

DREAMING OF FIRE



J.J. Cassidy

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

DREAMING OF FIRE

By J.J. Cassidy

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A lean male holds a drape of red cloth around his hips with one gauntleted fist, while the other hand rests on his head, the position displaying his muscular arms and torso to perfection. His long, dark-blond hair blows around him, blending with swirling mist. A ghostly full moon glows over his shoulder, and obscured weapons form a horizon below a dark sky. Around his neck is a gold chain with a round ruby pendant.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Naxom was orphaned at five and taken in by a monk of the secretive Order of Cett. He and his wife raised Naxom as their son. Outside the Order, Cett is often derided as the god of nothing because he never claimed dominion over anything. But to those special few who have been called, Cett is the god of all—warrior, scholar, woodsmen, mage, sailor, smith—whatever he desires. Like their god, those of his order must be everything, yet nothing.

Naxom's father has sent him on his first mission—it is as simple as it is hard—find his other. You can tell the story from the POV of Naxom or the “other,” but not both. (You may change Naxom's name and/or Cett's if you wish) The “other” need not be human, but no vampires, werewolves and preferably, no shifters (though a magical creature who can take human form but is not part of a shifter pack or the like is fine). I do not necessarily see a HEA or HFN, as members of the Order lead dangerous lives, but HEA/HFN is a possible outcome for Naxom. This can be high fantasy, urban fantasy or sci-fi however you see it, but there should be magic and warrior skills of some kind as those are some of the skills Naxom will have mastered by the time he sets out to find his other.

Sincerely,

Andrew

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mage/sorcerer, religious orders, royalty, mythical creatures, magic users, soulmates/bonded, non-wolf shifters

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DREAMING OF FIRE

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Anger has no place in the heart of a Cettai.

Chapter One

The open road was a fine place to be on a bright day, with no clouds anywhere to be seen and the promise of good weather for the next hand of days. I shaded my eyes and judged the angle of the sun, thinking I might make it over the ridge up ahead before deciding where to camp. Or not. I had no one to please but myself, after all. I could walk all night if I wished.

Beyond that ridge—if I had read the map correctly—lay the plains, vast grasslands stretching west to the city of Abderan, at the edge of the Great Sea. My own magics ran to Earth and Air, a somewhat infelicitous combination, and while that meant I rarely got lost, the map was very old and, I suspected, not particularly accurate. Still, the land breeze playing with my hair was headed for the ocean, and so I followed along with it.

I had been traveling for three days, and other than a shepherd with a herd of paca, I had neither seen nor sensed anyone. The solitude was oddly pleasing after a lifetime with no space of my own. In the temple compound, I lived first with my adoptive father and his wife—not my parents by blood, but they had the raising of me—and then in the dormitory with the other novices. I would be there still, if not for the dreams.

Everyone dreams—the ordinary kind that takes scraps of this and that and weaves those scraps together with fear or longing or lust, clearing them from your head. Boys dreamed of lovers, and woke with sticky bellies, and perhaps girls dreamed that way as well—although I wouldn't know, not being one myself and not knowing any to speak with about such a thing.

I dreamed of fire. Not... ordinary fire. This flowed like water, surrounding me, carrying me—and I would wake to find myself on my feet, heading for the western gate of the monastery. The first few times, I returned to my pallet without anyone being the wiser. Then one of the other novices followed me, and the time after that my father, Noll, saw me and asked questions... and those questions led to my being here, climbing this road with the sun warm on my back.

It was the belief of my Order—I followed Cett, a god of many aspects—that everyone had an *Other*, someone or something that completed them. Most with the gift of magic could work all four elements—Earth, Air, Fire, and Water—to some degree, and their Other would balance their workings, and help them focus.

All my life I had heard stories of Cettai—members of my order—and their Others. My friend Sefin and I speculated endlessly on what our Others might be. He hoped for a woman from some exotic land, well-versed in the erotic arts, while I thought he deserved to be like one Cettai of legend who was joined with a tree. That suggestion resulted in both of us being punished for fighting.

My father came to the conclusion that the fire dreams were a call from my Other, and they would only grow stronger the longer I refused to follow them. He explained that if the dreaming were a true sending, perhaps my Other had an affinity for fire, and would balance my... In truth, calling it a *lack* of talent would not be correct. “Unpredictable talent” might be a better phrase. My teachers believed that practice or time would improve my skills—they had more faith in that respect than I ever did.

It took only a hand of days to prepare me to leave on my quest, half of those taken up by lectures from the senior members of my Order. Novices younger than me had already left on their own quests, or to train with masters in other provinces. Sefin had been sent south five, almost six moons ago to find his Other, and he was very near a year younger than me. My flawed abilities might be the excuse given out for why I lingered in the monastery, but I knew better.

Cettai are allowed little in the way of personal possessions, we are limited to things we have made or earned by our own hand. As a result of this, I had no sword—the forge and I were not in sympathy—although I did have a fine bow crafted during a long winter. I had bartered my lesser bow for a wickedly long knife, and my pile of pelts, gathered over a fall and winter of hunting, were traded for a good pair of boots. My gauntlets were my own work, and clothing was provided by the Order. According to custom, I took only what I could carry on my person or in a pack.

Lost in thought, I crested the ridge and blinked at the view—the plains spread out before me, mottled in gold and green all the way off to where the walls and spires of Abderan glowed in the sun. And beyond the city lay the western sea, a darker blue curve glittering below the paler blue of the sky.

Closer by far, and utterly ruining my enjoyment of the moment, a caravan made its ponderous way across the plain, leaving in its wake a roil of red-brown dust and the stink of the massive bufa yoked to the carts. As I watched, one of the carts, one with a shrouded box in its bed, rocked once, twice, thrice—and tipped on its side with a screech of abused wood, accompanied by the startled bellows of the pair of bufa in front of it. Men ran for the cart, their yells audible even from a distance, and the wreckage erupted with an enraged squeal of absolute rage.

A hot, bright hook lodged in my chest and *yanked*—I obeyed the pull of that invisible tether and ran toward the chaos below, the downhill path lending me speed. And robbing me of any chance of stopping to think.

Metal bars from the rolling cage—for that was what it had been—rattled and sang as the thing that had been imprisoned within it rose on its hind legs, long silvery chains whipping through the air. I kept running as the terrain leveled out, one hand on the strap of my pack to keep it still, the other on the hilt of my knife, and still not entirely sure what I ran *to*, exactly. Or why.

The escaped beast leapt over and through the scattered pieces of its prison, frightening the placid pair of bufa into an awkward run when it hissed at them. I had a blurred impression of a matted, tangled, smoky mane of hair, and a dusty dark coat. Not a tanga, this was bigger, and the feet were wrong. Another leap, undeniably graceful even among the chaos, and then the beast scrambled forward, straight at *me*, closing the distance with alarming speed. Driven by necessity, my mind added up disparate details, and I realized what was charging me—a dhourgan.

Gods above and below—I thought they were myths, a pretty illustration to fill up the pages of a fanciful bestiary, not a real creature at all. Dhourgan were all beasts and none, the saying went, which made them kin to the Cettai, in a strange way. The drawings did not do it justice in the least, I thought, nearly going to my knees in the attempt to stop my forward rush.

I managed a balanced crouch as the dhourgan lunged—and then the beast was brought up short by the two long chains attached to the collar on its sinuous neck, each of those chains now weighted by four men. With a horrible grinding snarl, it snapped to the left. Now I could see it was muzzled, its jaws caged in a lattice of metal fastened to its head with broad leather straps.

The long narrow head—almost the length of my torso—swung back in my direction, and the dhourgan regarded me with dark, dark eyes glowing with mad red fire. It hissed again, and lowered its head further, nostrils flaring behind the silver muzzle. The deep, plaintive noise it made raised the fine hairs on my neck, cramping my stomach with a sudden chill.

I sidled to the right, thinking to put some distance between us, and the beast moved as well, a two-toed forefoot sliding sideways. It made the same low sound, more frustrated than plaintive this time—perhaps it was disappointed not to make me its next meal. I wasn't entirely sure what dhourgan ate, but the curved teeth behind the muzzle hinted that it might not be herbivorous.

The other men from the caravan had gathered around by now, and one, in fine enough clothes to be their chief, came to greet me, leaving a goodly distance between himself and the dhourgan. "Is it not a wonder?" he said. "I should think that even one of Cett's own would not have seen its like out in the world."

I let the *Cett's own* lie there, ignored, and raised an eyebrow. "And how did you come to acquire such a thing?"

"Ah." The man grinned and spread his hands. "That's a tale best told before the fire. Camp with us, and I shall tell you." I inclined my head in silent agreement, and the man leaned closer. "It might be—"

The dhourgan surged forward, snarling, hind legs digging for purchase and dragging the eight men with it. The muzzled snout swung at the headman, sending him scrambling backward, before it reversed to face me.

I was a hunter and a tracker, and familiar with the nature of prey and predators—from timid, tiny lupa to nimble, wild paca, as well as the feral kunda, cousin to the tame ones used for herding and hunting. I knew domestic creatures, their care and feeding, and I could ride a tanga well enough, although I'd rather walk. None of that prepared me for the wicked intelligence gleaming at me from the dhourgan's dark eyes.

That same bright hook from before snagged my hand and drew it up and forward, until my palm rested on the broad, bony forehead of a creature out of legend. The dhourgan sighed—there was no other word for it—and I could hear the men around me murmuring invocations to various gods. Answering an urge that was not my own, my fingers dug in and rubbed at a faint ridge under the sleek, short, dark hair. Then up further, to scratch the base of the mobile pointed ears, and further still, to the leather strap of the muzzle behind those ears, sliding my fingers around it, under it—

I snatched my hand back, and the dhourgan sighed again, not so much in pleasure this time as resignation.

"Perhaps," the chief drover said, slowly and thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are traveling on to Abderan, as we are?"

Chapter Two

I almost laughed at the look of calculation on his face, but settled for inclining my head in what could be taken for agreement. It was enough, for the man hurried off, giving orders to make camp. If he believed I could keep the dhourgan quiet and cooperative, well, then, that was all to the good. I wanted time to examine the beast, and I did, in fact, intend to visit Abderan.

In two hands of days the moon would be at the full, and every man, woman, and child would celebrate Cydnos, the sun festival that signaled the start of the growing season. Abderan would overflow with people from every province, and I believed it was where I should find my Other—for Cydnos was a festival of both sun and of rain, the things needed for a successful harvest. Fire and water, the missing half of my talent.

Admittedly, Abderan was probably the worst place I could go, and I had shaded the truth about my route to my father and the elder monks as much as I dared. To my mind, it had been more than twenty years, and other than a few nobles at the emperor's court—and the emperor himself—it was doubtful anyone seeing me would instantly recognize the child in the man. In any case, I had no plans for visiting the palace, and no one else was likely to recognize me and carry rumors.

Once they had secured the dhourgan's chains behind nearby rocks, the men left us alone. The dhourgan crouched, belly on the ground, and stared at me. I stared back—when would I have such an opportunity again? If I had the talent to do more than sketch rough maps, I should have liked to draw it, capture the lines of muscle and sinew and bone. It—no, *he*, for I had seen the proof of that when the men led the dhourgan away—was covered in dust, the short coat thick with it, the mane matted and snarled. He had a tail like a kunda's, long and thick, and the bottom half matched the mane, with the same soft hair.

There was no menace in the way it watched me. Curiosity, yes. Still, the dhourgan was not any sort of tame creature, was it? “How did they capture you?” I murmured, walking in an arc around where he lay. “And what do they intend to do with you?”

The dhourgan grunted softly, and with a grumbling sigh, rested his head on his folded forelegs and closed his eyes.

“I suppose I shall have to ask the head drover, then, if you won't tell me.” I laughed, a single quiet huff, and shook my head. Beasts were incapable of

understanding speech, or so I had been taught, although they were quick to catch nuances of tone or pitch. Foolish for me to read more into the creature's response than could actually be there.

I was escorted to the head drover's fire when dinner was ready. To my surprise, they had set up a table and benches, with an actual chair for him and another for me. The food was simple—roasted cubes of meat and vegetables, fresh flatbreads, greens, and some cheese curds. There was wine, too, and I saluted the head drover once my cup was filled.

“Water and salt,” I said, the traditional blessing from a guest. There were two hands of men at the table, and they all relaxed when I spoke. Did they think I would curse them? Cettai were feared, to a certain extent, but I had not expected this sort of wariness. I took a guest's portion of everything—not too little, not too much, thereby allowing the host to offer more.

When we had all eaten our fill, and another jug of wine was on the table, the head drover sat back in his chair with the air of a man about to tell a tale. His name, I now knew, was Lefi ap Horas, marking him as an Easterner. Most of the caravan was his blood kin to one degree or another—they were, to a man, shorter than me, wiry and dark. Dark hair, dark eyes, dusky skin made darker by the sun.

I stood out among them like the moon in the middle of the night sky with my pale skin, amber hair, and gray eyes, everything about me marking me as a man from the provinces north of the capital. In point of fact, I was born in Iuvanum, a northern province that no longer existed, a true-blooded son of House Valerii—which also no longer existed, save for me.

My given name—Naxomion—would have told them I was northern-born as well, but out here in the world I had no name. I was simply Cettai, a monk of the Order of Cett. A houseless and clanless wanderer, and under the law I might be summoned to act as both judge and executioner. It had been so for countless generations of Cettai, and to ask for a Cettai was to ask for both the man and the judgment—one word for both, and our word was final, our authority absolute, with no recourse. It made people less likely to trouble us over simple things, for our investigations might turn over stones or open chests that might have been better left untouched.

“Tell me of the dhourgan, then,” I said, the traditional asking for a tale, and I mimed Lefi ap Horas' easy sprawl.

“I am no bard,” he began, and that, too, was tradition. “But I shall tell the tale as best I may. It happened that we had some paca go missing, as the creatures will, and I and my brother went to track them. And among the rocks we saw prints that no beast nor man we knew could have made. We determined to drive it from our grazing land, and barring that, capture it.” He paused to take a sip of wine. “We took nets, and more men, and we scoured our valley and the hills beyond, searching. Three of our missing paca did we find, but no more strange tracks.”

