



the downs

kim
fielding

Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....3

The Downs – Information.....6

A Note from the Author.....7

The Downs8

Chapter One9

Chapter Two.....15

Chapter Three.....17

Chapter Four24

Chapter Five.....31

Chapter Six.....38

Chapter Seven44

Chapter Eight54

Chapter Nine66

Chapter Ten.....73

Chapter Eleven.....78

Chapter Twelve.....85

Chapter Thirteen92

Author Bio95

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE DOWNS

By Kim Fielding

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

The Downs, Copyright © 2015 Kim Fielding

Cover Art by Kim Fielding

Cover Photograph by [John Andresen](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

THE DOWNS

By Kim Fielding

Photo Description

A naked man stands with his back to the viewer, a plain white floor beneath his feet. Ahead of him, a pair of large black doors are ajar, revealing a glimpse of bright light. The man's shoulders are slightly hunched and his head is bowed; he appears hesitant to face whatever fate awaits him through the doors.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He stood, head bowed, body tense, waiting. No matter what happened next, his life would never be the same...

Please give this man his life changing event, whatever that may be, as long as he ends up with his HEA/HFN by the end.

Thank you,

Aislinn

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: hurt/comfort, magic users, prison/captivity, revenge, disabilities

Content Warnings: rape (briefly suggested but not described)

Word Count: 31,705

A Note from the Author

My deepest gratitude to John Andresen, who kindly gave me permission to use his beautiful photograph as the cover of this book. You can view his work at his website: <http://www.johnandresen.no/>. Thanks also to my dear friend Karen, magical polisher of my prose. I'm grateful to Jennifer Mattison for her edits. And thank you, Aislinn, for the wonderful prompt that inspired me so well.

THE DOWNS

By Kim Fielding

Chapter One

The anteroom was warm—much warmer than the cell where he'd been kept for the past several weeks. Enitan tried to concentrate on that small crumb of comfort instead of panicking over the complete darkness or giving in to the fear churning in his belly. He wouldn't cry, he couldn't run, and there was nobody to fight. Just him, naked, in a small bare room, the marble floor hot and smooth like skin.

When the huge doors began to rumble open, he turned to face them but had to bow his head against the piercing light. Although his hands wanted to clench into fists, he kept them open at his sides. The tightness across his shoulders and down his back threatened to affect his lungs. *Steady*, he told himself. *Your future is out of your hands now. Just accept.*

He'd never been the compliant kind.

Finally the doors stopped their slow scrape. "Forward!" barked a female voice. Eyes squinted nearly shut, Enitan shuffled ahead.

"Stop!"

He couldn't see the figure before him—the glare was much too bright—but he felt the weight of the Judge's gaze. He wondered if she saw his physical self: a tall man, long-legged and muscular, with an angular face many men and women had called pleasing. Did she see the Enitan others saw now, a man accused and convicted of killing his father? Or did the Judge see his inner self, where the last bits of defiance lay smothered by terror, despair, and rage?

For a very long time, he remained still, his eyes closed and his heartbeat thudding loudly in his ears.

"This man is judged," said the female voice at last, in a flat and unemotional tone. "Enitan Javed cannot be redeemed."

He raised his head, opened his eyes, and looked at the Judge. He couldn't make out the details well. She was taller than he was—taller than any human—and stood ramrod straight, her golden robes hanging from her thin body like curtains. Her skin and hair were golden as well, as if she'd been cast all in one piece from the precious metal. Her face would have been beautiful if it had been less harsh, more alive. But where her eyes should have been, two deep holes threatened to suck Enitan's soul away. Overcome with dizziness, he almost lost his balance, and he staggered a half step. The Judge didn't react.

Some men might have wept or pleaded for mercy. Some might have proclaimed their innocence. Others might have given a noble speech. Enitan did none of those things. In a voice almost as cool as the Judge's, he said, "Fuck you."

A bolt of agony made him cry out and collapse to his hands and knees. His skin burned. His *organs* burned. He couldn't scream anymore because flames seared his lungs; he saw nothing but molten gold; his limbs flailed uncontrollably. Then the ground opened beneath him—or perhaps he flew into the air. He couldn't tell. There was nothing around him but an inferno of pain as the last vestiges of his life burned to ashes. He had time for one final thought: *Revenge*.

He awoke to darkness, thirst, and a throbbing ache that encompassed his entire body. He was grateful for the thirst, however, because it meant he was still alive, and at least the pain was only a shadow of what he'd felt in front of the Judge. He lay curled on his side in a solid metal enclosure that was too small for him to stretch out his legs or raise his head and shoulders more than a few inches. The cramped space reeked of piss, shit, and vomit. And, he realized, the cage was moving, bumping along a road that seemed made of nothing but ruts. He shouldn't have been surprised at that; few people journeyed across the Reach, and those who did were not entitled to comfort.

Groaning, trying not to lose what little remained in his stomach, he scraped at the walls. After a concerted effort, his fingernails came away bloody, but he hadn't found any seams or weaknesses in the enclosure. The only irregularity was a small bit of grating near one corner. The tiny holes let in air but no light.

He was still naked, his skin and hair crusted with a fetid mess. His skin hurt as if he had a nasty sunburn. The worst spot was on his forehead, raw and seeping. The mark of the condemned. Nobody would call him handsome now. Not that it mattered.

With no one to see or hear, he could finally cry. But although his throat was bitter and his eyes stung, no tears fell. Maybe the Judge had burned them out of him for good.

But she hadn't consumed his hatred. *Minna, somehow I will find a way to visit vengeance upon you*. He repeated it over and over in his head as a cutting form of comfort.

As the cage rattled on, Enitan closed his eyes against the darkness and tried to imagine himself far away. In his own bed, perhaps, with clean sheets that smelled of lavender and with one of his lovers bathed in moonlight and smiling at him. Or maybe at the Bennu Club, lounging among piles of cushions and laughing with his friends. But his lovers were gone and his friends had turned away from him, and he'd never go home or to the club again.

His thoughts turned to family. To his father, poisoned. The old man had spent too many hours at work for the two of them to be close, yet Enitan had loved him and had grieved at his death. His sister, Minna, had pretended to grieve as well, and she was a good actress—good enough to fool almost everyone. But Enitan had seen the triumph in her eyes when the Council had pronounced him guilty of patricide. Now rage burned in the pit of his empty belly, and he was glad. The Judge hadn't taken everything from him.

He might have dozed for a while, but he grew alert when the cage came to a halt and metal squealed. As light flooded his enclosure, he instinctively curled into a ball. Someone laughed harshly and threw something at him, then slammed the hatch closed again. With some trepidation, Enitan felt for the object and was relieved to discover a waterskin. The liquid inside was warm and rank-tasting—he suspected someone had added piss to the contents—but he was dehydrated enough that he sipped at it anyway, grateful that he didn't vomit.

After a time, the cage began to move again. Hours passed. He tried to remember how long it took to cross the Reach. Two days? Three? He'd seen paintings: a landscape as flat and endless as the sky and with no buildings to break the monotony, just league after league of stubbly brown grass. He'd heard that the only creatures living in the Reach were a few species of insects and some spiders. People said that the land was as cursed as the prisoners who were dragged across it.

When another fit of claustrophobia threatened to overwhelm him, Enitan measured his breathing. "Accept," he whispered. "It's already done. No use in fighting." He found it difficult to heed his own advice, so he changed his tactic. "Revenge. Find a path for revenge."

Although he tried to conserve the water, it was gone long before the cage stopped again. His limbs had progressed from cramped to numb, and he felt as if his stomach were consuming itself. He cried out hoarsely when the hatch sprang open and the bright light assaulted him, but he didn't fight back as rough

hands seized him and dragged him out of the box. He was dumped roughly onto the hard ground.

“Get up!” Someone kicked him hard enough to make him yelp. He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn’t obey. Twice more a foot connected with his back before two men grabbed his arms and hauled him upright. Even then, Enitan would have fallen if his captors hadn’t held him up.

What kind of person made a living transporting the unredeemable across the Reach? Enitan squinted at them. There were three men, each coarsely dressed and sun-ruddy, all of them sneering.

“Not such a fine fellow *now*, are you?” laughed the one who wasn’t gripping Enitan’s arm. He was probably close to Enitan’s age—not yet into his forties—but his gray eyes were cold and lifeless. “No, not very fine at all.”

Enitan gritted his teeth.

For a few minutes, all three men shoved and taunted him. He took the opportunity to look around, but there wasn’t much to see. Mainly the wagon that had brought them there, pulled by a pair of underfed yaley-beasts with broken horns. In addition to the driver’s seat, the wagon boasted a small enclosure that must have provided shelter and storage for the three men as they traveled. Behind the enclosure and affixed to a platform was the metal box that had served as Enitan’s prison. Aside from the wagon, the yaleys, and the men, there was... nothing. Pale blue sky. Dull grass the color of old straw, waving slightly in the breeze. A road almost too overgrown to see. And there, to Enitan’s left—He turned his head quickly away.

The men began to handle him more roughly. He fell several times, but each time they dragged him to his feet again, jeering. They called him names and spat on him; they pulled his hair and slapped his bare skin. He knew there was no point in being outraged. There were three of them, and he was weak from his ordeals. And here at the end of the world with nobody to see, they could do whatever they wanted with him. Maybe that was the appeal of the job—the opportunity to have someone at their mercy.

One of the men gave a hard shove that forced Enitan to fall onto all fours, and while all three of his tormenters yelled at him to stand up, they kept knocking him down again. They laughed as he crouched on hands and knees, panting, his head hanging low. His dry mouth tasted of blood and dirt, and the grass prickled his skin. *Doesn’t matter*, he reminded himself again. *No use in*

fighting anymore. He was nothing now—condemned and judged and worse than dead—and he couldn't do anything to change his fate.

Gods. That Minna would do this to him out of nothing but greed! Perhaps he hadn't spent money wisely, and perhaps he'd paid more attention to his own desires than the family finances. But he'd never harmed anyone—not her, not his father, not a soul. She should have poisoned him as well, made it look like suicide. She could have pulled it off. The fact that she hadn't tried, that she'd deliberately consigned him to this hell, made his vision grow dim and red.

He shot to his feet and took a solid swing into the gray-eyed man's jaw, catching him by surprise. It felt *good* for Enitan's fist to connect with flesh and bone, and when the man fell to the ground, Enitan imagined his sister collapsing instead.

But it was only one punch, and immediately the other two men were on him, wrestling him to the ground. One kept his boot planted solidly on the back of Enitan's neck, while the other straddled Enitan, pinning his arms behind his back. Enitan's momentary strength drained away; he didn't struggle when Gray Eyes grabbed a length of rope and tied Enitan's wrists so tightly that blood trickled down his skin.

They all kicked him viciously then, concentrating on his unprotected head and back. It was a good thing, actually, because he grew dizzy and muzzy-headed, his awareness shrouded in thick gray fog. By the time his legs were jerked far apart, he was far enough gone that he barely registered the invasion and the fresh pain. His body lay battered and defiled on the Reach, but his mind was far away.

They could have left him to die just as he was. He wouldn't have lasted long. But whether from a sense of duty or the desire to torment him to the end, the men roused him to full consciousness with a sizable splash of cold water, then yanked him upright. They dragged him forward, his feet scraping along the raspy grass. And then they stopped.

"Look at *that*," Gray Eyes said smugly, as if he'd created the spectacle himself.

Enitan didn't want to look. He wanted to curl into a ball and just... not be. But he couldn't stop his head from rising a bit, his eyes from opening, and then he couldn't stop himself from seeing.

The Reach ended abruptly just a few steps in front of him, the grassy plain cut off as if by a god's knife. Where the Reach stopped, a steep slope began. It

plunged so deeply that gray clouds floated far below, obscuring the bottom. Obscuring the Downs.

Although Enitan slightly feared heights, that wasn't what made him shudder now. In fact, he was almost grateful for the depth of the drop, because if he were very fortunate, the fall would kill him. But he had run out of luck lately, and if he survived to reach the bottom, the Downs awaited him.

"No," he rasped, attempting to brace his feet on the ground. He had no more pride. "Don't."

The men laughed and propelled him slightly forward. "The demons won't let you die right away," said the one with ginger hair. "They can keep you alive a *long* time."

They were almost at the edge, only a few tufts of grass separating Enitan from his fate. He was suddenly glad that he'd had little to eat or drink, because otherwise he might have voided his bladder and bowels. His heart raced so quickly that he couldn't discern the individual beats at all, and he couldn't draw oxygen into his lungs.

But deep within himself he found one final bit of defiance. "May the gods curse you all," he said. *Especially Minna.*

The men stopped laughing. Then somebody shoved him hard, forcing him forward. His feet slipped over the edge. For one very brief moment he felt like a wingless bird—and then he fell.

Chapter Two

Even at seventeen years old, Minna Javed had been plain and solemn; life had not yet made her twisted and bitter. She had unusually heavy obligations for a person her age, because she'd been given primary charge of her brother Enitan, who was almost ten years younger. Their mother had died shortly after Enitan was born, their father was busy with his duties in the Council, and once Enitan began school, he had been deemed too old for a nanny. Servants kept everyone fed and did most of the household chores, but it was Minna's responsibility to get Enitan ready in the mornings, to supervise his play in the afternoon and his studies in the evening, and to get him tucked into bed at night. When he was disobedient—which was often—she used a combination of threats and bribery to persuade him to behave.

One particular day, he'd been especially difficult about practicing his spelling and numbers, and then he'd made a fuss when Minna said it was time for him to go to sleep. "I'm not tired!" he'd insisted.

But Minna somehow managed to get him washed and combed and changed into his nightshirt, and then she'd practically dragged him to his mattress. She covered him to his neck and sat on the blankets, pinning him in place. "I'm not tired," he whined again.

"You are. But even if you weren't, it doesn't matter. It's your bedtime."

"You don't have to go to sleep now."

"I'm older."

He scowled at her. "You always say that. But I'm not a baby anymore. I'm big."

"Not big enough."

"But when will I be big enough?" Because he felt nearly grown-up. He could read and everything.

"You'll be big enough when you have big responsibilities. When you contribute to this family. Help run the household, Enitan, and instead of spending money, earn it. Like Father and I do. Then you'll be big enough."

"I don't *want* to. You and Father never have any fun."

Up to that point, she'd merely looked tired and perhaps slightly indulgent, but now her face hardened. "Fun is for children. Father and I must act like adults."

“I won’t. Not even when I’m old. Not if it means I have to go around looking like this all the time.” He made a comically exaggerated version of Minna’s usual frown.

“You *will*. Because it’s your job. Do you know what happens to people who don’t do their job?”

“What?”

“If they’re just a little naughty, they get punished. But if they’re *very* naughty—if the Judge says they’re bad—they get sent across the Reach and banished to the Downs. And do you know what happens to them then?”

He’d heard about the Downs, of course. Everyone had. But at seven, his knowledge was sketchy at best, mostly the result of vague schoolyard curses. “What?” he whispered, both fascinated and scared.

“The demons take them. That’s all that lives there—no people, nothing nice. And the demons torture them slowly. They eat them, nibble by nibble. They kick them around like a child kicks a ball. They make them blind and deaf and they tear out their tongues and chop off their arms and legs and drink their blood. And they steal the bad people’s memories until they can’t remember anything but pain.” She stood up and looked regally down at him. “That’s what happens.”

“But... but... I’m not bad,” he’d whimpered.

“Not quite. But you’d better listen, Enitan, and you’d better do your job. And when you grow up, you’d better do what you’re supposed to. Otherwise the Judge is going to send you to the Downs.”

“Father wouldn’t let them take me!”

She shrugged. “Not now. But he’s old. He won’t always be around to protect you.”

And she’d marched out of his bedroom, leaving Enitan shivering in his bed. He’d had nightmares for weeks.

Chapter Three

When Enitan floated slowly to consciousness and felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, his first muddled thought was that he'd had a terrible dream like those from his childhood. There had been no murder, no Judge, no trip across the Reach. Now he would awake with a lover beside him, and perhaps they'd enjoy each other's bodies before finding some breakfast.

But even as Enitan grasped desperately at those thoughts, pain washed through him, making him cry out. It felt as if every bone was broken and his skin scoured away. He registered the hard ground beneath him and the odors of smoke and something bitter.

The Downs. Oh gods, the Downs.

He shouted and tried to move away, but rough hands kept him pinned. "Stay still! You'll hurt yourself." The accent was strange to his ears, the vowels recognizable but a twist or two off true. A demon?

Enitan lurched again, creating a sharp agony despite his captor's strong grip, and oh gods, he couldn't *see*. "My eyes! Don't eat my eyes!" Panicked, he tried to thrash free but was held fast.

"Ssh, ssh. You're safe. Stay *still*."

The voice was calm and deep and somehow reassuring, but Enitan knew it had to be part of the demon's game: fool the captive into a false sense of security before inflicting more damage. Just as Minna had been unusually kind and attentive shortly before she killed their father. Even knowing it was hopeless, Enitan tried again to get away. But he was too badly hurt and the demon was far too strong, and Enitan eventually stopped struggling. "Go ahead, you bastard," he whispered.

But the demon didn't hurt him. Instead it settled a cool, damp cloth on Enitan's forehead and traced its fingers gently over his cheekbones. Enitan wanted to flinch away, but the touch felt oddly good, as if each little stroke erased a bit more of his pain. The demon was chanting something very quietly. Enitan couldn't recognize the words, but the tune was as soft and soothing as a lullaby. A spell of some kind, perhaps, but in his pain and confusion he couldn't work out the advantage of that. He was already at the demon's mercy.

His terrible agony softened at the edges and became slightly less jagged as the creature petted him, and the blessing of unconsciousness settled gradually

over him like a blanket. Before he fell asleep completely, though, several droplets of liquid were squeezed between his slack lips. *Poison!* he thought, mindful of his father's fate. But the liquid felt good on his parched tissues and tasted sweet, and anyway he hadn't the strength to fight it.

The demon crooned an approving sound. "Good. Very good. Sleep now and mend well. I'll have more for you when you wake."

Enitan fell asleep wondering whether that was a promise or a threat.

He still couldn't see when he woke up, and pain continued to wrack his body, but his head was slightly clearer. While he was definitely not on his own comfortable mattress, at least he wasn't lying on the ground. He was on some kind of thinly padded mat, and he was naked except for the many bandages swathing his body. Including, he realized, a thick strip of cloth across his eyes. Perhaps he was blindfolded instead of blinded. That thought brought a small bit of relief.

Warm air felt good on his bare skin, and judging by the draft and the slight echoes of his breaths, he guessed that he was indoors. Although sharp medicinal scents pricked his nose, he no longer smelled the mingled reek of blood, shit, vomit, piss, and come. Someone had made the effort to clean him as well as bind his wounds. But why? So he would survive longer in order to amuse the demons?

