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Regeneration

Written by Stephanie Saulter

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REGENERATION

STEPHANIE SAULTER

®EVOLUTION BOOK 3



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For the children of revolution,
who build in the ruins

‘What is REAL?’ asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’

‘Real isn’t how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.’

‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit.

‘Sometimes,’ said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.’

The Velveteen Rabbit, Margery Williams

Sinkat

1

It is a rare thing, to see change coming. Embracing it is rarer still. We cling to the past even as we dream of the future, fearing always that what might be gained cannot make up for what must be lost. Those few who have an instinct for metamorphosis know only too well how bitterly it can be resisted, how unlikely it is for evolution to occur without struggle. They know that transition is most often an ungentle business, and that many weapons can be employed against it.

They know there will be casualties.

Among those few are a man and a woman: friends, lovers, partners: pillars of strength and dispensers of wisdom, although the latter is in short supply at the moment. They have received unwelcome news, though it may shed light on much else that troubles them; and so they grapple with it, trying to understand what it means and how it fits.

The man knows the woman is better at this than he is. For all his scholarship and training and experience, for all that he has been proven right far more often than otherwise, she has a gestalt gift that he cannot match. As he watches her framed against the city's skyline he knows that she is sifting through the cacophony of pending events, looking for connections, parallels, patterns.

Her perch is precarious, for she has eschewed the comfort of a chair, sitting instead in a window open to the cold, blustery air. Only here, in her particular space, can the glass panels be thrown open to permit this. The resulting gap in the skin of the tower is a couple of hundred feet above the ground, yet she dangles there unconcerned. He watches the dappling of shade and sunshine across her features just as she watches the clouds chasing each other across the sky. He has seen inspiration strike her before, is accustomed to the swift confidence of her decisions, so he waits patiently for the quirk of a smile that will tell him she has a plan, and a part for him in it.

It surprises him, the weary way in which she turns her back into the wind that gusts around her. He has spent hours, days, years gazing at that face, mapping its moods and memorising every expression. Only now does he notice that the laughter lines around her eyes no longer disappear when she is solemn. He wonders at what precise moment that happened, and how he could have missed it, and is filled with relief when the downcast gaze flicks up to hold his and he sees that they remain the same deep delphinium blue as the autumn sky behind her. The sun sails clear of clouds, though only for a moment, and the great span of her wings opens wide against the exterior of the glass as though to soak up every iota of warmth. Their shadow falls towards him even as the light glancing off them throws a shimmering bronze-gold aureole against the glazing above her head. It looks for all the world like a halo.

He knows better.

'It might be no more than coincidence,' she says thoughtfully, distractedly, as though her mind is still out among the clouds. 'We knew this would happen eventually. It may just be chance that it's happening now.'

'That's more plausible than the alternative,' he replies, equally thoughtful. 'But then again . . .'

'We are dealing with someone who defies plausibility, I know.'

'Could she be aware of Gabriel's involvement?'

'It's possible – more possible than I like to think. But the main incentives there are wealth and power.'

'She's not one to miss an opportunity for either.'

He knows it is an unnecessary reminder. They are quiet for longer than he can bear.

'So,' he says finally, and thinks as he says it how many times over the years he has directed these same words to this same woman, but never before wondered whether she would have an answer, 'what are you going to do?'

She takes her time replying. She does this with him now: takes her time, lets him see her pondering. He can remember when she would have replied quickly, glibly if necessary, rather than risk any suspicion that she was less than certain of her next move. It is part of the legend of Aryel Morningstar that she is never in doubt.

And yet doubt is what he sees in the slump of her shoulders and the tired twitch of her wings in the sunlight; it is what he hears in her voice, when she finally speaks.

'Learn more,' she says. 'Trust that Mikal can manage his side of things. And warn those who need to be warned. Money matters, but it's not all she cares about.'

The same cold wind that gusted around Aryel, finding its way inside the skin of the Bel'Natur tower and sending a chill trickling down Eli Walker's spine, also tugged at a front door several miles away. The door opened onto a high street that sloped gently in the direction of the river and quayside. Behind it, a narrow corridor transected the ground floor of a building that, like its neighbours,

had recently been renovated. It now housed a popular café that would be bustling come the lunch hour, and a small grocery that was already seeing a steady stream of shoppers. Stacked above were two storeys of living accommodation. A staircase at the far end of the corridor led up to a spacious flat; beside it, another door opened onto a walled back garden.

Gaela was clearing away the remains of a late breakfast. She knew that the back door must be ajar when she heard the front, which would normally have been closed gently, slam shut.

A voice floated up through the window overlooking the street. 'Sorry! Wind got it!'