He went on in that vein—treacherous weather, men lost and found, strange sounds—for long enough that I finished my cup and reached for the jug, pouring myself another measure. He took that as a sign of impatience, and thankfully came to the crux of the tale.

“Then fortune favored us, and we came upon a freshly killed paca. We laid a clever trap, a spring-net, and waited to see what would come sniffing. A day and a night we waited, in tree and thicket, and to our great wonder, a dhourgan crept back to the kill, and we all believed it an illusion. Yet our net tangled it as surely as any real beast, and with much—”

My glance at him just then was pointed, and he decided against whatever flowery recounting of injury and mayhem he had intended.

“—cost to ourselves, we were able to subdue it. We used shackles from the bufa, and logging chains—nothing else would hold it. We are not a wealthy house, and after a great deal of deliberation, we began this journey. We travel to Abderan, there to make the dhourgan a gift to the emperor.”

“Indeed. Such a gift guarantees your house will be spoken of for generations.” My voice was all smooth admiration for his cleverness and his tale-telling, and I refilled his cup. “The muzzle, though, that was not made for any bufa.”

The pause before he answered lasted less than a heartbeat, but his eyes flicked to his left and he hunched one shoulder. I took a sip of wine and waited to hear the lie... or at the very least not the whole truth. “It was not. The maker crafted it of steel and silver, for all men know the dhourgan is no mortal creature.”

Ah, I had wondered when he'd bring magic into it. I knew those stories as well as he did, perhaps better. The dhourgan were said to come from some other realm, slipping through holes in the weave of the world for reasons best known only to the dhourgan, that is, if they were capable of reason. The dark

intelligence of the dhourgan's gaze came to mind, and the skin on my arms rippled with a chill. There was a kind of magic here for certain—the compulsion that dragged me down the hill, and the impulse to slip the strap of the muzzle.

“I commend that maker's cleverness as well as your own. And the telling of such a tale. But now?” I drained my cup and stood, inclining my head to show I meant no disrespect to my host. “My thanks, but the nights are short, and I wish to seek my pallet.”

I walked back to where the dhourgan was tethered, taking time to allow my fire-dazzled eyes to adjust to the dark. The dhourgan did not stir as I readied myself for sleep. With a brief prayer of thanks to Cett for the day past, I spread out my blanket, laid myself down on the mattress that had been left for me and descended easily into sleep, one hand on the hilt of my knife.

Chapter Three

I might have been asleep for half the night, or slipped directly into the dream—I had no way of knowing. This was and somehow was not the now-familiar dream of liquid fire. I went from nothingness to every part of me saturated with heat, moving with no effort through stuff too thick to be air, but not water, either. I had no sense of up or down, and the only warning I had was a subtle thickening of the substance surrounding me, a brief resistance, before I slid past some barrier and found myself on my feet.

I knew this place, from my own memory. There was a spring an arm's length away, and it rose out of the earth and spread into a pool, the steam rising from the surface and smelling of iron and copper. My bare feet rested on warm sand, and instead of my leathers, I wore only my red kilt, the official garment of my order, knotted around my hips rather than secured with a belt the way it should be.

I turned, intending to orient myself by the stars or perhaps the moon, and there, on the rocks, crouched a man. In my waking life I would have been wary, prepared for an attack, but in the way of dreams, it struck me as right that he was here. The instant my eyes found him he rose, uncoiling to his full height with a predator's liquid grace. He was bare-chested over hunting leathers, with dark hair not quite as long as mine, and muscled like a swordsman. He was, in a word, desirable—I could not imagine a man or a woman looking at him and not thinking lustful thoughts.

He smiled at me, the smile of one old acquaintance to another, and leapt easily from the rock, landing with only the faintest thud of his bare feet in the sand. "Cettai," he said, studying my face with flattering intentness. I was not vain—one's physical form is a shell, and outward beauty, or its lack, was beyond our control—but I knew both women and men found me attractive. It was a weapon, same as any other. He tilted his head. "What is your name?"

I raised my eyebrows at his presumption, and shrugged one shoulder, ignoring the twist of apprehension at the question. "I am Cettai—"

"—Houseless, friendless, nameless." He waved a lean hand in dismissal. "I know all *that*. I need to know your *name*." He took a step closer, less than an arm's length away, close enough so I could see his eyes, strangely colorless in the dark. "I need to know who you are." Another step, and then one more, and I could not look away.

This close, the warmth of his body was temptation to my fingers, which were lonely for the feel of skin that was not my own. A fleeting sense of familiarity, of *knowing* him, rasped over me and made my skin prickle with uneasy craving. I wanted to—

“Touch me,” he breathed, and I saw him swallow.

I raised one hand, not to do the obvious—cup the bulge in his leathers—but to lay it flat on the smooth skin of his abdomen. No—not smooth. My other hand joined the first, both palms resting lightly while my fingers traced the subtle contours I could feel but not see. His skin glided under my fingertips so easily it might have been oiled, and under the skin was hard muscle. But between the two—I frowned and listened carefully to what my fingers told me. It was not bone, or even cartilage—the skin itself was somehow thickened. Armored. I traced the boundaries of it, out to the arch of his ribs and then up, where the strange armor tapered slightly before widening to cover his pectorals.

My thumbs inadvertently brushed his nipples and he shivered under my hands, the first response I'd gotten. His hands settled on my hipbones, callused thumbs slipping under the edge of my kilt to brush my lower belly, and he ran his nose along my jaw, inhaling against my skin. And even that touch struck me as familiar, something he had done before or perhaps would do one day—it made no difference at the moment.

This close, he smelled of smoke and brine and male arousal—musk with a sharp edge of sweat. He tasted my skin, using lips and tongue, and now it was my turn to shiver. He hummed, and his mouth moved higher on my neck. “Mountains,” he said quietly, lips moving on my ear. “You taste like the air in the mountains, and you smell—” One of his hands found my lower back and pressed until our rigid shafts were separated only by leather and silk. “You smell of earth.” His wicked growl urged me to lean into him, one of my bare thighs slipping between his leather-clad ones. “I want that all over me.”

Gods—the image in my head at that moment was enough to bring me over. I rutted lightly against his hip instead of shoving him onto his knees—or trying to, for we were evenly matched in height, if not in breadth—reaching around his waist to get more leverage.

“Your *name*,” he groaned. “Tell me your name and I will be yours.”

I shoved him away over my body's instant protest. “I have no name,” I spat. I could feel the tug of magic—he had asked three times, and it took real effort to not let those two forbidden words tumble from my lips. “I am Cettaí.”

“You are mine,” he said, low and insistent. “And a fool.”

Everything disappeared between two heartbeats—the sand under my feet, the steamy air, the warm male body in front of me—and my next indrawn breath was abruptly cold inside in my lungs. Now I was curled on my side, wrapped in my blanket... and inexplicably, deliciously, warm. There was a quote from some Cettai master about there being no shame in taking ease where one found it, but I was too disoriented to think of how it went.

Hot breath ruffled my hair, and I rolled onto my feet with a speed that would have made my arms master proud, crouched with my knife in one hand and blanket in the other. The dhourgan opened one eye and grunted at me, apparently unimpressed.

The mattress was where it had been when I fell asleep, but at some time during the night I had moved until I lay against the dhourgan, my back fitted against the swell of its ribs and belly. I stared at the wickedly long claw visible on the back of one foreleg, a hand's breadth from where my face had been resting. Then, behind me, in the camp, I heard a commotion—voices raised in alarm. I dropped the blanket and trotted off to see what had happened, and if that left me with a sense of deliberately avoiding things, so be it.

I followed the disruption all the way to where the herd of bufa had been left for the night, next to a trickle of water too pitiful to be called a stream. One of them had been killed, dragged away from the others some little distance. The throat had been torn out, and the belly ripped open, but beyond that the carcass appeared untouched.

The dirt all around was a confusion of tracks, both human and animal. Circling around, I ignored the angry and alarmed drovers, looking for something that was not human or bufa. *There*. I knelt, and used one finger to trace the impression in the dirt. Not a bufa, not with four oval toes in front of a sizable pad. No claws. I would guess kunda, save for the size of the paw print—it was close to the width and length of my hand. Still, it was the only beast that matched, and I knew the wild ones hunted in packs. When I broadened my search, I counted four sets of tracks heading away from the camp, off onto the plains.

Looking at the map before I began this journey, I'd supposed the plains to be flat, like a tabletop. Looking out across them now, they were more like rumpled bedclothes, hillocks rising over hidden creases and valleys. Easy for

things to hide out of view and yet be close by—and even my tracking skills would be stretched in such a place.

“What have you found?”

I turned to see Lefi ap Horas, barefoot and wearing nothing but breeches. I waved at the tracks. “Kunda, mayhap. Four of them.” He flinched, the reaction quickly hidden, and I stored that information away for later. “I should think they would hesitate to come so near a camp.”

“We have had so little rain, the game has all fled north,” Lefi said, staring at the tracks. “They are hungry, and hunger will make even a lupa bold.” He sighed. “We shall wait until the men have finished butchering the carcass—the meat is too fresh to waste, leaving it here for scavengers. If you wish to break your fast, there is food ready. We will all have time to eat it this morning.”

I chose not to watch—having done my share of dressing a kill—and wandered first to the kitchen wagon for hot bread and sausages, taking time to observe the camp, and then back to the dhourgan. His ears flattened when I got near, and I could hear him snuffling. I licked the grease from the sausage off my fingers, and he growled—no, groaned. I paused, wondering when anyone had thought to offer him food or water. No one had come last night, not that I was aware of. I went back to the kitchen wagon for a bucket and water, promising to return it, and carried it back without spilling it all. I set it down in front of the dhourgan, who plunged his face into it immediately.

It did occur to me then that eating would be difficult, if not impossible, with the muzzle on, and I wondered if they intended to starve the dhourgan into docility. The destruction of the cage made that theory unlikely, but then again, how would they get the muzzle back in place once they removed it? For that matter, how had they gotten it on him in the first place?

I also wondered how they intended to move the dhourgan without that cage. I got my answer some time later, when four men pulled a flat cart over to us, followed by six more men. After removing the bars securing the chains to the rocks, they led the dhourgan onto the cart, four of them on each chain. The remaining two men controlled the front of the cart as it tipped forward under the dhourgan's weight, propping up the shaft in the front with an ingenious folding leg. After shackling the dhourgan to the cart using the chains, a pair of bufa were led over and yoked to the shaft.

Other carts were already on the move, and the men led the bufa to join the rest of the caravan. I shouldered my pack and followed, walking beside the cart

carrying the dhourgan. Even with the spare bufa trailing behind us all, the dust was intolerable. I pulled my cowl from my pack and draped it around my face and neck, covering my nose, which made breathing somewhat easier.

All through the day, the caravan never stopped moving. If a team of bufa needed to be switched, that cart fell back in the line, changed the spent bufa for fresh ones, and caught up again. The kitchen wagon served the midday meal on the move—men walked up to receive a wrapped bundle, and fell back into position to eat as they walked. It made sense, for once prodded into motion, bufa will walk steadily all the day long, but are difficult to start again after they have stopped. They will also not move in the dark, so the caravan needed every bit of daylight.

By the time the caravan master called a halt and we all made camp, I was surprisingly weary. I ate at Lefi's table again rather than crouch by the kitchen wagon with the rest of the drovers, but excused myself as soon as I finished.

I remembered to fetch a bucket and fill it with water on my way, for I doubted anyone else would remember. The dhourgan lifted his head when I approached, and I delayed collapsing face down on my blanket to set the bucket near him, and waited while he drank. Afterwards, he demanded attention, hooking me with his jaw and pinning me in place against his chest until I scratched his neck and fondled his ears. With a final stroke, I stumbled over to my bed, under the cart the dhourgan had ridden in all day, and lay down with a groan of relief.

Chapter Four

No sooner did I slip into sleep than I was back in the same place as the night before—standing in the sand near the rocks next to the hot spring, wearing my kilt, with the same man sitting on the ground at the base of the rocks.

He didn't stand, just regarded me with a faint scowl on his handsome face. "I should not have called you a fool," he said tiredly. "That was ill-done of me."

"Who are you?" I studied him, wondering at the nagging sense of familiarity.

He opened his mouth, made a frustrated sound, and shook his head, his long hair sliding around his bare shoulders. I wondered what it would be like against my skin, and my shaft hardened. Not fully, just... thickening with curious anticipation, rolling against my thigh.

He inhaled, and grunted in the back of his throat. "Ask me something else."

I considered that, staring at the lines of his chest and abdomen, remembering the way his skin had glided under my palms. "Are you bespelled? Or under some compulsion?"

"I should think a Cettai would be better at riddles," he growled.

His obvious frustration made me laugh, and I settled cross-legged in the sand. "Is that what this is? I thought you were simply being rude."

He huffed, and moved until his seated position mimicked mine. His head bowed, his dark hair hiding his face for a moment, and he swayed from side to side the least bit. Finally he raised his head, frowning at me again. "Do not go to Abderan. And do not trust Lefi ap Horas."

"Why?" I stared at his bare arms, the muscles tensing as he gripped his knees.

His heavy sigh reminded me of the dhourgan. "Do not make me call you a fool again. Ask me something else."

I leaned forward, resting one elbow on a half-raised knee so I could cradle my chin in that hand. It was hard to miss the way he shifted slightly, trying to see under my kilt, and my lips twitched. "You want me."

“Only a fool would ask that question.” His eyes narrowed, and I wondered what color they actually were. “Ask. Me. Something. *Else.*”

I *was* a fool, just as he'd said. “What is your name?”

He uncoiled onto his feet with a fluid economy of motion, and his smile bared rather white teeth that, again, somehow made me think of the dhourgan. “Zerimedes Scipionus,” he said. “You may call me Zeri,” he added, and disappeared.

I woke up in exactly the same position as the morning before—my back tucked against the dhourgan's belly, his fore and hind legs forming a cage around me. This time, I stayed where I was rather than leaping away.

