

Da Phai Nai: Extracts

The Birth of Ræm

Da Phai Nai stood near at hand to offer a potion, different from the ones she usually proffered, this one to ease the passage of childbirth. Jinnie gratefully accepted, and I stayed to comfort her, until a woman's voice commanded, "Jack Barleycorn, will you please leave this poor girl alone and find something useful to do. You are cluttering up the place and getting in our way. This is woman's work, and you have no place here. Look at what he has done to her, made her with child. Sun Kist, fetch my best broom so I can chase this wastrel out of here!"

We started to laugh, before another contraction stymied Jinnie's mirth. I stood my ground as Da Phai Nai chased interloping Ladies in Waiting and Imperial physicians out of our bedroom. Gung Loi took control of the confused hangers-on, and cleared them out of our home.

I knew that Da Phai Nai had not forgotten about me, and that my turn would come, but for the interval, I held Jien Noi's hand, and wiped her brow in simple sharing of togetherness and compassion. Somehow, n'Gnung had managed to dodge the matron's broom, and having infiltrated the heart of this exclusively female domain, uttered hurriedly, "Empress, Guardian, everybody is coming here."

"What? Festivities have already begun in Grimwaldi Rinns."

"Guardian, when you departed, so did they. Every single person of our nation is coming here to witness the birth of their new Empress. Come, we need to manage this."

Jinnie spoke up, "Husband, *Daddy*," she smiled as she patted her stomach; "We must share this moment, it is the most important moment in the lives of our people. Bring them all here, and bring our restaurants and kitchens too if you can find a way, because only you can do this. Bring everything you can think of, tables, chairs, and have builders standing by just in case things don't quite work out as planned. Hurry, my contractions come closer together; our daughter will be with us soon."

I kissed her lips, and rose to leave, placing my hand on her swollen belly for the last time. My eyes were bewitched by the love and understanding of creation. My wife whispered into my

distraction, “Send Weid Noi to me, I have need of her; she must witness the birth—it is something I do not understand.”

I began to reply, when a voice boomed nearby. “Ahha! There you are Guardian. I knew you would be lurking somewhere nearby. Be gone with you, and take this wiseacre with you.”

She swung her broom, almost catching me on the arm with a stout blow. I ran for cover, n’Gnung leading the way to safety. We ran for the door. Da Phai Nai charged after us, her broom casting pre-emptive strikes against our behinds, occasionally connecting, as we began to find the situation ludicrously hilarious.

She continued hollering as she chased us away, “What would you two likely lads be doing loitering here, if not up to some kind of mischief? Be off with you,” swoosh, “for you have guests to entertain,” swish, “a kingdom to run,” slap, “and a world to save!”

We made it just outside the entrance, and doubled over in fits of laughter. Our arms interlocked upon the other’s back, before the swoosh of practised broom caned our backsides. We ran a few more paces before turning.

Her rant continued unabashed, “That should be enough, but oh no. Instead, I find you whispering in secret about *girls*. Don’t even bother to deny it, for I know you both well—one of them your as yet, unborn daughter, Guardian. The good Lord preserve us.”

Her eyes were telling a very different story. n’Gnung spoke into my thoughts, “You said many weeks ago, Da Phai Nai is a person who changes your perspective, and brings laughter in her wake—once you understand her and her true intentions of course.”

We looked back at her in admiration; Da Phai Nai was standing resolute in the middle of the doorway to my home, the upright broom in her hand a fearsome weapon. We stood before her formidable demeanour and bowed to her, thanking her for her understanding. She dropped her mask for a moment, and bowed back, her smile, that of a small sun upon our countenance.

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Cooking with Da Phai Nai (Book One, Chapter 14)

I set off early and transferred to the Outlands. We killed three birds with one stone that day, by teaching fire to those that would spread the art across the kingdom. Bu Te became my equal and took over from me, as in the sea, n’Gnung was teaching fishing.

Later I showed both groups how to tend the traps for crabs, lobsters, and catch prawns. The third task was to teach the chefs how to cook, and we began after lunch with the Imperial and Royal kitchen staff. They were partially skilled by sundown, and returned with one of our cooks in support.

That night I began to cook for our people; I soon had a good fire going, placed some large fish on the griddle, and went outside to retrieve crabs and lobsters. I returned to discover Da Phai Nai tending the hearth, and said, "I am cooking tonight dear lady."

She cocked a presumptuous eye at me, stating; "The King of the Outlands will not be cooking for his staff on my watch; thank you!" She handed me a full flagon of ale and said, "Go and find something useful to do with this, as I have no use for it, my liege."

My hands were full of creatures with large claws. I threw them on the fire pit, and put the flagon aside. I took an oyster from my carryall, and said, "At least let me show you how to cook this."

She took the object from my hand, and asked, "Why are you cooking rocks?"

I leaned in close with conspiratorial grace and said, "Because I have a feeling you will greatly enjoy eating what is hidden within—let me show you..."

