

**Taking Care of Oneself**  
**by Alestar, Indiana Jen, and Red Monster**

"We're almost here, Tom."

Thomas Cassidy, known to many as "Black Tom," hung limply over the shoulder strap of the passenger seat of their plane, apparently unconscious, but he heard his friend, Cain Marko's, words over the roar of the engine as they began their descent towards Muir Island.

"That's good," he drawled weakly.

"You're gonna be okay," Cain went on. "I'm gonna make sure of that."

Tom straightened up to lean back against the seat. He snapped off some random twigs that had grown out of his shoulders. Normally, he should have concentrated to make them disappear back under the surface, but at that time he didn't have the energy.

Tom just grunted, staring at the approaching Muir Island and its precious emptied research facility. Some fog, expected but still annoying, obscured only some of the land. Most of it hung around the coast, leaving the two with fairly good landing conditions.

"There," Cain said, guiding the plane closer, "a nice parking spot right near the front door."

Tom remained silent; his eyes swept back and forth, waiting to catch on any sign of habitation, and tightened as a cuticle on his right hand split for a tendril of wood that curled tightly around his nail bed. Tom flexed his hand and the wood broke off. A puff of breath escaped him.

Cain looked at him. "hey," he said.

"I'm all righ'."

"Okay." Cain turned back to the console, tapped a few buttons; the cabin jostled as the wheels slid from the belly of the plane, shook as the wheels hit ground. "We're here." Cain didn't ask if Tom needed help getting out. He unbuckled his own seatbelt and folded his hands in his lap, and waited.

"I'm all right," Tom said again.

Cain nodded. "So let's go."

Tom took a breath and wrenched at the handle to the plane door, which slid obediently open to cool wet air, the smell of sea and grass. "Let's."

They headed toward the complex where Excalibur used to live, but more importantly, where Moira MacTaggart conducted her genetic research before she died. There was enormously useful equipment and information stored in there, which could be used to treat Tom's illness. Before they got inside, Tom turned his head away from the building, and stopped there.

"That bastard," he muttered. "That stupid son of a bitch beat us here."

Cain looked in the same direction, and saw a man tottering and gesticulating in front of a lone headstone.

"Tom, you're not gonna..." Cain began.

"Not if he doesn't," Tom responded.

"You really shouldn't, you know," said Cain, a slight quake in his voice. "You're not up to it."

"Neither is he," said Tom, who, in contrast, sounded stronger.

Cain noticed the strawberry-blonde head under the hat, and when the man swayed out of the way for a second, they saw the name "Moirra Kinross MacTaggart" on the headstone. Cain also noticed the open flask in Sean Cassidy's hand, and he understood what Tom meant.

"So this is where Theresa gets it," Tom called out.

Sean turned around, and began to stumble his way toward them. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

"That's none of your concern, dear cousin," said Tom.

"Just back off, okay?" said Cain to Sean, stepping between them. "We didn't come here to fight."

"Here I thought I was the reason for your daughter's drinking," Tom continued, "when she really inherited it from you!"

"Get out of here," said Sean, going around Cain to face Tom.

"Why should I get out of here, when your only reason to be here is to puke and pass out in front of this woman's grave?"

"Tom, why are you doing this?" Cain demanded.

"Because my cousin; my perfect, straight-laced, self-righteous cousin is a mess, and I want to know what the hell is going on."

"Hah!" Sean barked, rocking back slightly on his heels. "Considering the fact that you are here, *dear cousin*, I think you bloody well know what's going on." He glanced at Moira's grave briefly, his look softening for just a second, before glaring back at Tom.

Tom shrugged, wincing slightly as a branch cracked off of his shoulder. "What I think is that Moira MacTaggart is dead and that you've picked the wrong way to mourn her. What I think is going on is that you've become stupid."

Sean took a swig out of his flask, obviously long past the point of caring about the taste of the drink. "What do you know of mourning, Black Tom?"

"Awww, shit," Cain muttered.

Tom stiffened. "You bastard. You absolute, utter, drunk bastard. What do I know of mourning?! *Who buried your wife while you were playing 'hero'?! "*

"Don't you dare bring Maeve into this, she isn't involved!"

"Maeve will always be involved in this, with us," Tom snapped, glaring at Sean. "She will always haunt the both of us, apart or together." Cain took a step back from the cousins, his mouth twisted. "We don't have time for this."

"No," Sean said, hand fisting around the flask and drawing back, "we don't."

Tom was weak with floundering in his flesh but he wasn't drunk or mad, so when Sean reared toward him, Tom sidestepped him and only stumbled a little. Cain put out a hand to steady him. Sean whipped around, didn't lose his balance; but the flask slipped from his hand and sloshed whiskey onto his slacks and the mossy ground. The stink was everywhere.

Tom sneered. "So stupid."

Sean released a hard breath, then shook his head. "Don't talk about her."

"I'm confused now, cousin. D'ye mean Maeve or MacTaggart?"

Sean turned his head toward the grave in a slow flinch. He said, "Both. Either. Don't talk about anything." He bent to pick up the flask and fell hard onto his knee. He fished the flask from the dirt and tipped its empty head into his mouth, then pulled it away with a look of disgust. He said, "I've lost ev'ryone." He looked up at Tom, face twisted. "Ev'ryone but you."