Do not trust Lefi ap Horas. That is what Zerimedes—Zeri—had said. True, it was in some dream-realm, but whether the warning was from another being or something brewed from my own mind made no difference. A warning was a warning. I would watch, and judge for myself now. I shrugged out of my blanket and sat up, blinking and breathing through a wave of sick dizziness. If I had anything in my stomach, I would have cast it out. *Gods*—I managed to gain my feet, swallowing the urge to vomit, and locked my knees.

Everything behind my eyes was one dull throb—even my jaw ached—and my tongue may as well have been dipped in sand. I made it two steps, and the dhourgan moaned softly, the distress in that single note cramping my chest. Water—we both needed water.

I braced my entire body and forced it into motion, careful not to betray any weakness. The further from the dhourgan I walked, the better I felt, and by the time I reached the kitchen wagon my headache was gone. I ordered a man to fetch more water for the dhourgan, and I drank from a jug while he fetched some full skins. The pain in my head swelled behind my eyes as I carried them back, three on each shoulder, hurrying when I saw the dhourgan lying flat on his side, his sides barely moving. Rather curiously, from where I was, his belly appeared to be hairless, and the skin was segmented, like armor. The dhourgan rolled onto his chest at my approach, and moaned a little when he scented the water. I emptied four of the skins two at a time into the bucket, trying to get a look at his belly while I did. Up close, the hair there was simply lighter in color, and the impression of armor must have been a trick of light and shadow.

The dhourgan plunged his muzzle into the water and drank, eyes half closed. I patted his neck, and as I went to touch his ears, I realized that the strap

of the muzzle had rubbed him raw along the back of his head. Without any hesitation, my fingers slid along the leather until they found the buckle. I undid the strap as gently as I could, not wanting to cause more hurt, and eased the muzzle off when the dhourgan raised his dripping snout.

I tossed the muzzle away as his huge head turned into my chest, the bony forehead pressing against me. I tangled my fingers in the knotted mane and simply stood there, the pain in my head faded to a mild annoyance rather than consuming all my attention. Idly, I pinched a fold of the skin on his long neck between my fingers and let it go, watching the sluggish way it flattened. The dhourgan needed more water—and food. I sighed, smoothing my hand along his neck, and dull anger rose at the rough feel of his hair.

“I shall return with food,” I murmured, stepping away. “Drink.”

I found Lefi ap Horas by following the low buzz of agitation in the camp, past the wagons and over to the herd of bufa. By the look of things, another one had been slaughtered in the night. One of the men muttered about *molossa*, and I raked my memory for the word, sifting through layers of accumulated knowledge—I had heard that name before. Another illustrated bestiary? The faint ache in my head made it hard to think.

“A word with you,” I said to ap Horas, and waited while he closed the distance. “The dhourgan needs water. And food.”

He stared at me, unblinking, and I did not miss the way his jaw clenched or the tightening of the skin around his eyes. “Water, yes. Food, no.”

“The dhourgan will not be very much of a gift to the emperor if it is dead.” I crossed my arms over my chest, reminding myself that anger would not serve. “When was the last time it was fed?”

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “It will be fine. Besides, there was no way to offer food without removing the muzzle.”

“I removed it. The skin was rubbed raw.”

This time, his anger was more visible, and I waited, perfectly still, aware of the way his fists clenched and the twitch of a hand toward a dagger. “Feed it, then,” he said at last. He jerked his head at the dead bufa, already being carved up by two men, and walked away.

It would be the work of a moment to kill him—snap his neck or cut some essential vein with my dagger—and I breathed through the wave of violent longing. Cettai did not kill in the heat of anger or for revenge. Death, if it was

to be dealt by my hand, would be a considered act, born of logic, not passion. That did not mean the urge was not in me, for blood will tell, and it made me wonder if my father had done right setting me out into the wider world beyond the monastery walls.

Still riding that red wave, I gathered a hunk of bufa flesh, still on the bone, and headed back for the dhourgan. The entire way, the morning sun beat down on my head, making my eyes water, and it took all my will to keep my steps even. I dropped the piece of meat in front of the dhourgan, and my empty stomach threatened to revolt at the way he tore into it. I backed up, one step, and then two, before sinking to my knees and fumbling for one of the remaining full water skins.

The water cleared my head, lessening the pounding behind my eyes, and my stomach gradually settled. I knelt in the dirt next to the bucket, watching the dhourgan strip the bone clean.

What possible reason could ap Horas have for starving the dhourgan? Or withholding water? If the creature was intended as a gift, it should be in the best condition possible. I could understand wanting to keep it docile, but surely keeping it fed would be the better way to accomplish that—feral kunda could be tamed in that manner, at least enough to be handled with some measure of safety. I was more inclined to credit him with ignorance than malice, but it did not sit well with me in either case.

The dhourgan finished stripping the last scraps of meat off the bone and took another drink, swishing its snout in the remaining water to wash off the blood. In the camp, a whip cracked, and I could hear the complaints of bufa being yoked as the caravan prepared to move for the day. I rose to my feet, brushing the dirt from my palms, and the dhourgan gently butted my midsection. I took a moment to fondle his ears, staring off at nothing. There was something in this I did not—or could not—see. I knew ap Horas lied, but there was more than that. And if I could not puzzle this simple thing out, what chance did I have of fulfilling my purpose as a Cettai?

Chapter Five

I broke my fast while walking alongside the wagon carrying the dhourgan, and once the sun climbed to its zenith, I vaulted onto the wagon bed. I shed my pack, and then used the dhourgan to cushion my back, stretching my legs and giving my feet a rest. It didn't take long for the double warmth to weight my eyelids, and I let my head fall against the dhourgan's muscled shoulder.

One moment I was on the wagon, leaning against the dhourgan's warm side, and the next I was at the hot spring. This time, however, it was daylight, and now I knew for certain this was a place from my five years of life before the monastery, in Iuvanum.

A touch on my hair made me whirl, one arm sweeping out and the other reaching for my dagger. The handle leapt to my palm, and only the sight of Zerimedes' grin stayed my hand. That, and seeing his eyes clearly for the first time. They were a vivid blue around the outer edge of the iris, melting into a dark gold around the pupils, reminding me of the sky around the setting sun. And in the light of day, his hair shone true black, highlighting his slightly dusky skin. He was darker than me, which was not difficult given my paleness, a rich sand color everywhere I could see.

Zerimedes reached for my hair again, and I allowed the touch this time. He gathered the end of my braid and rubbed it between his fingers before using it to tug me closer. His other hand slid around behind my waist, and I understood his intent immediately.

I tilted my head to complement the angle of his and our mouths met, our parted lips sealing together as our tongues came out to explore. I gripped his lean hips, giving over to sensation, and let his scent fill my head as his taste filled my mouth.

Power ran up from the earth, through the bare soles of my feet, and was drawn out of the air and into my lungs with every breath I took. Parts of me I had no names for rolled into perfect alignment, and the gates to my magic settled and unlocked inside me. I groaned at the perfection of it, the wholeness, and Zerimedes echoed the sound into my mouth.

He was my Other. I had no doubt of that, not with all four elements singing in my blood and bones the way they were. Remembering his demand from our first meeting, I drew back, panting, prepared to tell him at least my given name.

Zerimedes gripped my face with both hands, his thumbs under my jaw, and the near-panic in his eyes stopped my tongue.

“Go to the river,” he gasped. “Go *into* the river. Gods—I cannot hold you here.”

He let go of me, pushed me away from him so hard my arms flew out for balance. Unlike the other times, this was no gentle transition—here one moment, back in the waking world the next. No, this time I flew back into my sleeping self like an arrow loosed from a bow, as though Zerimedes had been an archer, pulling me out of the waking world, yet this time the draw of the bow proved too much for him, and he had no choice but to let me go.

I jerked back into my body and into wakefulness at the same moment the wagon hit a rut, and my body told me I was falling. I rolled to my knees even as understanding dawned—I was not falling, it was only that the wagon had turned down a slope. And before us, in a curving liquid silver line across the land, was the river.

It took almost the rest of the day for the caravan to ease its way down to the riverbank. The Botha, it was called, an inauspicious name, since in the old language it meant *drown*. Part of me worried over what Zerimedes had told me to do—go into the river—while the rest of me worried over the dhourgan.

The food and water from the morning might both have been for naught, because he lay on the boards of the wagon, his huge body rolling limply with every pitch and jerk. If not for the chains from his collar, I believed he would have slid off to the ground. His dark coat shone with sweat, almost too hot to touch, and he breathed in shallow pants, his flared nostrils showing red inside. He needed shade, and water, and even that might not be enough to save him now.

The entire caravan headed for a flat spot—a ford, given the worn trail on the opposite side. As the wagons drew closer, the bufa scented water and strained against their yokes. The herd of spare bufa that usually brought up the rear swung past the rest of the caravan at a near jog, raising dust and bellowing, adding to the overall air of urgency.

If I could get the dhourgan in the river, the water might cool him enough to keep him alive. The problem would be getting him off the wagon, because I feared he would not be able to get up, much less walk. Then again, the wagon's

two wheels allowed the bed to tip—if the wagon were rolled into the shallows, we could slide the dhourgan off right into the water.

I vaulted off the bed, and almost ran into Lefi ap Horas. “The dhourgan is dying,” I told him, ready and willing to stretch the truth, and he recoiled at the lash in my voice. “The sun has nearly roasted him. He needs to cool off, or you will have nothing to show for this journey except a rotting carcass.”

He hesitated, for two heartbeats, his eyes shifting toward the sun and then the city on the horizon, and I locked my jaw against a curse. *Fool*. The dhourgan was not meant for a *gift*, not in the sense I had understood the word. It was to be a *sacrifice*.

At sunrise on the morning of the sun festival, at the exact moment the sun's light struck the dome of the great temple in Abderan, the emperor would make an offering. First a beast from the land, perfect and unblemished, and then one from the water. Sun and earth and water, all to ensure a plentiful harvest at the end of the growing season. In its own way, the dhourgan was the perfect choice, for according to legend, it was born of fire and water.

“You will have nothing,” I repeated. “Get him in the river, and you may save him.”

He stared at me, and then turned and yelled for the bufa to be driven into the water, taking the wagon with them. I climbed back onto the wagon, next to the dhourgan, and undid the heavy shackles, first at the end of one chain and then the other. The drovers undid the yoke, releasing the shaft, and I tugged at the collar on the dhourgan's neck.

He moaned, breathy and low, and I hissed at him, still tugging. “Up,” I snarled. The wagon tilted, tipped, and the dhourgan's head rose, his eyes wide and startled. I ran down the bed as he slid into the water, wishing I had thought to take off my boots. The water came past my waist, and it took some effort to wade against the sluggish current to reach the dhourgan, who wasn't moving.

I heard thunder, and turned in time to see the entire herd of spare bufa run through the caravan. Some of the yoked bufa tried to follow them, and men screamed as they were knocked down or trampled. The dhourgan threw itself into motion, surging into deeper water, and one of the chains from its collar dragged me off my feet, under the water. Rather than try to stand, I swam until I could grab the dhourgan's mane, and used that to haul myself to the surface.

My fingers wrapped around the collar for support, and the dhourgan dove, dragging me down with him. The collar glowed a sullen red, visible even

through the roil of sediment, but it was not hot to the touch. Bubbles rushed from the dhourgan's jaws, a bellow I could hear under the water. With no warning, my blood turned to fire, bubbling with acid, with poison, my bones swelling inside my skin, and I clamped my teeth around a scream. I was sinking, too heavy to stand, my lungs empty and aching. I could not let go of the collar, so I tried to pull it with me, my arms straining uselessly against the dhourgan's mass.

I tried once more, closing my eyes when something tore in my elbow, and the collar gave way. My head broke the surface and I sucked in scalding lungfuls of air—still holding the empty collar, the chains waving in the current.

The dhourgan was gone.

I waded out of the river carrying the collar—unopened, the lock in place—and trailing the lengths of chain, filled with a sense of loss entirely out of proportion to what had happened. The dhourgan was a beast—a fantastic, legendary one to be sure, but nevertheless a beast. I had no reason to mourn, not after barely three days. I needed to shake off that empty feeling and focus on finding a way to Zerimedes—discover his location in the waking world and make my way to him as soon as I could manage it.

Lefi ap Horas came at me, running, his face suffused with rage. He had a knife, and I batted it away with the collar. I broke his wrist, judging by his scream, and wrapped my free hand around his throat. Rather than drop the collar, I let it hang on my forearm, and it was the work of a breath to find my knife and press it to the edge of his ribs.

His face was wet with tears of pain and frustrated rage, and he sobbed curses at me. “You will see us all dead, Cettai. The beast was bought and paid for, and what are we to do now?”

He stumbled back when I shoved him, and sat down hard, cradling his wrist. I crouched in front of him. “That was no part of the story I was told.” Switching the knife to my other hand, I examined the collar. Made of iron, the metal sang to me under its coating of silver, and it was cast with incised runes—a simple binding—not a spell that would hold anything of real power. “Who forged this?”

“Peredur. Grygor Peredur.” Lefi spat, as though the name fouled his tongue. And it very well might have.

“The mage?” That explained a great deal. By all accounts, Peredur’s position in the emperor’s court was past its zenith, and if he was not careful he would lose it entirely. Producing a creature out of legend would go far to ensuring his continued security. “Was the dhourgan to be the Cydnos sacrifice?”

He blinked at me, startled enough that I believed his next words. “No. A gift. As I said.”

I would not put it past Peredur to lie, or at least not tell the entire truth. He had once, a great many years before, been a novice at the very monastery that had sheltered and raised me. But he left of his own accord after barely a year, saying he did not have a true vocation to Cett. Instead, he apprenticed to a lesser mage in the Eastern provinces... and then left there to find another master, and another after that. The Cettai supposed he sought some ultimate knowledge, and kept apprised of his doings. Eventually, Peredur found a place at court, and faded safely into obscurity.

“Please.” Lefi raised his head. “You could track the dhourgan. Find it.”

