



Nor
Iron Bars
a
Cage

Kaje
Harper

Love Has No Boundaries ~ 2013

NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

First I was a sorcerer. Then I was a hermit. For so long—for years that seemed to go on forever—I couldn't bear to be touched. I put up not just walls but whole stone bunkers to keep everyone out, emotionally, and physically as well. I was protected from people, from ghosts, from specters real and imagined. Sure, I was alone. But I felt safe. Only, after a while, I wasn't sure any longer whether a totally "safe" empty life was really worth living.

Then Tobin came along. Out of the blue, out of my past, with a summons from the king that he wouldn't let me ignore. I tried to cling to my isolation, but he wouldn't give up on me. Tobin never believed in walls.

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

By Kaje Harper

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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.

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Photo Description

In black and white, back-lit and tightly-focused, half of a man's bare chest is exposed. Every curve of pec and shoulder is silvered, the nipple tight. Another man's face hovers, upturned, clearly kneeling before him. Only the straight nose, strong chin, and open mouth can be seen. The kneeling man extends his tongue with the tip curled, waiting, half an inch—a hesitation's width—from that expectant nipple. In the next breath, they will touch.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

For so long, years that seemed to go on forever, I couldn't bear to be touched. I put up not just walls but whole concrete bunkers to keep people out—not just emotionally, but physically as well. Sure, I was alone. But I felt safe. Only, after a while, I wasn't sure any longer whether a totally “safe” life was really worth living. But I was still too afraid to reach out. I started to think about a way out—a way out of living, that is.

Then someone came along. Someone... completely unexpected. How do I explain him? I can't. But he wouldn't give up on me, and he never believed in walls.

Thanks,

Plainbrownwrapper

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mage/sorcerer, first time, hurt/comfort, friends to lovers, magic users, PTSD

Content Warnings: history of past abuse, self-harm

Word Count: 104,307

Dedication

For Plainbrownwrapper, whose prompt gave me these two men,
and for my excellent beta readers, who spent a lot of time and
effort to make my story better.

NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

by Kaje Harper

CHAPTER ONE

There's a silence that's the opposite of peaceful. It's that moment when the wind drops, and you see the storm-clouds piled up high and dark in the sky. That hot noontime when all birdsong in the forest fades away, and you realize the dappled shadow on the branch above is a hunting cat—when you freeze, and hold your breath, and hold your breath, as it blinks glowing amber eyes, and decides whether it's hungry. I heard that silence when I woke.

It froze me there in my bed, eyes still closed, not moving. I was on my familiar little cot in my third-floor room, which I'd been given as Meldov's junior apprentice and kept even now. I felt the scratch of the cheap wool blanket under my cheek, and smelled the musty combination of old books and stale air. Nothing stirred, nothing broke the stillness, there was no reason for my fear, but my heart pounded a staccato rhythm. I held my breath, fighting awareness, until I could it put off no longer.

From the moment I opened my eyes, I knew I was still dreaming. Fifteen years of meditation and study had given me the ability to tell the difference. Sometimes, though, I wasn't sure if that was a blessing or a curse, to be aware of my state and to watch my younger self, knowing where this was going, knowing where it would end, and to be unable to do *anything*.

In this dream, it was always dark in my old bedroom. I'd lain down for just a moment to rest, tired from the work Meldov had set me. My mentor was a strong believer that a tired body made for a quiet mind. It was common for him to give me chores hard enough that I longed for a moment's respite. But tonight my stolen minute had clearly lasted longer than I'd intended. While my eyes were closed, dusk had turned to full night.

I sprang from the bed, my heart pounding. A year ago, even six months ago, Meldov might've made me clean the privy, or cuffed me lightly, with

inventive curses for my lateness. But now... now his anger came faster and more sharply and his punishments had a bitter bite. I could only hope that he hadn't called for me yet, and my absence might not have been noticed.

Asleep, aware but helpless, I wished I could reach into that dream and stop myself, longed to grab that young, unbroken boy and make him turn around. The window was there, with a clean, free night beyond it. The old apple tree had been an easy route for an agile teenager, on the nights when I'd chosen roaming over sleep. I could have run. But I had no idea then that there was a reason to flee.

I made my way out of my familiar dark room, half by touch, and ran down the stairs as quickly and silently as I could. The only light on the floor below came from the study. I hurried over there and paused in the doorway. Meldov was sitting in his favorite upholstered chair, reading an old book with yellowed corners, his long fingers turning the pages with slow deliberation. When he noticed me, he set the volume aside, open on the small table. Very slowly and deliberately he laid a black ribbon in the book to mark his place.

I braced myself for his anger, but instead he slowly smiled at me and said, "There you are, boy." He looked me over, head to toe and back up, until my nails bit my palms in the effort to hold still under his eyes. Finally he added, "Did you have a nice *nap*?" The last word held the whip of acid I'd been expecting.

"I'm sorry, sir." I bent my head.

"No harm done. I had preparations to make anyway. Follow me." He stood and turned toward the door into the workroom.

"Now?" I was startled into speaking out of turn. Usually we prepared for a working together, now that I was a true apprentice. Meldov would discuss who we were searching for, what the questions would be. He'd show me the focus, make me work out the ritual and check it for mistakes. This sudden decision was very unlike him.

"Yes, now. What did you think I meant, next week?" He pulled the heavy door open, and glanced back at me. "Oh, do you feel unprepared? Don't

worry, boy, we're not summoning anyone tonight. Or anything. I have a different ritual planned."

I followed him inside. The familiar walls of the workroom looked closer, higher and wreathed in deeper shadows, although that had to be illusion. There were no windows. We always worked by the same candle light. Still there was a claustrophobic feel to the room that night, and it wasn't just the foreknowledge of my older self leaking into the dream. Even in real life, fifteen years ago, I'd been reluctant to cross that familiar threshold.

But I followed him in obediently, took the lit taper from his hand, and set flame to the candles he indicated, in the prescribed order. First the door-ward candles, with the words of protection as I lit them. Then the beeswax altar pillars, with a prayer for guidance. I'd sometimes been a bit perfunctory in my prayers to Na, god of mages, but my words were heartfelt that night. Last, the candles of the working laid out on the floor.

It was an unfamiliar shape. Not the usual circle in a triangle, designed to call a spirit to us, but a straight line with only two points, less than an arm's length apart. There were only three candles on it, short white stubs glued to the floor with dark wax, and I lit them all. Meldov took back the taper. "Good. Now take one of the two ends."

As I stepped into the charcoal circle at one end of the line, I could feel the power building in the spell. It whispered through me, like a chill wind with the laughter of waiting ghosts in it. I shuddered. "Sir, are you sure?"

"Silence, boy." His voice snapped with restrained tension. "Do your part and all will be well."

I wanted to argue more. I should have. But this was Meldov, my mentor and teacher, and the man I thought I loved, whether he had an inkling of that or not. Meldov, who'd seen in a scrawny boy the hidden signs of talent, and brought me here, raised me, taught me. We'd probably done a hundred workings in here in the last two years, since he began letting me help in his true craft. And every one had been controlled and effective, and I'd come through safely in Meldov's hands.

Sorcery was a science as well as an art to Meldov. He chose his foci carefully, called spirits he could learn from, and sent them cleanly on their way. He was one of the best. So I set aside my fears, and tried to center myself and breathe from my belly. Slowly the working trance came over me.

Meldov stepped onto the other end of the line. I saw it, heard it, felt it, as his presence woke the spell. The charcoal line lit with the illusion of cold fire, while the spell stirred and stretched like a cat. It locked onto me, curling tendrils of power around my ankles, reaching slowly up toward my knees. It was definitely different. I was used to the power serving as a fence, sweeping around the central circle to imprison the being we brought there to interrogate. All those times, I'd stood outside the circle, raising and controlling it, but not part of it. Tonight the spell touched me, and it latched tight around me with little hooked barbs I could feel but not see.

I wanted to brush it off of my legs. With every moment, I wanted more and more to get away from that room and that chill force. But I didn't move a foot, or even open my mouth. I waited obediently for my mentor to explain. Meldov reached out toward me above that glowing line of power, his familiar hand looking different in the odd light. I realized he wore gloves.

“Take my hand, Lyon of Riverrun.”

I reached toward him and took his fingers in my own. An action taken of my own free will, because he asked it of me. The last really free thing I did in that house. Until the end. In the dream, the chill of his fingers froze mine despite the gloves, although there was nothing to see. Then his thumb pressed over the life-point on my wrist. It burned me, the pain sharp and real. Or was it freezing cold? I tried to pull free, but he held me still a long, agonizing minute. The ache from it spread up my arm and into my heart. Then he eased his grip, and turned my hand over. There, burned into my wrist, was his symbol—a feather quill, drawing a circle of power.

I sucked in a harsh breath. My hand shook in his grasp. “What did you do?” The burn itself had an odd silver-black shine, and around it the skin was already rising, puffy and red.

“You wanted to advance to the next level,” he said, in a voice that sounded reasonable, as if he’d just had me sign a contract. “This will help us work together. Your power and mine will meld. Don’t be a child. The effect is only skin deep. I wouldn’t harm your body for the world.”

I opened my mouth to protest, to ask what he meant. But when I met his eyes, my questions died unspoken. Because he smiled, and it was slow and hungry and dark, and for the first time, he let me see the wraith who’d taken up residence behind his once-human eyes...

I woke shaking. Not screaming and not puking, which was an improvement. I sat up in bed, cradling my useless right hand against my chest, blinking in the light of the lantern I always kept lit. My wrist throbbed, as it had the night the brand had been set there. I couldn’t help looking at it, even though I knew what I would see. No circle. No feather. Just the wide, rough patch of thickly-scarred skin where I’d burned that mark off with real flame, afterward.

I rubbed the spot slowly with my left thumb, the habit of so many years. The ridges and tightness of it, even the atrophied way my hand curled over the ruined tendons, were reassurance. It was over. Cleansed and healed, as much as it would ever heal, and long over. I was here in my own home, with my own stone walls around me.

I felt both sick and embarrassed, even though there was no one to see me. It had been fifteen years since I was that boy. Almost half my lifetime. Surely I should be over this stupid, senseless panic. Whatever had happened then, I’d been safe for so long now that its effects should have faded. Surely a *normal* man would have gone on with his life, cheerfully, or at least sanely.

Sometimes there were stretches of time when all was well, and I believed I was finally past it; that my quiet solitary routine was now a matter of choice and preference, not necessity. Then something would set me off, and there would be night after night of bad dreams again, and days when speaking to anyone was difficult. Sometimes the trigger was something so humiliatingly minuscule as to be undefinable. I had no idea what had set me off now, only that last night and this, the wraith had once again stalked my sleep.

I took slow breaths, and looked about me for comfort. My house was small and I liked it like that. There was an alcove with my bed, a cleverly-designed fireplace, a kitchen area with sink and iron cookstove on the facing wall, and a table, a desk, a bookshelf. Other than the small door leading to the bath and garderobe, I could see every inch of the room. Even the desk was made of a spindly table with open shelves above it for my quills and paper. There was no place anyone could hide.

I sat in my tangled bedclothes and waited for my heart to slow down. Of all the nasty, terrifying dreams I had, that one was always somehow the worst—the first time I saw the soulless hunger, the spirit-eater, living in my mentor’s mind.

After a while I got up and fumbled about my kitchen shelves for the canister of dried mint. There’d clearly be no more sleep for me tonight. A cup of herb tea and something to read might get me through until morning. I’d done this for so long I had a rhythm for working the pump handle with my right forearm while holding the kettle in my left hand. The stove was cold, but a small fire burned in the fireplace as always, and I hooked the kettle onto the swing-arm and lowered it over the flames.

I knelt in front of the fire, added a log, and watched the tongues of red and gold lick over the fresh bark. Sparks of flickering white snapped out from the droplets of resin hiding there. The good smell of burning pine filled me, erasing the memory of burning flesh. Almost. I rubbed my wrist again. I’m not sure I’d have the courage now to do what had needed to be done. But back then I’d been desperate enough, and young enough, not to care how much it would hurt.

The kettle began to whistle. I swung it off the flame, wrapped a cloth round the handle and poured hot water into the pot. The rising steam further soothed me, carrying the fresh-grass smell of the mint and a hint of dried lemon peel in it. That was a luxury, but one that made a huge difference for me. Meldov, my real Meldov, had loved lemon but the wraith had hated it. The day we gave up lemon tea after a hard working, I should have known something was wrong. These days I couldn’t afford a lot of the imported fruit, but I added a hint to all

my teas, and that citrus astringency in the steam was balm to my heart. *There's nothing to fear here.*

I took the cup with me to my favorite chair, placed tight against the wall where nothing could lurk behind it. It was my only comfortable chair, actually, but then for fifteen years no one but me had crossed that threshold, so I had no need of more. It was deep and soft, upholstered in leather, big enough that it had been all I could do to haul it across the room one-handed, when the craftsman had left it by the door. Over the years, I'd dozed in it enough to be glad a hundred times over for its solid size.

I sank into the familiar leather upholstery, and held the cup to my nose to breathe the steam. *So good.*

Truly, I had no cause for complaints. Half the men in the world, more than half, would've given their own right arms for the life I led. In this house I was safe, warm enough in winter, cool in summer. I worked in my garden, gathered wood nearby, cleaned and cooked, but my labor was far less demanding than that of most men. These days, my skill with languages was becoming more widely known. Translations now brought enough money to keep me well-supplied, even after I'd spent every penny I'd stolen from Meldov. I had clothing, good boots. I even had books of my own and the leisure to read them.

I was in no real pain, although my wrist ached sometimes when the wind was wrong. I had no dependents to worry and coerce me, no overlord to threaten me, no illnesses, no loss. Well, no more loss. This was as close to Paradise as this world offered. So it was wrong, very wrong, that the little knife on my desk should call to me with a siren song as sweet as the whisper of an incubus in my ear.

