

Nula and Aydal

Short stories from Zelannor

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It was a beautiful day. The sun was high in the sky and Nula could hear meadowlarks singing nearby. Her feet beat out a rhythm as she hurried down the dirt track, past gently waving fields of wheat, eager to reach her destination. Nula's steps slowed as she turned the corner of the lane and caught sight of the familiar figure sitting on the log under an ancient apple tree. Her mouth curved into an easy smile as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Normally, she wore it plaited in a braid when she worked at the inn, but ever since he had expressed a preference for it hanging loose down her back, she had always untied it before coming to meet him.

He hadn't yet heard her approach, so she took the opportunity to admire him. Aquiline features, full lips and blond hair, slightly darker than her own. A body honed to perfection from hard labour in the fields. She closed her eyes briefly, trying to conjure up another's face, darker and more serious, but the image was vague and, she realised, from several cycles ago.

If only he had come to see her before setting off on yet another journey almost five moons ago, she would be free. Instead, she still felt shackled to him, and the guilt gnawed at her. Only Destry had guessed her dark secret, but she wouldn't betray her. Every day Nula had to maintain a bland mask of friendship while hiding her burgeoning feelings deep inside.

Aydal's head turned as she neared, and the smile she had come to love transformed his face.

"You're late," he chided good-naturedly as she sat next to him, close enough to feel his heat without touching him.

"Da needed me to cover for him. He had another one of his headaches." She pulled out a slim volume from the pocket of her skirt and handed it to him. "I read it all. Twice. It's beautiful."

He stroked the faded blue cover of the book reverently. "Da gave it to Ma when they were walking out," he said softly. "She loved to read the poems to us in the evenings." He swallowed visibly and Nula laid her hand on his arm and squeezed gently.

By unspoken consent, there were three topics they usually avoided. His mother's death because it was still so raw. The many girls he had kissed over the cycles, and Reez, even though his brother was one of the main things they had in common.

"I miss her too."

It was true. Lina had stepped in after the death of her own mother, helping Nula to navigate the sudden responsibility of managing a household as well as caring for her younger sister. Her wisdom and careful advice had been a lifeline to a girl forced to grow up too soon.

"It all happened so fast. One minute she was laughing with Damino, the next..."

Aydal blinked several times and took a deep breath before pasting on his usual grin. Most people thought him a jovial philanderer who breezed through life without a care, but Nula knew better. Their increasingly close relationship allowed her to glimpse his hidden depths, appreciate his insightful intelligence, and understand the complicated, driven man buried beneath the façade.

She thought back to the first day, when their lifelong acquaintance had evolved into something deeper. He had discovered her on this very spot. Nula had escaped here after finding out from one of the villagers that Reez had disappeared once more without bothering to tell her. The hurt and embarrassment had festered inside until she had allowed it free reign thinking she was alone. Hearing her sobs, Aydal had sat with her, holding her as she vented her feelings and comforting her until she had emptied herself. Then he had eased her out of her black mood, until she had found herself laughing again. Since then, they sat together regularly, at first by accident and later by design.

Unlike Reez, Aydal saw her. He listened to her. He valued her opinions.

"I hear Gerran fell asleep over his ale last night," Aydal said, breaking her reverie.

She recognised his need for levity. "He didn't even wake when the dregs dribbled over his trews. Destry thought he had wet himself when he finally roused and stood up." Nula giggled at the memory.

"Tis a shame Wictor can't magic the babe's colic away," Aydal said.

"Lesti says it is so bad, Gerran is pacing the floor most of the night, trying to rock her to sleep."

"Sounds awful." He looked over at her, his blue eyes shining. "Are you still certain you want a dozen of them?"

"To start with. Who knows, I may want more later."

Aydal laughed. "By the Mage, your poor husband will be exhausted."

She joined him, but when their eyes met, their merriment faded. He glanced down at her lips and swallowed before turning away. The silence grew heavy.