He could barely move his arms and legs, and at first he thought he was restrained. But after a few moments he realized that his limbs had been splinted. Again, he didn't understand.

He tensed as he heard soft footfalls approaching. Someone settled beside him with a sigh. "Did you rest well?" asked the demon. Enitan thought it was the same one as before.

Enitan tried to clear his throat. "What are you doing to me?"

"Healing you. Slowly, I'm afraid."

"Why?"

The demon paused before replying. "It was that or leave you to die. I'm hoping you prefer this option."

"But—"

“I have some tea for you. It tastes awful, but you need to drink it. If you can hold it down for a few minutes, I’ll give you some water after.”

Water sounded like heaven. And when the demon lifted Enitan’s head so he could drink the tea—which was vile—the creature handled him gently. Paintings of demons showed them with gnarled fingers tipped by vicious claws, but that wasn’t what Enitan felt. He hadn’t felt it earlier either, when the demon stroked his cheeks. Its hands had felt human.

The demon hummed its lullaby while Enitan drank, and after the tea was gone, the demon settled Enitan’s head back on the mat. Then it got up and moved around a bit, producing quiet homey sounds—the small clatter of dishes and the little thuds of objects being moved from one place to another. Water gurgled as it was poured. The demon sat beside him and again lifted his head. Nothing had ever tasted as wonderful as the next few sips of cool water.

“Slowly,” the demon said, more to itself than Enitan. It sighed deeply. “So much hurt.”

Enitan was sleepy again, but he had so many questions. He fought to stay awake as the demon trailed its fingers rhythmically along his shoulders. “Wh-what—”

“Just healing. I do all the work. Your job is to relax and let yourself mend. That’s enough.”

It was tempting to obey. Whatever the demon’s eventual plans for him, thus far it hadn’t hurt him. Much the opposite, in fact—with every touch, the demon eased a bit more of his agony. He should enjoy it while it lasted, even if it meant that eventually his suffering would be increased.

“What’s your name?” the demon asked after a time.

Enitan briefly wondered if that knowledge would give the demon more power. But that seemed impossible—it already held all the power over him. “Enitan Javed.”

“Hello, Enitan Javed. I’m Rig.”

A strange name that didn’t sound demonic, and Rig’s soft chuckle seemed entirely human. “You’re the type who wants explanations, I can tell. They’ll come. But rest now.” The demon continued the soothing movements of his fingers as he spoke, and Enitan imagined he could feel the broken little bits of himself gradually coming back together.

“Demon,” Enitan mumbled, trying to remind himself.

Rig laughed again. “Not really.”

This time, Enitan fell asleep wondering about that strange denial.

He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Rig to turn cruel. But as the days passed, that never happened. Rig’s touches were always gentle, even when he tended to the torn tissues in the most private parts of Enitan’s body. He kept Enitan clean and warm, and he gave him water and tea, then rich broth, and eventually small spoonfuls of buttery mush. Rig hummed nearly all the time, but especially when he stroked Enitan’s skin; and his voice rumbled cheerfully when he spoke. But he answered few of Enitan’s questions. “Later. Now you concentrate on getting better.”

Rig kept saying that, and after a while, Enitan had to admit he was right. Enitan might have been doing nothing but lying there, yet it took enormous energy to knit shattered bones and ravaged skin. He slept almost all the time, yet when he was awake, he felt as if he’d been at hard labor.

Only after many days did Enitan realize that Rig slept in the same room, close enough to lay a hand on if Enitan awakened from discomfort or nightmares. And after this happened, Rig held a cup of water to his mouth, then matter-of-factly helped him piss into some kind of container. Finally he’d pet Enitan’s chest or shoulder or hip—singing his lullabies until Enitan fell back asleep.

Enitan stopped fearing Rig. Foolish, he knew, but a person could hold on to terror only so long, and his wounds were sapping most of his strength. He tried to picture Rig but was largely unsuccessful. He knew the demon was big—his hands were large and his body sounded heavy when he moved—but not inhumanly so. Fancifully, Enitan imagined him as a large cat, perhaps because his voice resembled a deep purr and he seemed capable of sheathing his claws. But beneath their beauty and soft fur, beneath their guise of sleepy contentment, cats were deadly creatures. Enitan would do well to remember that.

If other demons were nearby, Enitan never heard them. Sometimes Rig left him alone, but never for long. Did demons have jobs as people do? And if so, what was Rig’s? Aside from healing, apparently.

Although Enitan had never done much actual work, he hadn’t been the type to lie about in bed all day either. He liked to wander the city, to spar with fists

or swords, to dance at the Bennu Club until nearly dawn. So as his pains ebbed away, he became restless, and visions of his sister's mockery danced in front of his unseeing eyes. He tossed fitfully on his mat until Rig scolded him to remain still.

"I *can't*," Enitan said after Rig admonished him for the hundredth time. This wasn't the kind of torture he'd expected to endure in the Downs, but it was torture nonetheless. He twitched as his nerves buzzed, vigorously but aimlessly.

Rig sat beside him with a sigh that had now become familiar. "You're not an easy patient. You should be thankful you can move at all—and that you're not just a pile of bones by now." His words were slightly harsh, but as always, his tone was light. Amused.

"Gods, I can't... Just *start* already."

"Start what?"

"Whatever you're going to do to me. The maiming and the torment and..." And that sounded faintly ridiculous, really.

Rig must have thought so too, because he gave his warm chuckle. "After I've spent so much time and work putting you back together, do you really think I'm eager to take you apart again?"

"What *do* you want, dammit?"

"For you to get better." Another of Rig's noisy sighs. "Would it help if you could see?"

Enitan had given up on regaining his sight. "Can I?"

"Not yet. When you fell, you... well, you damaged your eyes very badly. It happens. The fog is caustic. I've been trying to heal all your parts at once, but if I concentrate on your eyes today I should be able to remove the bandage by tonight. If I do that, will you promise to stop squirming so much?" Rig sounded so much like the teacher who'd bribed Enitan into learning to read, that Enitan almost smiled.

"All right," he said.

The healing session that followed was intense. Rig rubbed his fingers over and over Enitan's cheekbones, chanting in rhythm with the strokes. Enitan's eyes prickled and burned, and he would have had a difficult time remaining still if Rig's presence hadn't been so soothing. *I shouldn't be calmed by a demon*, he

reminded himself. But he was. So much so that he allowed his mind to float loose from his body, wandering over pleasant memories of better times.

He thought especially about a man named Masozi. Several years earlier, Enitan had seen Masozi perform at the Bennu Club and had been immediately taken by the singer's beautiful voice and handsome face. Enitan had done his very best to seduce Masozi, and soon he was getting private performances in his bed, Masozi gleaming with sweat as he fucked Enitan. They'd spent several weeks together, good weeks. Eventually Minna's harsh words eroded Masozi's patience. But until then, Enitan had learned that Masozi's tongue was talented at many things besides singing.

"Well, one part of you is working well," Rig said with a laugh.

Enitan was mortified to realize his dick had grown erect as he reminisced. He made a choked sound and tried to move away, but Rig held him in place.

"Stop. It's a good thing. If your cock's waking up, that's a sign that your healing is progressing well."

Not feeling especially appreciative, Enitan groaned. "But I don't—"

"Here." Rig let go of him and stepped away, returning a moment later to drape a large soft cloth over Enitan's hips. "We'll both pretend it's an invisibility cloak. I can't see a thing." He resumed his tuneful attention to Enitan's eyes.

What kind of demon made accommodations for his prisoner's modesty? "I'm sorry," Enitan murmured miserably.

"No need for it. I'd take it as a compliment, except I'm sure you weren't thinking of me. Did you have a spouse?"

"No."

"A lover, then?"

It was Enitan's turn to sigh. "Not recently. I used to be... active. But I was arrested and..." And of course Rig *knew* that. They were in the Downs, after all, and Rig was a demon who preyed on condemned humans, who captured them and... and massaged them and sang them lullabies. Enitan sighed again.

Perhaps mistaking the reason for the sad exhalation, Rig clucked his tongue. "It's better this way. It's always harder when people grieve for the spouses they'll never see again. Or children! That's even worse."

And then a very strange thought occurred to Enitan and he blurted it out before he could stop himself. “Are you married?” Demons probably didn’t marry, and even if they did, what should it matter to Enitan?

Rig didn’t pause his healing caresses. “Not anymore. I had a husband, but he died.” For the first time since Enitan had been with him, Rig sounded unhappy.

“I’m sorry,” Enitan said—and he found himself sincere in the statement. It hadn’t occurred to him that demons might mourn.

“Thank you. But that is my trouble, not yours. You should sleep. And have good dreams.” By the sound of his voice, a smile had returned to his face. “When you wake up, we’ll see if you can see.” Then he began a song that was especially soporific, and Enitan slipped away.

Chapter Four

“The bandage. Please.” Enitan had tried to remove it himself as soon as he woke up, but his splinted arms didn’t allow it.

Rig had been busily clattering pots and pans, but now he came over and sat. “All right. But don’t expect your eyesight to be perfect right away. Things will be blurry. And if your eyes start hurting, let me know right away. We don’t want to strain them.”

“Fine, fine.” Enitan had given up wondering about the solicitous demon. He just wanted to see.

But Rig paused with his hands at Enitan’s temples. “When you see me... don’t be shocked.” He sounded worried, which was strange.

Enitan would have explored the thread of the conversation more fully, but he didn’t want to delay things. “Please,” he said. “The bandage.”

Moving slowly, Rig peeled the layers of soft cloth away, then removed the thick padding underneath. Enitan kept his eyes closed at first, but even through the lids he could discern light. He shuddered slightly with relief.

“All right?” asked Rig.

“Yes.” As much as he yearned for vision, it took all of Enitan’s will to open his eyes. In part this was because the unaccustomed light hurt, but mostly it was because he feared he’d discover he couldn’t see anything but indistinct light and shadow. Rig was waiting, however, and there was no point in putting off the inevitable. Gradually, Enitan raised his lids.

At first he saw nothing but vague blurs, and that terrified him. Only when they began to resolve into more definite shapes and his heartbeat slowed to more reasonable levels did he notice the heavy palm on his shoulder. Not hurting him, not pinning him in place. Just... there. Gentle but strong.

“Wood,” Enitan said. Because that was what the low ceiling was made of—rough planks traversed by heavy beams—and the walls as well. At home, he’d had a few pieces of furniture carved from the trunks of harpy trees, purchases Minna had thoroughly disapproved of. But he’d never imagined an entire room made of wood. The extravagance made him slightly dizzy. In the city, buildings were made from only stone and metal.

As he continued to look around, he saw that the room was small and sparsely furnished. A few pieces of clothing hung from hooks, while pots and

dishes sat on shelves. Two crudely made stools accompanied a small table. There were no windows, but the door was slightly ajar, letting in the dim light of late evening. The rest of the room's illumination came from some glowing coals nestled in a stone fireplace and from a single flickering lantern hanging from a roof beam.

The space was exotic but not frightening. It was hard to imagine anyone being tortured here. Maybe the demons took people someplace else for that.

Enitan finally screwed up his courage and turned his head to look at Rig. He gasped at what he saw. "You're—"

"Hideous. I know."

"—human," Enitan finished. Because although one side of Rig's face was badly scarred—the skin looked like wax melted by a fire—and although he was a very large man, broad-shouldered and muscular, there was no question that he was a *man*. He had dark unruly hair that curled a bit near his neck, wide brown eyes, and slightly uneven teeth. He wore coarse clothing in shades of brown, and a thick gold hoop dangled from one ear. Like the room, he was exotic, and his appearance was slightly alarming. But he was not a demon.

When Rig smiled, only the unburned side of his face lifted, but both his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Human."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have believed me?"

Enitan thought about this for a moment. "Probably not," he admitted. He'd have considered it just another mysterious part of the demon's diabolical game.

"I figured. And it wasn't worth arguing over. Besides, I'm ugly enough to be a demon."

"You're not," Enitan said. Rig snorted, but Enitan meant it. Honestly, *any* human face would have been beautiful at the moment—when he'd never expected to encounter another human and had doubted whether he'd see again at all. After so many days of Rig's tender care, Enitan was inclined to view him as beautiful, scars or not. Besides, his eyes were warm and his crooked smile was endearing.

"Your vision's obviously still blurry," Rig said. He removed his hand from Enitan's shoulder, stood, and walked to the fire. As Enitan watched, Rig added a few logs and poked the coals into flames.

"You're burning wood!" Enitan exclaimed.

Rig grinned over his shoulder. "I'm making us dinner."

"But... all that wood. Such an expense!" Usually Minna was the only one to fret over such things, but this was too much even for Enitan.

"Expense?" Rig's laughter echoed loudly. "If there's one thing we have here in abundance, it's wood."

Enitan licked his lips. "Where's here?" he asked quietly.

Rig didn't answer at once. He poured water from a large earthen pitcher into a pot, then hung the pot on a frame over the fire. He tossed some items that might have been vegetables into the water before adding what appeared to be a large chunk of meat still on the bone. Finally he sprinkled some herbs or spices into the mix, wiped his hands on a scrap of cloth, and turned to face Enitan.

"It won't be ready for a while. You should sleep while you're waiting."

"Where's *here*? And how did you get me out of the Downs? I fell. I know I fell." He remembered the beginning all too well—the terror and the pain—but not the end.

"Yes, you fell. This *is* the Downs."

Enitan's stomach clenched. "So the demons will—"

"There *are* no demons. Just people. Some of us are better than others, and a lot of us are broken, but we're as human as you are."

"I don't understand."

Rig crossed the room in a few steps and crouched beside him. "I told you from the beginning—you're safe. Safe from demons anyway, and safe from those monsters on the Reach." His lips curled into a snarl.

"They weren't monsters. They were—"

"I saw what they did to you. They were monsters." He shook his head slightly. "The Downs—it's not an easy place by any means. There are dangers here. But no demons." He traced his fingers across his scarred cheek.

Thousands of questions crowded Enitan's head, but he ended up asking the one that seemed least pertinent to his current situation. "You can't heal yourself?"

"No. Besides, I need to keep myself like this as a reminder."

"Of what?"

“Of my pride and shortcomings.” Rig stood. “Sleep now. Then food, and after that we’ll do another healing session. I know you’re eager to get out of those splints.”

Enitan truly was. “But you haven’t explained anything. Who *are* you? Why are you helping me? What’s going to happen once I’m healed? Where—”

“Stop! I’ll tell you everything, I promise. But it’s a lot to take in. We’ll wait until you’re a little stronger. The curiosity won’t be fatal over a few more days, will it?”

Suddenly as weary as Rig claimed he should be, Enitan sighed. “I suppose not.”

It was easier to bear inactivity now that he could see. And now that he knew he wasn’t going to be tortured anytime soon, Enitan’s worries were slightly alleviated. But a dull pain still pervaded his body, the healing process exhausted him, and a new problem had presented itself.

When he’d been blind and had believed Rig would soon start tormenting him, Enitan had been able to ignore the intimacy of Rig’s touch. Now that was impossible. He tried to close his eyes when Rig helped him empty his bladder and bowels and when Rig cleaned him with a warm damp cloth; but that didn’t help. Every brush of fingertips across his skin made his nerves tingle. At first he didn’t understand why, because there was nothing sexual about the contact. But then he understood—he was so very vulnerable right now, and nobody had truly cared for him like this since he was a small boy.

Several days after the bandages came off his eyes, Enitan wiggled his fingers and toes. “Can the splints come off now?”

Rig placed his palm on Enitan’s chest, closed his eyes, and hummed for a moment. When he opened his eyes again, he shook his head. “Two or three more days. Believe me, you don’t want to try to move around until your bones are strong.”

Enitan knew this was true. And based on the frequent sharp twinges, he knew that his arms and legs were not fully healed. But gods, he was so tired of just lying there.

“Have you always been a healer?” he asked, trying to distract himself.

“Since I was a child. It runs in my family.”

“It’s a good gift.”

“It is. But it doesn’t make me all-powerful.”

Enitan couldn’t really shrug, so he huffed instead. “Nobody’s all-powerful. But you do good for others. I... never have.”

Rig’s hand was still on Enitan’s chest. “What did you do before you came here?”

“Very little.” Enitan smiled wryly. “We had money. Not enough to make Minna happy, but enough to satisfy me. I went to university because my father insisted on it, but I didn’t put effort into my studies, and I tended to butt heads with the professors. I had more fun fighting, fucking... playing.”

“Who’s Minna?” Rig asked, his head tilted slightly.

Enitan answered through clenched teeth. “My sister.”

“Oh. I had a brother and a sister, but they both died as infants. Many children do here.”

“You... you were born in the Downs?” Enitan knew Rig wasn’t banished—he didn’t have the mark on his forehead—and surely no one would come here by choice. But it hadn’t occurred to Enitan that Rig might have spent his entire life in the Downs.

“Of course. There were always people here. Not many, because life is hard. But we were here long before your city was built, I think. And then the city folk began to send people falling over the edge and a few survived to join us. Now all of us have ancestors from the city and from the Downs. Maybe you and I are distantly related.” He gave his lopsided grin. “Did any of your forebears get sent to the Downs?”

“I’m fairly certain I’m the first with that distinction.”

Enitan thought that Rig might ask him why he’d been banished. But instead, he seated himself more comfortably on the floor and touched his fingertips to Enitan’s bare hips. He began to sing.

Each of his healing chants was a little different. Enitan didn’t know whether that was because he was healing different bits of Enitan’s body or he just got bored repeating the same tunes. He wondered whether Rig also spoke the language he sang in. Had it been the native tongue of the Downs before the city dwellers came?

With these thoughts rattling around his skull, Enitan barely noticed when Rig moved his fingers inward a bit, to the seam where Enitan's legs met his torso. But when Enitan glanced at Rig's face, their gazes caught, and he was suddenly very aware of the warmth of Rig's broad fingertips on his skin. The light cloth covering Enitan's crotch did nothing to camouflage his growing erection.

"Sorry," he mumbled, blushing.

Rig smiled, closed his eyes, and continued his song.

Enitan was still hard when the song ended, and his cheeks still flamed. But Rig looked bemused, not angry. "Who were you thinking of?" he asked gently.

"I... Nobody. You... you felt good."

Uncertainty sat oddly on Rig's face. He usually seemed very confident. "And my face doesn't bother you?"

"No." Enitan laughed at the absurdity of the conversation. "You don't bother me."

Rig pulled his hands away but remained seated. He rubbed the back of his neck, squinted up at the ceiling, and then narrowed his eyes at Enitan. "With your looks, you must have had beautiful lovers."