It was mostly lack of sleep making me weak. I knew that. But I set the cup aside and stood, and went to the desk. The little knife lay beside my blotter, with the whetstone above it. I picked up both in my left hand, and took them to my chair. The knife was a pretty thing—bone-handled, with a fine, thin blade no longer than my thumb, and sharper than my shaving razor. I pinned it between my right wrist and knee, picked up the oiled stone, and stroked it along the edge. I used a feather touch. Really, there was no need to sharpen it.

I'd cut perhaps three quills since the last time. But it soothed me to hear the fine steel sing under the stroke of the stone.

Eventually I set the whetstone on the table beside my cup, pushed up my right sleeve, and picked up the blade. With the tip, I barely traced the lines of blue that marked the veins in my forearm, following them down from the crook of my elbow to where the color became hidden by the dense scar. I pressed inward there, lightly, and watched a drop of blood well up from under the blade. Blood was bad for steel. I'd have to clean the knife again. *Or not.* I pressed harder, and saw a second drop and a third, beading on that lumpy, taut white surface, like rain on a windowpane. *See, there's life under the scar. I can cut through to it and set it free. Forever free.*

After a long, long time, I put the blade beside the stone, and lifted the cup instead. The small stain on the cuff of my nightshirt turned from crimson to burgundy to russet. After I washed it, it would be as faded as the rest. Eventually, slowly, the sun came up.

CHAPTER TWO

I was cleaning up from my morning meal when there was a knock on the door. I was pleased to see Dag, the market boy, waiting on the step. He'd made good time today. He held out a full basket to me. "Here 'tis, Mister Lyon. Same as always, but Mum says to tell you there weren't no eggs, on account of the hens weren't laying well yesterday. She put in an extra rasher of bacon to go round."

I took the handle from him, but set the basket on the step. "Thank her for me. I hope there's nothing seriously wrong with the hens."

"Oh no, sir. A fox came by, we think, and frightened them. But he couldn't get through the coop I built. 'Twas too solid for him." He gave me a crooked-toothed grin of pride.

I nodded back. Dag was skinny, his clothes worn thin, and his eyes were steadier than most youngsters'. His grin was pure happiness though. Despite being the man of the house since he was nine, he was every inch a fun-loving boy. He'd made this trip to see me twice a week for years now, and I'd come to enjoy our few moments of chat. *For years...* "How old are you now, Dag?"

"Near on fourteen, sir."

That old. Sometimes I was amazed I was still here, after so long. "Getting too old for barley candy then, I guess."

"Never too old," he said cheekily. "Else why would there be a bag full of it in your *own* shopping? Sir."

I laughed. "Take your wages, imp, while I get your mother's money."

I left the door ajar as I went to my desk and located my purse. I'd learned that if I tipped the boy with coin, it went straight to his mother's hand. So I paid her well in coin, and him in candy. I brought him the money, in the old basket. "Here, keep that safe. And take a barley-stick for each of your sisters too."

"Thank you sir." He dug into the basket and pulled out two more sticks.

“And there’s a bit of paper in the basket to wrap them in.” We both pretended that wasn’t the most important thing I gave him, that he wouldn’t hold the candy gently in it and then at home press it flat and render wonderfully detailed drawings of animals in charcoal on it. I’d found a drawing of his once, when his mother had wrapped a cut of meat with it. I’d offered him a clean paper for the one clearly often used, erased and reused, and now spoiled. The light in his eyes had been something to see, and though we never spoke of it, I gave him another clean page weekly. His mother was a wonderful woman, but she’d never encourage something that frivolous.

I should have probably done more for him. Dag had amazing talent, and village life would give him no outlet for it. Unless the local temple decided to paint a mural or something, he might live and die here and leave not a trace of his art. By this time, I had contacts among the literate rich folk back in the cities. I could have done more to find him a mentor. But even this little chat on my doorstep sometimes made my skin twitch for hours afterward. And he was just fourteen and his mother needed him. I said, “Be off with you then. My regards to your mother. I’ll see you in three days.”

“Right, sir. See you then.” He gave me a jaunty wave, cheek distended with the candy, and turned. I liked that about him, that he would stay and chat if I chose, seeming quite happy to pass along gossip and news, but showed no hurt on the days I dismissed him abruptly. I desperately envied him that contented nature. I’d never been that way, even as a child.

I picked up the full basket, shut the door and carried my bounty over to the kitchen area. It took only a few minutes to set the food in its places, with the butter and cheese in the cool stone box low beneath the counter. When there was another knock, I almost cracked my head on the wooden edge above me. Grumbling to myself, I went to see what Dag could have possibly forgotten. But when I yanked open the door, the face staring at me was familiar, but not a fourteen-year-old boy.

“Lyon! It *is* you!”

I slammed the door in Tobin’s face. I’d have collapsed into my chair, but I didn’t even make it that far. My knees gave out halfway across the room.

How? Why? My mind screamed in protest. *What was Tobin doing here?* Seventeen years without a word between us, and there he stood on my doorstep. And here I lay in some shameful puddle of dismay and self-disgust, and mangled unquenchable hope. That scared me more than all the rest. I was settled and safe here, and none could pry me out of my shell. But I hadn't expected Tobin.

"Lyon?" He rapped on the door again, more slowly. "It's me. Tobin. Remember me? We were friends once."

Remember me. I'd have laughed if I could have got breath to do it. Of course I remembered. Strong, sensible Tobin, two years older and headed for a high position, and all that I was not. He'd let me tag along after him for years. He'd been the focus of my days, and truth to tell, of my solitary nights, until Meldov's cool, dark power had caught my full attention when I was sixteen. And after that...

I couldn't stand to see Tobin now.

"Lyon? Can you answer the door? I need to talk to you." After a long silence, in which I just managed to sit up enough to pull my knees to my chest and clamp my hands between them, he added, "I'm not here to do any harm. By Samal's Hand, I swear it."

I no longer believed in any gods, but for Tobin that oath apparently still meant something. I'd never thought he'd planned to hurt me. He just had no idea the harm he could do, simply by saying my name in that voice, as if I were still that boy. I didn't uncurl from the floor or make a sound. Maybe he'd go away, if I said nothing, did nothing. He knew I was in here—there was no hope he'd believe the house was empty—but if I ignored him long enough maybe he'd go away and leave me in peace.

He knocked again, a slow steady rhythm that beat into my ears and echoed around my head until after many minutes I could no longer stand it. "Go away! Just go *away!*"

There was a moment's silence. "It's Tobin. We were boys together, back in Riverrun. Remember? I used to get us into trouble, and you figured out how to get us out."

I remembered it the other way. He'd rescued me from the consequences of my folly, more than once.

He said, "Remember the time I said I was going to ride the white-foot stallion, and he got away from me? And you nailed a horseshoe to a bat and then lured the guards away for me, while I made it look like he'd kicked his way out of the stall?"

I'd been thirteen then. We'd met in the orchard afterward, half delighted, half appalled at our own daring, watching through the trees as six men with ropes were needed to catch the wayward horse and put him in a stronger pen. Tobin's dark eyes had danced with amusement, but his voice had been wistful as he said, "I still think I could have ridden him."

And I'd replied, "If you really want to kill yourself, do it without me next time."

He'd turned to me, looking startled. "Really?"

And I'd said, "No. Of course not." I'd punched his arm and he'd wrestled me to the ground, laughing...

"Go away."

"Lyon, please. It's me. I thought we were friends. Don't you remember anything?"

I'd never been able to say no when he begged me. And although I'd thought I was stronger now, or perhaps more self-centered, I dragged myself to my feet and went to the door. I pulled it ajar, and stood in the gap, taking a better look at him.

The years had been kind to Tobin. Like me, he'd passed thirty and entered his middle age, but he was as solidly-built and dark of hair as ever. There was a light crease between his strong brows, and a hint of laugh-lines around his eyes to counterweight it. The shadow of stubble on his chin was darker than I recalled, but perhaps he'd missed shaving. His lips curved up when he saw me, but slowly sobered as I just stared coldly at him.

"Lyon?"

“Hello, Tobin.”

“So you *do* remember me.”

This time I did laugh. It came out hoarse. “What do you want?”

“Can I come in and talk to you?”

“You seem to be talking just fine right here.”

“Yes, but... Lyon, it’s been seventeen years. Don’t you want to at least spend a moment catching up?” His voice caught. “I’ve missed you. I thought you might have missed me too. I thought we were friends, close friends.”

“Bian’s Grace, Tobin!” Two minutes and he was returning me to my childhood ways. I straightened more, holding my right hand behind me. “All right, yes, we were. But I can’t... Just tell me how you found me. Why you bothered, after so long.”

“So *long*?” He stared at me. “I thought you were dead! That fire in Meldov’s house took all day and night to burn itself out, and there was nothing but ashes left. We thought you both were dead. When I was sent to track down the scholar who translated *Dar Vanskiet Nichsenst* for Lord Pardo, I had no idea it would turn out to be you. Even riding here, I told myself with each mile not to keep my hopes up. Because if you had lived, *surely you would have contacted me long ago!*” His eyes blazed.

I wasn’t going to apologize, but I couldn’t help saying, “I was ill for a long time afterward.” It was even the truth.

“And for the seventeen years since then?” He gritted his teeth. “Is Meldov alive too? Are you still with him?”

“No!”

That was clearly too forceful, because his expression went from angry to thoughtful. “With someone else, then?”

“No.” I made the effort to say it casually, but from the narrowing of his eyes I might have failed. I added quickly, “What about you? Still in the king’s service? Wife? Children?”

He snorted. “If you couldn’t tell I was fay by the time I was sixteen, then you were the only one. But no. I have had a lover or three. None the last few years though.”

Just like that. “*I was fay.*” Like it made no difference. Like it didn’t unlock the door I’d closed against a hundred memories of him. I hardened my heart. The man that I was now had no right to touch those innocent childhood moments.

“So you were sent to find me then? You have work for me?” The languages that I knew were mainly long out of use. Most of what I did was esoteric translation of dry old books, for scholars and sorcerers, but I’d done some antique contracts, and an old erotic story or two. I was becoming better known, which was good for my purse, but clearly had suddenly become bad for my peace of mind.

Tobin hesitated, and then reached into the neck of his shirt. The medallion he pulled out was one I’d never seen, but I knew what it was. The gold lips pursed around a clear crystal were the sigil of a King’s Voice. He said clearly and loudly, “His Majesty commands you to come with me to Riverrun, where he has need of your services. You will, of course, be well paid for your time.”

I said, “No.” And shut the door on him again.

There was a moment’s pause before he knocked. I think for once I’d caught Tobin completely by surprise. After the second knock, he muttered something, then raised his voice. “Lyon. You can’t say no to the king.”

“Watch me,” I called back through the wood. I was almost laughing, because this day that had started so simply was decaying into confusion and darkness. The *king* wanted *me* to come back to *Riverrun*. I’d had nightmares that went like this, although they’d never included Tobin at my door. Perhaps what separated nightmare from life was that extra edge of pain that your own mind could not conceive of.

“Lyon, really. Let me in and we’ll talk about it. We don’t have to set off right away.”

“We’re not setting off at all.”

“Be *reasonable*. I speak for the king.”

I glared at the door. “I speak for myself. And I said no.” I had that power now, to say no and stand by it. And I wasn’t leaving my stone walls and my peaceful garden and my workable life for anyone, not even His High and Mightiness King Faro the Second. “If he needs something translated, he can send it here.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple. Come on, Lyon, open the door. I don’t want to shout at you through an inch of wood.”

“Then *go away!*” I was done. Just flat out done. I went to bed, burrowed deep under the covers, and pulled the pillow over my head. It was a good tightly-stuffed down one, and muffled Tobin’s comments enough to make his words undecipherable. I counted metaphorical sheep, and pretended that the sound of his voice didn’t go right through me.

I actually fell asleep. Crazy, but it had been a horrible night, and I often slept better in the daylight. And instinctively I must not have considered Tobin a threat, because I dropped off peacefully to the droning backdrop of his words. Tobin’s “*just be reasonable*” tone. So familiar, and something I had practice ignoring.

When I woke, the angle of the sun told me it was late afternoon. I struggled out of the warm, smothering embrace of covers and pillow and listened. All I heard outside was the familiar chirp and whistle of birdsong. I wondered if perhaps I’d dreamed the whole morning, but the market basket was a new one, and there was a fresh loaf on the counter.

I somehow felt better rested than I had in many weeks. I slid out of bed and stood as quietly as I could. Despite the silence, I had no illusion that the episode was over. Tobin wasn’t sneaky—that had always been my role. But he was tenacious, relentless even. Set Tobin at a goal and he’d reach it or die trying. He’d ridden that gods-bedamned whitefoot stallion a week later.

His knock came as the sun was getting low. I looked up from the book I’d been too distracted to really read, and didn’t answer.

“Lyon, you can’t hide in here forever.”

I muttered, “It worked for fifteen years.” I didn’t say it quite loud enough for him to catch, and I heard him growl in frustration.

“Let me in!”

Fifteen years and no one had crossed that threshold. But I was under no illusions that they couldn’t. Even Meldov hadn’t been powerful enough to set a ward that would keep physical beings out, and the wards I had on my windows and doors were a pale shadow of his. At best they might give a wraith a bad case of itch on its way through. Tobin had the authority of the king and his own curiosity behind him. There was no real sense in dragging this out like a petulant child. But I still moved slowly, as I stood and went to the door.

He ducked his head low, coming inside. He’d always been taller than me, and my lintel barely cleared my own hair. I’d liked that.

Tobin stopped inside the room and looked around. “This is more snug than I imagined from outside.”

