

Pharel

by Tiona Yates

Pharel knew they were unique, had known so since their breasts started growing in. By whatever luck they'd been given, they didn't have the other feminine effect to further complicate things. So, with very little of a disguise, Pharel went about as the male they thought they'd been since their parents had died, many years ago. Pharel guessed that they were around sixteen summers old, though, with no knowledge of a birthday or anyone to look after them since they were very young, they really couldn't guess. They knew that they were more than twelve, and were pretty sure that they were younger than twenty, but there was no real way to know.

Pharel had lived by their wits since their parents had died, finding that due to their small stature as a gnoroi, they could easily pass as toddlers for most of their life until now. Even now, at close to three foot in height, they weren't easily guessed at anywhere near their age or competence. There were only a very few gnoroi families in Siartel, and a gnoroi child easily looked far younger than their actual age. Pharel had learned early on how to swipe food from windows or clothing out of baskets. If they was caught, they could easily play that they were just a lost child, and would find a way to weasel out of things as soon as the owner of what they'd stolen was distracted.

It had become easier of late, with certain abilities that Pharel had begun to be aware of. They could always hear the thoughts of others; it had taken a few years to realize that some of what they'd heard wasn't actually spoken. When they'd discovered that, they realized they had an advantage in keeping away from troublemakers that targeted stray children. That is where the other ability came in. Pharel had learned a trick for making themselves appear differently. It made it less necessary for them to bind themselves with strips of cloth to hide their feminine traits. It was magic, of some sort, but not something that Pharel had gotten any training in. It had come naturally.

Pharel kept their anonymity as much as possible, not wanting to alert any of the children about them that their companion was not growing up the way human children did. They would never reach even four foot in height, and likely not much more than they had now. While perhaps once Pharel would have attempted to surround themselves with other gnoroi, years on the streets had taught them that they were both safer among the humans, and of a greater use. Pharel had learned that street children often banded together, for safety. The children had helped them out many times over the years, and Pharel was more than grateful to return the favor. All without revealing who and what they were. To most people, Pharel was a little boy, maybe five years old. No one considered that Pharel was both male and female, and nearly an adult.

Pharel did have to now scrape their chin with the dagger they'd found and kept, to keep the down from showing. But with ragged clothing that concealed their dual nature, and care to keep hair short enough that it didn't give away their age, they kept up this disguise year after year, hiding among the children and trying not to be noticed.

Pharel hadn't been very old when they'd learned a few hard facts about Siartel. Even though it was almost ruled by the priestesses of Jirel, there were many, too many, men who wouldn't think twice about forcing a girl child about the right age to start her cycles. There were too many predators, and the sounds of Pharel's friends' screams haunted their dreams. Pharel knew they were lucky; as long as no one saw them without a shirt, there would be little to make any of these predators consider that Pharel

had female qualities. But the injustice of what was being done so often to the street children was something they wouldn't tolerate. When they had gotten skilled enough at the use of their magic, what few spells they had, they would use them to discourage these predators from touching the other street children. And, with the mind-speech that Pharel had been born with, they tended to know where these predators were before anything could go wrong.

Pharel had just finished eating a piece of bread they'd swiped from a store front when they could catch the thoughts of another of those predators, or, more likely, one of the same ones they'd been deflecting for a while now. If the image they were picking up from Lasha was correct, it was one of the usual problems. Pharel had been wanting to do something direct to stop this man for a while now, but simply had no easy way of stopping him. He was far bigger than they were, and they had very little magic about them to use. A touch of disguise, the ability to call a fog if they were in the right spot, and little more, beyond their mindspeech. If they could find some way of proving to the guards what this man was doing, it would stop him, but it would be very hard to do so.

There was a priest, one of the Jirellians, here in the market. If they could somehow lead the priest to what was happening, it might do some good. Pharel had never tried to force their thoughts upon another being before, but guessed that it might be possible. If they could do nothing else, they could relay the pain and fear from Lasha's mind to the Jirellian, and hopefully the priest would act. But, they had to hurry.