"Yes. But not all of them. A pretty face is nice. And I took some lovers because they had nicely shaped bodies. But I was also attracted to bed partners who told interesting stories or made me laugh. When I was much younger, I spent over a month with a woman old enough to be my mother, but she danced so well my head would spin. And once there was a very young man who could take a scrap of paper and fold it into any shape you wanted—animals, buildings, flowers." Of course, Minna had declared the woman, the boy, and everyone else unsuitable.

"I was never handsome," Rig said. "Not even before."

"And I could never bring a dying man back to life. Which is more valuable?"

Rig shook his head. "You're an odd one, even for a city dweller." That conclusion seemed to amuse him.

"I've been told that before." Enitan's erection had wilted, but his skin felt tight and he had the impression it would take very little to make him hard again. He wanted the comfort of sex. "But if you find me attractive, and I feel the same way about you..."

“You’re not well enough for it yet. Besides,” Rig paused to sigh heavily, “I couldn’t.”

“Because I’m condemned?”

“That matters less to me than my scars do to you. Look. I live alone at the edge of the Downs and I have little to offer anyone who doesn’t need healing. And I’m not the sort to take touching frivolously—either for healing or for sex. I’ve never slept with anyone but my husband and one other man, and I doubt I ever will again. But you’ll be better soon and you can move on. There are plenty of people here who aren’t... aren’t me.”

Rig stood and walked to the fire, keeping his broad back to Enitan.

Enitan closed his eyes but didn’t sleep. *Move on*, Rig had said. To where? When Enitan tried to imagine his future—now that he actually *had* one—all he saw was Minna’s angry face.

Chapter Five

Based on observations made while flat on his back, Enitan knew that Rig was a large man. But he didn't fully appreciate *how* large until the splints were finally off and Rig helped him stand upright. Enitan had long legs and was taller than average, but Rig had at least two hand widths over him and was considerably heavier too. That turned out to be a good thing, because there was no way Enitan could stand unassisted. Rig's supporting arms felt good around him. Safe.

"I want to go outside," Enitan said as soon as he recovered from the vertigo of changing positions.

"Not today unless you want me to carry you. Give yourself a few days to rebuild your strength."

Enitan grimaced as he looked down at himself. In some belated semblance of modesty, Rig had given him a shirt to wear, but Enitan's bare legs stuck out beneath the hem. They were too thin, and the skin was pink and tender-looking. "I feel like I've been weak forever."

"Patience. Death was reaching for you when I found you. If you weren't strong, you wouldn't have survived."

Although Enitan wanted to respond, Rig urged him to take a few steps, which took all of Enitan's concentration. Walking hurt, and his muscles felt loose and watery. He didn't even make it to the far end of the small room before his legs gave out entirely. Rig caught him, carried him back to the sleeping mat, and gently set him down. He propped Enitan's head with a pillow before beginning a light massage of his legs.

"That was very good," Rig said.

Enitan snorted. But instead of arguing, he picked up the thread of their earlier conversation. "How *did* you find me? And why did you rescue me? You know I've been banished."

"You've been banished from the city, but I live in the Downs. And it's what I do."

"What do you mean?"

Rig didn't answer right away. He kept moving his thumbs over Enitan's calves, pressing almost hard enough to hurt, but not quite. His dark brows formed a vee of concentration, his gaze unfocused.

“My village is a day’s walk from here,” he finally said. “It’s not... I’ve heard that thousands and thousands of people live in the city, but fewer than five hundred live in my village. It’s where I grew up.”

“Then why aren’t you there now?” asked Enitan, who until recently had never even imagined leaving his home. Why would he? To the west was the Reach and then the Downs, and to the east, desert. Nearly impassible mountains lay to the north, and the south had farmland leading to the sea.

“I was born a healer. I told you that. But we had other healers—my father, my aunt and cousins. We were lucky. Some generations have none at all, and then when people get ill or injured...” He shrugged. “Anyhow, we have a tradition that if we are rich in healers, we send one here, to the edge, to find those who are cast out from the city. That’s why this cabin was built long ago. City dwellers don’t arrive often, but when they do, they land very close to this spot. And then I try to save them. Some I can’t help. They’re already dead when I find them or too far gone for my skills. But a few have survived.” He glanced up at Enitan and gave a quick grin.

Enitan briefly pictured himself flying through the air like an ungainly bird, then crashing to the ground at Rig’s feet. “How do you know when someone... when someone lands?”

“I hear them scream,” Rig answered quietly.

“Oh.” Enitan shuddered. “But why bother? We’ve all been condemned. We’re unredeemable.”

It was Rig’s turn to snort. “I believe anyone can be redeemed. The people I’ve saved and the ones my predecessors saved, they joined the village once they were healed. And sure, some were disagreeable. A few were violent. But the same is true for some of us. Most settled in among us. They bring fresh blood, new ideas. I think the newcomers have saved us from dying out.”

“But—”

“They’re human beings, Enitan. They deserve a chance.” Rig smiled. “You too.”

“You don’t even know what crime I was convicted of.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

And that was that for now, apparently, because Rig let go of Enitan’s legs and walked to the fire. He kept his back turned until Enitan fell asleep.

It took nearly a week of several daily healing sessions before Rig declared Enitan strong enough to venture outside. He made sure Enitan ate well first, and as they crossed the floor, he hovered anxiously at Enitan's side. "Lean on me if you feel weak," he ordered. "Don't overtax yourself. And your feet will feel tender. I'm sorry I haven't any shoes to fit you."

Enitan was so eager to see anything but the same four walls that he would have happily walked over hot coals. But he didn't say so. He just carefully placed one foot in front of the other until he came to the door, then held his breath when Rig opened it.

He expected something different from the city. This was the Downs, after all. But nothing could have prepared him for what he saw. "Trees!" he exclaimed.

Some trees grew in the city, of course, but all of them were stunted and spindly and planted in orderly configurations. His family had four in their garden, a fact that had always made Minna very proud. Wealthier families had more. And in a few scattered parks, Council employees carefully tended additional trees—watering, trimming, inspecting them obsessively for pests or disease.

Here, though... here the trees towered so high that they made Enitan dizzy. They were taller than the highest city houses. Many were so broad that he and Rig together couldn't have circled their trunks with their arms. The trees—with their deeply wrinkled bark and richly green needlelike foliage—were not planted in straight lines or careful squares, but seemed to have been scattered randomly by a giant's hand. They stretched as far as he could see. At the base of the trunks, low shrubs in varied shades of green surrounded deep carpets of fallen leaves. High above everything, the sky was soft gray.

Enitan was so awed that he didn't realize Rig was standing behind him in the doorway, keeping him from falling down. "Merciful gods," Enitan whispered.

"I told you firewood wasn't a problem."

"But... how?"

"It's the forest. It's always been like this."

When Enitan was a boy, he'd read a story about the gods creating humans. Back then, the story claimed, there were trees everywhere. The whole world was a forest. But humans multiplied and cut down trees to make room for a

city, and they became so convinced of their own cleverness that they forgot to thank the gods. The gods had punished them by sending down a toxic cloud that killed all the trees, leaving nothing but bare earth and the endless grass of the Reach. Vengeance. It was a powerful thing.

Rig gave Enitan's shoulder a light squeeze. "Are you going outside? Or standing here until you collapse?"

"Outside."

And with two careful steps, Enitan was outdoors, his feet sinking slightly into the soft ground. But he was still dazed, so Rig took his arm and steered him to a fallen tree. Enitan sat on the log, making sure the shirttail protected his ass from the bark.

Rig sat beside him and stared up at the sky. "Clouds are getting thicker." He sounded concerned.

"Is that a problem?"

"Sometimes they drop lower and the fog settles on the ground. That's... dangerous."

Enitan vaguely remembered Rig mentioning the fog back when Enitan was blind and thought himself held captive by a demon. "Why?"

"You already know. It's caustic. The plants can survive it, and the birds and animals burrow for shelter. But if it touches human flesh..." Absently, he rubbed his scarred cheek before turning to look at Enitan. "You were lucky. The day you fell, the clouds were fairly thin, so you weren't in them for long. That's why you lived."

Enitan didn't feel especially lucky, but he nodded. "What do you do when the fog comes?"

"What we all do. We lock ourselves tightly inside our homes until it goes away. It rarely lasts longer than a day or two." His face turned grim. "Sometimes it comes faster than expected. People die if they can't make it to shelter in time."

Of course the fog wasn't Minna's fault, but Enitan blamed her anyway. If she'd minded her own business, he'd never be in a position to be endangered by such an exotic thing. The city never had fog at all, killing or otherwise. And except for the brief few weeks of winter, the sun shone brightly all the time in the city—so much so that in the afternoons, those who could afford to do so

took languid naps in shaded rooms. Those who were poor and had to work just suffered, he supposed.

As if a tiny, bitter seed had sprouted, a thought began in Enitan's head. "Are the clouds always there?"

Rig shot him a glance. "Usually. Sometimes they clear for a day or so. But..."

"What?"

"Nothing." Rig gave Enitan an assessing look.

A blue bird with a long tail swooped down from a nearby branch, startling Enitan from his thoughts. It landed on the ground nearby, cocked its head at them, and croaked.

Rig laughed. "Greedy bugger. No crumbs for you today."

"Do you *feed* it?"

"Sometimes." Rig's face colored slightly. "When I have an extra crust. He likes some fruits, too, and loves seeds."

Birds in the city were generally ugly and dirty and lived off garbage. Nobody fed them. Enitan wondered if it was this bird's beauty that attracted Rig, or just the bit of company.

"Why do you live here alone?" Enitan blurted. "Don't you miss people?"

"People from the village come here once a month to bring me food and supplies. They'll be here any day, in fact. They usually stay at least one night. And those I heal are company."

That didn't add up to much. Fewer than a dozen men and women were banished each year, and if Rig was to be believed, many of those didn't survive the fall to the Downs. Enitan couldn't imagine such solitude. In the city, he'd spent most of his waking hours in the company of friends—and many of his sleeping hours as well. On the rare occasions when he found himself alone, all he had to do was walk to Club Bennu or one of the other establishments he frequented. Or take a walk down the street, for that matter. At any hour, early or late, there were people about. And if he got truly desperate, there were always his family's handful of servants.

But now he scowled, remembering that some of those servants had helped Minna betray him. They had testified against him, claiming that Enitan and his father had been arguing frequently in the weeks before the death. Two of them

said that on the night Father died, they saw Enitan skulking in the kitchen and later in the hallways.

Maybe there were some advantages in being alone.

Rig startled him slightly by placing a hand on Enitan's shoulder. "This is enough of an outing for your first time. Let's go back inside."

Enitan didn't argue. The brief interlude had exhausted him, and he leaned on Rig's arm for the walk back.

Later that evening, a dozing Enitan was awakened by the soft sound of splashing water. The hut was dimly lit, the glowing embers unable to reach the deeply shadowed corners. Rig stood near the fireplace wearing only a breechclout, his broad back to Enitan. He was slowly passing a cloth over one arm. He was truly magnificent, all heavy bones and corded muscles, his skin tinted orange by the glow from the fireplace. His legs reminded Enitan of tree trunks. Yet the way his hair curled at his nape somehow added a bit of vulnerability, reminding Enitan that Rig was only human after all.

When Rig turned slightly to dip his cloth in a pot, Enitan had to stifle a gasp. The scars weren't confined to his face. In fact, the entire shoulder and upper arm on that side of his body carried similar marks, as did his thigh and calf.

He must have sensed Enitan staring, because Rig looked over at him and sighed. "Not pretty, is it?"

That hadn't been what Enitan was thinking. "Do they hurt?"

Apparently surprised by the question, Rig paused. "Not much, not anymore. A lot of the nerves near the surface of my skin were destroyed, which is mostly a good thing. I have to be careful, though. I can cut myself and not feel it."

"Will you tell me what happened?"

"The fog."

And that was all, it seemed. Rig turned his back to Enitan and finished bathing, then hung the cloth from a hook and dumped the pot outside the door. Only after he returned the pot to its shelf did he look at Enitan again. "Do you want anything to eat or drink before I go to sleep? Do you need to piss?"

"No." Blessedly, Enitan had healed enough that he could walk to the chamber pot and use it unassisted. But Rig insisted on hovering nearby, just in case—which was both endearing and slightly irritating.

Rig poked at the fireplace and covered the coals with ashes. It was a warm night; they wouldn't need a fire. He doused the lantern, putting the cabin into absolute dark, found his way to his sleeping mat without mishap, and lay down with a heavy grunt.

Enitan pictured Rig lying nearly within reach, almost naked, and for once Enitan didn't fall asleep right away. He listened to Rig's even breathing and the slight rustle of the nearby trees. A creature called out harshly, making him jump a little.

"Don't worry," Rig said with a chuckle. "It's just a night sprite calling for a mate."

"Night sprite?"

"They're more common near the village, but a few live around here too. They're about knee-high and covered in scraggly black hair, with mouths full of wicked-looking teeth. But they don't bother people—except during mating season when they can get pretty noisy."

The sprite screeched again. It was a plaintive sound.

"I've never heard of them," Enitan said.

"The Downs is full of things you've never heard of. Some are harmless, like the nighties. A few of them are wonderful. Merryberries! And Glows in the springtime! But quite a lot of them are dangerous, Enitan. You'll need to take care."

Soon afterward, Rig began to snore quietly. But Enitan remained awake long afterward.

Chapter Six

Three days later, Enitan was sitting on the log in front of the cabin when he heard voices approaching. Rig looked up from the animal he was gutting—apparently, he laid traps for the tasty little creatures—and grinned. “Supplies,” he said. “I hope they brought sugar and flour, because we’re out.”

For the first time in ages, Enitan gave a thought to how he must look: branded, unshaven, pale, and wearing nothing but Rig’s overlong shirt. Although he’d never previously been hesitant about meeting new people, he was apprehensive now. Perhaps no demons haunted the Downs, but surely not everyone here was as kind and gentle as Rig. The newcomers might see him for what he was—unredeemable.

It took all of Enitan’s strength and will to stand straight, hands fisted at his sides, chin high.

Two men and a woman burst into the little clearing. They were chatting merrily, and each back was heavily laden with a bulging bag. One of the men bore an ugly mark on his forehead—the same, Enitan supposed, as he now carried.

When they spied Enitan, the trio stopped so abruptly that they nearly collided with one another. They gaped. Rig stood, smiling, his hands held before him. “Sorry. I’m a bit too bloody to greet you.”

“But it looks like a new patient dropped into your hands,” said the marked man. His accent was more like Enitan’s than like Rig’s.

Rig turned to face Enitan. “May I?” he asked, waving at the others.

Chin up. “Of course.”

“Enitan, this is Sar and her husband Kef, and this is Danyal. Everyone, this is Enitan.”

They exchanged greetings, Enitan’s more subdued than the others. Then the new people carried their bags into the cabin while Rig finished cleaning their dinner. “It’s all right,” he said quietly to Enitan. “None of them are demons either.”

“Danyal is... like me.”

“He arrived several years ago. He was barely more than a boy.” He made a low growling noise. “Declaring a youth irredeemable before he even knew who he was. It’s a disgrace.”

“He’s not—”

“He’s a good man. Turns out he’s skilled with tools, so when someone in the village needs a house repaired, Danyal does the job. He works hard. Makes sure every home can hold out the fog.”

Although Rig had explained several times that banished people were welcomed into his community, Enitan still had trouble accepting it. “But he must have been convicted of something awful. What if he’s dangerous?”

Rig’s gaze was sharp. “Anyone can be dangerous.”

Enitan didn’t reenter the cabin until Rig accompanied him. The visitors had unpacked their bags, so the shelves now overflowed with food and other supplies. Kef was cooking something in Rig’s biggest pot, while Sar and Danyal sat on the floor, talking quietly.

Rig handed the meat to Kef and grabbed a bucket. “I’m going to wash up and fetch some water,” he announced.

Danyal sprang to his feet, grinning widely. “I’ll help.”

“Um...” Rig cut his eyes quickly in Enitan’s direction. “Not this time, all right?”

Looking slightly disappointed, Danyal shrugged and sat back down. Still hovering near the open door, Enitan realized that Danyal and Rig were lovers—and that he was jealous. Which was ridiculous on several grounds.

He was going to urge Rig to take Danyal with him, but Rig left before Enitan could spit out the words. He had never felt so awkward.

And then he was surprised when Danyal came to his rescue, smiling warmly at him. “I’m sorry, Enitan. We’re overwhelming you.”

“No, I—”

“It’s difficult when you haven’t been around anyone for a while. Anyone but Rig. But he’s easy to handle. Please. Come sit with us.” He patted the floor next to him.

Enitan couldn’t politely refuse. But instead of the floor, he sat stiffly on his sleeping mat, which was several feet away. He arranged the blanket over his lap to keep from flashing the visitors.

“How long since you arrived?” asked Danyal, which earned him a stern look from Sar.

“I’m... not sure. I was hurt...”

Danyal nodded gravely. “You must have caught a lot of fog to have burned so badly.”

Automatically, Enitan touched his face. Was he as terribly scarred as Rig? He hadn’t thought so. His newly healed skin felt smooth and healthy. “I...”

“You look fine,” Danyal said kindly. “Rig is good at his art. The only reason I can tell you were burned is that your mark is gone.”

“What?” His fingers flew to his forehead, but they told him nothing.

This time, Sar scowled even more fiercely at Danyal. “Of course he didn’t know, Dany. How could he.” She turned to Enitan with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. He’s very direct.”

Still confused, Enitan shook his head. “My face?”

“Handsome and unmarked. Not that we consider a brand shameful. My mother has one. But yours is gone.”

He was rubbing his forehead so hard it began to hurt, so he stopped. Then he looked at Danyal. “Why is yours still there?”

If Danyal was offended by the question, he didn’t show it. “The skies were clear the day I fell. Lucky for me. Didn’t stop me from being busted up by the fall, but I didn’t burn.”

Rig had said that occasionally the clouds disappeared for short periods. And if a man could fall from the Reach unscathed by the toxic substance, wouldn’t it also be possible for him to climb up again from the Downs? If the mark had been scoured from that man’s face, couldn’t he return to the city without being noticed? And once he was there... He saw Minna’s face, her mouth hanging open, her eyes wide with shock and fear.

Danyal interrupted these musings. “Do you want me to go outside, Enitan? I don’t want to upset you.”

Enitan collected himself. “No. I’m sorry. I’ve just... Things have been so odd lately. So unexpected and out of my control.”

“I know the feeling. But you’ll get used to this place. It’s nothing at all like the city, but that’s a good thing. I promise you’ll have friends here.” When he smiled, Danyal looked very young. He was pretty too, the mark notwithstanding.