“I like it.”

“Have you lived here long?”

“Fifteen years.”

He glanced at me from under lowered brows. “Since the fire?”

“More or less.” As soon as I could travel. It had taken a month. I still kept my hand behind me.

“Alone?”

“Yes.” I just let that stand.

Tobin nodded as if he’d heard more than I said. “So. Are you ready to listen to the King’s Voice?”

“No. I might listen to an old friend though.”

“So you do remember being friends.” Tobin tried to make his voice acid, but really, I’d heard it done far better.

“Of course I remember. But there’s no way to go back there. Tell me what the king wants with a humble translator. In your own words.”

He glanced around the room. “Can we at least sit down? I’ve been on my feet for hours and my knee isn’t up to that anymore.”

“Your knee?” I’d started to sit in my favorite chair, but stood again hastily, and only just remembered not to reach for him. With either hand. “Are you hurt?”

“Three years ago. Which was when I left the cavalry and was offered this job. I’m fine, as long as I don’t overdo things.”

“Oh.” I made a point of lowering myself to the soft leather, tucking my hand under my left arm. I nodded to the straight kitchen chair. “You can have that one.”

He gave me a grin as he sat. “Compared to pointy rocks and rotting logs, this is perfect. Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t think one of the King’s Voices would sit on rocks.”

“The job involves a lot of travel. And really, we’re more like exalted messenger boys than anything. Even in Riverrun, we often sit below the salt, when we get to sit down at all.”

I paused and just looked at him. *Tobin, in my own home*. He looked relaxed and confident, stretching his booted feet out in front of him with a sigh. Behind him, my simple kitchen looked smaller. He cocked his head, but didn’t speak. Once, I’d have been the first to come out with questions or to spill my story on the floor at his boots. But now I could hold my tongue for hours if necessary. I said nothing.

It was Tobin who broke first. “So, did Meldov actually die in the fire? Or did he escape too?”

“Burned to a crisp.” I didn’t mention that he’d been dead well before that happened.

“I thought you liked him.”

“Things change.”

Tobin frowned, but didn't pursue that. "And now you make a living doing translations."

"I do. Which brings me to what the king wants from me. And why me? Surely there must be other translators closer and better." I'd gotten as far from Riverrun as I could without leaving the kingdom.

"Actually, not as many as you'd think. And not one he trusts to translate ancient *tridescant* or *kanshishel* and not make a hash of it. We checked and there used to be a couple, but, well, Meldov was one, and another died of old age, and that leaves you. You *do* know the languages?"

His doubt stung me. "I do. Although ancient *tridescant* was never a written tongue, so it won't help you much. *Kanshishel* is as close to the written form as it gets. I see it now and then, and I know it as well as anyone." *Probably better than anyone else now alive.*

"The king mentioned both, and some urgency."

"If it's so critical, why didn't he just send the document with you? I could be translating it right now and he could have had his answer as fast as you could ride back. Why send for me instead?"

"I'm just His Majesty's voice. I'm not privy to his plans. If I was to speculate, which I did plenty of on the ride out here, I'd say either the item is too valuable to risk on the road, even with a guard, or too difficult or too fragile to transport."

It made sense of sorts. Which wasn't reassuring to my prospects. "I can't go. Not won't. I can't."

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

Because I'm crazy. Because I'm scared and damaged and if I leave these stone walls I think I may lose my mind altogether. I'd thought I was far more healed than that. I'd even wondered lately if the cure to my ill-humor might be to get away for a while, and set foot in the world again, but all it had taken was his arrival on my doorstep to disabuse me of that notion. He said "*Riverrun*" and my mind was full of smoke and screaming.

"I can't explain it."

“Is it to do with the sorcery? A spell?”

“Yes.” I leaped on that. In a way, it was true. It began with a spell. “So you see, if he’ll just send the item here, or perhaps a tracing of the inscription or the text, then he can have his answer.”

“He has his own sorcerers. If I asked him, he would send one here to see if they could free you.”

“No! I mean, it’s slowly wearing off. Messing with it might make it worse.”

“I’ve never heard of a spell that could trap a live human. Not since the days of the mages.” He leaned forward to look more closely. “You look okay. Other than the hand you’re hiding.” But his own hand dropped to hover near his belt knife. “Show me.”

“Go to Na’s own hell.”

He shook off my best glare like he didn’t even see it. “Show me what you have, or I’ll force you. Is it a weapon? Or some mark of damnation?”

I laughed, and the sound hurt my own ears. He winced, but didn’t take his fingers from the hilt.

“Oh, I’ve done damnation,” I said gaily. “And believe me, this isn’t it.” But I could tell he’d follow through with his threat, so I pulled my hand out from under my elbow and waved it at him. “Lovely, right?”

It actually wasn’t that bad. The fingers were untouched, although a little thin from disuse. It was the way they curled in to my palm, and the hand in turn curled toward my wrist, that looked horrible. Like a claw, frozen in a coil of unnatural tension. Living hands were not made to look like that. But since the moment I’d set a flame to the tendons of my wrist, to wrest myself free of the wraith, I hadn’t had a living hand.

He grunted like he’d taken a blow, and dropped his fingers away from his knife. “The fire.”

“Yes.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Nothing to do with you.” I couldn’t drop the light, happy voice, although he winced again when I used it. “It’s been a long time. I hardly even notice now.”

“Stop!” He went to his knees in front of me, reaching for my hand, but when I drew back out of reach he didn’t pursue me. “Don’t pretend.”

“I’m not pretending.” I smiled to show him I meant it. “I’ve learned to do everything left-handed. My penmanship is better than it ever was. I’m fine.”

“Lyon.” It came out a groan.

I kicked at him, one foot catching his hip and spilling him on the floor. “And you wondered why I never wrote you.” *Here was a lie that would serve me, twisted up in truth.* “I can’t stand that look. Don’t you *dare* pity me. I’d like to see you have the guts to burn...” I bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood.

He rolled to his feet and asked slowly, “Burn what?”

“Nothing. Go away and leave me alone. Tell your king you couldn’t find me. Tell him I died. Or tell him to have some scribe trace the document and bring it and I’ll translate it. For free, even, since he’s a friend of yours. Just go.”

“I can’t. He’s my liege and has my oath. And he’s your king too.”

“I really don’t care.”

“But I care for you. I don’t want to see you get in trouble or hurt. More hurt. There is no spell holding you here, is there?”

I glared at him.

“Be reasonable, lion-boy. He commands you.”

“Don’t call me that!” I surged to my feet, facing him, furious. He was ripping open all the old wounds today. “Just get the hells out of here!” I set my hand on the back of the chair, swaying and hearing the rush of blood in my ears.

“All right.” I must have looked bad, because he backed away from me, hands held out at his sides. “Listen, I’ll go away for a bit. But you know he *is* king. If he wants you in court, sooner or later you’ll have to go.”

“The hells I will.”

He backed toward the door. “I’ll come back later. You should maybe eat something. Think about it a bit. How bad would it be, really, to come with me? It would be like the old days, but with horses. You and me on an adventure. Five days ride, a little job for your king, and I promise I’d escort you all the way back. You’d not be gone more than three weeks, maybe less. And well paid for it. And we could catch each other up on old times. How bad could it be?”

“Worse than the fire,” I said, and meant it.

When he was gone, I had barely enough strength to shut and bolt the door before dropping back into my chair. I pulled my feet up on the seat, heedless of my shoes on the fine leather, and wrapped my arms around my knees. *How bad could it be?*

Part of me wanted to go. Oh Mother Bian, the picture he painted. Tobin and me riding side by side, comrades again. And not just friends, but two fay men. We were no longer boys, and neither of us virgins, even if... *not going there.*

I closed my eyes. I could almost picture it. I could also picture his face the first time I woke screaming and puking in the night. The first time I put a fist in his face, in unknowing panic, as I’d done to one of the nurses at the hostel so long ago. He’d watch me trying to cut my meat left-handed as it slid about my plate, or buttoning buttons, or any of another thousand simple tasks that I did slowly and not well. He’d get that look in his eyes again and I could not *bear* it.

I had a life here, and however circumscribed it was, it suited me well.

I looked up at the shelf that held my books. I had dozens now. Faithful friends who took me on journeys without judgment and without pity. Over there on the counter, Mother Fiona’s bread was fresh and good, and I could haggle off a thick slice in here with no one to watch. I was my own man, and I would choose, and my choice was to stay here.

In an odd way, the thought of leaving had made my home lovelier in my eyes. Although I didn't sleep, that also meant no bad dreams. I spent a quiet night in my chair, resting, and each time I opened my eyes I took in the thick stone walls and the glow of lamplight with satisfaction. I read a little, off and on, from a book in *teshmidoran*. I'd gotten it cheap, because there was no one else around who could now read it.

It was a travelogue, which had almost made me set it aside tonight. But in fact, I thought it was probably mostly fiction. Surely no real trip went half that smoothly, and although I'd never been to the far Southlands across the seas, some of the adventures he described had to be apocryphal. I'd heard of elephants, although no one I knew had ever seen one. But riding on the back of an elephant in a little house filled with soft cushions was taking it a bit far. I read along with pleasure at the author's imagination.

By morning I'd convinced myself that Tobin would take my "*No*" this time and go back to his king with it. I'm not sure where that delusion came from, because I surely knew better.

He showed up mid-morning, as I was pulling weeds in the garden. I heard him whistling before I saw him striding up the lane.

"In seventeen years you never learned another song?" I teased him. But I said it lightly. The sun was warm and the lettuces were growing well, and in a little while he would be gone.

"I like that one."

"I know."

"Show me your garden," he said.

"I imagine one is pretty much like another."

"No doubt. But I was a horse-boy and then a squire and then a knight and company commander, and now I do my king's errands. I've never owned a garden."

"You poor man. There's nothing more worth having. Well, other than books. Look here." I showed him the early greens, leafing out well enough already to harvest from around the edges. I pointed to the lacy fronds of

carrots, and the beans galloping skyward on the climbing frames I'd made for them.

"What's that? It's doing well." He pointed, and then made a sound as I tugged the plant up, leaf and root.

"Coldwort. It's a weed. It likes the cool weather so it outgrows the rest in this season, if you let it." I tossed it on the compost pile.

He bent to touch a smaller furry leaf. "Is this the same?"

"Yes. You can slay it for me."

He glanced up through his eyelashes at me, but yanked on it. The leaves came free, leaving the root in the soil. He peered at his trophy. "Mine's falling apart."

"You only wounded it. Oh well. I'll get the root next time."

"I never leave a wounded enemy behind me." He knelt to dig around the root with his fingers. I passed him the trowel, and he quickly worked the taproot free and tossed it with the rest.

"Victorious over weeds. Congratulations, Tobin."

He laughed. It was the same laugh he'd shared with me a hundred times. I'd missed that laugh. I moved quickly on down the row. "Here we have the squash. Nothing much yet, but by fall there will be more than I can eat. Luckily it keeps well."

He looked around. "This is nice and big. No chickens though? No cow? What do you do for meat and milk?"

"I've a woman in the village who supplies me. Chickens are noisy and a cow needs too much tending. I have some money coming in, and she can use a little coin, with three young ones to clothe and shoe."

"You always were good with children."

I looked over, startled. "That was you. The little ones followed you all over. I barely put up with them." I'd been jealous, truth be told, of the easy way he'd smile and kiss small cheeks and hold them on his hip. "I thought you'd have a brood of your own by now." It was one of the things that had

made it easier not to go to him, thinking that he'd have a wife and a family, and not need a strange man—a very strange man—coming near them.

“I wouldn't have minded children,” he said. “But no amount of prayers to Bian can make the union of two men fertile. Plus I've never found a man I'd actually want to raise a child with.”

“I hope you do someday,” I said, and meant it, even if it took him one step further from me. He was leaving soon, no matter what, and if ever a man was meant to be a father it was Tobin. “There are plenty of orphan children who need a good home.”

“Maybe. What about you? You're settled here with a house and an income. If you never found a girl to please you, why not take in a child?”

I shuddered. In the orderly routines and quiet I needed to survive, a child would be a disaster. As for the rest... “What makes you think I was looking for a girl?”

He gave me another sidelong look. “Weren't you?”

“I'm as fay as you are,” I said tartly. “Now who's blind?”

“I'd guessed it,” he admitted. “But it's not something I like to assume, unless the man tells me so himself.”

“Well, now you know for certain.” My good mood was fading. I wrapped my hand around a fast-growing strand of threadbind, and pulled hard, heedless of the way it dug into my fingers. The long, wiry stuff resisted my efforts. I'd have twined it around my right forearm for an assist, as I often had to, but Tobin's strong hands landed on the stem below mine and together we dragged it from the earth. I dropped it on the pile, and wriggled my fingers to return circulation.

“It's not a bad thing that you're fay,” he murmured, closer to my ear than I'd realized.

I jumped sideways, and concealed it with a quick tug at my boot. “I didn't say it was.” But I moved away from him down the row.

“Is your garden why you don’t want to leave? Are you worried about this place? I’m sure someone from the village will be willing care for it for a few weeks. On the king’s coin, of course.”

He hadn’t followed after me. At a safe distance I turned. The sun was behind him and I had to squint to see him while my features were no doubt clear in the light. Unfair. “I’m sure they would, except that I’m not leaving it.”

He scrubbed his face with one hand. “How do I convince you? You don’t have a choice. I’m charged with bringing you back to Riverrun, one way or the other.”

“You’d have to tie me up and throw me across the horse!”

The long silence that followed was cold as winter.

“You wouldn’t.”

“This isn’t some kind of whim for His Majesty. Something serious is afoot, something vital. I could tell by the way my instructions were given. I’ve already waited a day for you to agree, but... I have orders.”