“You have trackers, surely.”

“Yes, but...” He closed his eyes, perhaps from the pain of his wrist. Perhaps not. “I ask you as a Cettai.”

Ah. I smoothed all expression from my face. If his kinsmen tracked and found the dhourgan—although I doubted they could—they would be bound by their agreement to deliver the beast to Peredur. If I did it—as a Cettai—I would have the final say on its fate, and my word would be law. Whatever I decided, Lefi ap Horas would be free of blame or prosecution. Also by law. I nodded in acknowledgement of his cleverness. “So be it.”

I took food—dried meat and fruit—and water, found my pack rather miraculously still snagged on the wagon, safely out of the river, and set off. Two of Lefi’s kin came with me, a pair of cousins, Anis and Efrau. I had no doubt they were meant as spies, and perhaps I should have been angry—was the word of a Cettai worth so little these days?—but all of my concentration was on the faintest of tugs below my breastbone.

Chapter Six

The three of us crossed the river upstream a ways from where the dhourgan slipped free. There were rocks scattered from bank to bank, and the worn track there made it clear it was the favored foot crossing. Once on the other side, I moved into a slow jog, obeying the pull of that invisible tether. I didn't know what it meant, but I would use it nonetheless. That made me think of Zerimedes again, for I imagined there should be that same kind of connection between us. No one ever explained how it would feel to find my Other, for it was understood that every Cettai's experience was unique. Still, that rush of power—what else could it have been? It could be that one might lead me to the other, and with that thought to comfort me, I scanned the bank for tracks, for water, for any sign something as large as the dhourgan had come ashore.

When I did find tracks, I knelt to examine them and suppressed a shiver. The damp earth showed me clear impressions of the dhourgan's two-toed feet, heading roughly north. But following them, nearly obliterating them, were other tracks. Four toes and a pad, the same footprints I'd seen by the slain bufa. Five sets of tracks all told, all heading the same direction.

After not too long, I left Anis and Efrau behind, trusting they would catch up by nightfall. Or not—I had not asked for their company, and had no need of them. For the remainder of the day I followed the dhourgan's trail, never once catching sight of him although he could not have been that far ahead of us. The other, four-toed tracks wove back and forth, until they split off and disappeared onto a rocky hillside. I kept on until the shadows made it impossible to track him at more than a crawl, and found a likely place to camp.

I gathered an armload of small branches for a fire, plus a few larger pieces that would burn longer. I wanted fire between me and whatever made those other tracks. Once I had the wood arranged, I reached in my pack for flint and steel... and paused. Could I...?

Even the most inept novice Cettai was able to light a fire with nothing more than magic—it was the very first thing they learned. I could not. Although, perhaps it would be better to say that I *could*, but *should not*. I looked around. It might be safe. There had been that moment when the gates of my magic aligned inside me, and my surroundings were not particularly flammable.

Crouching down, I reached for the pile of tinder, the dried grass and twigs, the invisible fingers of my will testing for dryness, for the willingness to burn.

They were things of earth, and I ignored the ties that bound them to the soil, the entire history of their growth laid out for me to read. I *pushed*, drawing air away from the tinder and into it at the same time, and... *nothing*. I sighed through my teeth. Better nothing than an inferno, or so my teacher had said after my last unfortunate experience.

Zerimedes, I thought. *Why won't this work?* I pictured his face, the spill of dark hair, the span of his shoulders—and I could feel him, in my head but somehow not. I closed my eyes and extended my will again, testing the boundary of whatever kept us separated. When I leaned on that boundary, it gave way but did not tear—like a net with no holes. The harder I pressed, the more it stretched, and he was on the other side, startled. *Zerimedes*.

He turned to face me. Watching. Waiting.

Now I understood what he had meant. It required real effort to keep myself close to him, for the barrier resisted me, wanting to push me back into myself. How did he pull me through, then? I struggled forward, not ready to give in just yet, and the barrier thinned as I pressed harder, until it was sheer enough to see through.

“*Zerimedes*.” I put out a hand, the barrier clinging to my skin like oil. “Can you pull me through?”

He shook his head, his eyes pleading with me for something—What? What did he—?

“*Naxomion*,” I said firmly, and his head jerked up. I leaned my shoulder into the barrier and added, “*Naxom*.”

His grin was wide and white, startling. “Wait,” he said, and I snapped back into my physical self so hard I almost tipped over.

“Damn you,” I snarled, at the same time as the pile of tinder flared aggressively to life.

Wait for what?

Anis and Efrau arrived long after the last glimmer of light had faded, and the three of us said nothing—the ap Horas cousins laid down near the fire and went immediately to sleep. I was up at first light and nudged them awake with the toe of my boot, impatient to be off. Trusting they could at least follow my trail, I set off, breaking my fast with the remainder of the dried fruit and some water.

Long before midmorning, I found where the dhourgan had spent the night. The molossa tracks converged nearby, and followed the dhourgan's when the trail started out again, still heading north. When a foolish lupa showed itself near the mouth of its burrow, I brought it down with my bow, and managed a second one not too long after. I gutted them both, tying them to my belt to leave my hands free, and kept walking, following the dhourgan's rather obvious trail. According to the tracks, every so often one or two of the molossa would split off and circle back before rejoining the others, or so it appeared.

The sun climbed overhead, and then began its downward slide toward evening. It was not so much that I recognized where I was, but a sense of familiarity stole over me the further north I traveled. The color of the rocks was different here, and the dirt had changed from the red-brown I'd grown up seeing, turning a darker, richer brown, almost black. In the distance, green mountains rolled away in waves to the horizon, and some inner part of my heart unfurled a little at the sight, like a plant sensing the warmth of the sun after a long cold season.

I knew my own history—this green and fertile valley was not more than two days ride from the place I had been born and spent my first five years. Not so long ago, this had all been the province of Iuvanum, and some maps still called it thus. Now it was two provinces—Clusium in the southern part, where I walked now, and Valatria in the northern half. While it was true I had done nothing worse than be born, it would not be altogether wise for me to show myself in either of the larger towns further north. The northern clans were slow to forget, and my family resemblance was too great for me to think I would not, eventually, be recognized.

When the sky darkened to purple, I found a likely place to camp in the lee of a rocky mound, and started a fire the mundane way. An elusive sense of being watched raised the hair on my neck, but that could mean some creature had made its nest among the tumbled rocks. Aside from feral kunda, there were few predators here. Efrau and Anis wandered in after the sun had slid out of sight, and one of my lupa was already skinned and over the fire.

"We're being followed," Efrau told me, keeping his voice low. "Ever since the other tracks separated the last time."

That wasn't news to me, but the firelight would give us an advantage if they were planning an ambush. Anis muttered something under his breath, one word followed by a long curse.

“What about the molossa?” I asked him. “What do they have to do with anything?”

Anis snorted, and I understood that to mean I was being stupid. “If there is a dhourgan, there are molossa,” he explained. “They have been following the caravan the whole way.”

“And killing bufa? Why do you not hunt them?” The prickling unease from earlier increased, and I stilled, wishing I could hear over the crackle of the fire.

“Do you not think we’ve tried?” Efrau squatted, stretching his palms toward the flames. “We’ve wasted arrows the entire trip, shooting at shadows. Add to that the dead bufa, and this was hardly—” He broke off at a quelling look from his cousin, and shrugged. “Lefi thought you might grant us some measure of protection,” he admitted.

A husky, barking cough brought me to my feet, one hand going for my bow. “Onto the rocks,” I told the cousins. “Quickly.” I grabbed the raw lupa and flung it out into the darkness. I heard a scuffle, and hoped whatever was out there was investigating the carcass. The only things I remembered about molossa was that they were big, near the weight of a man, and smooth-coated except for a ridge of shaggy hair down their spine. They could pass for a very large feral kunda, provided you didn’t look all that closely.

If we were facing bowmen, the rocks were a poor choice—we would be outlined against the sky, even in the growing dark—but the height would give us an advantage with a beast. Or beasts. I scooped up my pack and my weapons, gaining the first of the rocks with a one-handed vault. I scrambled to the top and strung my bow, waiting.

I fired at the suggestion of movement, another arrow in my hand almost the instant the first one flew. I heard nothing, even so, I loosed a second arrow at a moving shadow. Not a beast—firelight sparked dully off a leather doublet and a short sword. My magic kept the arrow on course, adding enough force to pierce the unprotected shoulder—and *it missed*. My hand stilled in the act of nocking a third arrow. Inconceivable. I had not missed a target since I first learned to hold a bow.

Three more figures materialized in the scant firelight—compact, wiry men in serviceable, old-style stiffened leather doublets sewn all over with metal rings. Bareheaded. Dark-haired. Leathers and boots, also dark. I slung my bow over my shoulder and around my neck, out of the way, and took out my knife.

Not as effective as a sword, and I had a moment to regret not trading for one. Next to me, Anis and Efrau both had their swords out—awkwardly, worse than any novice. Cett help me—if these bandits had any skill, those two were paca for the slaughter.

Chapter Seven

The four strangers ran for the rocks, leaping up with no effort and a fair amount of grace. One engaged Efrau, one swung at Anis, and a third came at me. The fourth one skipped around to my other side, and I spared a breath from parrying a swing at my head to shove at him using only air. My gifts might not lend themselves to starting a fire, but they had their uses. The fourth one stumbled back, and I grinned in feral pleasure. That was all I had time for, though—aside from wishing again that I'd traded for a sword instead of the knife.

If they were bandits, they were not the usual kind—we had nothing of value for them to steal. And they weren't bent on killing us, for the cousins were so inept as fighters they should have been dead already. The two strangers facing me did not try to advance the fight, but simply kept me at bay, preventing me from helping Anis or Efrau.

I took a blow on one gauntlet that numbed my arm, and lashed out with one foot, catching my opponent squarely on the side of his knee. He yelped, and fell back to let number four have a go at me. A sword clattered on stone at the same time someone cried out—and I snatched the discarded sword up in my left hand as it slid past. My opponent's eyes widened when I swung at him, the whites visible in the dark, and he hesitated for a breath and a heartbeat.

I snarled at him and used my knife to swipe at his free arm, wondering what their game was. Beyond my two opponents, one of the ap Horas cousins lost their footing and slid off the rocks. Instead of following him and finishing him, that fighter joined the two facing me.

Steel rang on steel as I took the offensive, my teeth set in a fierce grin. All they did was defend themselves, meeting each blow of mine with equal or lesser force—it was maddening, and my arms and shoulders ached. I growled in exasperation and prayed for Cett to grant me patience, for mine was nearly gone—and all the lectures I'd ever gotten on caging my temper meant nothing at the moment.

One of my opponents whistled, high and sharp, and beyond the rocks some dark shape hurtled into view. The phantom hook in my chest jerked, almost a physical pain, and without questioning the how or the why, I abandoned the futile fight and slid off the side of the rock, feet first, shoving my knife home in its sheath to leave me a free hand. The dhourgan sat down on his haunches,

sliding to a stop, and I grabbed the cloud of mane right above his shoulders. His front half spun away while his haunches swung toward me, and I let the motion aid my leap onto his broad back. I landed off-center, and he twitched one hip in a buck that bounced me into place.

And *ran*.

Part of my training included leaning to ride a tanga—a short, placid beast content to trot around a meadow while I attempted to coordinate staying centered in a padded saddle at the same time I learned the commands for *right* and *left*, *stop* and *go*. Eventually, I was able to shoot my bow while the tanga ran past a target, but it wasn't something I excelled at. Or particularly enjoyed.

And it bore no relation whatsoever to flying through the night with the dhourgan's mane stinging my face, heat and sweat bleeding through my leathers from the dhourgan's muscular back and sides. Somehow, I managed to reverse my grip on the sword so it lay flat along my thigh instead of threatening to cut my own throat with every dip and rise in the terrain.

I was riding a dhourgan. The idea of it was enough to put me off-balance, and the reality cramped my guts. As we hurtled down a short slope into a gully, a blur of motion off to my left made me turn to look—and wish I hadn't. A glance to my right confirmed that, yes, there were four beasts running with us, two on a side.

If there is a dhourgan, there are molossa—Anis had spoken the truth. The molossa—what else would they be?—were easily the size of a man, with sleek dark coats, and bristling coarse manes adding bulk to already powerful necks and shoulders. Parted jaws displayed a lolling tongue and sharp white teeth, and I caught the gleam of an eye when one looked at me. All they did was run alongside, and if they were somehow connected to the dhourgan, perhaps they would not attack me when I dismounted.

A stray thought bounced loose in my head—something about riding a dhourgan. So long as the rider held fast to the mane—and for as long as the dhourgan permitted—that rider would not come off. That made me sit up a little straighter, allowing me to see over the dhourgan's head, between the flattened ears.

We charged up a slope, then, out of the gully onto flatter, more open terrain. The dhourgan slowed his pace down to a rocking lope, and I drew an easier breath—only to inhale sharply the next instant. The dhourgan—no, the entire

world—twisted, my head insisting I was upside down and sideways. The moonlit valley winked out, replaced by absolute darkness—the liquid fire from my dreams. I clenched my jaw and tried not to breathe, one heartbeat after another until my pulse pounded in my ears and the need for air clogged my throat. White sparks lit my vision, the only light, and finally there came another dizzying twist, turning the fabric of reality inside out as though it were a tunic.

Another moonlit scene, not the same as before, with an aching familiar line of hills against the night sky. That was all I had time to see before I tumbled off the dhourgan, the sword flying from my hand. I tucked my arms and rolled, my bow stabbing my lower back, horribly aware of the dhourgan tumbling with me, of the curved talon on each foot.

I came to a stop with dirt in my mouth and a hard male body under my own, both of us breathing hard—and whoever it was grabbed my face in two hands and kissed me. I knew that taste, that scent, and scrambled back, onto my feet.

