

Goodbye

by debbiechan

Disclaimer: I don't own DBZ; I share it with an entire fandom.

"You really look like an old lady now." ~Goku to Bulma, episode 289, Dragonball Z

Bulma sat on the ground and tore at the grass.

She didn't know why rage possessed her; it's not like she didn't make the "old lady" remark to her own face in the mirror on occasion. So *what* if she was no longer a sixteen-year-old nymphet blossoming out of short shorts and a handkerchief top? Bulma knew she was still stunning, rich, and, most importantly, brilliant. In one of the many worlds that encompassed Reality, she had built a time machine, and so it wasn't like her mind was incapable of settling scores with the great Mystery of Time. Saving this world from the Androids and restoring hope to another world ravaged by terror--*yey, Bulma!*

She hadn't figured out a way to stop dying, that's all.

Bulma clawed her fingers into the ground and yanked up a fistful of dirt along with the grass.

Leave it to Son-kun to bring up my age!

There was little comfort in thinking about her other timeline selves. They were a kind of sideways immortality--all those Bulmas reflected in the fly's eye of space and time--yet they would all die out too.

Oh yes, she had thought about them often: according to simple time-travel theory, there existed younger versions of herself all over the universe. Timelines where she had lavender hair, timelines where she had blue. Worlds where her grieving, war-battered self was unrecognizable from the bejeweled and fashionable woman tantruming on the grass. Worlds where the realms of the Living and the Dead were undone and there was no justice.

Life is good here. Life is fine now. I don't want it all to end.

The Saiyans were talking, ignoring her. She was used to that. She had no interest in the damn tournament anyway, and at least Vegeta hadn't ignored her outburst utterly. Vegeta had made that remark about a warrior race maintaining their vitality and youth many times over the years. He said it on mornings when she traced her hand over his face and searched for wrinkles, for looser skin, for any sign that he was growing older too. The freak! His teeth didn't even decay!

"I'm going to die before you do," she had said once, trying to get him to admit to the seriousness of her aging and his not.

"I've died twice now, and who is to say that the third time won't be this afternoon? Bra has that... that... thing?"

"Ballet class recital."

"Bra has ballet class recital, and the last one lasted longer than my fight with Majin Buu. I may not survive this time."

Staring at the frowning profile next her pillow, Bulma had felt the full weight of what she had learned since Buu's defeat: her husband was an unfathomable, alien bastard, but he would never leave his family again.

No, Bulma would definitely die first.

And despite what she had just told Son-kun about getting Shenlong to restore her youth, Bulma knew that the Eternal Dragon wouldn't always fix everything, that were limits to magic and science both, and that some battles were destined to be lost.

"Mom?"

Bulma was standing now, and Trunks was before her, and grass leaves were fluttering from her open hand. It wasn't all about faking her composure after that; Bulma could hardly feel the weight of Death when her handsome son was standing right there.

No more reflection. The moment moved into the blur of present time.

It wasn't until weeks later, during the World Martial Arts Tournament, when Son Goku said goodbye to his wife and loved ones and flew away to train Uub, that the old dread of Death returned. Son-kun was always saying goodbye; he had never belonged to any passion but to fighting, so his departure seemed to surprise everyone but Bulma. How could Son-kun even *understand* being so attached to someone that the very idea of losing--?

In the tournament stands, Bulma had fingered the jewels at her neck and had felt a tiny triumph in the knowledge that Vegeta would never fly off like that. For however improvisational and carefree as Goku was, Vegeta was as obsessive and religious in routine. He was as bound to Bulma, Earth, and family now as he had once been to the idea of defeating his Saiyan rival.

Age-invincible warriors--Gohan, Goten, Trunks, four-year-old Pan and Krillen's robot wife--had turned serene profiles to the sky. Chi-Chi was a sobbing wreck for hours; Krillen seemed particularly sad. Bulma knew that for all her smugness about Vegeta not being the one to leave, she belonged with the all-too-mortal human gang.

"Goodbye," Bulma had said at last, a sleeping Bra on her shoulder. The word carried a brittle meaning for everyone who loved Son Goku. Chi Chi, in an unusual display of camaraderie, had smashed her wet cheek against Bulma's perfectly dry, perfumed one and had hugged and hugged.

"It will be alright," Bulma had heard herself saying. "You know how it goes with him. He'll be back."

It was almost dawn now. Bra had been handed over to Videl, so Bulma and Vegeta could be alone in their hotel room. Bulma knew Vegeta was expecting pillow-talk. Speculation about where Son-kun had flown off to. Analyses of the day's matches. Bulma, full of reception champagne and the excitement of seeing old friends, usually talked his ear off on nights like these.

Bulma rose to her knees on the mattress and in one motion, swept her nightgown over her head. She knew she was still beautiful. Slight-boned, thinner than in her younger years but still full and concave in the right places. There was a dew of youth no cosmetic surgery or pampering lifestyle could replace, though, and Bulma knew that her mouth could no longer shape the little *o* of pleasure without displaying a halo of creases. She knew her breasts sagged some. That didn't matter... that really didn't matter.

Vegeta always initiated sex more than she did, and he was no more gentle in these years of encroaching osteoporosis than he had been in the early years--that is, he was careful enough not to kill her, but he always took her as if against his *own* will, as if he fought a monster inside himself to keep from biting her limbs off, tearing her flesh.

He gave her a hard look now. His black eyes were full of a sinister devotion to the moment. Didn't he know? Didn't he know that she would be gone one day? Or had he always known? That they could never be like human couples, investing in one another's daily intimacies, comforted by anonymity? It struck Bulma as odd that Vegeta could be more prepared for grief than she was.

They were Death and Life from the beginning.

Vegeta grabbed her shoulders, and Bulma felt the rage of pleasure begin: *Why fear Death when it holds you like this?* She opened her mouth against the fear. She had been rising and failing against this hard wall for years now. Her legs around his. *Goodbye.* Her fists in his hair. *Goodbye.* Her screams against his body. *Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.*

END

A/N: This ficlet was inspired by an old revered story in the B/V fandom, one presenting a non-romanticized view of the couple in their latter years--Dot Warner's "Anatomy of a Mid-Life Crisis." (HYPERLINK <http://www.dotchan.com/dball/midlife.html>) <http://www.dotchan.com/dball/midlife.html>). I never bought that the idea that Vegeta would be anything like the distracted husband who leaves his family little by little or that Bulma could resolve a mid-life crisis with anything approaching calm acceptance. Still, Dot Warner's story exists for me in an authentic way, as part of the many timelines and possibilities that the fandom has created. I've loved so many of these stories, so many versions of these characters.

I also wrote this ficlet because, hard as I try, saying *goodbye* to the Dbz fandom is beyond me. I'm not sure if this story does that for me or not.