“Damn you then. You’ll have to do it! You’ll have to drag me back there.” I was so angry it froze my bones. Deep down shaking-with-it angry. I’d said *never again*. Never again would I let myself be suborned or coerced or forced at another’s will. I’d die first. I wished there was something nearby to hold onto. I took three steps back to put my hip against the fence.

He hadn’t moved forward. “Please. Don’t make me choose between my duty and what you prefer.”

“What I *prefer*.” I put both hands behind me to hide the shaking. “Yes. You will have to choose, you bastard. Now get off my land or arrest me.”

“I’m not a constable. I don’t arrest...”

“Whatever it is you do, when your king commands you. Either go or take me.”

He froze, even more still. The sun shone in his dark hair, raising the red in it. I’d said, “*or take me*.” I suddenly heard the double meaning in that, totally unintended. But retracting or explaining would dilute the words, and if he

heard both meanings he was welcome to them. But not to me, in any way, shape or form. I'd fight him on this as long as I could.

"I've just found you again, after so long." His voice was weary. "Could we please not do this? Could we just sit and talk? Get to know each other again? And then you can pack a few things and make a small trip. One short job for your king, and you'll be back here in your sanctuary none the worse for wear. I'll be at your side the whole time, I swear it."

I could almost taste the picture that made. So my voice was harsher than ever when I asked, "How can you swear to it? What if your *king* wants me to stay in Riverrun at his beck and call? What if he *orders* you on another errand?"

He gave me no answer then, and I turned away. "I'm going inside. You can stay here, or leave, or come and drag me out by my hair. I see no other choices."

I'd gone a dozen steps toward the house, hearing nothing behind me, when his voice drifted to me, softly. "I like your hair."

Gods-bedamned mother-screwing bastard. I went inside and closed and bolted the door.

CHAPTER THREE

I spent the evening curled up with my most prized possession. The book was battered, with some of the first pages torn out. The peddler who'd brought it to me said they'd been used to start a fire. "*What good is a book no-one can read, save for the paper?*" He was lucky I'd had to let him live. If my glare could have started a fire, he'd have been charred.

Still, for once, *no-one* included me. The wraith had left me owning a dozen old and forgotten tongues, and a few newer ones, but this one was unknown to me. It was naggingly familiar, having the sound of *britarian* when read phonetically, and here and there a few words that seemed to make sense in that language. I thought it might be a much older form, but the paper was modern. Perhaps it was a copy. I puzzled at it when I needed my brain totally engaged.

And tonight I really needed that. I'd spent all afternoon and half the evening waiting for Tobin to knock on my door and take up his arguments. I had my heart hardened against even opening the latch for him. So it was a distraction and annoyance, instead of a relief, when the sun was long down and he still hadn't come. I leaned closer to the book. Could *teshmian* mean the same thing as *tesh-man*? If so, this might be a household guide of some kind, dealing with the running of a large keep. The words I'd found were mostly domestic ones.

Eventually I put the book carefully back on the shelf. I hadn't jotted a note for over an hour. I glanced out at the dark beyond the window, and wondered what time it was. I'd had a clock once, but I'd beaten the little gears out of it one night, when it refused to move forward at a reasonable pace. I'd decided not to replace it. The cycle of light and dark were enough for me.

My knife called to me and tonight I didn't even try to fight it. The little blade winked in the lamplight as I picked it up.

I wondered if Tobin actually had the stones to make me go with him. If I cried—make that if I screamed—would he still bundle me up and drag me back to his king, like a cat bringing home a half-dead mouse? He'd called me

friend. He'd even said he liked my hair. *I couldn't afford to get distracted down that path.*

Tobin had been a soldier, for over a decade apparently. I was sure he'd been a good one. And he liked King Faro, or at least trusted him. I could hear it in his voice and see in his flinches when I defied the wishes of the Crown. Set that long history of service, and his duty to his liege lord, against some old, lingering friendship for me, and I knew where his loyalty would fall.

What choices did I have? I could sit here and force him to come in after me and drag me out. I could run away, leave all my comforts and start again. I'd almost have done that, if I wasn't certain that, now that he knew where I lived, Tobin would have little difficulty in finding me again. Probably six miles down the road and already limping.

I could try to kill him before I ran. A stranger coming later to the hunt might never locate me again.

Sometimes I wondered if the thoughts of violence that came to me were the normal imaginings anyone might have, or some kind of stain on my soul left by the wraith. This one was pure stupidity anyway. I had my kitchen cleaver, an axe, and this little blade. Tobin had a dagger and his sword, and a decade of experience. Not to mention three inches of height on me. He'd disarm me and laugh doing it. And not even I had enough darkness in my soul to imagine killing him by stealth or poison.

So truly, it came down to letting him take me, or hoping that my powers of persuasion would somehow miraculously change his mind. I could tell him that a spell would drive me mad if I left these walls. It might be no more than the truth. But he might still feel compelled to try it.

The tip of the little blade slid familiarly over my skin. I pushed my shirt sleeve higher to keep it clean. I hadn't bothered to change for bed, knowing I'd never sleep. This was my good shirt, that I'd put on after washing the garden soil off myself, because... well, it was my favorite. And I didn't want it stained.

I looked at my forearm, bared to the light. I always tried to use the arm as much as possible. I had a bag I'd made with handles that fit my elbow, to fetch

and carry with. Sometimes I filled it with stone weights and lifted it up and down, until I had to stop. I did exercises, holding myself up in a plank on my elbows. But some days, some weeks, it ached too much to do that, and despite my efforts the muscles had dwindled until my wrist was as small around as a child's. Useless. The skin was thinner too, and against its winter pale, the veins stood blue. I wondered idly if this would be the night. Would I finally push the tip a little deeper, and let the crimson spill inexorably from those blue lines? I dipped the tip just deep enough to coax free a drop.

The window across from me exploded with a shattering crash, as a heavy body plunged through it. I was knocked from my chair. Even as I fell, I knew Tobin's touch and his voice, gasping, "No! Gods, no. Don't."

He wrestled me for the knife, pried it from my startled grasp, and threw it across the room.

"Damn it, that was my good blade!" I struggled to get free from him. "If you've broken it..."

"Broken it!" He held me in an unshakable grip, wrapped against his chest with both wrists prisoned in his hands. "You son of a whore. I hope it's shattered!"

His arms were bands of steel around me, his chest a stone wall at my back, and I fought him. I struggled with all my might, my vision dark with the need to get free. "Let go. Let go. Let GO!"

"Promise you won't move if I do. Promise you'll stay right here."

His breath was a foul thing against my cheek, in my hair, the whisper of graveyards and creatures long dead. I fought to get free. The fetters bound my wrists to the wall. The floor under my bare feet was cold. He pressed against me, whispering of the power we would gain. He asked for permission, asked for free will, told me of the riches of the world laid before us if I yielded to his request. His eyes were Meldov's brown ones, the words ones I'd longed to hear, but under the honey was acid and decay. I fought him. I denied him. Until he turned me around and took what he wanted, with a snarl at my intransigence. Took and drugged and cajoled and suborned me. And I was left

with only a shred of free will, deep inside, hoarded and cowering in the dark of my soul. Kept hidden against the day...

I eventually realized I was sobbing. My cheek was pressed to my floor, my hair glued to my face with tears and snot and sweat. I was curled as tightly as possible, knees to my chest, the flagstones hard under my hip. Something rubbed across my shoulders with a firm soft pressure, like a friendly cat. I realized it was a man's hand, and scrambled away, dragging myself up to my knees. I couldn't stand. I pushed off from the floor with both arms, whimpering as my bad wrist took the strain. I raised my head.

Tobin sat back on his heels, staring at me. His pupils were so wide they swallowed the honey-brown of his eyes. He held his hands up, empty. "Do you know who I am?" His voice was agonizingly gentle.

I sat back on my heels, and wiped my face with my sleeve. "The bastard who's going to drag me back to Riverrun."

"You called me Meldov."

I had no good answer for that.

Tobin whispered, "I thought he was a good man. What did he do to you?"

"Oh, he *was* a good man," I said jauntily. "He was long dead when he did that."

If Tobin had been pale before he was sheet-white now. "He was *what*?"

I sighed. "It's a long story." The tears had done something for me, emptied me out. I actually felt better than I had. I was loose and drifting and untouchable, all my doors swinging open. That was a dangerous thought, and I tried to care about it.

"I have lots of time. Tell me?"

"You should just go."

"The hells I will." He stood up. "You're bleeding. Do you have any bandages?"

"This?" I looked at my arm dispassionately. I'd cut deeper than usual, when he grabbed me. Still, it was nothing that wouldn't heal. In fact, when I

looked at him, I saw way more blood than that on his own sleeve. Which reminded me— “You broke my window! Who told you to dive through like some run-away beer wagon and break it? Damn you, do you know how much that cost?” I’d had to buy the large panes in the city and have them carefully shipped, and paid the local carpenter to frame it. I’d loved it. The local glassmaker couldn’t come close to it. “And you’re bleeding worse than I am. Look to your own wounds.”

He looked down in surprise, as if he hadn’t noticed anything, and slid his sleeve up his arm to check it. A shard of bright glass fell from the fabric to the floor. A long, shallow gash scored his tanned forearm. Blood welled slowly out. He grimaced and wrapped his hand over it. “That’s nothing. But you. You were going to...” He swallowed, the sound loud in the quiet night.

“No, I wasn’t.” *At least, probably not.* “I like to play with the knife. It calms me.”

“*Calms* you?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t going to explain myself to him.

“Well it sure as hells didn’t calm me.” He took down my dishcloth from the rack, not looking at me. “I was so damned scared.”

“Don’t use that. It’s for the dishes. There’s a basket of cotton strips under the sink there.” Because this wasn’t the first time I’d gone a bit deep.

He wrapped his own arm, his motions so practiced, down to tying the strip with left hand and teeth that it came home to me how often he must have done something like this. *He was a soldier.* I’d known, intellectually, that he was in the cavalry all those years ago. But that simple, practical action brought home the impact of that. *He might have died.* That realization stunned the breath out of me so well that I scarcely moved as he came over and knelt in front of me, reaching very slowly for my arm.

I came out of my distraction before he touched me though. “Just give me a bandage.”

He handed it over, careful not to brush my fingers with his own.

Well, I had practice at bandaging too. I wiped my wrist clean, knowing he was looking at it as I did so, and resisting the impulse to hide from his gaze. The original damage was less visible in the lamplight, but the low angle somehow brought out the lines of scars that overlay the first, parallel ridge after ridge, and small nicks, old and new, marking my bad nights. I hadn't realized there were so many. I covered them in stained but washed cotton, and pulled my sleeve down over it all.

Tobin said, "If you weren't going to kill yourself, what were you doing?"

"It's a distraction."

"Cutting yourself?"

"Sometimes." I had the impulse to see if he could understand this. "Or just knowing that I could. Knowing that I can make that choice, can lay the blade on skin, or push in just a little and draw blood, or go deeper and no one can stop me."

"I stopped you tonight."

"You grabbed me. That's not the same thing."

He shook his head. "I don't understand. I want to though. I want to help."

"I thought you wanted to take me back to your king." I stood and turned my back on him.

"Watch where you walk," he said quickly. "There's glass on the floor and you're barefoot."

I had to laugh. It came out surprisingly real, and after a moment he chuckled too.

"Well, you can clean it up then," I told him. "You have boots on, and anyway it's your mess."

I went to my chair, managing to avoid cutting myself, and sat down with my feet on the seat while he worked. He picked up the big shards and pieces of the frame, and then swept the small stuff into a corner with my broom. "I'll get that swept out the door in the morning."

I wasn't sure how he knew I didn't want the door opened to the dark, but I said, "The market boy comes barefoot. You'd better get it away from the path."

"I can do that." He set the broom in its place and looked at me. "I'm really sorry about your window. I thought I was saving your life."

He seemed so sad, I had to give him something. "Maybe you were. I've always known one day I might use the freedom to cut deep. This might have been the night."

That didn't make him happier. "Because I came here and ruined your nice quiet life."

"Hardly. I mean, yes, right now I'm really not happy with you. But you saw the scars. I've cut myself often enough when you were hundreds of miles away. It's not your fault."

"Then whose?" He grabbed the kitchen chair, swung it around, and sat on it backwards to look at me, his arms crossed on the wooden rail. "Can you tell me? Please? You said Meldov was dead, and you sounded... tortured."

I tried to say it wasn't that bad, but it had been. Perhaps not torture of the body, but of the mind and soul. It had been.

After a silence he said, "Can you tell me about the fire maybe? We knew it wasn't an ordinary blaze when we arrived to put it out, from how long and hot it burned. And you said Meldov was caught in it. And clearly you were injured."

He was a soldier. He'd seen injuries. I guessed he could see that the burn on my wrist, isolated as it was, was unlikely to be from a house fire. But he waited patiently for my answer.

"I got out," I said hoarsely. "Ran as far as I could." I hadn't been certain the fire would be enough to destroy the wraith, until I felt its hold finally let go. I'd been two miles down the road by then, with no reason to go back.

"And afterward?"

“I hid in an old barn, for days.” I’d cowered in the hayloft, as high above the ground as I could get. The fever had come on fast, but it had taken a thirst so severe I no longer cared if I died, to drive me out of my refuge. “Eventually I made it to the hostel of the Sisters of Bian in Lowbridge.”

“I searched for you. You and Meldov. I asked at the local hostels and everywhere else I could think of.” Tobin’s voice was thin. “No one had heard of you. Even in Lowbridge.”

“Perhaps I hadn’t arrived yet. In any case, I begged them to hide me. I was afraid, and delirious. The burn was suppurating by then.” And I was babbling, in a panic over some nebulous pursuit, and wouldn’t tell them my own name. They’d either believed my fears were real, or humored me. “They tended me for a little while. Then I... traveled, and eventually wound up here. It was peaceful. I stayed.”