After that, Enitan remained mostly silent while the others chatted. They didn't exclude him—sometimes they even paused to explain something—but he had nothing to add to their gossip about life in the village. He tried to imagine living in a place where you knew every living soul, where everyone knew everyone else's secrets. But he couldn't.

After Rig returned, the five of them ate. The food was delicious: a hearty stew full of meat and vegetables, handfuls of small sweet fruit, and fresh bread that had been baked in the village early that morning. Everyone ate a lot, including Enitan. And then there was time for more talk about village life, this time with Rig asking questions about a bewildering number of people.

It was more activity than Enitan had experienced since he was banished, and he grew weary. Rig noticed and insisted it was time for sleep; Enitan was too exhausted to argue. The floor of the little hut grew crowded when Rig spread out mats for everyone, but the company was friendly and Enitan didn't mind. With Rig at his side, he fell asleep to the soft sound of whispers.

He awakened early when the others stirred. Rig was poking at the fire while Sar and Kef gathered their few belongings and stuffed them into their bags. Danyal stood at the open door, looking up at the sky. "The clouds are thin and high this morning," he announced. "Safe for a journey."

"It's never *safe*," Rig muttered.

"Safe enough."

Enitan sat up slowly—still quite stiff—and rubbed his eyes. "You're not staying any longer?"

Kef surprised him by answering. "No. It's a bit crowded and we don't want to interfere with your healing."

"It's all right. You're not interfering. I'm almost well anyway." Enitan knew Rig didn't see his friends often or for long, and he didn't want Rig deprived of their company on his account.

Rig glanced over his shoulder. "You still need more rest. Can't hurry these things."

Danyal smiled at Enitan. "When we return for you in a few weeks, we'll bring you clothes. And a pair of shoes."

"Return for me?" Enitan felt as if he were perpetually three steps behind the conversation.

“To bring you to the village, of course. Hmm, we’ll have to build you a house, but in the meantime any of us would be happy to share. I’d be pleased if you stayed with me.” He shot Enitan a smile that was downright flirty.

“You want me to go to the village?”

“Of course,” said several people at once. Not Rig, though. He remained silent.

“We told you,” Danyal said, pointing to his own forehead. “This doesn’t matter here. Nothing from the past matters.”

That wasn’t true. Murder mattered, and so did betrayal. But Enitan didn’t say that. “How do you know I’m like you? What if I’m a monster?”

Danyal crouched so they were eye to eye. “When I lived in the city, I did some very bad things. But falling—I know you think of it as punishment, but it’s not. It’s rebirth. A chance to remake yourself into whoever you want. I like who I became. You can do this too.”

He was so earnest about it that Enitan could almost believe him. He might not have killed anyone, but he’d never amounted to much in the city. He was a rich man’s son, and he liked to fight and fuck. He prided himself on being *good* at those things. But Minna had been right about one thing—those were skills that hadn’t mattered much to the rest of the world. He hadn’t mattered. Here in the Downs, he could be different. He could find a way to contribute to the community. He could—

But no. The journey had scoured him, broken him, but it hadn’t bettered him. He had no future in the Downs. All that was left to him was making sure Minna paid a price for her actions. Vengeance was his last remaining task.

Danyal must have seen the doubt on Enitan’s face, because he frowned and briefly clasped Enitan’s shoulder. “Give it time. The body isn’t the only part that needs time to heal.”

Enitan stood while everyone said good-bye. He noticed that while Rig exchanged friendly arm clasps with Sar and Kef, he hugged Danyal. But then the visitors were gone, leaving the hut quiet and empty-feeling.

“I’m sorry,” Enitan said finally.

Rig had begun doing something at the table with flour and animal fat. “For what?”

“Chasing them away.”

“You didn’t. It’s happened before, when I’ve had other people healing here. Besides, this will give the village time to get ready for you. You’ll see. By the time you arrive, they’ll have worked themselves into a frenzy. We don’t get new additions often, and it’s always grounds for celebration. You’ll be attacked by nearly every unmarried man and woman there.” He gave a wolfish grin, but Enitan thought his eyes were shadowed by sadness.

Enitan walked to the fireplace and stared at the fire. It was mesmerizing. In the city, it very rarely got cold enough for heat to be necessary, and cooking stoves were fueled with chunks of peat dug from the closer parts of the Reach. There were never dancing flames or sharp pops of sap exploding.

“You should have spent time with Danyal yesterday. Now you’ll have to wait weeks.”

Behind him, Rig sighed. “I can wait. Anyway, Dany... He was the first person I healed after my husband died. It was an enormous relief to discover I was still capable of it. But as I said, Dany was barely grown. We didn’t sleep together, not then. He moved to the village. Soon after he became comfortable there, though, he began returning here every time I needed supplies. That’s when we began sleeping together. We don’t love each other. He feels gratitude toward me, and I think a lot of pity. I’m thankful for a warm body against mine now and then, and I’m glad he doesn’t mind my scars. That’s all.”

Enitan scowled to himself, and it took him a moment to realize why—it was because, in a way, Rig’s story was like his own. Even though Rig had sex only every few weeks and with just one man while Enitan had fucked often and widely, in the end, each of Enitan’s partners had been little more than a momentary warm body. A way to fend off the loneliness for a few hours. That had been mostly Minna’s fault, because whenever he considered getting serious about someone, Minna chased him or her away. But Enitan was to blame as well for letting her do this. He shouldn’t have been so afraid to lose access to the family fortune.

Still frowning, Enitan turned to look at Rig. “You’re a good man. You deserve more than that.”

“I had more than that. I killed it.”

Chapter Seven

For several days Enitan practiced walking. A strange concept for a grown man, perhaps, but between the brief bouts of exercise and Rig's hearty cooking, Enitan felt his wasted muscles gradually rebuild. That was very good; he hated being weak.

One morning he joined Rig in another short jaunt around the clearing. Rig was in a pensive mood but seemed to enjoy pointing out some of the more exotic flora and fauna. "That's an arrow beetle," he said, indicating a large yellow bug with green stripes.

"Pretty. But it doesn't look like an arrow."

"It's called that because if it gets you with its pincers, you feel like you've been shot by an arrow."

Enitan stepped back slightly. "Nice."

"And see those green leaves over there?" Rig pointed between two trees at the edge of the clearing.

"All the leaves are green."

"The vining thing with really dark leaves shaped like hearts."

"More pincers?"

Rig chuckled. "No. It's called stop-wound, and if prepared right, the roots are good for ending bleeding. But if you touch the leaves, you'll end up with an itchy blistery rash."

"Is there anything in this place that doesn't want to hurt me?"

"Me," Rig answered, smiling gently.

Enitan wanted to embrace him. Instead, he sighed. "Why do you insist on living in such a dangerous place?"

"I told you. I try to save people who fall from the city. Anyway, it's only a little safer near the village. Less fog, but just as many deadly plants and animals."

"I don't mean here, specifically. I mean the Downs in general. Why not wait for a sunny day and leave? Is it impossible to climb to the Reach?"

Rig looked at him with furrowed brow. "Not impossible, no. It's very steep, but I suppose a determined person could manage it. Assuming the fog didn't

suddenly descend while he was midclimb.” He rumbled the last bit in nearly a growl.

Ignoring the implicit warning, Enitan spread his arms. “Then why doesn’t anyone try it?”

“For the same reason we don’t try to cross the sea on the far side of the Downs. It’s dangerous, and what would be the point? This is our home. What’s in the city or across the sea for us?” Before Enitan could answer, Rig stepped closer and looked him carefully in the eyes. “What’s in the city for *you*?”

“Revenge.”

Rig jerked his head back as if he’d been hit. Then he set his jaw. “Revenge is a more bitter poison than anything you’ll find in the Downs.”

Enitan knew that. But wasn’t he already consumed by bitterness? He was like the arrow beetle—attractive enough on the outside but capable of producing nothing but pain.

Making an effort to keep his voice even, he asked, “Can I tell you why I’m here? You haven’t asked.”

“It’s considered very rude to ask. It’s just as Dany said—the Downs gives a chance for rebirth. Part of that means forgetting the past.”

“I can’t forget,” Enitan whispered, his throat raw. He realized his hands were clenched tightly enough to hurt, and he slowly uncurled them.

Rig came closer—close enough to touch—and Enitan flinched reflexively. But all that Rig did was settle his heavy hands on Enitan’s shoulders and quietly say, “Tell me if you want to.”

For all Rig knew, Enitan was about to confess to multiple atrocities. But instead of rejecting him, Rig was offering comfort and support, just as he had from the beginning. Enitan couldn’t understand how anyone could have such a quantity of kindness to give, and his eyes stung as he held back stupid tears.

“I was convicted of murdering my father,” Enitan said, then waited for the response.

Rig didn’t look disgusted or upset. In fact, his gaze softened even more. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said.

And then a few salty droplets did escape, because instead of condemning him, Rig was acknowledging his grief. Not another living soul had done so—

almost everyone thinking he'd caused that death himself—and until now, Enitan hadn't realized how much that had hurt.

Enitan cleared his throat and dashed the tears impatiently away with the back of his hand. "I didn't kill him. I loved my father. Respected him. Although... in a way I am indirectly responsible."

Rig waited patiently, and Enitan had the impression that he was like a mountain that could wait forever, weathering time and storms with only a few marks to show for it.

"My sister, Minna, was angry at me." Anger didn't quite capture the emotion, but was the best he could do. "I wasted money and produced nothing; I shamed the family with my fighting and drinking and fucking. She... Ours is an old family. Our name appears in scrolls hundreds of years old. She has this idea that we should be... above everything. *Exemplary and impeccable*, she used to say. As if we were gilded statues in the Council Hall."

He could hear her lecturing him, her voice tight and shrill. Could see the look of disgust on her face when he brought home a bedmate or returned bruised and bloody from a fight. He'd largely ignored her. He should have thought about his future. Although he'd never have thought her capable of murder and betrayal, it should have occurred to him that someday Father would die, and Enitan would be at her mercy, financially. But he'd never been the type to look far beyond the next day.

Rig still clasped his shoulders, lending strength.

"I think the only thing that kept Minna in control was Father's position on the Council. He had enough public respect to outweigh my misdeeds. But then he announced he was going to retire, and I refused to take his place."

"Why didn't she take his place instead?"

Rig's bird swooped and landed nearby, distracting Enitan. It hopped a few times, scolding them, then flew to a nearby tree. Enitan wondered if the bird was somehow dangerous; Rig hadn't said.

Enitan sighed. "She wanted to, very badly. But the other Council members wouldn't have her. She blamed me, said my reputation had poisoned hers. But the truth is, she doesn't get along well with anyone. Nobody on the Council wanted to work with her." Enitan had told her so himself, after a particularly nasty round of yelling. He suspected that was the night she'd decided to plot against him.

Suddenly the strength drained from Enitan's body and—almost unwillingly—he allowed himself to lean against Rig's solid chest. And Rig, who was surely blessed by the gods, simply embraced him and took Enitan's weight. He felt so *good*. Perhaps even his hugs could heal.

"One morning, a servant found my father dead on his bedroom floor," Enitan said. "He'd been quite healthy the evening before. But there was bloody froth dried around his mouth, and he smelled strongly of mechka flowers."

"Poison."

"Just so. And when I was still reeling from that—still trying to come to terms with losing him—Minna found a letter that showed he intended to disinherit me. The secretary said Father had dictated it, and there was Father's signature."

Rig held him a bit tighter. "Did your father write that letter?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. He told me sometimes that I was frivolous, but he wasn't annoyed with it the way Minna was." In fact, his father had blamed himself for not providing better guidance when Enitan was younger. "I know he loved me. He told me so. And I know Minna was friendly with his secretary and very familiar with Father's signature."

"That letter was enough to convict you?"

"Two servants testified against me as well. I don't know if Minna bribed them or threatened them. I had no alibi. And I had a reputation as a violent man because I enjoyed sparring." He laughed humorlessly. "My fighting partners were always as eager as I was, and I never seriously injured any of them."

"But it was enough."

"Yes. And then the Judge..." His voice broke.

"I know the rest," Rig said. "No need to say it."

Which was a good thing, because Enitan couldn't talk at all for fear of dissolving into sobs. Gods, he was so weak! But Rig was solid against him and very safe, and now he was slowly stroking Enitan's back.

Enitan closed his eyes and inhaled Rig's wonderful scent of woodsmoke, stew, and sweat. "I am innocent of murder. But the Judge still condemned me. And... she was right. I'm unredeemable. Not because I'm a murderer, but because I'm... worthless."

“The Judge is a fool. Look at Dany. He was cast away too, yet he’s become a valuable member of the village. And a good friend. I don’t know you very well yet, but I know you have value.” When Rig sighed, Enitan felt it as if it were his own breath. “I value you.”

Enitan had no idea how to respond to that. Luckily, he was saved from deciding when Rig patted him and addressed him in a loud and cheerful voice. “The Downs isn’t just deadly, you know. It’s also beautiful.”

“Yes. The trees are nice.”

“Not just that.” He paused for a moment. “Do you think you’re up for a bit of a walk?”

That sounded wonderful. “Gods, yes.”

“Good. But let me know if you get tired or your feet start to hurt.”

“I will,” Enitan lied.

“And for the gods’ sake, keep close to me and don’t wander off the trail. I finally got you put back together and I have no intention of doing it again so soon.”

Fine. That much Enitan could do.

The soft ground was springy under his bare feet, and the narrow path provided plenty of things to look at. It didn’t seem possible that the world could contain so many shades of green. But there were also countless shades of brown and splashes of white, yellow, red, and blue from the flowers and insects they passed. At one point a dull gray snake slithered right in front of them, making Enitan jump. But Rig laughed. “Whispersnake. Harmless.”

Venomous reptiles skulked the farmland near the city and sometimes entered the city itself. Each year a few people died from bites. It figured that the only thing in the Downs that *wasn’t* dangerous was a snake.

They continued to walk for perhaps twenty minutes, and in fact Enitan was beginning to tire. But when they rounded a curve and exited the trees, he stumbled to a halt and gaped.

The ground in front of him was covered in low-growing plants that smelled like honey. They stretched before him for perhaps fifty paces, leading down a gentle slope to an enormous lake. The water extended almost as far as he could see, with a long smudge of trees on the distant bank. The surface of the lake sparkled beneath the thin clouds, and tiny wavelets lapped gently at the shore. It was like a living thing, vital and beautiful.

Not so the city that Enitan had come from. It had been built at the confluence of two rivers that flowed down from the mountains, but by the time they met at the city, they were sluggish and opaque with sediment. Even worse, where the combined waterway exited the city to roll on to the sea, it reeked of garbage and the emissions of thousands of people and animals.

Here, the lake wasn't the only wonder, because not far from its shore stood a wooden building that dwarfed Rig's little hut. It was two stories high, with a wide balcony spanning the second floor and facing the water. Both levels had windows flanked by solid-looking shutters.

"This was Ayo's favorite place," Rig said, looking out at the lake.

"Your husband?"

"Yes. I think it's what made living in such isolation bearable for him. We came here every day unless there was fog."

"I can see why."

Rig nodded. "We decided to build a house here. Something nicer than the hut. It's close enough to the Reach to hear when someone falls." He was silent for a long time, and Enitan thought that was all of the story he was going to get. But then Rig continued. "We'd barely begun the place when Ayo died. And then there didn't seem to be much point in continuing, but... I had to."

"You did this all yourself?"

"Not entirely. Dany helped, once he was well enough. It's how he learned he had the knack for it. He still helps when he comes to visit."

"But still, it's such a huge amount of work!" It seemed astounding to Enitan. Superhuman.

"I have time." Rig shrugged one shoulder. "When there's nobody to heal and I have enough food, I don't have much to occupy my time. Except this."

It also perhaps explained why Rig was so muscular. Moving the structure's massive beams and heavy boards into place would be a huge task. Not to mention felling the trees from which those components were fashioned.

"I don't think I'll ever finish it," said Rig. "That's fine. I don't need such a grand house anyway. But it keeps me busy and it's a way for me to honor Ayo's memory."

Enitan wasn't good at this sort of thing, but he knew how much better he'd felt when Rig comforted him earlier that day. So he marched across the sweet-

smelling ground and enveloped Rig in a hug. His heart broke a little when Rig whimpered and leaned against him.

It turned out that giving comfort was as nice as getting it.

Eventually they moved apart. "You should rest," Rig said. "Take a nap here if you like. It's safe. I want to work for a little while if you don't mind."

"I don't mind." Enitan turned to look at the lake. It was very inviting. "Could I bathe first? I feel... grimy." Rig had taken great care to keep Enitan's body clean during the recovery, and lately Enitan had been able to handle the task himself. But wiping himself with a cloth wasn't the same as a real bath. His hair felt especially in need of a wash.

"Help yourself. But don't go in past your knees."

"Afraid I'll drown?" Actually, Enitan was a poor swimmer, but Rig didn't need to know that.

"I hope not, because I can't swim. Anyway, you'd probably be killed by dragonfish before you drowned."

Enitan groaned. "Dragonfish?"

"Big. Pretty too, with red and yellow scales and a crest along their backs like a dragon's."

"But...?"

"They bite. Their teeth are sharp as daggers and longer than my fingers." He held up his hand to demonstrate. "The lake's full of them. The good thing is that although they'd be happy to eat you, we can also eat them. They're tasty. You've had them several times."

Enitan thought of some of the fish dinners Rig had served. They had always been very good. It was a fair enough situation, he supposed. Whoever was slower or dumber ended up as a meal.

"I'll stay in the shallows," he said.

Rig nodded, patted Enitan's arm, and lumbered off toward the house. Enitan slipped the shirt over his head, leaving him completely naked. He was going to drop it on the ground, but then he realized it could use a rinse. He didn't have soap, but perhaps letting it dry on the fragrant honey-grass would freshen it.

He carried the shirt as he entered the lake. The water was cold, but not horribly so, and the smooth pebbles of the lakebed felt good under his soles. He

waded until the water reached his shins, then crouched to scrub his shirt. Actually Rig's shirt, he remembered; Enitan owned nothing at all. He scrubbed at the coarse fabric for a while and then, hoping that was good enough, splashed back to the shore and spread the garment to dry.

When he glanced at the house, Rig was standing on the balcony. He waved at Enitan, who waved back, unselfconscious about his nudity. He'd never been prudish about his body, and besides, Rig had spent several weeks becoming intimate with every inch of Enitan's skin. Repairing that skin, in fact, until it was better than new.

Enitan returned to the lake and sat near the edge, letting the water lap over his legs and waist. He lay back and submerged his head, then scrubbed his fingers through his hair and beard. Later he'd ask Rig about a haircut and a shave. He might look less like a demon that way.