“Zerimedes,” I growled. The dhourgan was nowhere in sight, neither were the molossa. We were near the same hot spring as my visions, though—I knew exactly where we were. Before I said anything else, I checked to make sure I still wore my leathers and slightly damp boots, not my red kilt. Not a vision, then, and this was—it was—

Iuvanum. An easy walk would take me lower into the valley, to a small town clustered at the perimeter of a walled estate. To a pair of massive gates that had never in their long history been breached. Save the once—and in the end, once had proved more than enough. My throat closed—a ridiculous reaction considering how long it had been. An entire lifetime.

This was impossible. The dhourgan could run fast, I'd grant, but this cursed place was two days ride from where we'd been at the start of the night.

Zerimedes stayed on the ground, propped up on his elbows and grinning wickedly. His bare chest gleamed with sweat, the strange armoring under the skin creating edges that caught the light. “Naxom,” he said. “Or do you prefer Naxomion?”

“I would prefer an explanation,” I ground out. “And no more riddles.”

“I never told you any riddles.” He cocked his head. “Not even the one—”

“Zerimedes.” I pointedly did not sigh when he narrowed his eyes. “Zeri,” I amended. Somewhere, my teachers were gloating—they always said my besetting fault was impatience, and now I had an Other who would try the patience of Cett. No—a stone.

Zeri hummed and sat up, raising his eyebrows. "I do like the way my name sounds when you say it."

I was distracted by the way the muscles in his abdomen tightened, throwing the lines and cuts into sharp relief, and sighed through my teeth, annoyed with myself for looking. "How did the dhourgan carry me here—" I paused to glare at him when he opened his mouth. "And do not tell me 'on his back' or so help me, I will strike you. I know where we are, and it's a good two days ride from where I was before."

He hummed again, wrapping one arm around a knee and gesturing with the other. "There is—*space*—between this realm and others. And it is possible to travel through that space—provided you have a clear destination, someplace you are familiar with." He seemed to be waiting for me to ask another question. I debated which one of a dozen I wanted the answer to first, while at the same time trying to fit the idea of these... *spaces* into what I knew of the world and magic.

When I didn't speak, Zeri sighed and pushed onto his feet, dusting off his leathers and then his hands. "Watch," he said. He didn't move—and yet he did, his physical form twisting like a dust devil and disappearing as though he stepped around—behind—something I could not see. The moment he flicked out of sight, the dhourgan appeared in exactly the same manner.

I stepped forward, smoothing the sweat-roughened hair on his neck with one hand, and running the other down his bony forehead. The dhourgan nudged me, gently, and performed that sideways-twisting illusion in less than an eye blink—and there I stood, one hand on Zeri's shoulder and one patting his hair.

I swore and took a step back, half in surprise and half because, behind him, the four molossa had appeared out of the darkness. I reached for my knife, and Zeri's hand gripped my wrist. "Hold," he said. "They are not a threat to you." He turned his head, the moonlight casting his face with sinister angles, and nodded.

All four molossa winked out of existence, replaced by the four men who had attacked me and the ap Horas cousins. I was not sure which was the worse threat. Zeri tightened his fingers on my wrist when I tried to pull away, my gauntlet digging into the skin under his grip. "They are mine to command. And yours." He tipped his head to the side and let go of my wrist to slide his hand up my bare arm. "As am I," he murmured, one corner of his mouth curving up. "Within reason." I could feel the heat of his chest even through my own vest, and his breath warmed my cheek, my jaw.

I inhaled his scent, shivering as my skin prickled with awareness and no little want. If it were not for the four men watching, I would have gone further—let him go further. As it was, I shrugged free and put some air and earth between us. “I still require an explanation.”

Zeri narrowed his eyes. “Why is it that I feel the gods are laughing at me? You know the saying—logic makes for a cold bed?—I never thought that was meant to be literal.”

I snorted, fighting a smile. “And my teachers would tell you that cool consideration is not one of my strengths. I—” How to say this? “I am not immune to your... *charms*. I just—want to understand what you are.”

Zeri growled and threw his hands up, taking two steps away from me before whirling back. “I am Dhourgan, of the Scipionii. That is both *what* and *who*—you understand? We can choose our form to suit our purpose. Or our whim.” He pointed at the four molossa. “*They* are Molossa, of clan Aufidii, bound in service to my house. Calix, Therin, Bened, and Eliud.” Each of the four inclined their head as he named them. “They are mine to care for, just as I am theirs.”

“So why not appear to me this way?” I waved my hand at him. “Why appear as a beast out of legend?”

“That,” he bit out, “was not my choice.” He met my eyes, red sparks glowing in his widened pupils. “I would blame myself, but Grygor Peredur is more to blame than my pride.”

“He forged the collar,” I said. “Ap Horas confessed as much. Beyond that—how much of what I was told was truth?”

“At last. A proper question.”

Chapter Eight

Zeri and I compared stories, and it seemed that only the smallest part of what ap Horas related to me was truth. Peredur had been the one to approach the ap Horas clan, asking them to capture any dhourgan they could find in return for a staggering amount of coin—and providing them with the muzzle and the collar. While he and I spoke, magic ran across my skin like sparks—from the Aufidii, who made bedding and a meal appear, presumably out of thin air.

We all sat around a merry little fire, light and warmth against the cool night. Zeri sat next to me, almost close enough to touch, while the four Molossa were across the fire from us. I was starving, and barely tasted the hot meat and flatbreads except to note they were delicious. Zeri watched me lick grease off my fingers with a great deal of interest, so I made a show of sucking them clean and laughed when he shuddered.

“I can think of better ways to fill your mouth,” he promised darkly, and his accent—broader than mine, with odd rolling Rs—was rather noticeable.

My smile was sly. “I can still laugh with a full mouth.”

“Not if you’re choking.”

“Better men than you have tried.” I tucked another piece of meat in my mouth, grinning as I chewed—and ignoring my thickening cock’s interest in that image.

He widened his eyes and smiled, raising his eyebrows to complete the illusion of innocence. “We will see about the better, but I’ll wager they were not bigger.”

I huffed, and shrugged one shoulder, refusing to adjust myself to a more comfortable angle. “Every man brags. It means nothing.”

Zeri rolled smoothly onto his knees, but whatever he planned to say or do was interrupted by one of the Molossa—the first time any of them had spoken.

“My lord?”

“Calix?” Zeri stayed where he was, his eyes on my mouth. “Whatever it is, go and do it.”

“Yes, my lord.” Calix bowed his head, almost hiding a smile, and all four of them rose to their feet. “Rest well, my lords.” I lost sight of them as they walked past the rocks, out of the firelight. Zeri still hadn’t moved.

“Naxom,” he said, drawing my attention again. He sat back on his heels, palms flat on his thighs. “As *dosmallos*—*Others*, in your tongue—we are bound. Me to you and you to me. But as much as I wish it, that does not mean there needs to be more between us.” His gaze slid away from me to the blankets the Aufidii had laid out for us—one pallet, not two—and he sighed. “Nor does it mean anything must happen tonight, despite their assumptions.”

“Or yours?” I moved until I mimicked his position, our knees almost touching.

“I would—”

I didn’t wait for more. I straightened and put both hands on his shoulders, using my weight to topple him onto his back. He went with no resistance, his knees parting so I landed between his thighs, and his hips rocked up to meet mine. I hissed in frustration—my cock was trapped against my leg—and lifted up enough to slide a hand down inside my leathers. Zeri grabbed my hair and kissed me, pushing his tongue into my mouth, his moan encouraging me to do the same. I did, and he switched tactics and sucked it deeper—*gods*. I yanked my hand away from my cock before I spent then and there.

One-handed, I undid the laces at my waist so I could shove my leathers down to my thighs. I wanted his hands on my bare skin, not just a furtive tug with my cock poking through the placket. Zeri released my tongue and did the same, wriggling beneath me and panting.

Both of his hands, as callused as my own, grabbed my buttocks at the same time he arched up. “Move,” he growled, and I plunged my tongue into his mouth, tasting his gasp. I thrust my hips down to collide with his, spreading my knees and forcing his thighs wider and higher. His belly was slick and I rubbed along it shamelessly, rutting into his smooth armored skin and hard muscles. Our mouths parted ways as we found a rhythm of sorts, and kissing was replaced by sucking bites to throats and shoulders—I breathed in his scent and tasted the salt of his sweat, whining in frustration at not being closer, at still being two bodies separated by skin.

Zeri bit me, right at the juncture of neck and shoulder, and my cock jerked between us, weeping but not quite there, trapped on the cusp of release. He licked my jaw, and I shuddered at the hungry way he mouthed his way to my

ear. "Come for me," he breathed, "cover me. I want my skin to taste of you, I want to lick—"

The rest was lost when my entire body convulsed, toes curling in my boots, thighs shaking, and my vision gone to sparks and fog. I might have cried out, and I know Zeri did, hoarse and breathless while his fingers dug into my muscles and held me down, as close as our bodies allowed. Our hips slowed, our softening shafts gliding lazily on skin slippery with spend and sweat, riding the last tremors of pleasure for as long as we could stand it.

My head dropped to Zeri's shoulder, inexplicable laughter rising in my chest. Under me, Zeri snorted, and turned so his temple pressed mine. The more I imagined the way we must appear—leathers around our thighs, sweat-soaked hair—and how we had gone at one another with all the finesse of lupa in the spring, the worse the urge to laugh became. I pushed back to sit on my heels, grimacing at the mess we'd made of my shirt. My leathers had escaped unscathed, and I hitched them back around my hips, still swallowing my laughter.

Zeri propped himself up on his elbows, watching me. "You can do as you like," he said, waving a hand at his belly. "I'm not sleeping like this." He scrambled to his feet, making a face as he grabbed his own drooping leathers with one hand and brushed off his buttocks with the other. "I have sand in unseemly places." Then he shucked the leathers, shaking them out and tossing them in the direction of our makeshift bed, leaving him wonderfully naked.

My cock bobbed against my thigh, interested all over again, and I swear to all the gods that Zeri *purred*, the sound tightening my sack and sending a thrill coiling up my spine to lodge in my gut. He turned and walked to the hot spring, wading into the shallow end, and giving me another view to savor.

I got my boots off without falling over, and left the rest of my clothes where they fell. Zeri had left room for me on the rock ledge, and I sank into the steaming water with a groan of pure bliss. I rinsed my hair as best I could, and when I sat up, Zeri pulled the whole dripping tangle over my shoulder. His fingers started at the bottom, finding the snarls and easing them free. It was oddly intimate, and reminded me of the dhourgan's—Zeri's—matted mane.

"How did Peredur know to find you?" I asked, fighting to stay awake, and Zeri's fingers stilled for a moment.

"I don't think it was me he was looking for, and so far as I know, he's already captured one of us."

“Has he?”

Zeri hummed, and I could feel him nod. “He has been searching for one of my kind for a very long time—or so I have heard. I was sent to find my missing cousin.” He sighed. “We never considered that word would go out when a ship from Tharros landed here.”

I blinked. “Is that where you’re from? The stories never say.”

“*Stories.*” His tone left little doubt of his opinion, and he gave my hair a tug. “Tharros is the closest port. Our lands are farther north. Have you ever been on the sea?”

“I’ve never even seen it. The farthest west I’ve ever been was—” I shook my head. “Luculla, perhaps. And the closest to the eastern sea I’ve been was with the caravan.”

“I wonder...” Zeri paused, and his fingers slowed their movements. “I will admit to being curious. I wonder what will happen when ap Horas does not deliver me as promised?”

“I suppose he will use me as an excuse—he asked me as a Cettai.” I turned enough to see him over my shoulder. “Do you think they will continue to Abderan? To explain? When he asked me to find you, ap Horas said you were bought and paid for. Would Peredur have paid them in advance?”

Zeri brushed a kiss to my bare shoulder, humming thoughtfully. “If he did, he was a fool.” He kissed my shoulder again, more insistent this time, and then again. I turned all the way around, and he straddled my thighs, tucking my hardened shaft beneath him. His own bumped my belly, and his lazy smile tightened something in my chest. “Peredur can wait until the morning.”

He leaned down to capture my mouth, and under the water his hips began to rock, inviting me to do the same. Nothing mattered at that moment except learning his taste, and then giving him my fingers to suckle while I teased his nipples to stiffness with lips and tongue and teeth. It was my turn to grip his buttocks, spreading his cheeks so I could rub my cock along his taint and beyond. Zeri moaned around his mouthful of my fingers, his tongue making promises I hoped he would keep. He rose, letting my fingers slip free, and pushed back until my shaft bobbed up next to his.

He wrapped his fingers around us both as best he could. “Stay still.”

I shuddered as he stroked his length against mine in the tunnel of his fist, but did as he’d asked and did not move. The friction was torture, driving me

wild at the same time it was not enough to drive me over the edge. I bit at his nipples, taking them in my teeth and tugging until he hissed and groaned at the same time, pressing his chest forward and silently begging for more.

His hips moved faster, and he used his thumb against my slit—all I could think of was a stopper in the neck of a bottle, and my need to come cramped my thighs and clenched my buttocks under the water. Not caring if he objected, I worked one finger down his crack and speared him. He spasmed around my finger, and his free hand yanked my head back by the hair. Our mouths collided, and I plunged my tongue inside at the same time I added a second finger. He bucked, losing coordination, and I joined my fist to his on our shafts and brought us both over, swallowing his moans and imagining it was my cock his body gripped so tightly.

“Gods,” he breathed when we finally slowed, resting his forehead against mine. I nodded, too drained to form words. *Gods*, indeed.

Chapter Nine

I blinked up at the sun, squinting and trying to piece together where I was, rolling over to stare at the rocks. We were still in Iuvanum, then. It wasn't a dream.

"If you're going to squirm like that, you might move closer so I can enjoy it." Zeri raised his head to scowl at me, and everything fell into place.

"It wasn't a dream." I flopped onto my back and stretched, my muscles complaining.

Zeri turned onto his side, propping his head on one hand. The other slid along my belly, disappearing under the blanket. "Is that good or bad?" He looked thoughtful. "Do you? Have true dreams?"