Tom laughed, lost his breath in the middle of it. He said, "Well, don't get too attached, cousin. Ye're losin' me, too."

Cain looked down. "We need to get going."

"Not just this second," said Tom. He glanced at the Muir building; a grimace flickered across his face, then was gone, and he looked at Cain with a sour smile. Cain shrugged and folded his arms. Tom looked back to Sean. "We have all the time in the world for this." Sean scowled. Tom said, "Ye're losing me, and I can only hope I'm right in thinking it won't mess you up as bad as losing Dr. MacTaggart did." He gestured towards the headstone.

Sean looked taken aback at Tom's sudden mark of respect towards Moira. "But why do you care?" he asked. "What difference does it make to you how I deal with Moira dying? Why don't you just go about your business...whatever it is, and leave us alone?"

Tom glanced briefly at Cain, and said, "We can go about our business later. I care, Sean, because this isn't like you. Unless you jumped straight into a bottle of booze after Maeve died, too?"

"No," Sean snarled. "Don't talk about her again."

"I knew her better than you did," Tom began, with a sharpening note of rising temper in his voice. Sean opened his mouth to argue, but Tom cut him off. "I was the one who took care of her while she was pregnant with your daughter, I found her body and arranged her funeral, I saw her buried, while you had no idea."

"And this was my fault, was it? You think I abandoned my wife?"

"No, I know you didn't. I don't blame you for doing your job, but don't you ever, ever tell me not to talk about Maeve! What did you do after you found out she died?"

"Work," Sean mumbled. "Nothing but work. More'n you ever did."

"Did you take to drinking before or after Dr. MacTaggart died?"

"After. There was no reason to before."

"Then this isn't like you. What happened?"

"The love of my life died," Sean drawled contemptuously. "But I still don't understand why you give a damn! When have you ever cared what happens to me, except for when you were trying to kill me?!"

"Just because I hate your guts, doesn't mean I don't care about you," said Tom. Both Cain and Sean goggled at him. "And lately, I've had much more important things on my mind than how much I hate you."

"Those things are no one's fault but your own."

"I don't deny that," said Tom, and briefly smiled at the look of utter shock on his cousin's face as he admitted his own fault in his problems, then continued. "The point is...argh, the point is," he growled, and with great effort pronounced the next few words. "I'm worried about you."

Sean's gaze narrowed until he was squinting at Tom, then at the empty flask in his hand. "why're ye doin' this?" he asked.

"Are ye talkin' to me," Tom responded as quietly, "or yourself?"

Sean sank the rest of the way to the damp ground. "Ye don't know anything about me, Black Tom."

"I know that ye're an arrogant, self-indulgent bastard and that ye're rollin' about on the ground, drunk as piss." Tom stooped next to Sean, but his face pinched in pain as a shaft of wood wound from his shin to burrow in the dirt. There was a cracking sound and Tom mirrored Sean, on his knees. He ground out, "just look at yeh."

Sean swayed menacingly toward Tom, but his hands remained curled around the flask in his lap. "Ye don't--"

Tom's hand shot out and fisted in Sean's shirt, scattering splinters onto Sean, driving them into the remaining human flesh on Tom's hand, into his palm, under his nails. His voice was thick with pain as he said, "I'm the reason for Theresa's drinking." Sean let out a rush of breath. Tom was too weak to hold Sean still if he struggled, but Sean was all but limp, his gaze floating. "Ye're welcome to kill yerself, *Banshee*, and I'll thank ye for it." He shook the man. "But not like this."

Tom let his hands fall from Sean with another cracking sound and slumped back. Cain was there, suddenly, slipping a large hand under Tom's elbow.

"Hey," he said. Tom stood with his help; then Cain reached down a hand to Sean. Sean took it and stood. He blinked blearily at the larger man, then jerked his hand back.

"This isn't right," he said.

Cain snorted. "Nope."

Sean took a few stumbling steps backward. He turned to Moira's grave. The flask dangled from his hand and then dropped. Whether he meant love or failure or loss when he pointed at the dewy grey rock of headstone wasn't clear, when Sean pointed by flicking his fingertips toward it and said, "it's not right."

Cain put his hands into his pockets-- with Tom standing inches behind him, looking off toward the building that was his last hope, weaving a little on his feet and breathing shallowly-- and said, "nope."

"She was a wonderful woman," said Sean. "Her life's work was saving lives, and it was what killed her. I didn't find out until days later, when my student, Angelo, told me. My student, goddamnit, had to tell me my love had died. Just like with Maeve; I didn't get to say good-bye. Just like with Maeve, I couldn't help her."

"You can't control the universe, Sean."

Sean's voice was weak, more like a whine, when he said, "I know."

"You're absolutely right; she was a wonderful woman. I don't think she'd want you to do this to yourself. Am I right in thinking that?"

There was no answer at first; Sean looked at Moira's grave for a while before he nodded and said, "Yes."

"Then will you stop this?"

Sean's head drooped forward, and he shook it. "I need...more time."

"Which we don't have," said Cain to Tom.

"Then take your time to think about what we've said today," said Tom, starting to follow Cain back towards the base.

"Fine," was Sean's response.

"Good-bye, Sean. Take care of yourself."