

UNINTENDED GUARDIAN

A MYTHOS LEGACY
SHORT STORY

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BLUE
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Chapter One



KALA KNELT NEXT TO THE SOFA AND RAISED HER VOICE TO A loud, perky pitch. “Come on, Buster. Let’s do something fun. Want to go for a walk?”

Not even the *W* word was enough to stir the half-deaf old mutt from his nap. Drool bubbled along his mouth and threatened to join the wet spot already on the cushion.

So much for relieving her boredom with *his* help.

Maybe she could coax him awake by force. She scratched behind his ears, ruffling the bristly fur. “Please, Buster? I need an excuse to get out and meet people.”

In the few hours since she’d dropped off her parents at the Los Angeles airport for their who-knew-how-long trip to Japan to care for her ailing grandmother, emptiness had settled into her gut and begun putting up knickknacks. No more using them or her “just moved in” status as an excuse for her lack of local friends. Yet her so-called “faithful companion” remained unmoved.

“Sheesh. I rescued you from Death Row, and according to that shiny new lease agreement, I might be risking eviction for you too. The least you could do is show some appreciation.” Kala stroked his head a final time and pushed to her feet, a hint of a smile still stretching her face.

The doorbell buzzed. She lunged for the door before Buster chose *that* moment as the perfect time to wake up and bark. The

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last thing she needed was a neighbor complaining to the apartment manager about her “on probation” dog before she’d even finished unpacking.

She whipped open the door. “Yes?”

A package delivery guy stood in the hallway, his cap pulled low. He shoved a clipboard at her. “Sign here.”

“Good morning.” Or was it past noon already? With her screwed-up work schedule, she could never keep track of the time. “How are you today?”

The guy didn’t respond. Granted, that attempt at conversation had been pretty lame.

She tried again. “So...” She scrawled her name on the indicated line and pointed her toe toward the cubic-foot-sized package at his feet. “What is it?”

The guy gave her a how-would-I-know look and snatched the clipboard from her as soon as she finished signing. The metal board’s edge sliced the tender skin between her left thumb and index finger.

“Ow! Damn.”

The guy picked up the box and thrust it in her direction. “Sorry.”

He jogged down the hall fast enough to set the keys on his belt jingling, robbing her of the opportunity to chew him out. Yeah, *real* sorry.

She tucked the box under her injured arm and squeezed the cut to stop the bleeding. Crap, that hurt. Now she’d have to wear gloves in the kitchen at work, and her hand would sting for the next few days every time she moved her thumb, which was... Oh, constantly.

Perfect. Just perfect.

The box under her arm jiggled.

What the—? She didn’t remember ordering anything recently, much less something wiggly.

Heck, with how busy she’d been, preparing for the move across L.A., none of her childhood friends even knew her deficient love life required a vibrator.

The address label faced away from her, and she used her

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unencumbered right pinky finger to spin the box under her left arm. The delicate balancing act allowed her to keep pressure on her injury and glance at the sender information.

Ireland? That *really* didn't ring a bell.

She searched the box for identifying marks and stopped at the addressee. Griff Cyrus. Crap. All that hassle with the stupid cut, and the package wasn't even for her.

She juggled the box and her keys while locking her door. After sprinting down the hall and six flights of stairs, she flung herself out the front of the apartment building.

Nothing. Only an empty curb along Wilshire Boulevard, no idling delivery truck anywhere. Double crap.

She trudged back inside and up the stairs, sticking to her self-imposed rule to avoid the elevator. That insurance against putting on pounds was the price for working with sinfully rich desserts every day. Her breathing deepened at each floor.

Now what? The shipping label didn't have a logo, and she drew a blank for the company name of his cap. Which delivery company was it? QuickShip? ParcelExpress?

Ugh. Her only choice was to deliver the package herself. No matter how much of a pain it was, she'd want someone to do the same for her.

She studied the label again, and a smidgen of annoyance drained off her shoulders. At least the delivery guy hadn't bungled *everything*.

The address was for the apartment at the end of her hall—another neighbor she hadn't yet met. Her new pastry chef job at the swanky Beverly Hills resort down the road was a dream come true, but the middle-of-the-night hours were proving disastrous for her social life.

The package shook again, and she swore she heard a squeak. Was there something *alive* in the box? It had better not be a container of insects. She held the carton at arm's length and suspended the box between her fingertips, minimizing contact with the cardboard.

Although... What kind of bug squeaked?