When he was as clean as he was going to get, he shifted slightly closer to the bank and reclined on his elbows with his eyes closed, almost dozing, enjoying the contrast between the chilly water and the warm air. *This* was wonderful. In the city, their house had a bathtub the servants could fill with heated water. But even with scented oils and fancy soaps at hand, it wasn't nearly as nice as a lake under a pewter-lace sky.

And then pain lanced through his hip.

Imagining teeth as long as Rig's big fingers, Enitan yelped and shot to his feet. But of course the pebbles were slippery and his legs were still a bit unreliable, so he crashed down onto his ass with a noisy splash. He tried to regain his footing but mostly ended up flailing spastically as more lances of agony attacked the parts of him that were submerged. He shouted and spluttered and flopped, finally crawling out of the lake and dragging himself slightly up the bank. His feet were still in the water when strong hands grasped him under the armpits and hauled him fully onto dry land.

"How did you get here so quickly?" Enitan rasped as Rig gently eased him onto his back. It wasn't the most important issue at the moment perhaps, but it was the one his thick and muddy head grabbed onto.

"What happened?" Rig demanded.

"Dragonfish ate me. All gone." The pain was mostly gone now too, and he felt as if he were floating a hand width above his body.

"But you're not bleeding. You're—Oh, shit. Trancebeetles. I'm so sorry, Enitan."

Enitan had no idea what Rig was talking about, and he didn't really care. "You have trees in your hair," he said, giggling.

Rig grimaced and ran an impatient hand across his head, dislodging a few large splinters. Enitan laughed harder at the ones that remained. In fact, everything was very funny. The fact that he was naked and wet, and Rig was clothed and now pretty wet himself. The honey smell of the crushed plants beneath him. The bright yellow butterfly hovering nearby, because it could probably breathe fire or inject toxins. The tickle of Rig's hands as he inspected Enitan's bottom half.

Rig looked at him with a half smile and shook his head. "I've never heard of trancebeetles affecting anyone this way. Usually people just... sit in a daze."

"I'm special!" Enitan yelled. And that was funny too because he *wasn't* special. He was worthless. "Unre... unredee..." His tongue wouldn't work properly, so he blew a raspberry instead.

"Enjoy yourself now, Enitan, because you're going to hurt like a demon in the morning."

With an attempt at seriousness, Enitan said, "No demons. Only saviors." He ruined the solemn effect by reaching for Rig and tickling his unmarred cheek. "Big sexy saviors."

"Gods give me strength," Rig said with a sigh. Then in one smooth movement, he lifted Enitan off the ground and settled him over a shoulder, head hanging and ass up. Enitan didn't mind—it gave him a nice upside-down view of Rig's ass, which unfortunately wasn't as bare as his own.

After a few steps, Rig bent his knees, and Enitan thought he'd be dumped back onto the ground. Instead, Rig scooped up Enitan's drying shirt and resumed walking.

Rig ended up carrying him all the way back to the hut, which was good, because Enitan was fairly certain he wouldn't get his legs to work properly. Anyway, it was an interesting journey because the entire world was flipped. Trees looked very funny with their crowns reaching toward the ground and the roots burrowing into the sky.

When watching them made Enitan dizzy, he concentrated instead on Rig's body. A marvelously wide back and a narrow waist, and beneath that... Enitan placed his palms on Rig's buttocks.

“Enitan!” Rig rumbled. He punctuated his complaint with a slap of Enitan’s upraised rump—which did not have the discouraging effect he probably intended.

“Nice. Strong here too. *Very* nice.” Enitan could feel each flex of muscle beneath his palms.

“If you keep that up, I’m going to drop you.”

“You never would. Never,” Enitan repeated. And then he burst into song because even though he was a terrible singer, the notes would sound better upside down. He watched them drop from his mouth and float through the reversed forest, each a different color and each capable of killing people in a slightly different way.

Rig didn’t let go of him until they were back in the hut, at which point he settled Enitan on his sleeping mat and then stood with a grunt of relief. “You are heavy.”

“Your fault. You feed me.” The entire room was slowly spinning with Enitan as its axis. He shut his eyes. “Not blind, just dizzy.”

For some reason, that made Rig laugh. “Just... hold on a few minutes.”

Enitan did hold on so he wouldn’t fall off the world. He clutched the edges of his mat. Falling was bad. Burning clouds. Broken bones. Banishment. But at the bottom there was kindness. Redemption. So maybe—No. The Judge had decided, and while Dany and others may have fallen softly, for someone like Enitan that wasn’t possible.

“I used to fight,” he said when Rig sat beside him. “Now all I have is retribution.”

Rig touched his fingers to Enitan’s hips and began to chant. Enitan hadn’t realized how much he’d missed Rig’s lullabies since the healing sessions had ended. “Should have hurt myself earlier,” he mumbled. Or maybe he just thought it. He wasn’t sure. The space in his head was blurred into the space outside, and everything was getting increasingly opaque. “Fog.”

Chapter Eight

Enitan felt like vomit smelled. His head throbbed with every heartbeat, and the lower half of his body had apparently been crumbled into pieces and then reassembled wrongly. He moaned piteously.

"I am so sorry," Rig repeated for the hundredth time as he helped Enitan drink some water.

"You're not the one who did this to me."

"But I should have warned you about the trancebeetles. Or checked for them myself." Rig sighed. "I thought it was too early in the season."

"Who looks for beetles in a lake?"

"Somebody with more sense than me. They float in the shallows for a few weeks every spring. Their stings blister flesh and, uh, affect the mind."

Enitan tried to move a leg and groaned. "Trancebeetles in the shallows, dragonfish in the deep, killer clouds above. How do any of you people stay alive?"

"Some of us don't," Rig said unhappily.

Enitan's slightly muddled brain remembered Ayo, and he felt guilty. He gave Rig's arm an awkward pat.

Rig frowned. "I shouldn't have let this happen to you."

"Gods, Rig. I am a grown man. Give me some credit for my own stupidity. Besides, you've done a fine job with the bites. The blisters are nearly gone already."

"I can do another session for you."

A new thought occurred to Enitan. "What does it cost you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Healing me. It's... You've done so much already. And power like that doesn't come free." Enitan had once been a very good fighter, but he'd earned it with hours of practice and paid for it with endless cuts and bruises. And Minna's displeasure.

After a pause, Rig shrugged slightly. "It tires me, that's all. I can rest afterward." He started to pull the blanket away from Enitan's waist.

Enitan caught his hand. “Will I heal without your help?”

“Sure, by tomorrow. But—”

“Then let me be. I’ve taken enough from you already.”

“I don’t mind. It’s what I do. Please, Eni. Let me help you.”

The nickname surprised Enitan so much that he released Rig’s hand and momentarily forgot to argue. Nobody had called him that since he was a small boy. Maybe Rig only said it because he was accustomed to shorter names, but still, it was nice. Enitan closed his eyes and listened to Rig sing.

“Nap,” Rig ordered when he was done. “A little sleep will finish the job.”

Enitan felt much better. His head had cleared, and the pain from the bites had faded to discomfort. He wasn’t especially tired, but he knew better than to argue with Rig. “Fine. But beginning tomorrow, I’m helping you build your house.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know. I want to.” Assuming he could learn a few basic construction skills, it would be a good way to repay Rig for his care, room, and board. And the work would have the added benefit of increasing Enitan’s strength. If he was going to climb back to the Reach, he needed to get serious about rebuilding his muscles.

“All right then. Tomorrow. If you feel up to it.”

“I will.”

Enitan ended up dozing after all, more from boredom than anything else. He was so damned tired of inactivity! When he woke up, he carefully stood and stretched. He was a bit achy, but that was all. “Healed,” he announced to Rig, who was working on something at the table.

Rig blinked at him and looked away. “Good.”

Enitan didn’t bother trying to cover himself before padding over to pour a cup of water. The hut was warm, and Enitan didn’t see his borrowed shirt anywhere; and besides, at this point Rig was better acquainted with Enitan’s naked body than Enitan was himself. Something nice-smelling was bubbling in a pot over the fire, and the lantern cast warm light over the cabin’s interior. The little room felt homier than the family mansion in the city ever had.

“What are you doing?” Enitan asked.

Rig seemed to be struggling with fabric, needle, and thread. He smiled slightly. "It was supposed to be a surprise but you woke up too soon."

"A surprise?"

"Not anymore." Rig held up the fabric for inspection, and Enitan saw that it was one of Rig's pairs of trousers. Rough brown fabric, plain but sturdy. One leg was shorter than the other.

"What in heavens are you doing to your clothes?" Enitan asked.

"Your clothes now. I'm shortening them. I've already taken in the waist."

"Why?"

"Because it's dangerous to do construction dressed like that." Rig flapped his hand in Enitan's direction.

Enitan grinned.

After weeks of going pantsless, wearing trousers felt odd. Rig had done a passable job tailoring them, but they chafed a bit. Enitan didn't complain though. He was getting what he wanted: a chance to work.

When they reached the lake, Enitan glared balefully at the water before enduring a lecture from Rig on the safe handling of tools. He got a tour of the unfinished interior of the house, which was very interesting, and then settled into the main room downstairs to help Rig drill holes in logs.

"Why?" Enitan asked.

"For the pegs that will hold everything together. It's important to get the placement and depth right."

That made sense. And even though Enitan was awkward with the drill at first, he soon became accomplished enough to impress. "Are you sure you've never done this before?" Rig asked after a while.

"Never even seen anyone else drill. But it's not that hard."

"Even Dany had a tough time with it at first, and he has a real talent for this kind of thing."

Enitan felt a strange mixture of jealousy and pride, neither of which was called for. "I used to fight. I told you that. It was one of the few things I was good at. And it's not really all that different from this, when you think about it."

He lifted the U-shaped drill and looked at it. "It's just using your body correctly. The careful application of strength."

"There's a big difference between a sword and a drill."

"Just metal with a handle, either way." Enitan grinned and resumed work.

That evening, Enitan's back and arms were sore. But he accompanied Rig to the lake the next day and the day after that, and the soreness went away. Together they drilled, they cut, they moved wood into place, they hammered. They joked and chatted while they worked, mostly about inconsequential things. Enitan talked about some of his lovers and some of his fights. He described everyday life in the city. Rig catalogued every toxic organism in the Downs and told funny stories about life in the village. If sometimes one of the men found his gaze lingering on the other's body, neither commented on it.

At the end of each afternoon, they checked a stretch of lake for trancebeetles before stripping and wading into the shallows to bathe. Often they laughingly splashed each other. As they played, a hand would occasionally brush against a back or shoulder or thigh, or even an ass, but it was only a game, signifying nothing.

Enitan fell onto his mat each night wonderfully exhausted, Rig's big body just out of reach.

But one morning Rig stood at the door and announced they wouldn't be going anywhere that day.

"Why not?" asked Enitan, who was still eating breakfast.

"Fog's coming. If you have anything to do outdoors, do it now. When the fog comes, we'll be inside for the rest of the day. Maybe tomorrow too."

"All right." Enitan stood, gathered the crumbs from his meal, and wandered outside. He sprinkled the crumbs on the ground, but Rig's bird didn't appear, which was unusual. It generally dove into view as soon as it caught sight of Rig—or Enitan, who'd taken to feeding it too. In fact, everything was eerily still. No birds called; no insects buzzed. There was no sign of the small furry creatures that often scurried over tree trunks. And the sky was a uniform dull gray, ugly and heavy-looking.

Enitan quickly used the outhouse and hurried back. Rig remained at the doorway, arms crossed, brow furrowed. "We have enough water and food to last us, but we're going to be stuck with the chamber pot for a while. Not very pleasant, I'm afraid."

“Maybe the fog won’t come.”

“It will.”

He was right. Enitan stood with him at the open door, watching the clouds sink closer and the light grow dim. The thicker the sky became, the harder it was for Enitan to draw breath. He didn’t remember his fall to the Downs, yet his skin seemed to recall searing agony, and his eyes were watery. Not a single sound was audible except for those slight noises made by Enitan and Rig.

“It’s time,” Rig finally said, goaded by some cue Enitan couldn’t discern. He gently pushed Enitan fully into the house and closed the door.

“Can the fog open doors?” Enitan asked, horrified, after watching Rig fasten the latch.

Rig shook his head with a wry chuckle. “No. But the lock makes me feel better.” Then he blocked the very small gap between door and threshold with a folded blanket.

If it weren’t for the fire and the lantern, the room would have been completely dark. But... the fire. That sparked a question. “Can’t the fog get in through the chimney?”

“The smoke and rising heat keep it out. And if we were to run out of firewood, we would close the damper. A couple of vents near the floor give us fresh air. They’re lined with filtermoss to neutralize out the fog.”

Frightened, Enitan ignored the part about filtermoss and looked at the substantial stack of chopped wood. “Run out of firewood?”

“It’s very unlikely. But we have enough food and water and lanternseed oil to last about two weeks, if we’re careful.”

Enitan shuddered. “Is that—”

“Probably unnecessary. It almost never lasts more than a day or two. The longest I’ve ever seen it was six days. But there are stories about fogs that remained for longer than that. I won’t have you dying of dehydration or going insane in the darkness just because I was unprepared.”

An unexpectedly warm feeling pulsed through Enitan’s chest. Rig was looking out for him. “I was in the dark when I first arrived here. I wouldn’t be scared or go crazy as long as you were with me.”

Rig’s crooked smile made him beautiful.

At first, passing the time was not difficult. They occupied themselves with small tasks such as cleaning, food preparation, and mending clothes. Sometimes they just sat, each lost in his own thoughts. But shortly before dinnertime, when Enitan was beginning to get bored, Rig rummaged in a wooden chest and, with a triumphant noise, pulled out a small box. He carried it to the table and began taking out small carved figures.

“What’s that?” Enitan asked, coming close to see better.

“Mice and burrows. It’s a game. Can I teach you to play?”

Enitan took the second stool. “All right.”

The game had complicated rules and he was very bad at it, but that didn’t bother him. Playing kept them busy, and Enitan’s losses were spectacular enough to make Rig laugh. Not cruelly. Just... amused. Enitan couldn’t help laughing with him, but as he looked at the sparkle in Rig’s eyes, it occurred to him that Rig must usually spend fogtimes locked up in solitude.

By the time Rig doused the lantern, Enitan yearned to touch him. But he didn’t. They lay on their sleeping mats an arm’s width apart.

A swift look through the peephole in the morning revealed the fog still there. Rig and Enitan ate, they cleaned, they played mice and burrows. They went to sleep early.

Midmorning on the third day, the cabin reeked of the chamber pot and unwashed bodies. Enitan paced restlessly. Several years earlier, he’d attended a party at the home of a Council member. The family was considerably wealthier than his own, their house much grander, their gardens far more spectacular. The centerpiece of the largest garden was an iron cage; and inside the cage, a ragged-looking cockatrice moved back and forth, back and forth, its glazed eyes never blinking. Now Enitan knew how the creature felt.

“Play another round of mice and burrows with me,” Rig suggested.

“So you can trounce me again?”

“I’ll let you go first. Maybe you’ll have good luck this time.”

Enitan shook his head and continued walking.

“If you don’t stop, I am going to tie you to the table.”

Although that gave Enitan a pleasant image of the games he sometimes played with his bedmates, he growled. “Try it. You may be big, but I can fight.”

An odd light kindled in Rig's eyes just before he launched himself and tackled Enitan.

Rig was considerably bigger—heavier, and with a longer reach. But he had the temperament of a healer. On the other hand, Enitan had been sparring since he was a child. He knew exactly what moves to make, how to judge his opponent's weaknesses and take advantage of them, how to precisely leverage his own bones and muscles to control another man. Enitan was careful not to injure Rig, but several minutes of rolling around on the floor ended with Rig pinned facedown while Enitan straddled his body and kept his wrists trapped behind his back.

Rig struggled a moment or two longer before going limp beneath him. "You are really good at fighting."

"And you're as bad at wrestling as I am at mice and burrows."

When Rig sighed, his entire body moved. "I suppose so."

Enitan released his hands, but Rig made no attempt to dislodge him. And Enitan didn't move either because it felt good to sit on top of him. Not because it made him feel triumphant. It was body contact, and he'd been missing that.

But then his stupid cock began to harden. The last thing Enitan wanted was an unpleasant scene when neither of them could leave the cabin, so with a regretful little grunt, he climbed off. He offered a hand to help Rig stand, and if Rig squeezed a little too hard, well, Enitan couldn't blame him.

Enitan walked to the door and pounded it impotently. "Damn Minna!" he spat.

"Your sister is capable of bringing down the fog?"

"No. Although I'd wager she wishes she could. She likes to control things."

"So why blame her now?"

Enitan turned his back to the door and slid down into a sit. He bent his knees, wrapped his arms around them, and leaned against the door. "Because she trapped me here."

"Is that really such a terrible fate?" asked Rig, sounding angry.

"This isn't my home."

"But it can be. Don't you see that? Just like it became Dany's."

“I’m not Dany!” Enitan roared. And he wasn’t sorry for yelling. He was not a sweet boy who’d happily forget his past and accept a new life. He was good at building things, but no prodigy. And he had no intention of meeting up with Rig once a month to scratch their mutual itch.

“That’s not what I meant,” Rig answered quietly. Then he sat on one of the stools and faced the low flames in the fireplace, smoothing his hair back from his face.

Neither of them said anything for a long time. Eventually Rig broke the silence. Still not looking at Enitan, he said, “You shouldn’t go back to the city.”

No use denying it. “Why not?”

“Because nothing waits for you there.”

“Revenge.”

Rig snorted. “Revenge has no magic. It won’t change what’s already happened. And what will happen to you when it’s over?”

Enitan shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.” He’d never heard of anyone returning from the Downs, and he didn’t know what the penalty would be. Another brutal trip across the Reach, another fall? Maybe they’d just kill him.

“Why can’t you see more worth in yourself?” Rig asked in a strained voice. “Why can’t you see your value?”

“What value is that?” Enitan’s mouth tasted bitter.

Rig stood, crossed the room, and crouched beside him. Even like that, he was huge. A solid wall of a man. “You’re a fighter.”

“And how does that do anyone any good? Are you planning to go to war, Rig? Who needs to be fought?”

“Not who. What.” With a grunt, Rig sat in front of him. “We have to fight the Downs.”

Enitan narrowed his eyes. “How? You want me punch the dragonfish and stab the arrow beetles? Choke the fog into submission?”

“No. But I want you to get up again after the fog has scoured you and the trancebeetles have bitten you. I want you to keep on living and hoping, even though you know there are a million things that can hurt you.”

The anger drained away from Enitan at once, leaving him weary. “I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can.”

When Enitan shook his head, Rig inched closer. “You should have died when you fell, Eni. As hard as I worked to save you, it shouldn’t have been enough. I’ve... I’ve tried my best to heal people who were injured far less than you, but they didn’t survive. You did.”

“Luck.”

“Fighting.”