The shout was followed by the sound of footsteps hurrying away. Gaela glanced out the back window, surveying the garden. At first she saw no one. She pushed the window open, leaned out and scanned the enclosed space. With most of the summer flowers finished the visual onslaught had lessened a bit, but there were enough roses left to blaze warm in her specialised sight, and the ultraviolet starburst patterns on the blossoms of a few wandering geranium clumps threatened to make her seasick if she stared at them too long. Not many bees would be following the invisible nectar trail today, and any that did venture out would struggle to settle on the wind-tossed blooms.

Gaela was looking for a different signature; it took only a second or two to spot the small figure, crouched in a far corner of the garden between the shrubs, no doubt investigating earthworms or beetles. There was a flicker of heat and a flash of human-shaped ultraviolet from the bright white jumper as the child wearing it looked towards the house and waved.

Gaela waved back, sighing ruefully at her daughter's ill-judged clothing choice as she straightened up and closed the window. The jumper would be patchily dirt-coloured by lunchtime.

I'm not going to be able to tell her what to wear for much longer anyway, Gaela thought. *She barely listens as it is.*

She must have slipped out, sliding past her bleary-eyed father as Bal went downstairs to open up. She was the only one in the family not moving slowly this morning. They'd all been so busy recently: first the flurry of preparation, then the party. Gaela yawned. The day intended for a little bit of cleanup and a lot of relaxation hadn't quite worked out the way she'd planned; there had been far less of the latter and far more of the former.

Gabriel deserved the celebration, though. Maybe it was only natural for the boy to be this focused; gems of his parents' generation had been bred and trained under the indenture system, which did not permit an idle adolescence. They'd had to work from the onset of puberty, or even earlier, if their gemtech masters had judged their bodies and brains robust enough. So while Bal and Gaela and others bringing up their children in freedom would never allow them to labour so hard or so young, they didn't share the norm presumption of juvenile ineptitude.

But they had not anticipated that their son would turn out to be quite so diligent, or so accomplished.

This morning he was off to college for a couple of hours – not to take a class, but to present his own work for Thames Tidal Power as a case study in media management. He had confessed matter-of-factly that the junior students selected to take part in the workshop would most likely be his age, or even older. He'd get senior academic credits for the presentation and background work; they'd earn standard ones for showing up and paying attention. Then he'd return to the project office at Sinkat, back to the serious business of quietly transforming the city, and keeping its citizens mostly happy about it.

She crossed the room, still musing, and poked her head out

the front window to look up the street. The wind whipped her flame-red, faintly glowing hair over her face and she scraped it back, fumbling for a clasp. Gabriel was long out of even her sight, but he'd messaged a link and she'd promised to review it before he got home that evening.

Habit made her scan the street before she pulled back inside, turning her head slowly, letting her enhanced visual cortex process the scene, alert for anything out of place, any hidden source of radiation that might hint at surveillance . . . or danger. She saw a delivery van pulling up outside, a few people walking past, the usual heat signatures and tablet flashes and the faintly organic warmth of quantum-storage panels on the new building down the street. The current fashion was for autumn coats in vivid colours with UV-reflective surfaces that no one else could see but whose brightness made her wince. There was a man on the corner in a blessedly dull old waterproof, his shoulders hunched. Another van . . .

Her attention swung back to the man. Why would he just be standing there in the teeth of this wind?

As if sensing her stare, he stepped off the kerb and strode smartly away, cutting sharply in towards the buildings and moving out of sight in a heartbeat. Maybe he'd paused to get his bearings; he must be as eager to get out of the wind as she was. She pulled the window shut and glanced into the back garden again. Eve had emerged from the shrubbery and was now sprawled along the low, lichen-covered branch of an ancient apple tree, nose buried in her tablet. The sight made her smile.

Nothing to worry about, Gaela.

She could hear Bal downstairs, heaving barrels into the cellar. She could offer to help, whereupon he would roll his eyes and remind her that they weighed at least as much as she did. Instead,

she picked up her own tablet, sank into a chair with a view of the garden and swiped up Gabriel's assignment.

She had barely begun to read when the tablet hummed in her hands and her earset pinged an incoming call. Noting with surprise the comcode that flashed onscreen, she tapped to receive. Perhaps the caller had forgotten that Gabe would be in late today.

'Morning. If you're looking for the boy wonder—'

'No.' The man's voice in her ear sounded as worried as the face that was now on her screen. 'I was looking for you. Something strange is going on down here, Gaela. We need your help.'