We worked in tandem, I teaching and refining what she had learned since lunchtime, and she becoming naturally adept at cooking with fire, and the use of herbs. If I had not know of her ways from the hot springs, I would have felt insulted; but she had a curious way about her, a humour I found quite becoming.

During the course of our labours, that understanding deepened appreciably. I discovered that underneath her hard exterior shell of bullying obstinacy, sharp tongue, and quick wit, lay the heart of a person come up to her station the hard way.

The work was not hard, and in time everyone had been fed except for us. I offered her an oyster, and she loved it. I somehow knew she would; the food mirrored her character perfectly. We filled our plates and I picked up a large flagon of ale to take with me. I reached my seat and was welcomed by n'Gnung, but realised Da Phai Nai was nowhere to be seen.

I stomped back to the kitchen and found her eating in one corner. I asked her why she was eating there, and she replied, "It is the law. All staff must eat in the staff canteen."

I gave her an inquiring look, picked up her plate, added a couple more oysters, and walked purposefully outside. She followed cursing me, and I learned some new words, if not their specific meaning. I put her plate down next to Lo Si and sat her down, stating, “In my kingdom, we are all treated as equals. Some of us are better at some things than others, but we are all the same—Human beings. Eat girl!”

For the first time since I had met her, she appeared to be lost for words. I glanced at Lo Si as I turned to leave, our eyes meeting in greater understanding; he nodded his head and had a large, happy smile upon his face. I had only walked a pace before Da Phai Nai regained her voice, but what she said surprised me, “Thank you, King ... Jack?”

“Guardian, I have no need to be *king* of anything; thank you.”

We rose late the next morning, woken by the inviting odours of cooking. I splashed my head with water and drank with cupped hands from the stream, before going to check on Da Phai Nai.

“Tell people they are to come and help themselves. I am too old to go running around like a spring chicken. This is for you and your sidekick. The flagon of ale is over there.”

I took the offering, cast one look at the beer, knowing it was the last thing I needed on top of a hangover, and shook my head. She didn’t miss a beat, “Good. That is the first thing you’ve gotten right today—now give me some space, as I have much work to do, and you are cluttering up the place.”

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Rejuvenation

I thanked her [The medic] and was about to leave when an odd thought struck me, “Nurse, do you mean you can repair a body, say one that is very old?”

“Of course, although we can do nothing about the actual ageing process itself. Once a body has run its course, we simply clone it and transfer the existing mind into it, as such. We cannot do that complicated process here with these facilities. However, we can make limited DNA and RNA correction, meaning the body heals itself, almost instantly. It works best on things like internal organs; traumæ like cuts and breakages take noticeably longer.”

I returned Ælkræleinnoire to my home, and leaving instruction with staff, headed for the shore. I was looking for one of three people. Da Phai Nai was the first I encountered, and she greeted me ebulliently, “Ahha! The ringleader has returned at last, no doubt to drive me crazy with demands for beer no less. Here’s your first.” She put the flagon down and whispered, “Welcome back, Guardian. It’s been boring around here with you gone for so long.”

I looked back into her eyes and stated, “I need a guinea pig, and you’re it. Come with me, this won’t take a moment.”

Da Phai Nai became less trusting as the head nurse of the spacecraft’s medical facility gave her a full examination. There was a long list of things wrong with her, the ones that troubled my friend the most being concerned with joints, especially her knees and back. I ordered a full reconstitution, and left the room accompanied by the demonic revelations of a vitriolic tongue.

Later, n’Gnung spoke knowingly, “Guardian, I remember you once said that certain people make a difference, just regards how the days of our lives play out. You said you knew of two, Da Phai Nai and Owain. I agree up to that point, but for me, there are three I know of; it was never the same with you gone; it is once more, now you are back, Jack.”

n’Gnung and I raised a glass in brotherhood. Finishing our toast, we watched the others at play on the shore. Some were checking the rock pools and others beach-combing, or swimming. I thought aloud, “It is a shame Owain isn’t here this evening.”

“A shame indeed; he’d enjoy this evening more than most.”

We started, as a noise behind us turned into a familiar rumble of belly laughter, “Would that be so now me gallant young friends. Ye did’ne think I would miss yer wee party here now, did ye?”

The night was great fun, my will to live life to the full returning. A few days later, I took Kay back to see the medic, and waited for the treatment to finish.

One week passed; n’Gnung and I were ambling towards our table on the shore. Da Phai Nai had been released from care that morning, and she spotted us at once. She strode towards us with her best broom at the ready, and chased us towards our seats. “I have never—[whack]—felt fitter—[whish]—or better—[wallop]—for I don’t know how long. I feel twenty years younger, and it is all *this* rascal’s entire fault! You’ll be wanting a large flagon tonight,

what with guests expected. Don't even bother to rise, I can now manage quite ably once again; this is all *his* doing!"

n'Gnung spoke to my side, "It would appear Da Phai Nai has missed you. She hasn't used her broom for a long time; years."

I smiled ruefully and said, "There was a reason for that, she couldn't. Her back had a progressively debilitating problem, which appears to have been cured. Brother, we better wear padded pants in future."