When Enitan didn’t answer, Rig closed the remaining space between them so his crossed legs rested against Enitan’s shins. “It’s hard to live here. It’s a struggle every day, and the people who don’t struggle hard enough, they die. I’ve seen it so many times. My parents, my brother and sister, my friends.”

Enitan moved his legs just a little, increasing the pressure against Rig. “Fighting never got me anywhere. Where does it get you?”

“Through the day. I drag my scarred body onto my sleeping mat and close my eyes, and I know I beat the Downs again.”

That was the thing. Enitan never fought because he cared about winning. He never fought *for* anything. He did it because he could, because... well, because it would make Minna angry. Because it was another way to use his body when he couldn’t fuck. Nothing noble about it. Just boredom and an adolescent desire to irk his sister. He’d won a lot of his fights—most of them, as a matter of fact—but he never beat a thing.

“Ayo didn’t want to come here,” Rig said suddenly. “He liked the village and was a social person. He was a tailor. He’d spend all day sitting with his needles and cloth, chatting with me or anyone else who came into sight. I used to tease him that he even talked in his sleep.” Rig’s voice was low and rumble, warm as a hearth fire.

“Was he handsome?” Enitan asked.

“Not especially. Objectively, he had a beaky nose and a pointy chin, and his hair grew in the most unmanageable tufts. He was chubby. But I loved him, so he was beautiful. And he smiled more than anyone I’ve known.”

Rig smiled, too, remembering. Then he sobered. “I already told you the tradition that if more than one person in the village can heal, they take turns here near the Reach. One year at a time. But there were a few of us, and I hadn’t had a turn yet, not until after Ayo and I pledged to each other. We were

still young. Then it *was* my turn. I knew it would be hard on him, and I told him he could stay in the village, but he refused. Didn't want to be separated he said."

"He loved you too."

"Yes."

They were already touching, but Rig moved closer still, almost pinning Enitan to the door. Enitan spread his legs wide around Rig's hips so they could have more contact. It was a strange configuration but not unpleasant.

"At first it was sort of fun being here, just the two of us," Rig continued. "We had all the privacy in the world. I can be... loud. During sex. Which had always embarrassed him a little. But here we could both scream and nobody would hear. Sometimes the night sprites screamed back." He settled his hands on Enitan's shoulders, and Enitan reciprocated.

"I'm noisy too," Enitan said. Minna had hated that.

"We were here two months when the first person fell. I couldn't save him. Then a few months later another one came. He lived for three days in terrible pain before dying. I was... It was very difficult. So when we heard screams for the third time, a few months after that, I was very eager to keep that one alive. The problem was that the fog was coming."

Oh. Enitan shivered slightly with the ghost of pain.

Rig squeezed his shoulders. "Ayo begged me not to go outside. But I thought I had to. I was a healer. I yelled at Ayo to stay put, I grabbed a thick blanket, and I ran into the woods."

It wasn't Enitan's story and it had happened years ago, but his heart raced and his stomach clenched. "What happened?"

"He was dead already when I found him. Nothing left but..." He swallowed thickly. "He'd been in the clouds a long time as he fell. I draped the blanket over my head and raced back to the cabin. I'm strong, but I'm not a fast runner. Ayo could beat me in a race every time. I felt the moisture begin to sting, I ran faster, I panicked, I must have cried out... And then Ayo was there. He slammed me to the ground with the weight of his body and the godsdamned bastard thunked my head hard enough to knock me out."

Rig was speaking in a whisper now, but Enitan was very close and could clearly hear every painful word. Enitan reminded himself that he wasn't the

only human who suffered, and he recalled how comforting Rig's touch had been even when Enitan thought him a demon. So now Enitan pulled him close in a tight embrace.

Sighing, Rig rested his head on Enitan's shoulder. "Thank you."

Merciful gods, how could Enitan ever have mistaken this good, strong man for a monster?

"When I woke up, Ayo was still on top of me. He'd managed to get the blanket over us but..." He shuddered. "But the fabric wasn't enough. The fog had eaten through it. It had eaten through Ayo as well."

"Rig—"

"I was lucky. The fog didn't last long that day and it was gone by the time I woke up. I don't remember that time well. I know I carried Ayo's body back to the cabin. But he was shorter than me and couldn't shield me completely."

To show his understanding, Enitan brushed his fingers along the scars on Rig's cheek. "With nobody here to heal you, the pain must have been unimaginable."

"The pain in my body was nothing compared to the agony in my heart." He dropped his voice to a low whisper. The words were barely audible, even though Enitan's ear was inches from Rig's mouth. "I wanted to die. Yet I fought to live."

Enitan squeezed him again, understanding the feeling. He'd known it himself from the moment Minna confronted him, a letter in her hand and two constables at her side. She'd pasted a look of shocked outrage on her face, but her eyes were bright with triumph. Enitan had known then that he was doomed. As he awaited his trial—foreseeing the outcome—he'd even considered taking his own life. He'd gone so far as to break one of the cheap pottery bowls in which his prison meals were served, poisoning a shard against his wrist. But he couldn't force himself to press the point into his soft flesh.

"I'm glad you lived," he told Rig, petting his back.

Rig barked a laugh. "If I hadn't, another healer would have found you. You'd still have been saved."

"That's not what I meant. I'm glad you're alive. The world is a better place with you in it."

Rig drew back so he could look Enitan in the face. "I feel the same about you."

“Right. Because my contributions have been so outstanding.”

“It’s not about contributions, Eni. It’s about *you*.”

“You’re wrong about me,” Enitan said, shaking his head. “I can fight, but I’m weak. I never made the effort to do something with myself. I never stood up to my sister, never told her I’d run my own life. I gave myself over to petty disobedience like a wayward child. I killed my father.”

“And I killed Ayo.”

“You didn’t—”

“You can blame yourself and your sister and destroy the both of you. Or you can heal, move on. Perhaps even find a way to improve someone’s life.” To make his point, Rig dropped a quick kiss over Enitan’s right eye—an eye that would have been sightless if not for Rig’s work. Then he slowly stood and stretched. “I’d like another round of mice and burrows.”

For a long moment, Enitan looked up at him. Then he too rose to his feet. “You’ll beat me again.”

“Then we can wrestle afterward, and you can beat me.” Rig smiled.

Chapter Nine

By morning the fog had lifted, although the sky was still leaden. When Enitan stepped outside, he took deep breaths. He felt as if his lungs hadn't worked properly for days. The tree boughs drooped dispiritedly, and the smaller green things looked slightly crushed. Yet Rig's bird was there in the little clearing, hopping impatiently and scolding them for having left the clouds on the ground for so long. Other birds swooped and twittered, clearly as thrilled to be released from their hiding places as Enitan was from his.

"The Downs must be so strange under the fog, with nothing moving anywhere," said Enitan.

Rig stood beside him in front of the hut, scratching his scant beard. "A few species of bugs can withstand the fog. Special shells, I suppose."

"How do you know?" Enitan wasn't really all that curious about the subject, but some pointless conversation felt good.

"If you leave food or refuse out in the fog, you'll find it half eaten later, with the bugs still munching happily away. And... corpses. They'll eat those too."

Horried, Enitan turned to look at him. "Ayo?"

Rig shrugged. "It's what we do here when someone dies. We leave the body for the insects to strip, and then we keep the bones with those of our ancestors. There's a special bone house in the village."

In the city, the dead were burned. Among the wealthy, the ashes were worked into the soil of their gardens. Those who were too poor to have their own gardens took the ashes to one of the public parks. Enitan hadn't been there to see his father's ashes planted—he'd been in prison at the time, awaiting his trial.

Perhaps Rig mistook the reason for Enitan's frown. He patted Enitan's shoulder. "It's not such a bad place, the bone house. It's very old and beautifully made, and it's peaceful. When I lived in the village I used to go there sometimes, just to sit. I'd talk to my family members and I could almost imagine they heard me."

"Do you go...? Is Ayo there?"

Rig smiled and patted his chest. “Ayo is here. I don’t need to visit the bone house for him.”

Enitan’s own chest ached a bit. Alive or dead, he’d never live in anyone’s heart. He gave Rig what he hoped was a cheery smile. “Can we go to the lake today? I’d really like to wash properly.”

“Me too.”

They didn’t see any trancebeetles in the water, so they were both able to splash in the shallows for a long time, scrubbing and soaking and enjoying being clean. Enitan tried not to notice that Rig was naked, that his hard body was beautiful with droplets running down it—scars and all. After they were thoroughly waterlogged, they sat on the bank to dry. Rig smilingly produced a razor from the folds of his clothes and handed it to Enitan, who was soon thrilled to be rid of his bothersome beard.

The air hugged their bodies closely, keeping them warm, and neither man hurried to get dressed. It was pleasant enough to be outdoors watching the water ripple.

“How much longer until you finish your house?” Enitan asked. The structure was already quite imposing, with many rooms inside.

“Never,” Rig answered placidly.

“But...”

“It keeps me occupied.”

Enitan was fairly certain that boredom wasn’t the only prompt for continual construction. If the building never ended, Ayo’s memory remained that much more alive. But Enitan didn’t comment on this. Instead he asked something he’d been wondering for a while. “Why haven’t you returned to the village and let another healer take a turn here?”

“This is my work. And the others have families.” Rig stood suddenly and began to gather his clothes. “I’m hungry. Let’s see if we’ve caught any dragonfish. They’re easier to trap during fog.”

The traps held several of the big fish. After Rig slaughtered them quickly and carefully—they snapped at him even as they died—he gutted and cleaned them, then stuffed the meat into woven bags that he’d stashed nearby. He and Enitan each carried a bag back to the cabin, where Rig fried a little of their catch, put some of it in a stew, and brined the rest to smoke later.

Enitan and Rig ate well.

The afternoon was packed with various tasks: tending Rig's small garden, airing their sleeping mats, and scrubbing and refilling the water storage vessels. Enitan and Rig worked together without much talk. Late in the day, while a bit of sunlight still filtered through the scudding clouds, they sat in front of the cabin and tossed bits of food at the bird. Sometimes the bird hopped so close they could almost touch it, but it didn't eat all the tidbits at once. It flew away into the trees with the choicer ones, only to reappear a moment later and demand more.

"I wonder if it has babies to feed," Rig said quietly. He looked pleased at the idea.

"You might be supporting an entire family."

"Maybe."

How had a place as deadly as the Downs produced such a gentle, good man? The same way, perhaps, that a sumptuous mansion in the city produced a brutish, stupid one.

They didn't go inside until the darkness was complete, and they moved slowly as they stretched out their mats and prepared dinner. Dinner was fish, of course, along with some flatbread Rig cooked in a pan. Afterward they played a few rounds of mice and burrows. Enitan almost won the last game, but he was fairly certain that Rig had allowed it.

With the lantern doused and the fire banked, they undressed and lay on their mats. Enitan waited for Rig's breathing to even out, but the usual soft snores didn't come. Finally after what felt like hours, Enitan rolled to face him. "Are you all right?" he asked. He could sense Rig's bulk but not see it.

Rig paused before responding. "Yes." He didn't sound all right, though. His voice was hoarse.

Without a conscious decision to do so, Enitan stood, pushed his mat against Rig's, and then lay back down.

"What—" Rig began, but Enitan interrupted him by rolling close and flinging his arm across Rig's torso.

Rig went very still—Enitan couldn't even feel him breathing—and then nuzzled the top of Enitan's head. "What are you doing, Eni?"

"What I've been wanting to do for some time."

“Why?”

“Because...” Enitan didn’t have an answer. Who could understand the topography of want, the calculus of desire? All he knew was that Rig’s body felt lovely and every spot of skin-on-skin contact was like a balm to his bleeding soul.

But he couldn’t assume that just because he yearned for this, Rig felt the same. “Do you want this too?”

Rig answered on a long exhale, almost a moan. “Yeeees.”

That was all the urging Enitan needed. He impatiently kicked the blankets away and rolled on top of Rig, loving the unusual experience of mounting a body larger than his own. He kissed Rig’s face—soft presses of lips to brow, to cheeks, to nose—and he kissed his lips before focusing on his jawline and corded neck.

At first, Rig didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. For some reason, hesitancy in a man who was usually confident and competent sharpened Enitan’s hunger. Enitan sucked on Rig’s skin, no doubt leaving marks that would cause smiles in the morning.

Rig made another long, low sound—this one *definitely* a moan—as he firmly squeezed Enitan’s ass. “You’re better at this than fighting.”

Enitan laughed. “I told you. My skills are few but they’re first-rate. And I haven’t even begun with you tonight.”

When Rig laughed in return and gave him an extra squeeze, Enitan felt something akin to joy.

They had all night. Neither of them had to leave for duties elsewhere, and Minna would not come pounding at the door and peppering them with scornful words as they emerged. So although Enitan and Rig had seen each other naked many times already, they took time to explore. Not with eyes—the room was dark; and besides, vision lied—but with fingers and tongues. Sometimes even with gentle teeth.

And it was true; Rig was loud. He groaned and panted and cried out incoherently, and when Enitan took Rig’s thick salty cock into his mouth, Rig keened.

It had been a long time since Enitan gave head. And gods, Rig tasted good, and his heavy cock pulsed deliciously against Enitan’s tongue. Enitan very

much wanted to keep it there, to make Rig writhe and scream, to milk him of his essence and swallow every drop. But he wanted more than that too.

Enitan released Rig's cock with an obscene-sounding *pop* and slithered up his body. Rig tugged lightly on his hair. "Maybe you're the demon. You certainly seem intent on torturing me." He was more than slightly breathless.

"Hmm." Enitan resisted the urge to slide his aching prick along Rig's belly. He kissed Rig—long, hard, openmouthed—letting Rig taste himself on Enitan's tongue. Letting Rig know that a bit of himself had already entered Enitan's body. But Enitan wanted more than a bit. "Fuck me," he whispered into Rig's ear.

Rig shuddered beneath him. "Are you sure, Eni?"

"I've never been more sure of anything."

"But after what happened to you on the Reach..." Of course. Rig had seen the damage to the most intimate parts of Enitan's body. He'd healed that damage with his touch.

"That's why," Enitan whispered. He didn't say the rest—that Rig would cleanse him. That Enitan wanted his final time to be not with sadistic rapists but rather with a kind man who cared for him.

Rig kissed Enitan's brow. "Then I'd very much like to make love to you."

Enitan would have laughed at the quaint wording. Make love? That's not what a man like Enitan was for. But he gasped when Rig bent to suck his nipple. They rolled over and Rig applied his mouth nearly everywhere, so that soon Enitan lay splayed beneath him, as needy as a creature could be, yet pliant from the stimulation to his sensitive nerves. "Please," he begged raggedly in response to Rig's exquisite torture.

"Just a moment," said Rig, and Enitan nearly sobbed when he stood and walked away.

But he returned quickly, and now his fingers were slick as he teased them around Enitan's sphincter. "Cooking oil," he said in response to Enitan's unasked question. "Not fancy, but it does the trick." And then he gradually eased Enitan's tight muscles, softening and stretching until Enitan was ready to resort to threats.

"Now, Rig!" he managed to whimper.

Rig withdrew his fingers. Enitan immediately and wantonly hooked his ankles over Rig's broad shoulders. "Now!" Enitan repeated.

And it seemed as if Rig was going to obey, because he repositioned himself slightly, leaning forward and pressing the head of his cock to Enitan's ready entrance. But he didn't push in. "Eni?"

"What?"

"Will you... let me try something?"

At that moment, Enitan would have probably allowed Rig to dismember him if that was what it took to move things along. "Anything."

"You can tell me to stop and I will."

"Go, Rig!"

Rig did, pushing inside Enitan with frustrating slowness and care. Enitan tugged at Rig's hips in an effort to speed things along, but Rig chuckled roughly and remained unhurried. Then he did something that made Enitan gasp in surprise. Rig began to sing.

It was not one of his lullabies. This song was deeper, wilder, rougher. It was not a song to soothe but rather to arouse. Every note burned through their joined bodies like a flame through kindling. Enitan didn't understand the words, but that hardly mattered. He knew what they meant. Rig sang of possession, of desire, of cherishing, of pleasing and being pleased, of needs both primal and divine.

Enitan felt every thrust—each to the rhythm of the song—and every stroke of his own palm on his cock. He felt the heat of their bodies together and the little droplets of sweat that fell from Rig onto him. And that was all very lovely, but even more than that, he felt the singing, the tune building within him as Rig increased his speed and volume, the notes so loud and clear that the whole Downs seemed to shake with them.

Enitan shook too. And when Rig reached a crescendo, Enitan tasted the song, saw the words dancing like colored lights in the darkened room. He screamed as his climax crashed through him like a river through a broken dam.

At some point after that, Rig withdrew from Enitan's body, fetched a damp cloth, and cleaned them both up. Enitan lay there, limp and dazed. Then Rig lay down, took Enitan into his arms, and kissed his cheek.

"I'm still better at fighting," Enitan mumbled.

"Agreed."

That settled, Rig snuggled more tightly against him. Gods, Enitan rarely slept with anyone. This would be nice even without the mind-blowing sex that preceded it. But before he could fall asleep, Rig kissed him again. “Eni?”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t do that with Dany. Until now, I’ve only done that with Ayo, and even with him it was only rarely. Dany and I have sex and it’s good, but I don’t...”

“What *did* you just do?”

“It’s part of my gift. It’s a kind of healing, isn’t it? A special kind.”

Enitan tried to process this with his muzzy mind. It made sense, he decided after a few moments. Maybe sex—making love—with Rig hadn’t cured him of anything, but he certainly felt as if he’d been dosed with some very good medicine.

“Thank you,” he said.

Rig chuckled. “It’s no hardship. Healing a wound tires me, but what we just did? That feels wonderful.”

“Wonderful,” Enitan agreed. He burrowed his head into the crook of Rig’s neck and enjoyed the final taste he’d ever have of safety and love.

Chapter Ten

For the next few days, Enitan kept a careful distance from Rig. He separated their sleeping mats and kept his clothes on at night, and although he worked with Rig at the house by the lake, Enitan never touched him. Rig kept casting him troubled looks but didn't ask for an explanation for the sudden change in climate.

Not that Enitan didn't want to touch Rig, to sleep with him. Gods, he spent hours turning restlessly in the darkened hut; and when he finally did fall asleep, he dreamed of Rig. It would have been so easy to entice Rig back to him. But that would have been a theft, and although Enitan was unredeemable, he was not a thief.

It was another reason to hate Minna, really. If she hadn't damned him, he wouldn't have fallen into the Downs. Rig wouldn't have found him and healed him. They wouldn't have made love. And Enitan wouldn't have abandoned him, no doubt leaving Rig angry and bereft.