Mikal Varsi stifled a sigh, almost reflexively converting it into a rueful, slightly knowing smile. This generally flummoxed troublesome interviewers into wondering whether his grasp of whatever subject they were grilling him about was in fact more comprehensive than their own. More often than not, their suspicions were correct. Given that finding ways to mildly assert one's competence was a core skill for any gem in public life, he usually felt entirely sanguine about it.

Today, though, he was painfully aware of his own uncertainties.

The man sitting across from him shifted and cleared his throat. Robert Trench was short by norm standards – which made him *very* short compared to Mikal – and comfortably rotund. His hairline had receded drastically over the past decade, but he obviously hadn't lost the tendency to go red in the face when he felt particularly strongly about something. The effect, Mikal reflected, was not unlike one of the glowing gillung marker buoys deployed in the waters of Sinkat.

He raised a hand to try and forestall the next volley of persuasion, idly flexing the thumbs on either side of his palm, but Rob was undeterred.

'The synergy would be perfect. You already have a history of working together. It would reinforce our mutual commitment to integration, cement the association with the UPP . . . The way things are going, we all need to, you know, consolidate our positions.' He looked pleadingly at Mikal.

'I understand your concerns, and I share a lot of them. But there are other considerations as well.'

'You're not seriously planning to form a new party, are you? Please say you're not. That's *such* a bad . . . I mean, it could really weaken us . . .'

'I doubt strengthening the UPP would be a priority for a rival group,' Mikal said drily.

'That's precisely my point: the United People's Party stands for inclusion, you know that. They supported emancipation, they won the argument on universal suffrage, they've encouraged gem entrepreneurship and technology – they're keeping the reactionary element at bay. Public opinion is generally moving in the right direction, but it's cost the UPP support, especially outside the cities, and the gem vote only partly offsets that loss. Diverting it to a minor party would be a gift to the Trads. Why would you do that?'

'It's not my proposal. I've been approached. I'm not sold on the idea, but I said I would give it some thought, and that's what I'm doing.'

'But what's the point? Why not just join us?'

Mikal shrugged. 'Because for all that it's the liberal wing of contemporary politics, the UPP is still a bastion of privileged norms who have a stake in things not being disrupted any more than they already have been.' He caught Rob's gaze and held it. 'You know this. It's true that they've been good to us, but there's a suspicion that not being able to take us for granted is what keeps them that way.'

'I . . . Okay, so let's say there's something to that. For the sake of argument.' Rob looked down, breaking eye contact, sucking air in through his teeth with a faint hiss. 'If the gem community throws its support behind some new group, one that's only going to be looking out for their interests . . .'

'It wouldn't. At least, not if I were involved.'

'You think norms will see it that way? Even with your involvement? They mostly like and respect you, Mik, but not *that* much. Not enough. And the UPP would have to respond to their concerns.'

'So.' Mikal steepled his three-fingered, double-thumbed hands under his chin and glared at Rob. 'My choices are to join the UPP and risk becoming ineffectual, or to back an alternative and be thought of as the enemy.'

'I'm not . . . That's a bit dramatic . . .' Rob appeared to wilt slightly. 'Look, you're worried about whether they'll continue to prioritise gem issues? Well, they'd *really* have no reason to then. Neither of us wants that to happen.'

'There's a third option. I could stay the hell out of it, stay independent. I've won two elections that way. The UPP never wanted me until there was something in it for them.'

'You know that's not true, Mik. You could have joined any time—'

'*Could have*, yes. There's a difference between not shutting the door in my face – probably – and sending a parade of ever-more-impressive delegates to try and talk me into it.' He appraised the other man thoughtfully. 'What are they scared of, Rob?'

He threw his hands up in exasperation. 'What do you think? They're afraid of losing the next election. What happened last time wasn't a fluke, Mik. The Trads are starting to gain ground. It's one thing to have you and a few other indies scattered here and there, but most gems end up voting UPP because the only other

option is a Trad candidate. If another progressive party emerges and splits the vote, they could very well end up winning. Then where would you be?'

'Thirteen years is a long time,' Mikal mused. 'The UPP is in its third term in government, and if they did manage to get in again . . . Two decades of the same party in power isn't great for democracy, is it?'

'It's the reason we've been able to build the kind of society in which I can be sitting here now having this conversation with you. You think we'd be better off with the people who opposed the Declaration and voting rights, who still oppose funding for reproductive and educational support, back in charge?'

'Probably not, but me joining the UPP wouldn't prevent it. And a new party might happen anyway, no matter what I do. I told you, it's not my idea.' He drummed his fingers lightly on the tabletop, still thinking. 'Which begs the question, really. How much of this desperation to get me on board is because of Thames Tidal?'

'A lot.' Rob looked straight at him, and this time his gaze did not waver. 'A *lot*.'