

Blood Will Tell

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Shelley

THE PHONE RANG AT TWO THIRTY AM. SHELLEY HOTH, LOWLY INTERN, GROANED AND ROLLED AWAY from the sound; for a moment, he considered slipping his head beneath the pillow. There was only one reason he'd be receiving a call right now; Tina Mullen had gone into labor. It wasn't his shift yet, but the woman had the warning signs. The last three cases had proven to be false alarms. He just knew if he dragged himself out of bed and down to Maternity, this was going to be another one. And yet guilt chased away the blurred edges of sleep as his hand ran absently across his belly. He was a *veli*, a guardian, it was his place to protect the newborn of his kind, and if that meant three false alarms or thirty before a true birth, he still had to be there for each one, just in case.

Lives depended on it.

A moment later his pillow hit the far wall and he was casting aside the hospital-issue blanket. So much for catching a couple hours of sleep before his next round. In the end, there was no question. All the early signs had been there. He could not ignore the possibility that this time might be a true birth.

Shelley snatched up his cell phone on the final ring, before the call could be shunted to voice mail. As expected, Doctor Cramer's voice rumbled in his ear. "Yeah, yeah...ten minutes...ten minutes...I'll be right there."

With five of those minutes he made sure he had what he would need if the looming birth was as suspected. As a *veli*, he had in the hem of his scrubs top several hidden pockets. Into one of them he slid a specially designed ampule, pretty much the world's tiniest hypodermic containing a fast-acting clotting agent. In another pocket went an equally tiny vial of what looked like nothing more than a lotion sample. No sooner were the items secreted away than he was rushing down the corridor calling out for the elevator to be held.



True to his promise, Shelley strode through the doors of the McCarthy General maternity ward by two forty-two am, his breath coming a bit fast and his scrubs rumpled. In other words, he was completely unremarkable from any other personnel on duty. He groaned silently and rolled his shoulders, thought longingly of the day he would no longer be an intern, and headed toward the delivery room Cramer had indicated. The doctor himself stood outside reading the patient's chart. His expression was outwardly calm, but tension ran beneath the surface, visible only to one who'd worked closely with the man and knew the signs.

"It's going to be a tough one, kid," the doctor murmured just loud enough for Shelley to hear. "Her blood pressure is climbing, in fact, none of her vitals are where I'd like them to be, but we don't have a choice here. The woman's ready to deliver with or without our assistance." He looked down at the chart and Shelley knew the next call.

"Do we have enough units of S-s-U- blood on stand-by?"

"Yes, sir." Shelley followed the doctor into the antechamber leading to the delivery room, where controlled chaos reigned as the nurses scrambled to prep for the pending birth. "A courier from the American Rare Donor Program arrived this morning."

"Thank God for ARDP," Cramer responded as he scrubbed down. "Can't tell you how many times I've had to call on them..."

Truth to tell, Shelley already knew exactly how many times. The *Kantasi* had birth records going back millennia, though only the last few hundred years had any extensive detail. Not all bearers were of one of the rare blood types, and not all RBT mothers bore *Kantasi* children – that would make things too easy – but a sufficient percentage of them did that all RBT births were closely monitored, when at all possible. Shelley sighed and as if to reassure himself, his hand brushed across the minute bulge beneath the edge of his scrubs. The special clotting agent within the ampule was derived from a secretion naturally occurring in the *Kantasi*. All *veli* were armed with them, just in case. A *Kantasi* birth was most dangerous for the mother, and with each moment that passed, it seemed more likely this was not a false alarm.

The birth was a difficult one. Painful and long. Blood was everywhere. Not absolute confirmation the child was *Kantasi*, but definitely a potential indicator. Finally, the child was born. A boy. Shelley knew what was coming even before panic set in with the rest of the delivery crew. No one betrayed themselves aloud, but he could smell the tension in the room increase until it overwhelmed the odors of pain and fear and blood that

rose from the mother. Tina Mullen was bleeding out. Cramer began snapping orders. One in particular sent Shelley into motion.

“Start the transfusion, now!”

He headed for the blood storage unit in the corner and grabbed the first pouch earmarked for Tina Mullen. In moments it was hooked to the i.v. that stood prepped and ready, off to the side. Under the pretense of checking the shunt already inserted into the patient’s arm, he slipped the ampule from beneath his scrubs and injected it into her bloodstream before starting the transfusion. He felt calmer as the spent cartridge went back into its hidden pouch. At the very least, his actions would help save her life. It would also disrupt that life in one bold stroke, assuming the child was *Kantasi*. Though all the preliminary signs increasingly indicated so, there was no way to be certain without examining the state of the placenta for signs of an abnormally porous nature. All other signs could be coincidence, or the result of other complications. Only the afterbirth was an absolute indicator of a *Kantasi*. Any birth not caught at that point was generally discovered post-mortem.

Shelley waited with outward calm and inner turmoil for the final stage of delivery to complete.