His lips twisted ruefully. “And here I am to drag you out of your refuge. I am so, so sorry. But that doesn’t change the fact that the king commands it.”

“It won’t serve him if I wind up a babbling idiot drooling all over his floor.”

“Is that likely?” He looked at me intently. “Is there truly a spell tying you to this place?”

I was exhausted and wrung out. It was the only reason I could see for telling him the truth. “No. No spell. Just my own crazy mind, that likes hiding inside these stone walls. The books and the work come to me, and I stay here safe and snug.” I growled. “Less snug now my window’s broken.”

“But alone.”

“I like being alone. I wasn’t alone even in my own head back then.”

He was giving me that look again, pity and fear, and I couldn’t stand it.

“I’ve done fine. I built a life. I survived and I won and every year it gets easier. Keep your pity to yourself.”

“Every *year*?”

“Screw you.”

“Have you ever?”

“What?”

He cleared his throat. “Been with a man? You apprenticed to Meldov when I was sixteen, which means you were fourteen. And he was a cool man, and not one for boys, I thought, for all his looks.”

I made a sound, and Tobin shot me a glare. “You don’t think I was paying attention? I was a horny bastard at sixteen, and I was worried about you. But he seemed all right. So you went into his house, and then I went to training, and when I saw you off and on you seemed content. And then I was called out into the field. I had plenty of boys around in training, and later enough fay men in the cavalry to not be alone if I didn’t choose to be. But what about you? Did you ever have someone to hold you?”

I had to cut this off right here. “I’m not a virgin,” I said flatly. I set my feet onto the floor and pushed upright. “So now what? What should I pack? Will I need court clothes, because I don’t have any.”

He stared at me. “You’re coming?”

“Do I have a choice? I’ve pulled out all the stops, I asked, I *begged*, bargained and whined, and I haven’t shifted you. I remember how stubborn you are. So it looks like I’m going with you.” It felt oddly freeing to say so.

He looked pained and dropped his eyes. “I don’t understand you,” he said. “At all. But yes, we still have to go. So if you’re willing, now, somehow, then pack whatever you wish to have with you for three weeks, with travel. Don’t worry about fine clothes. If King Faro wants you in court finery, he’ll buy it for you.”

“This is my best shirt. Although hardly fit for court.” I stretched my arms upward, knowing that it had become short with many washings, and that the action would bare my midriff to his eyes. There at least I was muscled and toned and sleek, if a bit pale, and I wanted to shake him out of thinking of me as a victim.

“I like the shirt,” he muttered. “Bring it.”

I took the way his eyes followed me across the room as a sign he'd noticed. Although he might have just been making sure I wouldn't go for my knife, sitting where he'd put it onto the counter not six feet away. The edge of the blade was dull with blood. I'd have to clean it soon. Or make him do it.

He made me try to sleep before we left. I didn't think I could, especially with him there in my house, but I caught a couple of misty hours, drifting in and out on the edges of unconsciousness. I didn't want to go too deep anyway. After that waking remembrance, I wasn't sure what my dreams might be.

When the sun rose, I got up and went into the garderobe with a pitcher of water to wash and dress. I felt sticky with the sweat of old nightmares and wished I could have a bath, but heating and carrying water to fill the tin tub would take half the morning. I did the best I could with a cloth.

I chose sturdy clothes for traveling, and tucked my shirt into my trousers, with a good leather belt round me. I chose long thick stockings to go under my boots, and pulled a warm knit vest over the shirt. We'd be five nights on the trail, according to Tobin, and it would still get cold. I combed my hair, untangling it to lie sleek past the nape of my neck. My hair was more trouble long, but Meldov had made me wear it short, and its length was now one more choice I kept for myself.

And Tobin had liked it. Maybe I should cut it after all. I lifted the long strands at my neck in my hand, considering. But cutting hair, at least any shorter than a horse-tail I could tie up and saw through with a knife, was not a task for a one-handed man. All right, there were several reasons I kept it this length. Pathetic, that I couldn't sit still under the village barber's hand for a trim. But there it was.

When I finally emerged, Tobin gave me a shrewd glance. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd drowned yourself in the ewer. Second thoughts?"

"My hair had knots." I tossed my head to let it fall further across my eyes.

He grunted and hefted my pack. "We'll walk to the village and make arrangements for your house. And get the horses."

“You could go do that and fetch the horses while I water the garden,” I said.

“You watered yesterday. No.”

“Afraid I’ll change my mind?”

I could see that he was, but he said, “Seizing the moment.”

I took the pack from him and slung it on my back. He picked up my bedroll, and the second bag, grunting at the weight. “What did you put in here?”

“Books. You saw me.”

“Yeah. Didn’t realize how heavy they were. Do you really need all of these?”

If he didn’t want me to spend my nights pacing. I gave him the short answer. “Yes.”

He didn’t argue, just hooked it over his shoulder. I paused for one last look around. This had been home and refuge, and prison at times, for so long. I’d thought I’d never leave it alive. If they’d sent anyone else after me, I might not have.

My other books on the shelves were wrapped to keep out damp and insects. We’d nailed several layers of oilcloth over the broken window too, and the interior was almost as dim as the onset of night. The dishes were clean, the food packed for the road or stored in its tins for safekeeping. The bedclothes were stripped off and bundled with my bedroll. What I wasn’t taking, Dag’s mother could fetch to launder and send back with him. Already the place looked dingy and unused.

On the sills and the lintel of the door, my spells were visible as a fine burned tracery in the wood. Spells of banishment, of warding, of life-not-death. Tonight I’d be sleeping outside those wards. I was tempted to claim the call of nature and barricade myself in the garderobe after all. But the time for that had passed.

“I’ll get you a new window,” Tobin promised. “A better one. I took measurements and I’ll order it in the city. A single pane even. We can bring it back with us.”

I shrugged. I had the feeling I’d never come back.

Still, I pulled the door shut behind me, and set the bar. No sense leaving the place wide open. I tugged my pack higher on my shoulders and set off down the path. This was still familiar territory. For the last decade, I’d been to the village every month or so, and sometimes even on to the town, on market days. I might live alone, but I didn’t make my own boots or my own tools. Some commerce was necessary. Walking down this way with Tobin at my shoulder made it new, though. His footsteps behind me and the weight on my back were reminders with every yard we covered that I wasn’t coming right back.

Despite the cool of the morning, I could feel sweat on my face. I wished I’d tied my hair back that morning, but then, loose and long made it convenient for hiding behind. I might need that screen before the day was done. We walked in silence, as the sun rose to clear the trees.

At the village, I went to visit Mother Fiona, while Tobin headed to the inn to retrieve his horses and pay his shot. When I told her where I was headed and what I wanted, she gave me a long look. “Might be a good thing. You’re too young a man to be a hermit.”

“Not so young as that,” I protested. “And my hermitage was a sight more comfortable than this trip will be.”

“Comfort isn’t everything. And you’re younger than me anyway. Go have an adventure. Come back and tell us about it.” She smiled at me.

Dag got his smile from her. It seemed genuine. I wondered if she was maybe tired out from taking sole care of a house and children for years, and was wishing she was the one going. But when little Guinna ran up, Fiona’s face lit with affection.

“Mama, Dag says the stranger with the horses is getting them ready to travel. Can I go see?”

“Better stay out of the way, childling.”

The little girl’s eyes teared up. I heard myself say, “Those horses belong to a friend of mine. Would you really like to see them?”

“Oh yes.” She grinned up at me, a gap where her middle teeth had been. “They’re big ’uns, and shiny and black. Like king’s horses. You’ve never seen the like.”

Her mother laughed. “I’m betting Mister Lyon’s seen far more exciting things than that, but if he’ll take you, you can go.” She nodded to me. “Send her back with Dag. I need the boy anyway.”

Guinna squealed, “Thank you!” She bounced up and down. “Can we hurry? He’s grooming them now, so it won’t be much longer.”

I handed her mother a small stack of coins. “I should be back in three weeks. If I’m not I’ll send word.”

“We’ll keep your place nice for you.”

“Thank you.” I was surprised by a sudden reluctance to say farewell to her. She just gave me a nod, though, and went back in to her baking.

Guinna skipped along beside me as I walked up the rutted lane to the inn. “This is so great! No one good ever stays here. Those horses are the best. They’d make two of Farmer Comnal’s brown stud. And he’s the finest beast for miles. I wonder what load they can pull. Do you know? Do you reckon your friend might know?”

“If they’re riding horses, they’re not bred to pull loads,” I said bemusedly.

“But they *could*. ’Cause a horse is a horse.”

“I suppose so.”

The inn was barely worthy of the name—two guest rooms upstairs and stabling for four horses. The pair of blacks that Tobin had hitched to the rail for saddling had drawn quite a crowd. They were true king’s horses, with rumps round as apples and coats like black sunshine. Even standing there, hips askew, resting a hoof, you could tell they were made for both speed and

endurance. I had a moment's qualm. I'd loved horses as a boy, but riding was another thing I hadn't done for fifteen years.

Tobin lifted his head from picking out a hoof and saw me. The relief on his face made me wonder if he'd worried I might take the chance to run away. The crowd parted to let me through, with little Guinna dogging my heels.

"Almost ready?" I asked.

"Just give me your bag and I'll put it in the pack."

I handed over the rucksack and he settled it carefully behind the saddle of the smaller gelding, adjusting it and tying the load so it wouldn't shift or chafe.

Behind me, someone said, "Th'art leaving then, Mister Lyon?"

Before I could answer, Guinna spoke up. "He's going for three whole weeks and to the city an' all. But he'll be back. My mum is keeping his place ever-so. And he said I could see the horses."

Tobin laughed with the rest and then bent to her level. "Who are you, missy, who wants to see a war horse up close."

"I'm Guinna." But her thumb crept toward her mouth at being addressed by a stranger. "Are they really fighting war-horses? Sir? M'lord?"

"No, hon, no fear," Tobin said. "They don't fight now. They're fast runners though. Would you like to sit one? Just for a moment?"

"*Could I?*" The thumb was forgotten in the glory of that vision.

I caught sight of Dag in the crowd, scowling, and saw the other children gathered there. I leaned toward Tobin to mutter, "If you let her, you'll have to let the lot of them. Or at least her brother, or I may come home to rats in the pantry."

Tobin laughed, and for a moment he looked as young and cheerful as Dag had been two days ago. "Why not. *'Begin a trip with a kindness, and good fortune will follow you.'* We can afford a few minutes."

"Still a sucker for the kids," I muttered. I stood against the stable wall and watched, while he lifted one small child after another into the saddle of his horse and led them around. Then a couple of the boys were let ride by

themselves to the paddock fence and back. Dag didn't step forward. The others had all been younger.

I knew he'd ridden their old plow horse since before he could walk. I called out, "Hey Dag?"

He hurried to me. "Yes, Mister Lyon?"

"It's been a while since I was on a horse. You think you could get on mine and give him a quick turn, down to the lane and back? Take the buck out of him before I get on?"

"I could, sir!"

"Go on then."

He turned to the horses, and despite his eagerness, managed to walk over slow enough not to startle them. He untied my horse's leadrope, scrambled into the saddle without use of the stirrups, and gathered up the reins. Tobin turned to me with an eyebrow raised, but I shrugged. If Dag couldn't handle the beast, I was going to be in trouble myself.

He turned toward the road, and gave the horse's silken sides a kick that made me wince. I should perhaps have warned him. The gelding's first plunge forward nearly unseated him, but he clung to the saddle like a burr, and a hundred yards down the lane he successfully pulled the horse to a walk, and turned for home. When he reached me, he slid out of the saddle, landing with a thump. He handed me the reins. "He's a beauty, sir. Smooth as satin, and not a foot wrong!"

"Thank you."

Tobin helped another gangling young boy down from his mount and said, "Time for us to go."

I started to mount, and found it an awkward business, with my right hand useless to grab stirrup or cantle. My mount was tall enough to have me bouncing around on one foot, trying for leverage. Somehow, I made it aboard. When I glanced over at Tobin he was adjusting the length of his stirrup and not looking my way. Good.

The village constable came toward me. “Fare well, Mister Lyon. We’ll hope to see you back soon and in good health. And I’ll keep an extra watch on your place.” He directed a glare at someone in the crowd.

“Thank you.”

Tobin wheeled his horse toward the road and mine followed suit unasked. I saw more familiar faces than I realized I knew, as we trotted easily down the center of the village and out into the countryside. Some of them smiled and waved, their expressions open and easy. I wondered if any of them knew what I’d once been.

Once out of town, Tobin reined his horse back alongside mine and grinned at me. “Canter?”

“Sure.” Bravado maybe, but it had to be better than the damned trot. I’d forgotten how to relax into the gait, and both my horse and I would be sore soon at this rate. Tobin gave a whoop and set his mount loose. It was more a controlled gallop than a canter, but I gave mine its head and chased him.

It was exhilarating, in a mad reckless way, to be charging across the countryside into the unknown with the wind in my hair and the sun on my face. After the first few minutes of holding on for dear life, my body somehow remembered the way of it, and I relaxed. And Dag had been right about the gelding’s gaits. I’d never had a smoother ride. Tobin’s was faster, but after a while he pulled back to let me come even with him. I had no breath for speech, even if we could have heard each other over the pounding hooves, but I glanced over at him and smiled.

When the horses began blowing and sweating, we reined back to a fast walk. Tobin said, “So good! It’s been a lifetime since I rode out with you.”

“Yes.” We’d mostly run about his father’s land or the city on foot as youngsters. Only after he’d begun training, and I’d started my apprenticeship, had we both had horses to ride. A few golden afternoons when we’d managed to meet up for an adventure, before the end. I tried not to let my mind go to dark places, not now, when I was having my first new adventure in years. Even if not by choice. “Tell me what you’ve been up to. Where have you traveled? What’s your brother up to?”

