy tongue. Earning another lancing stare from Mother.

"If you continue to use such unpleasant language, Felina, I'm going to insist that you leave. As Brarian I am obligated to serve you, but I don't see why I should tolerate your abuse." Mother's icy dignity was impressive.

Trouble was, Felina wasn't impressed. She ignored Mother. "Right, what jer want?"

"C-can I please see your datatab?"

She'd handed it across to me, resuming her foot tapping. I examined the short entry. Hmm – this *might* work... I accessed the <History> level manually and then the date – one hundred and twenty four years ago. A list of Facs had flickered up onto the Nodescreen. The list went on and on. Did the Brarian in those times *always* produce this number of Facs in one day? Something I'd need to check out...

Meantime, I had the gumweed recipe. "Jer want the Node to read out the recipe onto your datatab, or would you like a download of the printed version?"

It was Felina's turn to give me a dirty look. "I can read, boy. Probably better than you. Download the printed version onto my 'tab, please."

She grinned nastily at Mother. "Lucky for you, Mai, that your son has inherited the Family talent, isn't it?" And with that she'd waddled out.

Mother had been in a stenching mood for days afterwards. And somehow she'd managed to persuade most of the villagers to hand in their datatabs. In return for... what? She must have promised them *something* – no one would give up their datatab for nothing. Had Felina Keeper given Mother her datatab? I flicked through the pile, looking for the Keeper Family sigil on the front casing. Nah. It wasn't here. So, what was happening? I'd need to check this out.

Returning to the Nodetable, I heard the muffled thumps.

Wilting hells, Granda's woken up and needs the toilet.

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Two hours later, after I'd washed, dressed and fed Granda then breakfasted, we returned to the Nodery. It was tricky getting his chair in amongst the crippling greenery. I lugged it in first, and came back for him.

He took a couple of shuffling steps into the Nodery. "Ahh... ahh... gr..."

"I know, I know," I wheezed, taking all of his weight while he teetered in his fury. "I've got the scrubbers working to dry it out. But we can't move the plants or she'll know. Now, help me out, here. You're not getting any lighter."

Granda drooled with effort, dragging his twisted leg along the floor. As I lowered him into his chair, he kicked over a pile of softening mangoes.

"Oh, Granda!"

He cackled with delight.

I wasn't so happy. "This isn't fair, Granda. If she reckons we've been here, I'm the one that'll get hoed flat." Warily, I picked them up.

He did his idiot act, trying to make out he didn't know what he was doing – and missing another pile of fruit by less than an inch.

I'd had enough. "Do that again, and I'll take you back to your room and leave you there until lunchtime. I haven't time for this roachbait!"

I don't know which of us was more shocked. He bared his teeth at me, growling and spitting. Like he did with Mother. I raised my hands, trying to calm him down.

“Mega-repentances! I didn’t mean it. I’m tired – and I haven’t got near the Node since forever. I only have today. I don’t want to spend it picking up fruit because you think it’s funny to kick it around.”

“Rrr... ee...”

I tried not to fidget while waiting for him to finally finish, although I knew what he was saying halfway through. He hated to be interrupted.

“I do respect you. You know I do. But I don’t have much time. Please, Granda, don’t foam at me.” I wiped my hands across my tunic. “You’ll never guess what she’s done – she’s only gone and taken everyone’s datatab away.”

I’d expected him to growl with fury. But he waved his good arm dismissively, tapping and grunting.

I stared at him. “What jer mean ‘So what?’”

Has the sun got to him?

Granda knew that as Brarian, Mother was the link between the village and all the knowledge in the Node.

Granda cackled, tapped and grunted.

I interrupted, “Well, of course she’s got to earn her living - but don’t tell me that Mother is poor. Not like Larold’s family.”

We owned livestock and lived in one of the best houses in Cnicus. Not that Granda ever seemed satisfied – he was always moaning about our primitive lifestyle.

He thrashed and growled, angry that I’d cut him off and started a rambling message.

I forced myself to stay still. There was a time when I’d be excited at every painful word he tapped out. I’d write it down, letter by letter. Then spell it back. Often he hit me with his stick when I got the spaces in the wrong place, making a nonsense of his message. Now, of course, I could decode the words in my head faster than he could make them and generally got there ahead of him.

Like now. I stared at the bruised mangoes.

Is my life ever going to get any better?

He finally wound down.

I smiled, trying to lull him. “I realize that, Granda. I know that you were the Brarian and that I’m only a feeb-witted apprentice. My repentances to you. But can I now start on the Node, while I’ve got this time?”

He tapped and rocked.

My fault. I shouldn’t have argued with him. I hauled him up, carefully avoiding the flora and manoeuvred him to the toilet. As I suspected, he only squeezed out a few drops using the toilet trip to punish me - knowing I was desperate to use the Node. As we threaded past the fruit and vegetables, he kicked the mangoes over again.

Lowering him into his chair, I re-stacked the damaged fruit in silence. Mother couldn’t fail to notice the dents in their squashy skins. She wouldn’t be foaming at Granda, would she? I’d be in for another barrage of her tight-lipped fury.

I hate you...

I still had the street map for Reseda up on the Node. I returned to the open Store and pulled out a datatab. I’d have loved to retrieve my own. But she’d notice if that went missing. So I took one belonging to a minor Family – the Vernal’s - shut the Store and returned to the Node.

Granda was quiet since I’d replaced the mangoes. But he’d been watching me as closely as a stalking mantivore. He tapped and grunted his question.

“A map of Reseda. I’m thinking of running away. It seems as good a place as any.” The words sounded even better outside my head.

I’d expected him to be angry. His reaction stunned me. Mewing, he bucked in his chair and would have fallen if I hadn’t rushed across and caught him. His twisted claws scrabbled at my arms. Tears poured down his face and he wailed like an infant.

Frantic with guilt, I crooned to him, “Shh. Lull it down. It’s alright. I won’t go. I wouldn’t leave you alone with her. You know that.”

And I knew it to be true. It would be his death sentence. How could I do that to my own Granda? And yet... the words felt like prison bars. Bleak and hard. Blocking out the light. And my freedom.