Maybe, Enitan thought, after he dealt with Minna he could make his way to the Judge, and he could exact vengeance on that bitch as well.

Four days after the fog lifted, the day dawned so brightly that Enitan squinted up at the sky. It was the same color as Rig's bird, which was greedily gathering crumbs from their breakfast. "No clouds," Enitan said. He hoped his calm voice hid his racing heart.

Rig looked at him sidelong. "Maybe my friends from the village will come today. We're running a little low on supplies." He paused. "You can go with them when they return home."

Instead of answering, Enitan tossed a few more tidbits to the bird. It knew him so well by now that it would sometimes peck at his bare toes if he was too slow at feeding it.

After a time, Rig turned to him. "A dip in the lake would be nice today, don't you think? And I'd like to gather some stones for the hearth in my house. We don't have enough." The house by the lake had an enormous fireplace. Enitan could stand inside it without stooping. "Help me pack a lunch. We can eat there."

"I'll help with lunch, but I'm not going." Voice flat, matter-of-fact. Face expressionless. Stomach turning itself inside out. He marched to the hut as if everything were settled.

But Rig grabbed his arm as Enitan passed him. “Come with me, Eni. Please.” He looked as if the final word cost him a great deal.

The nickname almost broke Enitan, but not quite. “Not today,” he said quietly, and he gently pulled his arm from Rig’s grip. He entered the cabin, where he began to assemble food for Rig’s midday meal: leftover flatbread, smoked dragonfish, a few small red fruits that tasted bland but were, according to Rig, good for one’s blood. Rig watched silently as Enitan stuffed the food into a cloth bag.

“I won’t let you—” Rig began when Enitan held the bag toward him.

“If we fight, I’ll win. And I’ll tie you up. Your friends from the village can rescue you.”

“I’ll tie *you* up,” Rig said, jaw tight.

“You can’t. And even if you could, then what? You’d keep me chained up forever? Could you do that to me, Rig?”

When Rig’s eyes welled with tears, Enitan’s heart shattered. But the tears didn’t fall, and Enitan didn’t yield. He’d *warned* Rig. He’d told him what he was.

Rig still hadn’t taken the bag from him, so Enitan grabbed Rig’s big hand and pressed the cloth against the palm until Rig curled his fingers. Gods, those fingers. Enitan shivered with the memory of them against his skin.

Rig seemed to misunderstand the reason for Enitan’s shudder. “The scars. I can ask one of the other healers to work on them. I don’t know if they’ll disappear entirely, but—”

Enitan touched the marred side of Rig’s face. “This has nothing to do with the scars. You’re a beautiful man, inside and out. I’m not. I’m ugly.”

“I’d hoped to help you see otherwise.”

Enitan had to look away. “Go work on your house.”

Without another word, Rig left.

Enitan hadn’t known it was possible to feel simultaneously deeply relieved and completely bereft. He stood inside the cabin for quite some time, rubbing his head and feeling ill. He would have liked to write Rig a letter, to thank him. To tell him that if Enitan had been capable, he would have loved Rig. But there was no parchment in the cabin, or ink; and anyway, Enitan had no idea if Rig could read. It didn’t seem a very necessary skill in the Downs.

In the end, Enitan had to do Rig another disservice—he stole his borrowed shirt and pants. He'd become a thief after all. He stuffed some dried meat into his pocket, filled a waterskin, and tied it to his waist.

That was all, he thought, taking a final look around the cabin. Odd how the little room felt more like home than his family's mansion ever had.

His feet had toughened over the past weeks, so he felt no discomfort as he left the cabin and ventured into the woods. He didn't take the well-worn path, instead traveling a fainter trail almost overgrown with vines and seedlings. He took care to avoid the plants Rig had warned him about—the ones that stung or had thorns or caused rashes.

Where had Rig fallen when the fog had caught him? In which spot had he lay unconscious, his skin peeling, as his lover died atop him? And merciful gods, how had Rig stood again and *lived*? How had he kept himself from turning bitter—from hating the fog and the Downs and the villagers who had sent him away? And the cursed city dwellers who fell, robbing him of everything?

Enitan's eyes stung, but he continued walking.

It didn't take him long to get to... the edge. There was no other name for it. The trees and brush stopped abruptly, as if they wanted to avoid the slopes of the Reach, and the last forty paces of the Downs contained nothing but bare, rocky soil. The steep incline began so suddenly that Enitan stood with one foot on completely flat land and one foot beginning to climb. He looked up and up, but he couldn't see the top. He couldn't believe he'd fallen so far and survived. Of course, he wouldn't have if it weren't for Rig.

That thought was enough to set him moving. Along with the realization that although the sky was currently an innocent blue, nothing stopped clouds from reforming. He imagined himself halfway up, the vapor beginning to coalesce, his flesh peeling, his eyes going opaque, his body spiraling down and down. Rig wouldn't be there to save him this time. Probably wouldn't want to, now that Enitan had abandoned him. And anyway, Enitan could not go through that agony again. He'd prefer to die.

The ground on the slope was softer than he expected. He crawled upwards on all fours, fingers and toes digging in for purchase. His back began to ache almost at once. Quite often, he slid back down a ways, desperately scrambling to regain his grasp. By the time he came to a slightly flatter bit where he could rest for a few moments, every muscle in his body was sore. But he still had a long distance to go.

He drank some water and ate some dried meat, and then he resumed his ascent.

The day was impossibly long. Hours after it seemed that the sun should have set, it continued to shine above him. He began to believe that he'd always been climbing that endless slope. Maybe that was the truth of the Downs—the demons taunted a man with false tastes of kindness, then set him to a perpetual, impossible task.

Then he began to laugh, and the sound was not sane even to his own ears. But he couldn't help it. He'd been struck by the irony of his fate. First he'd fallen to love and kindness, and now he was rising—still fucking rising—to hatred and revenge and destruction. The gods had made a very good plaything of him.

He crawled and he crawled, and he constantly expected the clouds to appear. He could almost feel them watching. His fingers sank into the gritty soil, and his nails cracked and bled. Stones dug into his palms and his knees. Dust caked his skin, made his dry mouth taste like iron, coated his lungs.

When he reached the top—the edge of the Reach—his mind didn't register it, and he continued to creep across the ground. Only when his arms and legs gave out and he collapsed completely did he realize that his face was buried in stubby grass, not bare earth. And his prone body lay completely, blessedly flat.

Enitan began to cry. Sour tears ran from his eyes and soaked at once into the parched ground. *Why not?* he thought brokenly. He'd already watered the Reach with his blood. He told himself that he sobbed with relief at surviving the climb out of the Downs, but he knew it was a lie. Fine then. He cried at the memory of what had been done to him in this place, the abuses those three men had inflicted on his body and his soul. Surely those memories were reason enough to weep. And then there were the losses he'd suffered. His father, his freedom, his friends, his home.

Any other losses he'd had? Those were his own damned fault and gave him no excuse to wail like a baby.

He eventually rose to his feet, though his legs wobbled and he knew he wouldn't last long. The blue sky had darkened to indigo, and the sun had disappeared over the edge of the Reach. Perhaps a few last rays still shone on parts of the Downs. But here, night was falling.

He knew he wouldn't find shelter, a thought that terrorized him until he remembered that he need no longer fear the fog. He could sleep safely—if not

very comfortably—right where he stood. The only real risk was that another poor wretch might be transported across the Reach and the three sadistic keepers would catch sight of Enitan. But that was unlikely. And besides, he could see the route the wagon and the yaley-beasts had made through the grass. He chose a sitting spot well away from it, but not so far that he'd be unable to find the path in the morning.

He took out the waterskin, swooshed a bit of liquid inside his dry mouth, and swallowed. Then he ate half of the remaining meat. He'd go hungry at least a day before arriving at the city, but that was all right. Rig had kept him well fed, and a day without meals wouldn't starve him. On the other hand, he needed to conserve his water, so he drank only a few more sips before replacing the stopper.

Enitan stood, and like a dog settling down to sleep, he turned in a circle a few times, hoping to press the grass down a bit. The ends were prickly, but if he could lay the blades flat, they might cushion the ground. The grass was tough, however, and resisted his bare feet.

He sighed and cast one final look through the twilight in the direction of the Downs. And saw the outline of a human figure approaching.

Chapter Eleven

Enitan had nowhere to hide, and he was far too sore and weary to run. But he could still fight. Gods, he could always fight. So he stood his ground, his legs planted firmly and his hands balled into fists. If this was one of the men who'd brutalized him before throwing him over the edge, Enitan would not be so helpless this time.

But the half-moon had risen, casting enough light for Enitan to discern the shape of the approaching man. Tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, long-legged. He recognized the silhouette long before he could make out the face.

"Rig," Enitan said when the man was close enough. It was hard to get that single syllable past his tight throat.

Rig stopped just out of reach. He was breathing heavily, and Enitan could smell him: dust, woodsmoke, sweat. But Rig didn't say anything. He simply stood, as solid as the Reach itself.

"Why?" Enitan finally managed to ask.

"Did you think I was just going to let you go? What if you fell?"

"What if *you* fell?"

Rig shrugged—a small movement of a dark shape against the dark sky.

His nonchalance made Enitan want to burst into tears again. Instead, he rushed forward and slammed his hands hard into Rig's chest, making Rig stagger back. "I don't want you!" Enitan yelled. "Can't you see that? Go away!"

Rig surged forward, and for a split second Enitan thought they were going to fight again. But before he could prepare to give and take blows, Rig wrapped his arms around Enitan and held him tight. It was an embrace, not a wrestling hold, a fact emphasized by the soft brush of lips against Enitan's temple. "No," Rig said. Quietly but firmly.

Enitan didn't even have the strength to struggle. He returned the hug, rested his forehead against Rig's shoulder, and sighed. "I've been called stubborn, but apparently I'm an amateur."

"I'd say you're pretty good at it, Eni."

"You have to go now. Nothing good waits for you here. I'll end up killing you and I can't—"

Rig pushed Enitan's shoulders away and looked him carefully in the eyes. The moon gave just enough light for Enitan to see the seriousness of Rig's expression. "You did not kill your father," Rig said. "And as for me... Well, you do what you have to do. The decisions I make are my own, and the consequences are nobody's fault but mine."

"Do you think you can throw yourself over me when I face Minna? Sacrifice yourself so I don't get burned? There's no fog here, Rig."

Winching slightly as if the allusion hurt him, Rig maintained his grip on Enitan's shoulders. "I don't want to die. But what waits for me in the Downs? Memories. A house I'll never finish. A pity fuck from Dany every few weeks. I'd..." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "I'd rather take my chances here with you. Maybe have a few more good days. I'm not leaving you."

They could have this argument all night, but Enitan didn't think his legs would hold him upright much longer, and Rig had to be equally exhausted. "I need to sleep," Enitan said.

Not surprisingly, Rig had come much better prepared than Enitan. He wore a makeshift pack, and although he didn't remove all the contents, he produced water and more food—smoked fish and some kind of salty nuts—as well as a rolled sleeping mat and a blanket. He and Enitan ate a little and drank quite a bit. Then Rig spread the mat on the ground. It was quite narrow for two big men, but he didn't complain and Enitan didn't mind. Dirty, sore, and weary, they lay on their sides with Rig spooning Enitan from behind and the blanket pulled over them both. They fell asleep at once.

Every bit of Enitan's body hurt when he woke up. He stood and tried to stretch some of the tightness from his muscles, but it didn't help much. And when he sat opposite Rig to eat some breakfast, Rig hissed and grabbed his hands. "You're injured."

It was true—beneath the caked-in dirt, Enitan's fingernails were blackened and bloody. But he only raised an eyebrow at Rig, whose hands were in equally poor shape. Undeterred, Rig began to sing one of his lullabies.

"Don't!" Enitan tried to pull his hands away, but Rig grinned smugly and held him fast. And although Enitan didn't want to be fussed over, well, it felt really nice. Within minutes the song was over and his hands—still filthy—were healed.

“But who will heal yours?” he asked when Rig finally let him go.

“Time.”

Enitan huffed at him. “But you said it tires you, and—”

“Bringing a man from the brink of death tires me. This was a very small matter. And there’s no point in both of us hurting.”

Scowling, Enitan conceded the point. But he made Rig sit while he folded the mat and blanket and tucked them in the pack, and he made sure Rig got the larger share of breakfast as well.

Then they began to walk toward the city.

If it weren’t for the faint tracks through the grass, Enitan would have lost his way. The Reach stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction, and each league they walked was as featureless as the one before. Although Enitan and Rig kept putting one foot in front of the other, it felt as if they were staying in one place.

An hour or two into their journey, Rig took Enitan’s hand. He held it loosely, not saying a word. Enitan pulled away. But a moment later Rig grabbed him again. Only then did it occur to Enitan that the Reach might be frightening to a man used to the Downs—aside from the wagon tracks, no landmarks; no birds or insects or small, scurrying animals; nothing taller than their ankles; no shelter in sight.

“There’s no fog here,” Enitan said.

“I know.”

“And nothing here can sting us or bite us or... or make us giddy and then send us to sleep.”

“I *know*.” But Rig continued to clutch Enitan’s hand, and this time Enitan let him.

Enitan had fucked many men and a few women, but he couldn’t remember ever walking hand in hand with anyone. He and his playmates didn’t go for romantic strolls. They drank, they screwed. Maybe they spent a little time at Club Bennu or another place, dancing and gossiping. And when he was a child, there had been nobody to hold his hand either. His nannies herded him impatiently, and Minna tugged him around by his arm.

Rig’s hand was bigger than his, broad-fingered, calloused from his many chores. Enitan couldn’t forget even for a moment how good those hands had been to him.

They stopped occasionally to rest, to eat and drink a little. Never for long. They didn't talk much, but they held hands almost the entire time they walked.

When the sun set and darkness descended, they set up their simple camp not far from the trail. Enitan was already tired of dried meat, smoked fish, and nuts, but he knew he should be thankful he wasn't going hungry. And thanks to Rig, they had plenty of water.

But with his feet rested, his thirst slaked, and his belly full, he noticed a new discomfort. His clothes were filthy and stiff with dried sweat, and the rough cloth chafed. "I don't suppose you brought the lake in that bag of yours," he said glumly to Rig.

"No. I guess I could have stuffed in a few trancebeetles if I'd known you'd miss it so much."

Oddly enough, Enitan *did* miss it, and not just because he yearned to be clean. He missed the clean, sharp scent of the trees and the soft carpet of fallen leaves. He missed the colorful birds and insects, even though many of them were dangerous. He missed Rig's tiny cabin and grand unfinished house. He missed Rig's demanding bird. Merciful gods, he missed the Downs.

Scowling at his unwanted epiphany, Enitan impatiently shed his shirt and trousers, then tossed them aside. His skin was dirty too, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Rig, who was sitting on the ground, grinned up at him. "Oh?"

"It's not an invitation. I stink."

"So do I," Rig answered cheerfully. He stood and shucked his clothing even more quickly than Enitan had. And then, while Enitan was trying to remember why he should protest, Rig tackled him with a crushing hug and bruising kiss.

Rig's healing touches were wonderful, but not even they felt as good as his gloriously naked body against Enitan's. Enitan drank in the contact, feasted on Rig's mouth, and reciprocated with eagerly roving hands.

When Enitan lived in the city, he'd never wanted anything for long. When he was hungry, he ate. When he was restless, he sparred. When he was horny, he fucked. All right, perhaps he wasn't completely happy, but he'd never been miserable. He'd thought himself satisfied.

Never in all those years had he experienced the ravenous need that overcame him now. He felt as though he'd been holding his breath his entire

life, and only now—only with Rig’s touch—could he finally fill his lungs with air. And he didn’t want to be cured, didn’t want the exquisite, magical act of love he and Rig had shared before. He wanted Rig not as a healer but as a flesh and blood man. The only man he would ever love.

Despite everything, Enitan pulled slightly away from him. It was the hardest thing he’d ever done, but he needed an answer. “Why me?” he asked.

Rig looked nearly as wild as Enitan felt. He swallowed a few times before answering. “You can’t believe I’d want you?”

“I know I’m pretty. But so is Dany, and I’m sure—”

Rig growled like an angry beast. “You said you could desire me despite the scars. Can’t you believe I’d desire you despite your beauty?”

It was a strange sort of argument, but Enitan understood. Still, he shook his head. “You are gentle and kind and good and strong. I’m none of those things—except strong, I suppose. But you’ve already told me anyone who survives the Downs for long can boast that quality. What do I have to offer someone like you?”

For a long time, Rig looked away, staring at the nothingness of the Reach at night. Then he looked up at the glittering sky. “We don’t see the stars often in the Downs,” he said quietly. “When they do shine, it’s like a beautiful gift. Rare and unexpected. Everyone wanders outside to gape, and some people get so enamored they bump into houses and trees. We call them star-blind.” He took a step closer and put his hand on Enitan’s bare shoulder. “That’s me. You make me star-blind.”

Gods. Enitan’s breath caught. Before he could manage to craft a response, Rig continued; and even if Enitan had been blind again, he would have heard the smile in Rig’s voice. “You’re smart and you’re funny. I can work beside you all day and be sad when it’s time to stop. You never complain, not even when you’re in terrible pain. You’re never greedy. You save your crumbs for the birds. And if you’d let go of your need for vengeance, a light would shine through you that would put all the stars to shame.”

Enitan opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. He couldn’t find a single word to say in response. So he answered the only way he could—with a kiss. He clutched Rig to him, pressing as much of their bodies together as possible, and tasted him. Sweet—despite the fish—sweet and warm and moist and, *gods*, nothing else would ever taste so good.

Even sweeter, though, was the knowledge that Rig was his, even if only for a few more days. Enitan would die knowing that he'd truly loved someone and that someone had thought him special.

Proving his possession, Enitan worked his mouth down Rig's neck, across the scars and muscles of his chest, onto his peaked nipples. That was when they both fell to the ground, but softly. And falling was good; Enitan had recently learned that much. The change in position didn't slow him. He licked the sweat and dust from Rig's skin, delighting at the slight softness of the belly, tonguing delicately into the little divot of Rig's navel.

Rig didn't take this treatment passively. He moaned and squirmed. He petted whatever parts of Enitan he could reach, the rough skin of his finger pads scratching deliciously. And when Enitan moved down a bit more to taste the salty musk of his balls, Rig splayed his legs wantonly and canted his hips.

But Enitan didn't stop there. He laved the points of Rig's hips and the seams where his legs met torso. His tongue was tickled by the hairs on Rig's powerful thighs and long shins. He even nibbled just a bit at the tender skin behind Rig's knees.