“Kirt is Lord of Goldwood now, since m’father passed.”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t surprised to hear his father had died—the old Lord would have been near sixty. But I’d liked that old man on the rare occasions he’d noticed me. His distracted good humor had been almost the same for me as for Tobin.

“It’s been years ago now. M’mother’s still hale, and giving Kirt’s wife fits about how to run the manorhouse.”

“He’s married then?”

“Oh yes, years ago, to the lovely Lady Ami. Seven children. Took the pressure right off me. Mother has even stopped asking if I’ve found a good woman and started asking about a good man.”

“Wow.” I couldn’t picture that. His mother had been very much the proper lady of the manor, although I’d only met her a few times.

“She’s happy as a pig in mud with the children.”

I snorted at the image. “Don’t say that about your mother.”

He grinned. “She’s a good soul, is my mum. And she’s eased off a lot since she let Ami take over her formal duties. Even if she does try to keep Ami up to snuff.”

He went on talking easily whenever we walked the horses, telling me of his campaigns and his family. And if sometimes his stories wandered into places and people that meant nothing to me, still it was good to hear his voice. All I had to do was nod, and murmur the occasional, “*He did?*” or “*Really?*” to keep him going.

He was no fool. He knew I was forcing him to do all the talking, but whenever a pause began to stretch without a comment from me, he would just move on with his tales. It was oddly restful.

Which the riding was not. When he finally called a halt for a bite and a rest, I fell off more than dismounted. The jolt of my heels hitting the grass traveled right up my spine and my thighs felt like rubber. “Just kill me now,” I muttered.

Tobin laughed at me. “Done in by half a day’s ride. You’re getting old, lion-boy.”

“That’s sophistication, you soldier.”

“And proud of it. Here, sit over here in the shade while I unsaddle the horses for an hour.”

“I prefer the sun,” I said, making my way stiffly to a large rock.

“And so you may, but you’re going to be burned by the day’s end. You should’ve worn a hat.”

“Curses.” I made myself get up and move under a tree. It was cool there, but he was right. I could already feel the tightness of the skin on my nose and forehead. I had to be glad my hair shielded my neck.

Tobin untacked the horses and haltered them to a downed tree, with grass and water at hand. They set to grazing happily. When his stallion lowered itself, grunting in anticipation of a good roll, I expected Tobin to stop it, but he watched indulgently.

“Won’t he get tangled in the rope?”

“He’s my old cavalry mount. If he couldn’t roll with a halter on him, he’d have broken a leg long ago.”

“What’s his name?”

From the look he gave me, I gathered that information had probably been somewhere in the morning’s chatter, but he just said, “Goldwood’s Darkwind. And yours is Cricket.”

“Not fair.”

He laughed. “I was younger when I named Dark. Much younger.”

We ate and then he repacked the gear, brushed and tacked the horses, while I sat idly, watching the clouds roll by overhead. “I wish this was all there was,” I said. “Daylight and traveling with you. I could do this forever.”

“I’ll remind you you said that when you wake up sore in the morning.”

“We have to get through the night first.”

He came back and crouched in front of me, sitting easily on his heels. “What will happen in the night?”

“Probably nothing.” I didn’t meet his eyes.

“Lyon, I saw the writing on your windows and doors. And I saw the... way you acted. Is there something out here, some threat? Because if so, I need to know about it.”

“Nothing. Only ghosts. Unsummoned, long-dead, impotent ghosts. Nothing to worry about.”

“No one’s that afraid of nothing.”

“I am.” I glared right at him. “I am, all right? I’m that afraid. There’s nothing left of him, and his ashes were no doubt sprouting weeds long ago. Nothing taps at my window or cozens me through the gap beneath my door. And I’m still that afraid.”

“Why?”

Good question. “Because I’m a coward, I guess. Because every time I wake I think, for just a moment, that he’s waiting...”

Tobin put his hand on my knee. “*What did he do?*”

I shook him off and stood. “Just don’t touch me. Don’t come near me if I wake up. Don’t listen to anything I say and don’t by all the gods ask me why I’m screaming.” I went to my horse. Cricket. Poor thing, what a name for so lovely a beast. “Oh, and there might be puking. But if you leave me be, I’ll clean it in the morning. Just ignore me and we can move on once it’s light.”

“There must be something I can do to help.”

“Will you give me back my knife?” It hadn’t escaped my notice that he’d removed it from my pen case where I’d stored it, and taken the longer one out of my pack as well.

“No.”

“Then no, there probably isn’t. Don’t let me spook the horses.” I swung into the saddle, trying to look dignified, which was marred by the pained grunt

I couldn't help uttering. I gathered my reins. "We should head on while it's light."

He let the subject drop, but the afternoon was much quieter than the morning had been. After an hour I was becoming sorry to have broken the mood. But maybe it was just as well. Riding with him had almost made me forget who and what I was now. That would be a mistake.

An hour or so from sunset he pulled up at a crossroads. "Lyon? I need your opinion on this."

I stopped beside him and tried to pretend I still had attention for anything except my aching thighs. "Yes?"

He pointed. "A couple of miles down there is an inn, not large but comfortable. I stayed there on the way up. It's off the direct route, but only half an hour or so, and we'd get hot food and real beds."

"Or?"

"Or we could keep going. Find a place to camp. We have food and bedrolls."

"But why?" I could barely keep my eyes open and a bed sounded heavenly.

"You said screaming. Could be a problem in an inn."

"Oh. Damn. Yeah."

He hesitated. "How likely is it? I mean, every night? Or just the off chance?"

It was many years since it had been a predictable part of each night, but this trip was likely to be a damned good trigger. "Bedrolls," I said morosely.

"All right."

We rode on for about fifteen minutes and then turned aside down a country track. It petered out into a meadow, which we crossed. The forest beyond was thin, and rising behind the trees was a small hill. Tobin set Darkwind at the rocky slope and the stallion scrambled up with barely a clatter. Cricket made heavier work of it, but soon enough we were on a grassy plateau just below the crown.

“This is good,” Tobin said. “A bit sheltered, and we’ll hear anyone else coming up. Grazing for the horses.”

“Lovely.” I barely managed to swing my right leg high enough to clear the saddle, before sliding down to the ground beside Cricket’s front feet. “I’ll sleep here.”

Tobin chuckled, damn him. “I’ll get things set up.”

Watching him make camp was almost enough to keep my eyelids open. He took on each task with a neat economy of motion that spoke of long practice, and an ease that spoke of muscles. Tobin bending, squatting, rising, his riding trews tight across his thighs, was a sight. I closed my eyes. Not for me.

I must have actually slept, because the next thing I knew was the smell of woodsmoke. I looked up. The sky was darkening, streaks of amber and crimson to the west, and the first faint stars in a deep blue-velvet firmament to the east. I rolled my head, with the grass tickling my cheek, and saw a fire, neat and contained, with sparks flickering heavensward. Tobin was silhouetted against it, cleaning a knife. Some instinct must have warned him, because he noticed my gaze right away.

“Hey, sleepyhead. Want some food?”

I licked my dry lips. “Water first?”

“Oh sure. I found a good stream and refilled the canteens.” He watched me struggle to sit up, the blanket he’d apparently draped over me sliding to my knees. “Do you need a hand?”

“I’m fine.” I staggered to my feet and walked in a small circle, trying to shake off the pins and prickles in my legs. The muscle aches that replaced them weren’t a lot better, but at least I could move. I went to the fire and sat carefully, as far from Tobin as I could without being downwind of the smoke. He handed me a canteen, and then a hunk of bread filled with cheese. I hadn’t realized I was hungry until I wolfed it down in three bites. He handed me another.

“Beautiful night.” His voice was soft. “I used to love that part of being on campaign, traveling across the land with my men, and my fellow officers. I

thought having to retire from active service was the worst thing that could happen. And it has been lonely. But there's a lot to be said for looking out across a quiet countryside and knowing you won't have to kill anyone tomorrow."

"I can probably drive you to contemplate murder."

"No. Thank you."

We ate in silence for a while. Eventually he said, "I'm not going to press you to talk to me. You've said enough for me to, well, guess at least, that something truly awful happened in Meldov's house. But if it would help you to tell me, or if you think it would help me be what you need, I'd like to know."

I sat and waited. Waited as the sky lost its blush and night crept in. I expected him, for all his fine words, to push me and nag me. He'd hated when I kept secrets as a boy. Somewhere he'd learned patience, though, because he sat quietly and kept the fire fed, as the sky turned to black and more stars came out.

"You know what sorcerers do." I almost didn't realize I was speaking until he turned to me, his eyes catching the flicker of the fire. Gold lights, not red.

He nodded, and then shrugged. "I guess so. I've met the King's Mages a few times. King Faro consults them about strategy but... I guess I don't know exactly how they help him. Scrying the future? I know they talk to the dead. As far as I can tell, whatever they do isn't useful on the battlefield. At least, we've never had a sorcerer with us on a campaign."

"No," I said bitterly. "Not very useful, really."

"Well, there aren't a lot of them, you, of sorcerers around."

"We're a fading breed," I said. "The King's Mages are the most powerful in the land, and they still don't *do* much."

"But magic is real."

"Oh, yes." *Although not as real as it used to be.*

"And working magic must give you some kind of powers."

“Or maybe not,” I said. “Most people believe that, and most sorcerers let them go on thinking it. We’re all-powerful, searching out spells that might let us work the weather or turn charcoal to gold, or raise stone towers like the mages of old.”

“Now that would be useful on campaign.”

“Yes. You’d think the fact that sorcerers don’t seem to be useful anymore would be a clue that we’re overrated. We’re more like glorified librarians. But instead of reading books, we hunt for treasures of information in the ephemeral and the arcane.”

“Information can be very useful too.”

“Oh yes, no denying that. And some of those secrets are worth more than others. Meldov loved forgotten languages and old books. He would summon the shades of men from the distant past, or ghosts from other lands, and ask for translations to things he’d found in old scrolls and half-mouldering parchments.”

“How odd. And I guess, yeah, pretty useless. But relatively harmless.”

“You’d think. It was a bond between us, because I loved books too, and he found that in addition to a talent for summoning, I had a talent for languages.”

“How did he make a living though? That house was huge.”

“Partly family money. And sometimes there was a secret worth knowing in those old papers. He found an old forgotten property record, and located deeds there that settled a land dispute.” Sometimes there had been secrets more recent and less benign that he’d come across too. He didn’t count hush money the same as blackmail, but I’d been hard-pressed to see the difference.

“So he was just a... translator? Like you are now?”

“More often he’d be hired to summon a particular ghost or spirit to answer a question. He would, for a nice fee, interrogate someone’s deceased relatives about their secrets. Or perhaps to dispel a spirit that was supposedly haunting someone. That work paid well.” I’d enjoyed that part, tracking down the focus that was holding a ghost to the material world, summoning and dispelling it. It was like detection work. But Meldov had scorned commonplace spirits with

no more to tell him than who murdered them, or why their heart had been broken. “He just wasn’t as interested in all that.”

“He was teaching you sorcery? Did you ever pass out of your apprenticeship?”

“Yes.”

When I’d been quiet for a while, Tobin said, “Did you like it?”

“Some of it, yes.” The long nights spent pouring over a book, as we applied some new scrap of knowledge gleaned from a summoning. Meldov’s dark head bent above the page, as his fingertip hovered over the fragile parchment. He would make this little grunt when I said something clever, and look at me in approval, which was almost better than the puzzle itself. Although now when I pictured it, I didn’t want to meet his eyes, just in case there was someone else there.

“I’d pictured sorcery as something more glamorous,” Tobin admitted.

“Back in the age of mages, there was the possibility of graduating from mere sorcery to real magecraft. They could work water, stone and fire with spells. Well, you’ve probably seen the mages’ tower at the palace.” I’d only seen it from outside the gates. It was a marvel by all accounts, smooth as glass on the outside, raised from the living bedrock. But that had happened more than a thousand years ago. The palace had been rebuilt around it more than once, in far more mundane ways. “Sorcerers like to pretend we still have those gifts, but if anyone still knows actual magecraft, they’re keeping it secret. Even the king’s three, well they’re called mages, but Meldov...” I cleared my throat. “Meldov said they’re just sorcerers now, like the rest of us. We deal with ghosts, spirits, with the dead,” *and the undead*. “But that’s all.”

“But where did the other kinds of magic go? Did people just forget how to do the spells, or wouldn’t they work anymore?”

“No one knows.”

“Couldn’t you call up the ghost of an old mage and ask?”

“Believe me, it’s been tried. But you can only call spirits who are still hanging around the material world. Spirits who have strong reasons to linger. I

guess true mages don't. You also have to have a focus, an object that was precious or personal to the ghost you're calling. The custom of burning the dead mage with all his personal effects was probably intended to help prevent that." *I'd guess I'd inadvertently been following ancient tradition, when I gave Meldov his send-off by fire.*

"So all that stuff from the old tales is lost?"

"Perhaps some of it never was true. But there are enough artifacts like that tower to say that mages once had talents that no one now can duplicate."

"And no one wrote that stuff down, to pass it on?"

"That was Meldov's holy quest. Finding an old book that would unlock the secrets of the mages. He never did though, no matter where he looked. You know, the plague years coincide with the passing of the last true mages. Meldov theorized that maybe in the dark years that followed, when a lot of people died and books were burned to keep warm, the secrets passed out of human keeping. He still thought they might be out there somewhere. He summoned other old spirits to question about it, but never learned more than that."

Tobin shuddered and I almost laughed. He didn't know the half of it.

He said, "I can understand wanting to know. But summoning spirits sounds uncanny. Not something I'd care to do. Although I guess, if that's where your talents lie..."