She stopped at the correct door and angled her elbow toward

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the buzzer. A toy-like squeal ripped from the package, and she almost dropped the box. Freaky timing.

Echoes of the screech surrounded her from the hallway at her back, and she tossed a glance over her shoulder. Toy or not, anyone else would have left the carton and tiptoed away, but apparently she was *that* desperate for the opportunity to meet another soul.

Before she could change her mind, the apartment door *whooshed* open. A hand yanked her inside, and the door slammed behind her, shutting her in the stranger's apartment.

Her chest tightened so fast she stumbled back, the wall catching her fall. Instinctively, she lifted the box in front of her, as though warding off danger. The same grabby hand seized the carton from her grasp.

What the hell? Rude much?

Her gaze followed the limb up to its owner. Oh, *hello*. A Viking of a man, all long tawny hair and broad shoulders, stared down at her.

"What were you doing with my package?"

His *package*? A snort choked her, and she covered it with a cough. God, she was such a teenage boy sometimes. And her frazzled nerves weren't helping.

"Uh, the delivery guy brought it to my door by mistake."

Despite the apartment manager's sales spiel about how their background-check process ensured safety among the residents, several *Aikijujutsu* self-defense lessons from her father scrolled through her head. Just in case.

"I recently moved in down the hall. I'm Kala. You're Griff?"

A perfect brow arched over one of his golden-hazel eyes.

"I saw the name on the shipping label of your, uh, *package*." She couldn't help the twitch curving her lips.

It took all her concentration not to sneak a peek at said package. She *would* behave. Luckily, his movie-star-worthy looks helped her focus on his face. In addition to his lion-mane hair and striking eyes, he boasted a perfectly straight nose and kissable lips.

Not that she was thinking of kissing him.

At all.

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Really.

Those lips curled into a snarl. "Package delivered. Now leave."

He walked away and set the box on a table in the kitchen. Her throat thickened, and she blinked quickly.

Wow. His dismissal cut deeper than his rudeness. Bluntness, she respected, but the cold shoulder crushed her hopes. She could have a better conversation with her dog.

Others must get lonely for friendship though, right? The possibility of making this place into a *home*—complete with friends, or at least acquaintances—was worth the risk of getting her head bitten off again. She'd give Mr. Antisocial the benefit of the doubt for one more attempt.

She scanned the room for ideas of something to talk about. In her matching apartment, she'd opted to forgo a table to keep her kitchen open and uncluttered. In contrast, his living room was the emptiest space, and thick black blankets covered the picture window, leaving the lights over the table as the only illumination. Despite the shrouded window, the heavy scent of sunshine and masculinity filled the room, like at a beach volleyball game.

Oblivious to her presence, the male in question muttered something to himself about needing a key and strode into a back room. She should leave. That would be the obedient, sensible thing to do.

Obedient and sensible had never helped her make friends before.

She stepped into his living room for a closer look in the dim light. A computer and stacks of encyclopedic-looking books loaded down a table in the far corner. Pushpin-decorated maps dominated the wall on her right, the multicolored pins marking locations throughout Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and North and South America. Had he traveled to all those places, or was this a wish list?

The room inspired more questions than answers. Unlike the high-end vibe throughout the rest of the complex, his apartment felt bare and temporary. He had no personal items of any kind. Anywhere.

Best-case scenario, he was odd. Worst-case scenario, he was a

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terrorist.

Regardless, her feet refused to turn toward the door. Maybe he was military. Or far from home and friendless.

Something in his eyes—a desperation visible even through his snarl—tempted her to stay, in spite of the hint of danger and his order to leave. She let herself hope that *something* was a loneliness like hers.

Whatever his situation, he was *home* at this middle-of-the-workday hour, when she was done with her job and still awake, and she wanted a conversation with another human, damn it. Even one who ranked on the questionable end of the eccentric-meter.

Besides, she remembered at least three dozen ways her dad had taught her to escape capture from a larger opponent. The chance to make a friend was worth a bit of risk.

The rip of packing tape pulled her attention back to the kitchen, where Viking man had returned. He twisted a key into whatever was inside the box. He was so focused on his task he probably hadn't noticed her in the dark corner opposite the kitchen, but curiosity kept her from announcing her presence—or leaving.

The squeal started up again, and he reached inside the carton. He pulled out something like a doll, except it was unlike any doll she'd ever seen. The red-bearded figure wore old-fashioned red clothes, complete with a long jacket and hat.

And then the doll moved. And spoke.

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