"No, not like that. They were all... I dreamed of you. Or, of finding you. Of—" I sucked in a surprised breath when he cupped my balls, lifting them, his thumb stroking. "*Zeri.*"

"I'm listening. You dreamed of what?" He sounded as though he were smiling. "You dreamed of fire, yes?" He let go of my balls to run the backs of his fingers along my thigh, and I spread my legs, wondering if he—

Zeri lowered himself between my knees, dragging the blanket down to my feet as he did. Before I could say anything, he licked right up my shaft, and when he reached the head, he swallowed me down whole. Breathing was impossible, and I grabbed handfuls of bedding, gasping. He let me go, and I swore at him as soon as I had enough breath.

He wrapped one hand around me, low and tight. His lips moved against my shaft. "You were saying?"

I reached down and grabbed his hair. "Don't stop," I told him, and he didn't, not until we were both dazed and sated.

Beyond the rocks, I could hear the Molossa stirring and smell a fire and cooking. My stomach gurgled, and I staggered up from the chaos we'd made of the bedding to go and piss. When I came back, Zeri was nowhere to be seen, but I heard his voice from the direction of the fire. My boots sat next to a stack of folded clean clothing, and I took that to mean I should dress.

The shirt was a fine, soft linen, far better made than my own, and the leathers were also marvelously soft, and dyed a rich earth color. They were reinforced for riding, and the fronts and sides of the thighs were doubled thickness, with thin bone plates sewn in between. The matching sleeveless doublet was made the same way, and would afford me some protection—not as good as the Molossa's, but adequate. Even the stockings were a wonder, knitted of undyed paca fleece, and welcome under my boots. Belt, knife—my hair was a lost cause, a hopeless tangle, and I let it be—now that I was dressed, I headed for the fire and Zeri.

In the light of morning, it was clear this camp was no makeshift thing. Wood for the fire was piled neatly, there was meat drying and smoking, and beyond the screen of scrubby trees were eight tanga, standing hipshot in the sun on a picket line. Only two of the Molossa were present, Calix and one other—Therin, I thought—plus Zeri.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Five hands of days, my lord,” Calix replied. He stood up and gave me a slight bow. “Will you come and break your fast, my lord?”

“Yes, thank you.” I hesitated. As a Cettai, I was not anyone's lord. “Calix, I am not—”

“Do not even try,” Zeri said dryly. “It will be a waste of breath on your part, and they will do it anyway.” He patted the empty space next to him on the folded blanket, and I lowered myself to sit with him. He smiled at me when we were eye level, and leaned in to brush his nose along my jaw. “Eat, and then we'll make plans.”

Hungry enough not to argue, I took the food Calix offered—hard-cooked eggs mixed with a salty dried meat and wrapped in the same flatbread as last night. It was like nothing I'd had before, and I said as much when I thanked Calix.

“Therin is the one to thank, my lord. Without him, we should all starve, even in the middle of a marketplace.” His glance at Therin was warm with affection, and the other Molossa ducked his head and mumbled his thanks. The other two Molossa returned then, coming over to the fire and crouching across from Zeri and me.

“No sign of any trackers, my lord,” one of the pair said in a hoarse voice, and I tried not to stare at the scars visible around his throat. “Those two from last night returned to the caravan.” He tipped his head at his companion. “Eliud

followed their trail, all the ways back down to the river, but it seems the entire caravan has had something of a change of heart—and direction.”

“I can’t say as I’m surprised,” Zeri said. “Lefi ap Horas is probably thinking it’ll be easier to explain things if he’s holed up in his mountains.” He raised one knee and propped an arm on it, turning to look at me. “I think we need to go to Abderan.”

“You said I should not go there,” I pointed out.

“That was... before.” Zeri shrugged. “The Wheel turns as it will, and now our path has changed. I had no way to be sure I would be able to slip the collar once we reached the river—or if you would remove that muzzle. Both needed to be off if I was to escape.” His mouth quirked up on one side. “You were remarkably resistant to compulsion—and for that I suppose I must blame your training.”

I grinned in acknowledgment, remembering the end of our conversation of the night before. “You want to find Peredur. And your cousin.”

“Yes. We were already on our way to the coast when we got word that my cousin had disappeared. He had two Molossa with him, and they came home without him. They said he went into the palace to meet with your emperor and disappeared.” Zeri shook his head, his eyes flat and their color strangely muted.

“They should never have returned without him,” Calix growled, and the other three nodded. The hoarse-voiced one—I guessed him to be Bened—leaned forward and spoke directly to me.

“Seeing as how only his death would release them from their vows—one of them should have stayed behind if he was still alive, and the other played messenger.”

“So... you were already on your way here?” I asked Zeri.

Zeri paused before he answered. “Yes. We were—” He looked away from me, and then back. “When you met with the caravan—when I called you—you were traveling to Abderan. Yes?” I nodded, and he shrugged one shoulder. His next words were slow, almost reluctant. “Before, for months I dreamed of a city, and fire. And you, although your face was never clear. Only the red kilt, and the tunic. And this.” He touched a finger to my amulet, a red stone suspended on a gold chain. “The city was no place I had ever been, and we have no followers of Cett in my homeland. In Tharros, I described the city, and one of the sailors said it was Abderan. So, when... someone was needed to come here, I agreed.” He frowned. “Why were you headed there?”

“Cydnos—the festival. It seemed as good a place as any to begin.”

Zeri stared at me for a long moment. “Calix—”

All four Molossa got to their feet, and Calix bowed his head. “We’ll just go and pack up camp then, my lord.”

“Does he always read your mind like that?” I asked, and only heard the edge in my voice after the words were out.

“He and I have been together for more than half my life, and no—” He paused until I turned to look at him. “We were never lovers. He and Therin were always a pair, for as long as I can remember.” Zeri held up a comb. “May I? It will only get worse if you leave it, and I would not see you cut it.”

I tried to take the comb from him. “I can—”

He lunged at me, shoving me sideways, and still managed to find my mouth—kissing me with a rough urgency that made me lose track of all my objections. And not incidentally leaving me dazed enough to let him have his way.

Chapter Ten

The Aufidii were efficient, I'd give them that, for they had the two extra tanga loaded and ready before the sun was even a quarter way to midday. Up close, these tanga were clearly nothing like the stocky mountain type I'd learned to ride on. These were longer-legged, with shining coats in varying shades of earth-brown, and elegant curved necks. Eliud explained that they had brought these with them from their homeland—these tanga were well used to both them and Zeri in both their forms and were smoother of gait, and therefore more comfortable over a distance.

He spoke the truth, for once we mounted up and began our journey, I rode for a goodly while before I could find words to describe the experience. *Floating*, perhaps came the closest—instead of bouncing in the saddle, I merely rocked from side to side, a strange sensation. The sun rose to its zenith, our shadows clinging underneath us, before we stopped to water the tanga and ourselves. Therin gave out food, and we all crouched next to our mounts on the bank of the stream to eat.

I had not thought about what would happen once I found my Other—foolish to plan for something that might take years, and who knew where I would be? Zeri and I could travel wherever we wished, even to his homeland—that would be an adventure worth having.

“After Abderan,” I said, and saw Zeri clench his jaw. “Where should we go?”

He scooped up a handful of water and rinsed his face. “Wherever you'd like,” he said after an overlong pause. He stood, not looking in my direction. “We should get moving.”

Abderan glowed in the afternoon sunlight, her walls rising to an imposing height as we neared the northern gate. This was our third day of traveling, and the fabulous smoothness of the tanga's paces had palled late on the first overlong day of riding. My lower back ached, my thighs ached, and the grit in my clothes and my hair had me half-wild with the need for a proper bath, in a bathhouse. Even in the monastery we had a bathing room, and we were expected to keep ourselves clean. It did not mean we bathed every day, but near enough to keep our bodies and hair free of pests.

We joined the throng of pilgrims streaming in toward the gates, for all were welcome in Abderan for the sun festival. There were still guards, though, and six armed men together would be marked and remarked upon, so our party split into three—Calix rode with me and Zeri, Therin trailed a few lengths behind us, and Eliud and Bened followed another group of riders.

The din inside the walls was near overwhelming after the relative quiet of our journey, and the smell of cooking warred with dung and overripe vegetables, all of it overlaid with smoke. Calix led the way onto a curving side street, the houses and shops overhanging the cobbles and blocking the light. The six of us rode on without speaking, and Calix turned into a gate that let into the walled yard of an inn. We all dismounted, and I tried not to groan at the relief of being on my feet. Therin and Calix went inside, and after a longish while they came back with a man I took for the innkeeper.

“My lord,” he said, bowing, his hands twisting together. “I can only spare two rooms of any size—and that is possible only if I move one of my guests to a lesser room—and he—”

Zeri held out his hand, and the innkeeper reached for the coins, still protesting. “Baths,” Zeri said, cutting him off. “For all of us. And a meal—I trust you have a private dining room.” It was not a question, and the innkeeper nodded in complete agreement, silenced by the coins in his fist and Zeri’s imperious drawl. “Stalls for our tanga, as well, food and water. We will carry our own packs. The rooms?”

More babbling from the innkeeper, the result of which was Calix and Therin taking our saddlebags and packs upstairs to oversee the preparation of our rooms, while Zeri and I followed a boy around the side of the inn to the bathhouse, trailed by Bened. Eliud went with another boy to see the tanga settled in their stalls.

Inside the bathhouse, Zeri and I stripped and left our things in a niche before entering the steam room with only a linen towel around our hips, with Bened standing guard outside. The boy ladled water over the rocks and left, leaving us to breathe in the heated, herb-scented air... and the tang of sweat, as the dirt and salt of our travels rose off our skin. And more.

The past nights, Zeri had been relentless in exploring my body and encouraging me to do the same to him. Sitting in the moist heat, I could smell him on me, a dark, nearly rank reminder of how many times he had come to completion against my belly or in my hand. I leaned back on the smooth

wooden bench and let my knees fall apart as my sack tightened and my shaft thickened, swinging around to bump my damp thigh under the linen drape.

Zeri was leaning back, eyes closed, so I swung my legs up, turning so I could use his thigh as a cushion. He tipped his head down to look at me. “Comfortable?”

I hummed my answer, arching a bit and resting my outside foot on the floor. The linen slid off my lap, exposing me to his interested gaze. Under my head, something nudged my ear. I grinned up at him. “And you?” Zeri’s fingertips trailed down my chest, and I closed my eyes.

His palm flattened over my abdomen, heading south. “Not yet. Wait a bit, then ask me again.”

We were boneless from the steam and hot water, among other things, by the time the six of us gathered in the private dining room of the inn and sat down to eat. The meal was a silent one, beyond some desultory small talk—the tanga were settled, our rooms were ready, was there more bread?—we were all exhausted, and for myself, clean hair and a fresh linen shirt only went so far in reviving me.

Our room was still glowing with twilight when Zeri and I fell into bed, and I remembered nothing until the morning sun woke me. Zeri was curled against my back, his breath tickling my neck. “I have a plan,” he whispered, and I rolled onto my back so I could see him. He stared back at me, unsmiling, and I closed my eyes.

“Why do I suspect I’m not going to like this very much?”

I was right about not liking what he had thought up—and he ignored every objection I produced. Calix brought him parchment and ink, and Zeri penned a note to Grygor Peredur, asking for an audience. He paid one of the innkeeper’s kitchen boys to deliver it while I fumed.

“Are you out of your head?” I demanded after the boy had left. “You’re going to go, alone?”

“Yes.” I knew him well enough by now to know he was hiding something, but considering my own secrets, I was hardly in a position to throw stones. “I don’t want you anywhere near the palace—all I am is a diversion. Calix and

Therin will search for my cousin—they are far better at that sort of glamour than I. Once they have him, I'll escape." His too-steady eye contact told me he was lying, but about what?

The last thing I wanted was to go anywhere near the palace—which gave all my protests an air of falseness. Coming to Abderan was one thing, for the crowds in the streets or the local guardsmen would hardly know what the vanished heir to the Valerii looked like. Plenty of northerners had my coloring, and my cowl would disguise that well enough. And if I dressed as a Cettai, I would be invisible, although that ruse would not work inside the palace. If anything, I would be found out sooner.

"Take the others with you then," I said. "Bened, at least. I don't need the two of them here with me while I wait."

"No." His jaw clenched so hard his teeth should have creaked, and I wanted to shake him until those teeth rattled.

Stalking over to the window and leaning my hands on the sill, I glared down at the inn yard below. Zeri came and draped over my back, running one hand down my arm and reaching for my chin with the other. He turned my head and stretched his neck, trying for a kiss, and I thought of every other time he had reached for me like this, using his hands and mouth and body to distract me.

I jerked my face away, jabbing an elbow back hard enough to make him grunt. Shouldering him out of my way, I put an arm's length between us. "Don't," I warned him.

The hurt that flashed across his features, there and then gone, surprised me. His lips parted, but all that came out was a soft sound before he shook his head, swallowing down whatever he had meant to say. Something dark moved behind his eyes, something awful, and he shuddered the least bit. "Please," he said, and that one quiet syllable sent a chill skittering down my spine on a thousand legs even as heat bloomed low inside me.

Zeri let me strip off his clothes, offering no resistance when I pushed him down on the bed, and he lay there with tiny shivers racing over his skin while I undressed myself. When I finally kissed him, he responded with a hungry enthusiasm that, for no reason I could name, left me uneasy even as I lost myself in his taste and the sounds he made.

He sucked my tongue, he bit my jaw, his fingers pinching and tugging at my nipples until I squirmed with the sweet pain of it, both of us grinding our hips into whatever part of the other was closest. We rolled together, putting me on

my back, and all I did was close my eyes when his mouth slid, hot and open and wet, along my belly until he reached my shaft. He licked everywhere, tip to sack, never taking me fully into his mouth, using one hand to tug my foreskin up over the weeping head until I was slick and desperate for release.

When he straddled me and lunged for my mouth, all I wanted was to come. I growled at him, and grabbed his buttocks, and he wrestled my hands off him. I moved my hips, looking for relief, for pressure, and he finally let me have something—one quick move from him and I slid up between his cheeks. Good as that was, I was greedy now, and too far gone to care what he wanted. Bucking, I wrapped a hand around his shaft and urged him up so that I could get my hand around both of us.