Finally, when neither of them could stand the torture a moment longer, Enitan worked his way back up and slipped Rig's cock into his mouth. *Yes*. Heavy and slick on his tongue, so swollen with blood that Enitan felt the beat of Rig's pulse. Enitan suckled near the tip so he could savor Rig's fluids, and then allowed the length to slip deeper into him until he had to swallow around the thickness. He wasn't exactly comfortable; he had to blink away a few tears. But he was so enraptured with the little thrusts of Rig's hips and the steady, ragged cries from his throat, that Enitan completely ignored the throbbing of his own cock. He lost himself in Rig's pleasure.

He was interrupted by a hard, desperate tug of his hair. "Eni... Gods, Eni. I want to taste you too. Please."

A request he couldn't refuse.

Enitan had to release Rig from his mouth to reposition himself, and that was a shame. But he scrambled quickly into place, sprawled on top of Rig with his mouth at Rig's groin and Rig's at his. With a satisfied little grunt, Rig immediately grasped Enitan's dick and began to lick it, while the blunt forefinger of his other hand caressed the tender skin behind Enitan's balls. It felt so wonderful that Enitan nearly forgot what he'd been doing—until Rig made a needy little sound that reminded him.

By unspoken agreement, they drew things out as long as possible, each of them pausing for a moment when the other man got too close to the edge. But then Enitan recalled his recent lesson—falling over the edge was a good thing—and increased the vigor of his actions. He once again swallowed Rig to the root and then bobbed his head as he fondled Rig's tight balls.

Probably less accustomed to another man in his mouth, Rig couldn't take him all the way in. But he alternately tongued at Enitan's slit and sucked on the entire crown, and when he inserted a spit-dampened finger into Enitan's sphincter, it was the beginning of the end. Enitan squeezed his eyes shut as his climax rushed through him. Rig came with him, filling Enitan's mouth with his spend, sending them both into a loop of pure bliss.

Sated and huddled together under the blanket, they continued to pet and kiss each other until they finally slipped into sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Rig saw the city first. Perhaps he had sharper eyes. More likely, though, Enitan was staring at the ground instead of ahead. The closer they came to their destination, the heavier the ball of dread in his stomach. He did not remotely feel like a triumphant hero about to wreak vengeance on his enemy.

“It’s... big,” Rig said, staring at the mass of square white structures. They were holding hands again.

“Not as tall as your forest.”

“You could put my entire village in there and nobody would even notice.”

“Oh, they’d notice,” Enitan said with a forced laugh. Nobody in the city had ever seen a building made of wood. He had a strange thought: what would Minna think of the Downs? Would she be horrified by how uncivilized it was? Terrified of all the dangers it possessed? She wouldn’t see the beauty of it. The thick trees reaching skyward, smelling of life. The cool, clear water of the lake. The bright colors of the birds, insects, fish, and reptiles—even the deadly ones. The wild calls of the amorous night sprites. The melancholy, defiant magnificence of the house Rig was building with his own two hands. And gods, the spirit of the huge, scarred man who saved those who fell.

“We should clean up before we enter the city,” Enitan said, probably louder than was necessary.

Rig glanced down at himself. Like Enitan’s, his clothes were heavily soiled, his skin grimy, his hair disheveled, and his cheeks stubbled. And they both undoubtedly reeked of sex. “We look disreputable,” Rig said, sounding amused.

“We do. And... I don’t have the mark on my forehead anymore, thanks to you, so people won’t know just from looking at me that I’ve been banished. But even clean, our clothing will stand out. And let’s face it—you’d be conspicuous no matter what you wore.”

“Yes,” Rig agreed, stroking the scars on his face.

“Even without them. You’re an impressive chunk of manhood.”

He was even more impressive when he gave his lopsided smile and his eyes lit up. “Am I?”

Enitan playfully squeezed Rig’s ass. “Very.” Then he sobered. “We’ll never make it to my—to Minna’s house in this shape. Someone will stop us.”

Rig's smiled faded and his expression turned grim. "What will you do when you get there?"

Honestly, Enitan didn't know the details. Ever since he'd faced Minna's betrayal, he'd imagined all sorts of grand, theatrical scenarios. But over the past few weeks, those scenarios had faded. Now he had no idea what he'd do. "Revenge," he muttered.

Although Rig had no problem expressing himself verbally, sometimes he could give an entire speech without saying a word. He did that now, and Enitan had to look away.

"I won't hurt anyone," Rig finally said. "I won't leave you, and I'll protect you as well as I can, but I won't hurt anyone."

"Good," Enitan answered, meaning it most sincerely. It was bad enough he'd dragged Rig out of the Downs—he didn't want to push him into destruction.

Enitan scratched his itchy hair. "We'll detour to the north of the city, where we can wash in one of the rivers. The water runs clean there." And a detour—a slight delay of the end—felt like a reprieve instead of an interference.

It took them most of the day to reach the closer river. Maybe they would have gotten there sooner if Rig hadn't kept pausing to exclaim over the size of the city. The childlike wonder would have charmed Enitan if he hadn't been nearly sick with dread. In any case, by the time they reached the sinuous waterway, the sky was tinged red and purple by the setting sun and they decided their bathing—and the end of their journey—could wait another day. They stripped off their clothes, though, and scrubbed them in the river, then spread them on the riverbank to dry.

"This is a pretty spot," Rig commented.

It was. The dry grass of the Reach had turned soft and green, spotted with small yellow flowers. The river bubbled happily—unaware of its fate once it reached the city—and the mountains rose steeply to the north, crowned with white snow.

"I've never been here before," Enitan admitted. "I hardly ever left the city."

"Why?"

"People don't. I guess I assumed nothing worthwhile existed anywhere else." He ran his hand down Rig's arm. "I was so wrong."

That night they made love again, Enitan entering Rig's body with nothing but spit and precome for lubrication. But it certainly wasn't pain that made Rig howl at the stars.

Afterward they lay huddled together, and Enitan didn't sleep. He wanted to be awake for every last minute of Rig's skin against his.

The river water felt wonderful as it sluiced the filth from Enitan's body. So at first he couldn't understand Rig's reluctance to wade in past his knees. Then Enitan realized what was happening and laughed. "There aren't any dragonfish here. Or trancebeetles or anything else to worry about. The current can be fairly swift near the middle, though, so be careful if you don't swim well. And there's a lot of silt."

"I don't swim at all." Rig proceeded a little farther into the water, stopping when it reached his waist.

Enitan wasn't very skilled at it himself, but he stayed close to Rig, just in case. They didn't have any soap, so they took turns scrubbing each other with their hands—enjoying the opportunity to stroke all that glorious bare skin—until finally they were both pink and thoroughly clean. Back on shore, they took turns with Rig's razor, then pulled on their clothes.

"Do we look slightly more reputable?" Rig asked.

"As good as we're going to get." He waited for Rig to shoulder his pack before grabbing his hand as they started their walk toward the city.

"Don't you want some breakfast?"

Enitan shook his head. His stomach was in such a hard knot; he couldn't possibly eat. "But I'll wait if you want some."

"I don't."

At one time, perhaps hundreds of years ago, a wall had ringed the city. But whatever threats existed then had eventually disappeared. Some sections of the wall had been incorporated into houses and other buildings, and most of the rest had fallen into ruin. The ancient gates still existed, however—huge arches that had once been guarded but now stood perpetually open, serving no purpose but to mark the city's edge. Rig gawked as they passed through the north gate, and Enitan held his hand more tightly.

Although it was early, crowds already clogged the streets. Food vendors called out to passersby. Men and women trudged to their workplaces, many of

them eating as they walked. Shopkeepers set up displays. Tradespeople carried packages or pushed carts, children scurried, servants toted empty bags for the morning shopping, wealthy people strolled. And everybody stared at Enitan and Rig. The city dwellers couldn't have known where the oddly dressed duo had come from—nobody would even imagine men rising up from the Downs—but they surely wondered at the unusual sight.

Rig clearly made an effort to keep his chin up and back straight, but his palm sweated heavily and his breathing was harsh. Enitan gave him a gentle smile and linked their arms instead. "Nothing deadly," he reminded Rig.

"No demons?"

Gods, Enitan loved this man! "Only in my head."

Enitan's house—dammit! *Minna's* house—was near the center of the city. It wasn't the poshest neighborhood, but it was fairly upscale. Although the house was only a few minutes' walk from the Council Hall, it was quite a trek from the north gate; and with so many people in the streets, the journey was slow. When they came to a narrow archway, Enitan steered Rig through, down a crushed stone path, and to a bench. They sat.

Rig took a few deep breaths before looking around curiously at the spindly trees and lackluster flowers. "What is this place?"

"A park. People come here to relax and enjoy... nature."

A raised eyebrow showed Rig's opinion.

"Yes, I know," Enitan sighed. "But it's all the nature they have. Some parks are bigger than this, with more complicated plantings, maybe a fountain and some statues. But dressed like this, we'd be evicted from those parks right away."

"The parks are... not for everyone?"

This was hard to explain since people in the Downs didn't use money and, for the most part, apparently shared their talents and their belongings. "In the city, if you're rich, you can have whatever you want. If you're poor..." He shrugged.

"You were rich."

"My family was, yes."

"And if your father truly had disinherited you and then died naturally? Or if you'd simply walked away? How would you have survived?"

Enitan rubbed his face. “I don’t know. Maybe I would have fought for money. People do.”

“You were trapped.”

“I wasn’t...” He scrubbed his face again before clasping his hands in his lap. When he’d lived in the city, he’d never considered himself trapped. After all, he had whatever he wanted. Well, almost whatever he wanted. He’d thought of Minna’s heavy thumb as an annoyance, but he’d never truly contemplated leaving the family. Instead, he’d countered her controlling behavior with petty disobedience—which had undoubtedly added to her infuriation and her determination to dominate him.

But after he fell to the Downs, once Rig had fully healed him, Enitan no longer had to worry about being poor. He could have remained with Rig. He could have walked to the village and lived there, contributing in some way to the general livelihood. Nobody would have complained that his behavior was unseemly and unfitting for someone of his status. Nobody would have chased his lover away.

Gods, Minna’s betrayal had freed him, and he hadn’t realized it until just now.

But now was too late. He’d already left the Downs. This time he’d closed the trap on himself.

“I’m unredeemable.”

Rig’s answering growl was pure frustration. “There’s nothing to redeem. Your mother died when you were a baby, your father was too busy with his work, and your sister was still just a child herself. You were a lonely little boy desperate for affection.”

“I grew up.”

“Into a lonely man desperate for affection—and with no idea how to get it. You took all the attention and all the contact you could find. Through fighting and sex. Through exasperating Minna. You never needed redemption, Eni. You needed love.”

Enitan closed his eyes tightly. Love. But look what he’d done with love when he’d been given it—abandoned it, lured it into danger.

“Let’s go,” Enitan said, abruptly standing. Rig obeyed wordlessly.

As they walked the last several blocks to his old home, Enitan did not feel righteous and victorious. He was tired and sad.

“You don’t have to do this,” Rig whispered to him.

Enitan’s response came out almost as a sob. “She murdered my father.”

“And nothing you do will bring him back.”

Enitan didn’t answer.

He’d never invested much thought into the details of how to break into his family home. Really, he’d never given much thought to *any* details, had he? So now he dragged Rig into a shadowed space between the two houses across the street, and he tried to exercise his sluggish brain.

“It’s pretty,” Rig said. “I like the statues.” He was referring to a pair of yaley-beasts that flanked the stairs leading to the front door. Enitan had always liked them too. When he was a boy, he’d named them Abenu and Ajinu and whispered to them and patted them whenever he passed by.

“It’s a good house. The walls are thick, so it stays cool inside even when the weather is hot. Every room has carved stone figures near the ceiling and around the windows. Animals, people, monsters. We have—*they* have a bathing room with a tub big enough for a crowd, and there’s a small library, and if you climb to the roof you can lie on your back and watch the night sky. There’s—” His voice broke; he cleared his throat. “There’s a garden in the back. It even has a few trees.”

Rig nodded. “It was a good home.”

“I’d rather live in your hut,” Enitan replied honestly. But gods, this *had* been his home, and he’d loved it, and Minna had stolen it away.

A small sound escaped Enitan’s throat. Not quite a sob—a whimper, perhaps. And although it had been very quiet, Rig heard it and grabbed Enitan’s shoulders. “I love you,” Rig said gruffly before giving him a hard, demanding kiss.

Enitan was still breathless and shaky from the kiss when the front door to the family house opened. A woman appeared. She closed the door and slowly descended the steps, placing each foot carefully and holding her body stiffly.

It was Minna.

The mourning period had ended, so instead of funereal brown, her tunic and trousers were a dazzling array of yellow, orange, and red. He knew the suit must have come from one of the city’s most fashionable tailors and was undoubtedly cut in the latest style. Gold and red beads glittered in her long hair, and more beads hung at her neck and wrists.

But Minna looked old. Her face—always on the thin side, with a too-long chin and too-prominent nose—was drawn and lined, and she had dark circles beneath her eyes. She had the same blue eyes as Enitan, but hers looked dull, watery, and red-rimmed. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she paused for a moment as if to catch her breath, then set off with shuffled steps and bowed shoulders.

She was alone and looked miserable.

Enitan, with Rig's hand on his shoulder, thought of a little girl who'd lost her mother and was given heavy responsibilities at too young an age. When other young women of her social class were dancing, drinking, taking lovers, she was managing the household and supervising her younger sibling. She was plain and serious, so unlike her handsome, carefree brother. He found it easy to get along with other people, while she struggled through everyday conversations. Although she worked hard and her brother didn't, their father favored his son. When she'd fought for respectability and a position in society, her brother had taunted her with his tawdry bedmates, his crude fighting, his dissolute habits. She had built her bitterness and anger into a thick wall; no love would ever penetrate it.

Minna Javed had murdered or driven away her only family. She had nothing left but money and servants, and she would always be alone.

But Enitan? He never had to be alone again.

He waited for her to reach the end of the block and turn the corner. Then he looked into his beloved's warm, puzzled eyes. "Rig? Let's go home."

Chapter Thirteen

Dany stood on the balcony, looking out at the lake. “You could almost dive right in from here.”

“And get eaten by dragonfish,” Rig reminded him.

“Yes, there’s that.” Dany turned around to grin at Enitan and Rig.

Rig’s arm rested comfortably across Enitan’s shoulders, while Enitan had wrapped his arm around Rig’s waist. Part of Enitan’s mind was following the conversation, but another part—perhaps a larger part—was speculating whether he wanted to top Rig that night or bottom for him. Well, perhaps he could do both. It would be a celebration evening, after all: their first night in their new house.

Judging by the long looks Rig kept sending him, his thoughts were running in the same direction.

Dany looked at them both and shook his head. “I should get back to the cabin before nightfall.”

“You can stay here,” Enitan offered.

“And listen to you two scream and howl half the night? I don’t think so. You’re worse than the nighties.” Dany winked. “It’s fine. If I’m very persuasive, sometimes I can get Sar and Kef to share their mat with me. I’m feeling persuasive today.”

Chuckling, Rig and Enitan accompanied Dany through the big upstairs bedroom, down the stairs, and out the front door. He picked up a waiting bag of dragonfish filets but paused before beginning the walk to the cabin. “I’m glad you two found each other. You’ve remade yourselves into something beautiful.” He winked again and went on his way.

Enitan sat on the doorstep and patted the space next to him, and Rig plopped down. He took Enitan’s hand in his larger one, but for a while neither of them said anything. Finally Enitan toppled slightly to lean on Rig’s shoulder. “Remade?” Enitan said.

“Healed.”

“Both of us.”

Rig kissed his head. “Both of us.”

Only a few stray clouds dirtied the afternoon sky. Perhaps they'd be able to sit on their deck and look at the stars tonight—between bouts of making love. Or even better, perhaps they could make love under the stars. Enitan was about to suggest this when a blue bird flapped over from the trees, landed near their feet, and squawked balefully.

"Our secret hideaway has been discovered," said Rig. He looked pleased about it. Enitan smiled; he'd been hoping their bird would find them. He ducked inside the house, hurried to the kitchen, and grabbed a piece of flatbread. It was supposed to be for their dinner, but they could spare some. He reclaimed his seat and handed Rig half the bread.

"You're an easy mark," Rig said. Then he tore off a piece and tossed it to the bird.

"Yes, I'm not mean and tough like you."

"Hmm." Rig threw another piece, which the bird caught in midair. "I was thinking. Maybe soon you'd like to go to the village."

"Trying to get rid of me already?"

"Go *with* me, I mean. Just for a day or two. Everyone's heard all about you, and I'm sure they're eager to meet you. We don't get new blood often."

A trip to the village sounded interesting. Enitan smiled at him. "I'll go wherever you lead me."

Rig looked at him solemnly. "What if I lead you into fog?"

"Then we'll die together."

"You don't seem upset at the idea."

"I don't want to die. But if I have the choice between a few minutes with you or an eternity without, well..." Smiling, he threw his entire chunk of bread at the bird, pulled the other piece from Rig's hand, and flung it as well. Let the bird puzzle out how to bring all that bounty back to its nest. Enitan had better things to do.

He launched himself at Rig hard enough to send him sprawling onto his back. Then Enitan used a few of his wrestling moves to keep Rig captive beneath him. "I choose you," he whispered in Rig's ear. "I will always choose you."

And of course they kissed.

They were still kissing, hands fumbling at each other's clothes, when a terrible noise echoed from the trees.

"What's that?" Enitan demanded.

But Rig was already pushing him off and scrambling to his feet. He grabbed a blanket that hung on a hook just inside the door, and he took off at a sprint toward the woods.

Enitan sped after him. "What is it?"

Rig stopped and whirled around. "That's the scream a man makes when he falls. Go back, Eni. Go wait for me at the house."

Although Enitan's heart raced, he shook his head. "No."

"Eni—"

"No fog today, Rig. But anyway, it doesn't matter. I choose *you*. Now let me help, dammit."

Rig gave him a searching look. Then he shook his head slightly, but a hint of a smile quirked his lips. "Stubborn."

Keeping pace, they ran through the trees. The fog might come. The newly fallen man might die. But gods willing, the sun would remain. And perhaps together, Enitan and Rig would work to help another man heal.

The End

Author Bio

Kim Fielding is the bestselling author of numerous m/m romance novels, novellas, and short stories. Like Kim herself, her work is eclectic, spanning genres such as contemporary, fantasy, paranormal, and historical. Her stories are set in alternate worlds, in 15th century Bosnia, in modern-day Oregon. Her heroes are hipster architect werewolves, housekeepers, maimed giants, and conflicted graduate students. They're usually flawed, they often encounter terrible obstacles, but they always find love.

After having migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States, Kim calls the boring part of California home. She lives there with her husband, her two daughters, and her day job as a university professor, but escapes as often as possible via car, train, plane, or boat. This may explain why her characters often seem to be in transit as well. She dreams of traveling and writing full-time.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)