"I was fourteen when he apprenticed me and began teaching me the basics. You remember." I'd been flying high as a kite, because the marvelous Meldov had chosen me. "He told me I had a rare gift, but I'd have to earn true apprenticeship. Lots of basic chores, of course, and languages the hard way."

"There's an easy way?"

I shuddered in my turn. "Oh yes." Eventually I said, "When I was sixteen he began including me in the rituals. You were gone on your first campaign by then, and he told me I was ready. Summoning takes strength of will and attention to detail. Get the spell wrong, let your attention slip, and the revenant spirit may escape, either back out of reach or loose to haunt somewhere. Two

people can hold fixed attention better than one, and two people checking the spellcraft means fewer mistakes.”

“Could anyone do it then? Raise a ghost? If they know the right spells?”

“I don’t think so. Meldov said we were special, that the focus of will needed to complete a spell was something not many men could accomplish. He said sorcerers were ninety percent training, but without the ten percent spark all the training in the world would be useless.”

“And you had the spark.”

“So it seems.” There, that was the easy part done with. I could stop there. Tobin had said he wouldn’t push me. But perhaps telling him just a bit more would help him understand my reactions. I hadn’t expected to ever share this with anyone, but then I hadn’t anticipated ever seeing Tobin again.

“When I was almost eighteen, things began to change. Meldov had always liked the nighttime more than the day. Since most summoning spells work far better in the darkness, he’d taken to waking at dusk and going to bed at daybreak.”

“I’ve heard most sorcerers do that. I know the king usually consults his mages after dark.”

“Maybe. But in the past Meldov would sometimes spend daylight hours awake too, working well past a summer dawn or even working straight through from one night to the next. So I was surprised to realize as winter became spring that he was still going to bed with the sun that year even as the nights got shorter, and not rising until dark. But I didn’t think much of it. He got more reclusive, more secretive. His personal habits changed. At the same time, he made superlative progress on some of the scrolls and old books we were translating. So maybe working only in the night was effective.”

“You were eighteen? I’d have been twenty then,” Tobin noted. “Commanding my first platoon.”

“Yes. Almost two years gone, in the hills of Galglay, I heard.” Even with my infatuation with Meldov, I’d kept track of Tobin back then, as my best and only friend.

“That was a bad campaign, slow and bitter. Give me defense over offense any time.” Tobin’s eyes held a shadow, hard to make out in the dim light, but I thought he’d found some pain of his own in those hills.

“I wish you’d been home.”

“Oh, I wished it many times too.” He sighed. “Maybe even more now. Tell me what I missed.”

I suddenly didn’t want to drag it out. Tobin didn’t need to know how Meldov had gone from being my teacher and mentor to the center of my universe, how I’d mooned over him and obsessed over every word and gesture, hoping to make him see me as more than his apprentice. Or how it went bad. If the wraith had only been willing from the very start to seduce instead of command me, it might well have owned me.

I said, “When a spell fails, the revenant spirit sometimes escapes. One night, when I was ill, Meldov decided to go ahead with a spell to trap a ghost he’d heard of, one with better language skills than any before. I don’t know what went wrong. Maybe he’d grown used to me checking his work, or sharing my strength.”

I hated to think that my illness had caused the disaster. I could probably have helped him that night. I’d been sick, but not on my death bed. I’d used my symptoms as the chance to take a break from the work. Since then I’d cursed myself up and down unceasingly for it. But there were also times when some part of me wondered if my illness had been Meldov’s deliberate doing, to keep me from being there, so he wouldn’t have to share his latest, best find. He’d shown signs of being jealous of my talents already. He’d been a complex man.

“Maybe he was tired or distracted. Or perhaps it offered him knowledge he wanted so badly that he chose to take a risk. It was an old, old spirit, with half a hundred languages at its command, including the archaic forms no one now remembers.” *Except me, perforce.* “But that spirit was no ghost. It was a full-blown wraith. And when it escaped his circle, it ate him.”

In the silence that followed, I added, “Metaphorically, of course.”

“Explain.” Tobin’s hand hovered near his hip, as if reaching for a sword hilt, and his eyes searched the darkness for enemies. It looked like at least that hypothetical sword wasn’t aimed at me.

“A wraith is one of the undead. They have autonomy far beyond any mere ghost. It took over his mind, controlled his body. It rode him like a horse. He was dead from that moment, and the wraith was, well, not alive again but animated, I guess.” *I hoped Meldov had been truly dead, and not confined back behind those eyes, screaming helplessly. I didn’t dare imagine that, for my own sanity.*

“Could you tell it wasn’t really Meldov?”

“Eventually.”

“How long?”

“Six months. Or so.”

“Gods, Lyon!”

“I suspected something was wrong right away of course. But the wraith had access to all his memories. So I couldn’t be sure.” I’d thought the fault was in me. I’d gotten up the next evening and gone to work around the house, and when Meldov arose at full dark he’d called me into his study, accused me of being lazy, named a dozen errors I’d made, and laid down new rules...

“What did you do when you figured it out?”

I took a breath. Couldn’t say anything. I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. Eventually I decided to skip ahead a bit. “I killed him, of course. Both of them.”

“You?”

I pushed to my feet, even though my thighs strongly voted against the move. “What? You think I’m small and weak and can’t protect myself?” I strode away from the fire, forcing myself to walk fast.

Behind me, Tobin said, “I never thought of you as weak.”

I went to the horses. Cricket ignored me, standing head low and eyes closed, but Dark looked my way and whickered softly. I moved cautiously,

because warhorses were often taught to accept only one master, but he let me come up to him and lay a hand on his strong neck. I stroked him, feeling a faint ridge here and there on his skin. I slid a hand down over his shoulder, leaning against him. There was a knot of scar tissue there right where the saddle would end. I rubbed it firmly—small, slow circles like the ones that usually felt good on my wrist—and he shifted his weight against me.

I staggered, and then Tobin's hand on Dark's neck pushed the big horse off a bit. Tobin laid his fingertips beside mine on the scar. "That was the one that almost took my leg," he said quietly. "If he hadn't moved in time I'd have lost it. As it was we both took months healing, and fighting was over for both of us."

"Where was I when that happened?" I muttered, in echo of his thought. He might have needed me. He had family, though, and other friends.

"Long dead," Tobin said bleakly. "Or so I assumed. Did you burn Meldov's manor?"

"Yes. I wasn't sure the wraith would die when his body did. But it was trapped in him until sunset, at least. All I could think of was a fire, fast and hot, to burn them both while the sun still shone."

"Good for you."

I laughed. Never thought I would laugh about that, but Tobin sounded so fierce and proud.

"Remember when we saw those boys tormenting a kitten?" I said. "And I figured out how to get the stablemaster to catch them at it the next time and deliver a beating of their own. You said, '*Good for you*' just like that."

"I meant it then, and I mean it now. Whatever you did, to escape and survive, I'm behind you in it. I'd have been cheering you on."

His arm on Dark's neck was right beside my shoulder. If I moved two inches that way I could lean on it. I turned the other direction.

"It wasn't quite that easy."

"I gathered."

“I’m leaving stuff out.”

“You tell me what you need to. Or don’t. Lyon, I’ve had your back since we were kids and I have it now. Believe me on this.”

I did. Or I wanted to. But it was dark out here under the stars and there were no wards on the windows. I thought of drawing a circle of protection around us all. But the ground was rough and I had no good tools, and a broken circle was worse than useless. Who knew that better than I? “I’m going to try to get some sleep. Maybe that horse of yours has beat my ass hard enough for me to drop off.”

“He has gaits like flowing water.”

“With big rocks in it.” But I was too wrung out to banter. He’d set my bedroll a small distance from the fire, between the flame and the rockface of the little cliff below the crown of the hill. Even a non-combatant like me could see it was the best-defended position. I wondered idly if that was a sop to my fears, or if he really had worries of his own. Or perhaps it was just habit. Put the weak ones in the middle. I was too tired to really care.

I found a place to piss, came back and dropped on the bed without removing my boots. After a minute he came over, and knelt at my feet.

“You don’ have to do that.” Even my voice dragged.

He still sounded wide awake. “You’ll thank me in the morning. And since I have to travel with you, *and* hear your grumbling, *I’ll* thank me in the morning.”

I closed my eyes and pretended that the tug and pull of his hands was a puppy, playing with my laces and not a man, removing a piece of my clothing. That idea was far too nauseatingly appealing to think about right now. He eased my boots off one by one, and set them aside somewhere. The blanket he’d used before settled over my shoulders. He might have said, “Sleep well,” but I wasn’t sure. Against all instincts I did sleep. *And of course, I dreamed...*

The manacles were new. Or at least they were newly bolted into the red brick wall. I’d been in the workroom just yesterday, and the wall had been bare. I stopped short, but he was behind me and he pushed me forward.

“Against the wall. Close one cuff on your wrist.” I tried to fight the instruction, and the brand on my arm flared to agony.

“It will ease when you put the cuff on.” It was still my mentor’s voice. The tone Meldov had used when I was being obtuse and not seeing something right in front of my eyes.

I was learning to take the pain. I could handle it for minutes at a time now. I gauged the distance between us. He’d been controlling me like this for days, but all he had was the pain. At first, he could put me writhing on the floor with it, nearly senseless at just a touch. But as I got better at living with it, I was gathering strength. Not long now, and I’d make a move on him. I’d get free and run.

I don’t know if the thing could see my resolve, or just got impatient. My arm flared white hot, dropping me to my knees. When the pain faded, my arm was locked in steel and chained to the wall. “Now,” my mentor wraith said. “We’ll put on the other one.” And the admagnium-laced steel closed on my left arm too.

I woke choking. Tobin rolled me on my side and held my hair, and I was shaking too hard to even fight him. When my stomach was empty, he let go and I sat up. He passed me a canteen, and sat back on his heels. I rinsed my mouth, spat, and then drank.

He took it back. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“More?”

I shook my head. “Was I screaming?”

“Just moaning a bit. And then that.” He gestured at the mess.

“Sorry.”

“You warned me. We should pull your bed out of the way though.”

I wasn’t going to sleep again, but I got up and let him move my bedroll several feet over. I sat on it, feeling creaky and old. “He wanted me. He tried...”

“You don’t have to explain.”

I needed to. All those years of silence—I needed him to understand. “Meldov—his body—was getting sick. I don’t know if that was coincidence or something to do with being taken, or gods forbend, two intelligences sharing it.” *That had been my biggest horror, that Meldov might be still inside there, watching, helpless.* “The wraith was frantic, searching through all the records for ways to stay alive, or as close as it was to alive. It didn’t dare leave the house, even in the night, because moving too far from Meldov’s workshop seemed to weaken it, but it had spent six months enjoying the pleasures of being alive in the flesh.” *I’d learned that from its mind, later.*

Tobin made a gutted sound.

“Oh, I wasn’t one of those pleasures.” *Not yet.* “But it decided that it needed to move into my body. Meldov was twenty years older than me and although he should have been still young and hale, he was falling apart. It didn’t know how to do the transfer though. It came to believe the only way was to be welcomed in, as it had somehow tricked or persuaded Meldov to do.”

“It wanted to possess you? Your mind?”

“Yes—well, my flesh, more like. It wanted me, but by the time it made a move, I’d found out what it was.” *Too late. And missed a chance to run. I was a fool, so infatuated that no change, no cruelty on Meldov’s part had been enough to shake me, until it was too late and the mark was on my wrist. Such a fool.*

“I realized too late to get away. And it needed me to give it house-room voluntarily. So it chained me to a wall in the work-room and... tried things.” I couldn’t believe I could say all this, in a dispassionate voice. I’d barely been able to even think about it awake, until now.

“It tortured you?” Tobin’s tone was admirably steady.

“Not really. It wanted my body whole and healthy, after all. It tried persuasion first, offering me bribes, knowledge, power, pleasure.” *Meldov’s familiar voice, offering things I hadn’t thought to imagine.* “It kept me fed and

clean, but it whispered at me, hours on end, night after night, and raged, and threatened.” It had learned fast not to stand where I could get a kick in. A pity I hadn’t gelded it the one chance I got, but the body had still been Meldov’s and I hadn’t been desperate enough yet to put the full force behind it. After that it drugged me most days, so I woke groggy and disoriented. “It would touch my arm, in that vulnerable place where the brand was, and I would *feel* it searching for the cracks in my thoughts, the way to make me let it in.”

“A brand? It was inside your mind? It could do that?”

“The brand on my wrist came first.” I touched the spot, rubbing it. “Some kind of rune that let it get a spell into me. A pain spell at first, no more.” But it had been enough to get that first control. Ironical, that the wraith had some kind of magecraft. Meldov had finally found his source for the old magics, and not lived to know it. “Then the first night I was... restrained, it painted a spell on my back, tied into a branded key on my wrist. I never saw the details. It drugged me unconscious for the spellwork—couldn’t risk me moving and messing up the lines, I’m sure. I imagine it hoped to do the whole job of possession while I was out, but I guess you can’t consent while unconscious. But the spell hooked into my mentor’s mark, and let the wraith speak to me, inside.” I started trembling, long rippling shudders that shook me against the blankets. Tobin reached for me and I barked, “Don’t!” I couldn’t bear a touch right now. He drew back and waited.

“It tried other things. For a while. Eventually I, um, went away for a bit, and that made space in my mind, I guess.” I was never going to tell Tobin how that was done, my ankles restrained by the steel bar, my body taken and filled as it slipped through my defenses. *Say yes. Just say yes.* Not violence but slow, repeated, unwanted pleasure, over and over, stopping on the brink. And then trying again. Another night. And another. The first pain disappearing until I couldn’t remember why I didn’t want this, but only that with all my heart I *did not*. I couldn’t say no, was not willing to ever say yes. I went away for a while. “The wraith thought it had won, but it was mistaken.”