He did raise up, but only to tip his hips and sink back down—and I froze, holding my breath when I partially breached his body. I had never—for all the times Sefin and I pleased one another, we'd never gone this far, and there hadn't been anyone else. Zeri's body was hot and tight, and all I managed was a curse before he forced me the rest of the way in. It hurt—the twist of his mouth and the way his eyes were squeezed shut told me as much—but oh gods, the rough grip of his body was unexpectedly perfect.

Zeri moved, an ungraceful twitch of his hips, and we both hissed. Again, and when he shuddered I felt it all the way down my shaft and into my balls. I reached up, flattening my palms to slide over his taut muscles, tracing the armored skin. His hips rose partway, and fell, and he shoved one of my hands down and curled my fingers around his half-hard cock. It thickened when I pumped, and Zeri threw his head back and thrust into my fingers, panting through clenched teeth. I dug my heels into the mattress and matched him, sliding easier when his body relaxed and accepted me, and when Zeri said *please* again, grinding down while he swelled in my fist, I drove myself as deep as I could reach. His hand took over when I lost coordination, and the strong pulse of his pleasure dragged out my own until it bordered on pain.

Once I slipped free, Zeri collapsed on top of me, his face buried between my head and the pillow. He was shivering, and I dragged a sheet over him as best I could. He muttered something, the words blurry against my skin. It took a long moment for them to sink in and make sense. *I don't want to leave you.*

I slid a hand into his hair, draping my other arm around his waist. "I'll be here. Waiting," I told him.

He took a deep breath before he replied. "I know."

Chapter Eleven

Far more than half the day was gone, and I paced the width of our room, too restless to sit. The tray from the midday meal sat nearly untouched, and I told my complaining stomach I would eat when Zeri returned.

The boy he had sent to the palace had returned with an escort, and Zeri had gone to meet Peredur, along with Calix and Therin. To distract myself, I tried thinking of what we had done together, but instead of the incredible pleasure of being joined that way, my mind persisted in showing me every time Zeri had deflected a question about the future.

I went round and round, picking at the memories until I suspected every move and every conversation. There was no obvious lie, no inconsistency to anything he'd told me. When I reached for my talent, the surety that he was, truly, my Other glowed like a coal, warming me and mocking my doubts. And then I would hear him say, "I know", and the... the strange *finality* in his tone would start the cycle all over again.

The shadows in the room lengthened and filled the corners, and still no word. I stared out the window at the darkening sky, and as the first star winked into being, I knew what I needed to do to keep from going mad.

I folded my clothes neatly on the bed as I stripped them off. From my pack, I drew out my red kilt, the wide belt, and the matching short tunic and cowl. First I put on a fresh loincloth, and then fastened the belt high on my waist. Next came the kilt, tucking each fold and pleat under the belt, all the way around, before settling the belt lower and snugging it tighter. Then the tunic, still smelling faintly of the sweet and fragrant herbs of the storage chest, and the cowl around my neck. My knife secure at my hip, I slipped the gold chain that held my amulet over my head, under the cowl, so the red stone rested against my breastbone, cool and heavy. Lastly, I slid two small knives into the sheaths inside my gauntlets, flexing my hands to check the fit. In the monastery, or if sitting in judgment, it was tradition to be barefoot, but I needed to walk the streets of Abderan this evening, so my boots would be needed. After a brief hesitation, I hefted the sword Zeri had left behind and fastened the scabbard to my belt. I did not intend to need it tonight, but far better to have it and not need it than the reverse.

I knocked once on the connecting door, and waited until Bened opened it. "I am going to the temple. To meditate. You can find me there if you receive any

word.” He clearly wanted to object, but a lifetime of service kept him silent—exactly as I had hoped. For what I intended to do, I wanted no escort waiting on me. And if word did come, or if Zeri returned, they would know where to find me.

The streets were less crowded around the late twilight—shops were closing, and the swarms of people going about their daytime errands had yet to be replaced by the nighttime packs of pleasure-seekers and thieves. Even so, the hush inside the temple forecourt surprised me.

As befitted Cett, the temple was constructed of plain grayish-brown local stone, the pale shade soothing to the eyes. There was no paint or gilding here, no elaborate murals or mosaics. The forecourt was all about symmetry and mathematics, its columns and arches precise and orderly, inspiring peace in the viewer. At the far end of the forecourt, an open doorway led to the domed sanctuary, although a trick of the construction made it appear that there was no doorway at all. To reach the sanctuary, you walked into what seemed a solid wall, only to find a passage stretching to either side. Left or right made no difference, both doubled back around the wall to another open doorway letting out into the sanctuary itself. Even our monastery temple used this arrangement, both for appearance and defense.

The sanctuary was empty, as I had hoped, and I walked to the center of the open space and knelt, the stone cool under my knees through the kilt. Like the forecourt, the sanctuary was plain to the point of austerity. Outsiders never looked beyond that, and considered us a poor Order—where was our gold, our gems? What famous artisans had we employed for the glory of our god? Where were our rich vestments and the costly incense?

We had no need of any of those—the goal of our Order was understanding the truth of the world. It was possible to learn everything and yet know nothing—so we were taught. Our lives were dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge arcane and mundane, and it was often said that we were novices at all trades and masters of none. Like Cett, who was the god of everything and nothing.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the musty scent of stone, letting the silence of the space seep through me and unknot my shoulders and neck. I knelt, and breathed, until the world fell away and there was only the now. The ragged spaces inside me lost their edges, and my heartbeat matched that of the earth, slow and even. The anxiety of waiting faded to nothing, and I opened myself to all of existence, the gates of my magic level and plumb and *there*.

No sound prompted me to open my eyes, but my knife was in my hand and I was balanced to lunge. The Cettai facing me was old, hair gone to white and his face crinkled from a lifetime of sun and wind. His sword did not waver, though, as we faced one another in the cool dimness.

“Brother.” He sheathed his sword and nodded, his stance relaxed, and I put away my knife as I straightened up.

“I have found my Other,” I said, and the echo of my voice murmured along the walls. “He is Dhourgan.”

The older Cettai’s chest expanded at his sudden inhale. “That has never been, though some have hoped.” His light brown eyes seemed almost gold as he watched me. “Such an Other is both a very great gift and a curse—their magic is not like ours.” His bow was of one Cettai to another, for now I was no longer a novice, and could take up the full responsibilities of our Order. “May Cett guide your arm and your feet, and may he open the way to wisdom for you.” As he spoke, his eyes searched my face, my body, and I saw the moment recognition dawned—and the dismay nipping at its heels.

I returned his bow. “Let me not keep you from your meditations, brother. I have been long on the road, and the peaceful—”

The pain in my chest was as abrupt as it was shocking, and I actually looked down to be sure blood didn’t stain my tunic. I did not cry out—I had no breath. The same bright hook as before tore at my heart and twisted in my guts, a summons impossible to ignore. I whirled, orienting, and only then heard the sounds of booted feet marching in rhythm outside the forecourt. The city guardsmen, on patrol. There was no reason for them to pay any attention to me—but a man running, at night?

The Cettai pointed at the far wall, and I sprinted for the disguised doorway there, around the dividing wall and out into another courtyard. Two Cettai looked up, startled, and I wasted no time on greetings or bows. A running step gained me the lip of a stone trough, and my fingers grabbed for the raised lip of the low roof. I leapt and swung, planting both hands on the roof the moment my feet found the edge, praying the sword would not trip me up. I vaulted over the ridge, and skipped down the slope, launching myself off the roof to the ground.

The street beyond was empty—and dark—and no one noted my passing. I ran, the hook in my chest burning my lungs, taking turn after turn as I followed that invisible tether onward. The wall of the castle foiled my mad dash, and just as I stopped, the hook evaporated, leaving behind a gaping tear.

I wasted an eternity doubling back to find an entrance, not knowing what the loss of the hook meant and hoping Zeri was merely unconscious or distracted and not dead. *That* I would have felt, I was sure of it, and that surety lent some calm reason to my search. The postern gate sat in a deep arch of stone, hidden from the street—and it was locked. I put both hands flat on the scarred wood and closed my eyes, trailing one hand down to look for a keyhole. Nothing. I extended my senses, sinking into the wood and touching the iron hinges. It would take more strength than I had to pull the long nails holding them in place, and I growled in frustration.

Behind me, I heard the scuff of paws on stone, and Bened and Eliud pressed against my thighs, both of them panting. As much as I wanted to take them to task for disobeying me, I gave that up when warmth flooded me from the contact, a prickle suffusing my every vein, and my palms flexed against the door as my magic swelled and looked deeper. A stout wooden bar held the door shut from the inside, and I felt along the iron brackets there for any weakness. Earth magic came easiest to me, so I tested the stone of the wall around the fastenings of those brackets.

The stone wanted to be whole, and the spike was an unwanted intrusion. The mortar holding the spike in place was old, and crumbled easily when I encouraged the stone to expel the iron. I urged the first spike out, slow and steady, and started on the second after I heard a faint *plink* from the other side. Sweat formed under my arms and in the small of my back from the effort. The second spike fell, and the bar slipped down on that side as the bracket came loose. I shoved, and Bened and Eliud stood on their hind legs and leaned their weight on the door as well. The door opened a finger's width and stopped—the bar had fallen, only it still held fast in the other bracket.

Mindful of how much time had passed, I clenched my will around the wood of the bar and wrenched it sideways. The door opened with a muted squeal of rusted hinges, and the three of us froze, listening. No alarm sounded, no footsteps came to investigate. “Stay here,” I told the Molossa, not sure if I was making a mistake. “I cannot risk you—and if all else fails, you may be able to get Zeri out.” I stepped around the door and pushed it closed, jamming the bar back in place before they could follow me. Bened growled, but did not push against the door. Now I could only hope I did not need their help.

The postern let into a disused narrow courtyard, with only one possible exit. As quickly as I dared, I crossed the length of the courtyard, and found myself in another narrow walled area the same as before. Not knowing the layout of the

castle, I guessed this was for defense—anyone coming through the postern gate would be trapped here, channeled from one area to the next through openings barely wide enough for one man at a time. I jogged through two more similar spaces, watching the walls above for patrolling guards.

I found an unlocked door, and as I slipped around it into some kind of practice ground—archery butts and a quintain—the absolute certainty that I was going the wrong way filled me to the brim. I needed to turn around, go back, find another—

The moment I acted on that feeling and headed back the way I had come, it drained away. I hesitated after only a few steps. Turning in place, I took one experimental step toward the practice ground, and then another. Doubt rose up and choked me—*not that way, I would be lost, go back, go back, go back...*

“Zeri.” I breathed his name, staring up at the dark bulk of the castle against the night sky. “You forget I know your tricks.”

Chapter Twelve

And in that fashion, in fits and starts and wrong turnings, I wended my way deeper into the castle complex. The stronger the idea of going back became, the more certain I could be of choosing the correct passage. More than once I slipped into the shadows to avoid being seen, casting only the most basic glimmers of avoidance—for all I knew, some of the guards could be sensitive to the presence of magic. At long last I entered the base of a square tower, where one staircase rose to the upper stories, and another led down into the cellars. For a moment, my dislike of closed dark spaces warred with Zeri's sending, but my own dread was no match for the terror choking me as soon as I ascended one step.

Up, then, wishing Bened and Eliud were crowding my heels and guarding my back. With every rising step, my heart hammered like dueling blacksmiths, my pulse rang in my ears, and I clenched my teeth against the urge to retch—and all the while, the compulsion to run down the stairs to freedom throbbed in my head. I stepped into a workroom of sorts—a stool next to a broad stone-topped table holding bowls and stoppered jars, another one of tools, and a tangle of pipes for distilling.

I crossed the room to reach the next set of stairs, and the pressure in my chest disappeared like a soap bubble, leaving me light-headed. The sword was in my hand without any thought, and I ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

As I cleared the landing, I blocked a wooden staff aimed at my head—grabbed it and jerked it away, letting it clatter down the stairs. In that first instant, all I saw was Zeri, chained to the wall and looking at me in horror. Considering he was the one bruised and streaked with blood, that did seem a bit strange, but all I knew or cared at the moment was that he lived.

A knife flew in my direction, poorly aimed. I batted it away on my gauntlet, advancing on the only other person in the chamber. He was in all ways unremarkable—not tall, not short, neither handsome nor ugly, the kind of man who could slip through a crowd unseen—the perfect Cettai, had he applied himself. All he did was walk backwards, hands raised in surrender... grinning.

“Valerius,” he said. “At last.”

My heart skipped a beat at the satisfaction oozing through those three words. No one outside of my Order, not even Zeri, knew my family name, or

that I existed. I lunged, intending to silence him, and he jerked sideways and skipped out of reach.

“Peredur,” I growled, to confirm what I had already guessed, and if anything, his grin widened.

“Even if you kill me,” he said, gliding sideways, “the guards will have you before you can escape.”

I snorted. “I managed to get this far without being seen, I daresay I can do the same in reverse. Who else knows?”

“Aneirin.”

Oh gods—the emperor? “Why?”

He shrugged, no longer grinning. “Clusium grows too powerful. You would be a handy bargaining chip.” Grygor Peredur cocked his head at me, and his sly smile chilled me to the core. In the distance, many booted feet thudded on stone, and I swallowed. I lowered the sword slightly, and Peredur smirked, his unremarkable eyes glowing with satisfaction. I cut off his head.

Peredur’s body fell in a spray of blood, and I ignored that to turn on Zeri. “Not a word out of you, unless you know where the keys are.”

“No keys,” he said hoarsely, eyes narrowed. “Pins.” So they were, and I made short work of his fetters, catching him when he staggered. “Look around,” he gasped, holding his ribs, and I did, noticing what I should have seen the moment I entered the chamber.

Shelves lined one wall, and they held books. *Books*. More than I had ever seen in one place. The lettering on one spine caught my eye, and I hissed, too dumbstruck for words. I snatched that one off the shelf and opened it at random, a moan bubbling in the back of my throat. In a careful hand were laid out the inner workings of my Order, something that should never have been committed to parchment. There was a very sound reason our teachings were oral, each and every novice only proceeding when his teacher judged him ready. With such a book as this, anyone with a sliver of talent could learn spells or incantations without the discipline to control the outcome. I ran shaking fingers over other volumes, realizing by the titles that these were all the same thing, more or less—the accumulated knowledge of different schools of magic all collected in one place.