"So," Nula said brightly, "is Amily still planning to move north after the blessing ceremony?"

Aydal nodded. "You should see her. She is so excited. She writes to the Master Jeweller almost daily with more questions. Faradan must be heartily regretting his decision by now."

"Do you think she would make me something pretty?" Nula asked wistfully. "Maybe a necklace with a special charm on."

"I'll make sure of it."

He glanced at her once more and her mouth went dry. She licked her lips. Dropping his head in his hands, he groaned.

"What's wrong?" Nula asked in alarm. "Are you ill?"

"I can't pretend anymore," he whispered.

Nula stilled. "What do you mean?"

Aydal surged to his feet and started to pace back and forth across the dusty lane, pushing his hand roughly through his hair.

"I want to kiss you."

She blushed and wrapped her arms around her body. "You're only saying that because I'm one of the few girls you haven't walked out with."

"That's not true. Well, it is, but that isn't why I want to kiss you. I can't stop thinking about you, Nula. You haunt my dreams."

Her heart started to beat furiously. "It will pass," she whispered. "I'm nothing special."

He paused before striding up and kneeling down on the packed earth in front of her. He placed his hands either side of her face and gently lifted her head. He was so close she could see the grey tones swirling in his eyes. Her breath hitched.

"I love you."

Her hands found his wrists, but instead of pushing him away as she intended, she found herself gripping him tightly.

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do." His thumb moved gently over her cheek, wiping away the tears that had started to fall. "I love you, and it's killing me."

He dropped his hands and sank back on his haunches, closing his eyes.

"Aydal..."

"It's alright. I know. I'm a horrible person. Who does that to his own brother? I tried so hard to stay away. I thought you were a fever that would cool in time, that if I only found the right person to distract me, I could forget you. Instead, I burn hotter each day."

Nula slipped off the log and knelt in front of him, heedless of her freshly laundered skirts. "Aydal," she said again, louder this time. His eyes opened and she could see the agony within. "I love you, too."

They stared at each other, hardly daring to breath.

"What are we going to do?" Aydal whispered.

She took a shuddering breath. "As soon as he comes back, I'll tell him I don't want to be with him anymore."

"Reez'll hate me."

She shook her head. "Honestly, I can't see why. We've hardly seen each other over the past two cycles. He is always so busy. I mean nothing to him anymore. He'll likely be just as relieved as me."

"I would never neglect you like that," he said fiercely. "You are my whole world." His gaze slipped to her lips and lingered there. Nula blinked.

"I want to kiss you so much," he said, "but not yet. Not until you are free. I can't betray my brother that way. I promise, though, once I start, I'll never stop."

"That sounds wonderful," she breathed.

He stood then, reaching his hand out and pulling her up, holding her closely, his face buried in her hair. "Will you be my wife?" he asked. "I know it's sudden but, I've never felt this way..."

"Oh, Aydal, yes," Nula interrupted. "A thousand times, yes."

He squeezed her tightly before stepping back and dropping his hands.

"Straight after the blessing ceremony. Before Amily leaves."

She nodded eagerly.

He swayed towards her before visibly stiffening and drawing even further away. "I need to go," he said tightly. "If I stay, I won't be able to stop myself. Will you dream of me tonight?"

"Every night," she promised, her voice hitching slightly.

He smiled then, not the perfect facsimile, but one of pure happiness that lit up face. He blew her a kiss, turned, and ran down the lane.

Nula watched until he was out of sight. Only when he had disappeared did she let out a squeal of joy, spinning until her skirts billowed out around her legs before dropping in dizzy delight on to the log, her heart thundering in her chest. He loved her! He wanted to be handfasted to her. He would give her the babies she ached for and the attention she craved.

Finally, all her dreams, all her desperate longings were about to come true.

She could hardly contain her joy as she leapt to her feet and ran down the lane,
desperate to tell Destry her news.