Pharel ducked into a hidden corner, trusting to their small size to keep them hidden. To do what they were going to attempt was going to be hard, require concentration. They pulled the images of where that man was menacing Lasha, trying to corner her, and focused on sending it to the priest. They also tried forcing the idea that this **must** be stopped on the priest, creating an imperative that would possibly feel like the Goddess' own mind. It was a risk, but it was one Pharel was willing to take.

Pharel could sense that their attempt was working. The priest had moved toward the alley where Lasha was being cornered. But then, Pharel recognized something else, the fact that someone or something was paying attention to them. There was a mind observing Pharel's attempt, not attempting to stop it, but observing Pharel. Almost, Pharel stopped their control, but they knew that if they did, Lasha would be harmed as so many of the other children would be. Gritting their teeth, they continued to exert the mental force necessary to control the priest.

The priest was there, pulling away the man who'd sought to harm Lasha, using his power and authority to command Lasha's attacker, binding him with magic for the moment. Even as Jirel's servant called to the guard to deal with the man, Pharel realized that there was someone standing right next to their hiding place. That someone was an old woman, someone Pharel wouldn't have paid attention to before, but now, they knew they had to.

"Child, thou have exerted thyself in ways which are surprising. What is it that thou hides, that thou would send others to save thy friends?" She didn't look down at Pharel, although they could feel that they were being watched carefully.

"Lady," Pharel tried to keep their voice as boy-neutral as possible, but couldn't help the surprising depth to it, more low pitched than most children's. "I only sought to protect one who's been nice to me, helped me from time to time. I didn't want her hurt." Pharel knew that somehow this woman could see into their mind, and tried to hide their oddities, even to the point of attempting to put a male pronoun to their thoughts of themself.

Her voice was soft, surprisingly gentle, "Thou are older than thou look, and hide much, trying to hide it from one who means thee no ill. Thou are different, in more ways than thou want to admit. Despite the danger to thee, thou would protect others. I think I might have a use for thee."

"Lady?"

The scene suddenly shifted, and Pharel found themselves in a small garden, with a ceiling above, and walls that shed a constant light. Pharel stared up at the woman and looked around in a panic. "Where am I?"

"Thou art in the heavens, and I would have thee spend much time here, learning ways in which thou canst continue to protect thy friends, and other children in the world."

Pharel was nearly dazzled by the woman's appearance as she seemed to change, dropping the disguise she'd held in the mortal world. Where the woman had seemed old and worn, now she was vibrant and in her prime, hair the color of flame falling over robes of green and pink. There could only be one person this would be, and that was the Earthmother herself. Pharel fell to their knees and bowed their head.

"Be at peace, Child. I would have thy service, not as a priest, for I do not think thy gifts would be suited there, but rather to help protect the young ones across the world. Many are the children harmed by the actions of their elders. While thou wilt not be able to help all, thou mayst help these children learn ways to help each other, and thus protect more of them. I will give thee the gifts to go where thou wilt, on heaven and within the earth when I send thee, and will strengthen the magic thou hast naturally so that thou have more gifts to deal with those who would defy my rules."

Pharel shuddered, uncertain of how to respond, "You want me to help the children, everywhere?"

"Yes, Child, I would take thee and grant thee immortality, an unchanging of thy form, and increase thy abilities to hide as a child when thou wouldst. Thou wouldst then go among the cities and aid children there, protect them and bring them the help they need when there is great harm. Wilt thou do that, for me, for them?"

Pharel looked up, realizing that this would be protection of a level they could not otherwise have. "I will serve you, if that is what you want, but it's mostly to help the other children. They need help, protectors."

"And thou wilt be well prepared to protect them. Come, take my hands, and we will prepare thee for what thou must do."

Pharel lifted their hands, overlarge in the manner of the gnoroi people, and placed them within Jirel's hands. There was a sense of tearing, but also an outpouring of energy into them. All pain and traces of hunger vanished, and Pharel could sense strength that they'd never had before. It was astounding.

"Come, Child, and I will teach thee what thou wilt need to know." And Pharel knew then that they would become the best protector for the children they could be.