Voices sounded at the base of the tower, someone giving orders, followed by the sound of steel sliding from scabbards. Going down the stairs was not an option anymore, and the only other way was up—useless unless one had wings.

“You should not have come after me,” Zeri said, and in my despair I shoved him, anger trampling any good sense. It was the curse of my house, and always had been.

“I would rather us die together than live knowing I had left you behind.” I shoved him again, and he stumbled back, his shoulders hitting the wall. Next to him, an open window showed a narrow slice of night sky, and beyond it, I heard more voices yelling the alarm.

“I saw you die,” he snarled at me. “Over and over. In my dreams. In a tower like this, filled with fire. I thought if he had me, he would let you live.”

I laughed, and even to my own ears, I sounded mad. “He would never have stopped looking for me, not once he knew who I was.”

“I did not tell him your name.”

“It doesn’t matter how he knew, now that the emperor knows I exist.” Footsteps on the stairs below now, and I stared at the books rather than face Zeri’s puzzlement. All those gods-cursed books. All that... parchment.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Zeri, and opened the gates of my magic just as the first guard reached our level. The books burst into flames, tumbling from the shelves as they ignited. The wooden shelves flared up a heartbeat later, and the soldier yelled in surprise as a burning book struck him. The linen of his shirt cuff went up, and so did the wall hanging above the stairwell. Then the ceiling above us caught fire, and still I could not stop—anger had a firm grip on me and I wanted everything to burn. Everything.

A bloody arm caught me around the chest, and Zeri laughed in my ear as he spun me around. “Hold on to me.” He spun us further, and my concentration wobbled. The room was an inferno now, my skin tightening even as sweat ran down and instantly disappeared. Cool air from the window rushed past us, and Zeri tumbled us both over the low sill into nothing.

Chapter Thirteen

The tower was gone, the fire was gone, the soldiers were gone. All that existed was Zeri, wrapped close to my side, as we twisted and spun through nothing and nowhere. My lungs screamed for air that did not exist, and the urge to breathe consumed me. White sparks danced across my vision as I fought not to inhale. My ears popped, and we slapped onto something hard, startling me into a gasp.

I inhaled water, and thrashed, choking, until my head broke the surface. Rocks scraped my knees as I crawled for the shore, and then I vomited up water and bile until my ribs ached. Zeri crawled up next to me, and if I could have, I would have hit him. "You could have warned me," I finally managed.

"I didn't know if it would work."

I raised my dripping face to stare at him. "You threw us both out a window without knowing what would happen?"

He moved farther from the water and flipped around to sit on the dry sand. He bared his teeth at me. "You think I should have let us burn?"

"I think you could have spared a moment to say more than 'hold on to me'." I sat back on my heels, flattening my hands on my thighs and then bunching my sodden kilt in both fists.

"This from someone who considers 'I'm sorry' a sufficient warning before they incinerate a room?" His teeth were clenched before he was finished.

"I have problems with fire," I admitted.

"Problems," he repeated, and I ducked my head so I wouldn't laugh at the look on his face just then. "Gods below." He scrubbed his face with both hands, grimacing at the sand, and I saw his hand shake—what had it cost him to move us this far? "I never thought—the dream was always the same, no matter what I did."

"You could have explained."

"Oh, for certain—and how would that have helped? We'd both be in chains now."

"Considering your brilliant plan consisted of leaving me behind—what if he killed you?"

"I didn't *plan* on dying," Zeri snarled, and I laughed at him.

"Yes, and I'm certain every dead man would say the same if asked."

"Gods." Zeri lay back down, covering his eyes. "It was the only thing I could think of."

"In the future, perhaps I should do the planning."

He laughed, with a curse in the middle of it, and sat back up. I looked around, only now recognizing the small lake we had landed in—the flat rocks and the way the land dipped beyond it were still familiar after all these years. I frowned at the lake. "How did you know to bring us here?"

"The hot spring is too shallow, and this was the only other place with water I knew well enough." He shrugged. "We camped here for a night or two, on our way south. We agreed to use this as a meeting place if we had to separate. This way, Calix and the others will know where to find us. Eventually," he added, mouth twisting. He leaned forward, looping his arms over his bent knees. "So who are you, really?"

"I could ask you the same." I moved onto drier ground, and into a more comfortable position, trying to ignore the cold water dripping from my hair down under my wet tunic. A fire would be—Perhaps not.

Zeri made motion with his hand that I interpreted as a bow. "My father is a duke, our Lord of War. Minor royalty—enough to cause an incident if I were to be killed, but not someone whose existence would threaten a kingdom." He narrowed his eyes at me, and I sighed.

"I am the eldest son of Melanion Valerius, who was the eldest son of Laxomion Valerius, clan chief of all the Valerii." Zeri made a rude gesture when I paused, so I continued—the first time I had ever said any of this aloud to anyone. "The Valerii ruled Iuvanum"—I waved a hand at the land around us, and Zeri nodded—"for more generations than I have fingers. They were... ambitious, and quick to anger, and it mattered very little to them who got in the way of those ambitions. The Maecia held Clusium, the province to the north, and no matter what the Valerii offered, the Maecia refused to give up so much as a twig or a stone."

Zeri grunted, and swung his hair over his bare shoulder so he could wring it out. "Let me guess. Blood-feud or outright slaughter?"

"Both. In a way. First the blood-feud, until every northern province had taken sides and the entire north was on the brink of war. One house was as bad

as the other—the Valerii would raze a village, and Maecia would offer the refugees succor. At a steep price. The emperor—this one, Aneiron the Fourth—sent a Cettai into the north to find a solution.”

“Ah.” Zeri raised his eyebrows. “If this was a story, there would be a daring escape by ship, and mistaken identities.” I rolled my eyes at him, and he gave me a tired smile. “So, the Cettai ventures into the nest of serpa—” He waved a hand, and I went on, slower now so as not to lose the threads of the story.

“Just so. In the end, the Cettai proposed sanctions against both houses, and a formal treaty, complete with hostages for their good behavior—one son from each house, of equal standing. The Cettai then made it so, and perhaps it might have settled things, save that word came to Maecia that the Valerii had killed their hostage, the nephew of the Maecia clan chief.” I had to stop and clear my throat, and only Zeri’s steady gaze allowed me to go on. “The emperor, when he heard, sent mercenaries to slaughter every single Valerii male, and every female of their house carrying a child.” Even now, a dull ache grew under my breastbone to say the words out loud.

Zeri stared at me for a long time. “You were the other hostage.”

I nodded. “Fortunately, the Cettai was still with the Maecia—with me. When he heard that the Valerii were dead, he took me away. I was, so far as we knew, now an orphan—my mother was with child when I left. I was... five.” Picking up a handful of sand, I let it trickle though my fingers. “Much later, it was said that the other hostage was killed not by the Valerii, but by an assassin in the pay of the emperor. That may or may not be the truth, but it came to light much later that the Maecia had granted the emperor a half share in all their trading ventures for twenty years, and a Maecia daughter for a concubine to sweeten the bargain.”

“And now the crown worries that Clusium is grown too powerful. I was right. Gods—what is the saying? Lay down with serpa, and never wake up?” Zeri stood, and offered me a hand, pulling me upright. We were both wet, and smelled like smoke, and this close, I could see the exhaustion etched in every line of his face and body.

I slid one arm around his waist, dropping my forehead to his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around me, leaning us together. My other hand found the damp ends of his hair and wrapped them around my fist. “I will not apologize. Not for any of it.” I raised my head, frowning. “Where are Calix and Therin?”

“When I presented myself to Peredur, they slipped off to find the other dhourgan. They are far better at that sort of glamour than I. The plan was that while Peredur was occupied with me, they would free my cousin.”

The image of him in chains rose in my mind, and I stepped back, shaking off his hold and giving his hair a sharp jerk. “Would you care to explain how you in chains was part of that plan?”

“I do not think he intended to kill me.” He grabbed my hand, untangling it from his hair, and licked my palm. He flashed his teeth at me when I scowled. “I’ll admit, there was a moment—when he gave me the drugged wine—” I spluttered, and he shrugged before continuing. “The beating was more to draw you in. He understood enough about my kind to know you would sense that, and come after me. Naxom—”

I looked up and met his eyes, and he chewed his lip. “If I had known the danger to you, I would have come up with a better plan. What will happen, now that the emperor knows you are alive?”

“We only have Peredur’s word on that, but if it is true...” I shivered, and not entirely because of my wet clothes. “My Order needs to be told, and after that...” Another shiver racked me, and Zeri hissed between his teeth.

“We need a fire,” he said. “Although perhaps it would be better if I started it this time. And then we can plan.” He stopped, raising his eyebrows when I coughed. “Hmm. Perhaps you can do the planning.”

Chapter Fourteen

Our planning could easily have been mistaken for arguing, if anyone had been around to hear us. This time of year, the locals would be occupied plowing or seeding their fields, or managing the young bufa and paca born earlier in the season. Once high summer arrived, and the smaller streams dried up, the lake would be used to water the herds. For the moment, though, we had the area to ourselves. With nothing decided, we eventually succumbed to sleep in the gray time before dawn.

The following morning, Zeri changed form and hunted on four legs, bringing back a year-old male bufa. If they were not intended as draft animals, or needed for slaughter, extra males were let loose to fend for themselves. They made for good hunting, and indicated that the local herds were doing well enough for there to be excess.

He was dead on his feet after that, still drained from moving the two of us from Abderan to here, and I let him sleep while I butchered the animal. Our discussion turned more rational once we had food in our bellies, and a bit more sleep, but we were still nowhere near set on a course of action when the Molossa showed up, late the next day.

Eliud and Bened were riding two of the tanga, with Bened trailing a string of three, and Eliud the two laden with packs. Calix and Therin wore their four-legged shapes, and ran beside the group. The last tanga bore a stranger, and Zeri grinned when he saw them.

When they reached our shabby excuse for a camp, Calix and Therin sprawled on their sides, panting, and all eight tanga staggered to a stop almost at once, nostrils wide and red, sweat dripping down their flanks to mix with the dust.

The stranger dismounted, and Zeri hugged him, nearly lifting him off his feet. They were of a height, and the stranger's hair was as black as Zeri's. The stranger stepped back, and they both turned to me, one of Zeri's hands squeezing the stranger's shoulder.

"Agamedes, this is my *desmallos*, Naxom." Zeri waved a hand at me, and gave a small bow. "And this is my cousin, Agamedes. The one I was sent to find."

Zeri's cousin had green and gold eyes, and between his pallor and the way his bones were a shade too prominent, I guessed he had not spent his stay in Abderan in one of the palace guest suites. Zeri had said *desmallos* meant *Other*, but given the way Agamedes looked me over—as though I were a *bufa* he wanted to buy—I had my doubts.

“You have the gods' own luck,” he told Zeri. “Felicitations.” He bowed to me, and before I could decide if I was being mocked, Zeri cuffed him in the ear—and then Agamedes caught him around the head and jabbed him in the ribs. Zeri retaliated, laughing, the two of them grappling like a pair of young *kunda*.

The relief on Zeri's face was almost painful to see, so I left them to their rough play, and helped Eliud and Bened unsaddle the *tanga*, who looked ready to drop where they stood.

“No one followed us, my lord,” Bened told me. His mouth quirked up in what might have been a smile. “They were far too occupied organizing a fire brigade, weren't they? The other two”—he inclined his head at Calix and Therin, still panting on the ground—“had already found our lord's cousin, and we all met up in the confusion.” His dark eyes met mine, glinting with amusement, and his smile was sly. “There was talk of how the mage summoned a fire-drake, and lost control of it—for didn't half the castle see the creature fly out the window of that tower and disappear?”

“Gods,” I muttered. “Better that than the truth, I suppose.” Set free, all the *tanga* shambled to the lakeshore and waded in, plunging their muzzles deep into the water. “Come,” I told him. “We have food.”

The *Aufidii* had rescued all of our belongings from the inn, and Zeri and I were grateful for fresh clothing—not to mention the cheese Therin produced from his packs, along with salt and spices. Our meal was much improved when he took over the preparation, and I told him as much, earning a shy smile.

The seven of us sat around the fire in the late afternoon light, licking grease from our fingers and trading stories. At Zeri's silent urging, I gave the others an edited tale of my origins. The telling seemed easier this time, with Zeri's hand on my knee and his shoulder warm against mine.

“I had more than enough time to think, locked in that cell,” Agamedes said when I was finished. “All *Peredur* wanted from me was some blood—for scrying. He kept me nearby while he used the mirror. When it didn't show him what he wanted, that's when he had me locked away. I think he knew a

dhourgan was somehow connected to you, and I was the first one that came to hand.”

Calix leaned forward, shaking his head. “What I want to know is who told him my lord Naxom was alive. Scrying don’t work that way, does it? You need to know what you want to ask beforehand, like. Somebody told—and why now, after all this time?”

“They’ll be watching for you,” Zeri said thoughtfully, rocking in place. “So perhaps it’s best if we let the trail go cold.”

I raised my eyebrows at him, waiting for him to elaborate, and he leaned over and kissed me until I almost forgot what I wanted to know. Then he drew back, grinning wickedly.

“How do you feel about sea travel?”

The End...

For Now

Author Bio

J.J. Cassidy has had more jobs over the past thirty-something years than she likes to think about—everything from bartender, to spreadsheet guru/corporate drone, to barn help—and figures all that experience has to be worth something when it comes to inventing imaginary people and places. It also helps that her head is crammed full of useless trivia, which actually turns out to be not so useless after all. Thanks to her amazing husband, she is looking forward to her upcoming retirement, and being able to write more or less full-time. You can find her work on Amazon, through Dreamspinner Press, and at All Romance Ebooks or through her website. She is always happy to hear from readers.

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