I grinned in the darkness, glad that Tobin couldn’t see me clearly. It didn’t feel like a nice grin at all, more like a thing of sharp teeth and bitter glee. That had been the most intense moment of my life, as the wraith struggled to

puppet-control my newly-acquired body, and to decide what to do with the old man. I'd cowered in the back of my mind, still aware. I don't think it knew I was there. It had hovered between me and Meldov for a moment, trying to animate us both. And succeeding.

It used Meldov to take off my cuffs, and then walked my body over to the table. It let him drop unheeded to the floor, still as death. I could feel the *thing* inside me. The weight of all those years, the narrow but deep knowledge, the hunger. It was deciding if it was safest to kill Meldov, or keep him in reserve. Wondering whether it had really slipped free of him, or was still inhabiting us both. And if both, whether Meldov would have to die, in order to free it to fully inhabit me. It cared less than nothing for the man whose life it had shared for six months. It was greedy to become me.

"There was a lantern on the table. I'd been hiding, somehow, down inside my own head. I made us stumble, just enough. It didn't realize—it thought it was just its own clumsiness with the new flesh. The lamp tipped over and the glass broke. And I set my wrist in the flame."

"Sweet goddess!"

"It was the best pain I've ever felt." Just shock at first, and soaring, screaming exultation. Then agony, of course.

The wraith had fought me. But I'd caught it by surprise, and as the brand sizzled and warped I could feel it leaving me, sucked back into Meldov.

"When it was back inside Meldov, before it could get up off the floor, I killed them." There'd been a knife on that table. We'd never used it for anything but cutting writing supplies, and I was working left-handed. But it went through a man's arteries just fine. "I cut its throat. His. I cut his throat." I caught back a sob. "Oh, gods, Tobin. I killed Meldov."

"You had to."

"I thought so then. But I managed to get free of its hold. Maybe he could have too. Was he still in there? If I could have dragged the body outside and chained it up, waiting for daylight, might that have weakened the wraith enough for him to force it out, as I did?"

“It was in you, controlled you for how long? Minutes?”

“Yes. And not completely.”

“And it walked around in his body doing things he’d never have consented to for how long?”

That was nothing I hadn’t told myself, over and over for years, but hearing it in Tobin’s voice helped.

He said, “You were tortured, captive and possessed, and you got free. You have nothing to be sorry for. Meldov had already had a long time to get loose, if he could have. So you cut its throat. The thing was dead. What did you do next?”

It was a relief to move on from that moment. “I wasn’t sure it was really destroyed. A wraith isn’t alive to begin with, after all. But I knew we had to be close to morning, and it hated the daylight. I put a containment circle around the body, because I couldn’t manage to move it.” Not because it was heavy, although I was weakened and one-handed. But because I hadn’t dared touch it skin to skin. Even when I found a glove, reaching for the body was impossible. “I thought I’d use heat and fire, and maybe I’d burn the roof off overhead and let in the sun. I put everything we had that would burn well in that room. Including our stock of admagnium.” The precious metal we used for augmenting spellcraft burned with a white-hot flame. “All our oils, distilled spirits, candle wax, paper. Even most of the books.” I’d perhaps been a little crazy. “I packed a bag with a few things. I stole his money, and the best three books.”

“Good,” Tobin repeated with the same conviction.

“Then I threw in a lighted candle and ran.” I’d almost caught myself in the inferno. The workroom was in the basement. I’d dashed up the stairs as fast as I could, my arm cradled to my chest and the bag bumping my shoulder. The roar of the flames behind me was like a living beast, and the heat rolled up the staircase, turning it into an oven.

“I was two miles away when the sun came up, and I still wasn’t sure I was safe. I kept running. Eventually I was certain it was gone.” I’d been sick, over

and over until I fell into the ditch beside the road. I'd thought I pushed it out completely before, when the mark on my wrist was gone, but I'd felt the moment an hour later when the wraith was banished. There'd been a greasy, lingering touch on my skin, on my back, in the curves and words of the spell, and I felt when it left me. Only then did I realize its hand had still been on me, and I hadn't even known it was there.

"Where did you go? Why didn't you come to me?" Tobin's voice rose thinly. "I would have helped you. Whatever you needed."

"At first, I was too scared and sick, barely able to hide myself away before I fell apart. When I finally emerged from hiding days later, a traveler came across me stumbling and raving and got me to the hostel at Lowbridge." And hadn't robbed me. I never knew his name but, despite my unbelief, I gave a tithe to the goddess Bian every year, on his behalf.

"And the sisters tended you?"

"Yes. I was out of my head for a while. And after that, I needed to find a sanctuary somewhere alone. Completely alone." Even from my oldest friend. In appeasement, I added, "Anyway, I assumed you were outcountry somewhere." During those last six months before the wraith tipped its hand, it hadn't let me go to town at all. I'd thought it was just Meldov being angry and disciplining me. I'd tried to do better, and followed every rule, accepted the restrictions, and lost track of Tobin in my own personal hell. Not that I'd looked for him, after.

He nodded. "Maybe I was away by the time you recovered. You know, I probably was. I'd just got home on leave to Riverrun when we heard about the fire. By the time I reached the manor, it was a pile of ash with the flames still dancing in it. It was too hot to approach, and clearly far too late. I sought word of you, or Meldov, for days afterward, but when none came I was sure you were dead. I volunteered to cut my leave short and went back to the front. Depending on how long you were ill?"

"A month," I said. I'd almost lost the arm, as the wound suppurated. The Mistress Healer had wanted to amputate, but I'd refused to let her get near it with a knife. I think I'd hoped I would die. But the sisters of Bian were skilled

physickers and eventually it got better, although the damaged tendons pulled it into the claw I now lived with.

“A month? Yeah, by then I was back to chasing tribesmen in their own hills. Bloody work, but it kept me busy.”

“I just wanted a place to rest. A safe place, and far from the city. Far from people. I paid an agent to find me that little house. I’d stolen enough money from Meldov to buy the place outright. It was perfect.” *The trip there had been hell, but once I’d arrived I’d gone to ground inside its walls and not come out for a long, long time.*

“And you’ve lived there alone, all this time.”

“From the moment I could get myself there. Gods, yes.” Alone. It had been such a relief. I’d spent most of my month with the sisters first out of my head, then drugged, and eventually pretending all was well and trying not to kill the nice ladies every time they laid a hand on me. Pretending to be sane enough to be let go. *Alone* had been my goal, my only hope for salvation.

“Weren’t you lonely?”

“I wasn’t fit for human company.” It was an answer, and yet not. I’d been desperately alone. I hadn’t wanted anyone near, but still the emptiness had echoed.

Tobin’s eyes narrowed. “You seemed to be doing okay now. The boy and his mother like you. You’re known in the village.”

“Now. Yes, I can hold a conversation without running away. But at first?” I laughed. “When I got there, I had them brick up the window. And put a dozen iron bars over the bricks as further comfort. I hid behind my stone walls and thought myself safe as humanly possible. And yet the thing I was afraid of could creep beneath a door. I wrote the wards over and over.” Sometimes hourly, in fear that some passing breath of air might have altered them. “I slept inside a circle. I had my household goods brought to me, and ventured out no further than to dump the night-soil in the blazing sun of midday.”

“But you’re much better now?”

“The day I took out the bricks and replaced them with glass was a victory. I was so tired of the dark. The day I took out the bars from behind that glass, so I could look at my garden unobscured—that was when I finally felt at home.”

“How long ago?”

“Oh, years and years now,” I said airily, to hide how ashamed I was of how long it had taken me. “I donated those bars to the king’s iron drive, to be made into swords. I felt quite pleased with myself.” I’d imagined Tobin perhaps armed with a new weapon, forged out of my escape from insanity. I’d forgotten that, but now it came back to me. I’d missed him fiercely that day.

“So you were happy there? Really? Before I came?”

Should I say “yes”, so he would blame himself for dragging me away, or “no”, and appear to give consent to this madness? “I was content.”

“I’m so sorry I had to force you to leave.”

I shrugged. “It’s done now.” Although there was still the city to come, and all its crowds and the king himself, waiting. *Done* was likely to be an optimistic statement.

“I’m glad you didn’t still have those window bars in place,” he added. “I’d have beaten through the door to get to you.”

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself,” I repeated peevishly. “You misunderstood.”

“I’m still not giving you the knife back.”

I was glad he was making me irritable. I’d come too close to feeling soft about him. “Suit yourself. You can keep watch then.” I rolled myself in my blanket, turned away from him, and watched the flames dance, as the night wore on.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the morning I was as sore as if I'd been beaten with a stick, and a little sick at heart over the things I'd told Tobin. At least I hadn't told him the worst of it. But I'd said enough about weakness and pain that I thought I'd never share with anyone. I watched closely to see if it would change the way he treated me.

Tobin raised an eyebrow. "Do I have soot on my face? You're staring."

"You're imagining things." I forced myself to my feet. We ate a hurried and cold breakfast, to get on the road faster. Then I made the mistake of insisting I could bridle and saddle my own damned horse. Forgetting that I'd never tried it one handed. Cricket let me slide the bit into his mouth, but then spit it out when I tried to move up the cheekpieces to loop the crown over his ears. We did that little dance several times. Then he stopped opening his mouth for me. I called him names. In several languages.

Tobin laughed. "I've heard more heart-felt cursing, but not classier. Can I help now?"

I threw the bridle at him. He caught it, shook it straight with one practiced motion and moved to Cricket's head. I stepped back and pretended I liked having Tobin waiting on me. He saddled quickly, with a smack at Cricket's belly to keep him from bloating under the girth, and then handed the reins to me.

"Aren't you going to lift me on?" I grumbled. "And set my feet into the stirrups? What kind of groom are you?"

"I'm not the groom here, I'm the commander," he returned. "Mount up."

"Some commander." I made it into the saddle on the second try. My thighs were already declaring mutiny. "Reduced to bossing around one cripple. What a comedown for you."

"Stop!" He wheeled Darkwind so the stallion's shoulder came against Cricket's, forcing me to cling on to the saddle as my mount sidestepped.

I glared at him. “What’s the matter with you?”

“You’re not a cripple.”

I waved my hand under his nose. “This says I am.”

“A cripple is someone who can’t work. Someone reduced to living on his lord’s dole, or begging at the gate. You work. You earn a living. You tend a garden and write and cook and live a life.”

I paused, a lump in my throat. But what I said was, “Not anymore.” I turned Cricket abruptly for the slope toward the lane.

We made it down the hill with no more than a scramble or two on the loose scree. Tobin let me go ahead at first, but at the main road he pushed Darkwind forward. Perforce, I watched his rigid back as he rode his horse out into a steady lope. Cricket tossed his head against my pull on the reins, and I gave in and let him speed up to follow. His smooth gait rocked me, but my body still protested. I muttered a few of those creative curses at Tobin, as we rode out through the bright morning.

When we’d cantered a stretch, Tobin reined back and dropped us to a walk. I gave Cricket loose reins and he lowered his head, snatching at a plant here and there to munch as we went along. I decided, since Tobin would have to clean the tack, I’d let my horse have his fun. Tobin glanced back. “You’re teaching him bad habits.”

“Seems like he came with this one.”

Tobin sighed and fell back alongside me. “If you’re a cripple, lion-boy, then so am I.”

I snorted.

“Seriously.” He slapped his left knee. “If you look under here I have plenty of ugly scars. And I can’t do the job I was born to. So if that’s your definition, then it fits me too. By my measure, though, it doesn’t fit either of us.”

He was trying to be kind, but it made me furious. “Are you seriously comparing that to this?” I waved my claw again. “You hardly even limp. So you walk a bit slower and had to stop killing people. That did what? Made you

change jobs? But everything that needs doing in life seems to require two good hands. Try a day with one wrist tied behind your back and see how you get on. And then tell me how alike we are.”

“I might just do that sometime, to understand you better.” Then he grinned at me. “Although I can think of one or two important things that can be done with just one hand.” He raised an eyebrow at me, and ran his hand slowly from his knee up his thigh.

For the first time in gods knew how long, my body responded to that thought. Springing wood in the saddle of a horse, when your body already hurts like damnation, is not the fun you might take it to be. I shifted uncomfortably, and glared at him some more.

He managed not to laugh.

We rode on in silence. Eventually he said, “There was a Sergeant in my company, a big brawny man. He took an axe-blow to his left arm, lost the hand completely. I sent him to my brother when he was healed. Last I heard, he was running the manor farm, and production was nearly doubled on his watch. I doubt they consider him a cripple either.”

“Shut up,” I said, but there wasn’t much heat in it.

Getting through the morning’s ride was hard, and getting back on the horse after lunch almost impossible. Tobin offered a boost, several times. It was only the thought of avoiding his hands on my leg or my ass that helped me get myself onboard in the end. Well, that and a large rock. We set out into the warming afternoon, riding through open fields and light-dappled woodlands. We passed a few other travelers. When someone did come along, I hung back behind Tobin and let him make all the conversation with strangers. I’d forgotten how to do that.

Once my legs were numb, it was almost like a holiday again to be riding out with Tobin. His manner was easy, as if none of our hard words had happened. He took it easier on me that afternoon, too, probably out of necessity. We alternated cantering and walking, with only one stretch of trotting. And that was payback for my calling him *The King’s Crystal-sucking Lips*. He stopped as soon as I called time though, and his laugh was a pleasant

one. “I know. What a symbol, eh? That mouth wrapped around a finger of quartz. I do wonder at the mage who made them. Either he was an oblivious monk, a twisted old man, or a joker.”

“You’d think the king might change it. Even a round crystal in place of the long one would look better.”

“Hallowed tradition. I’ve heard that once upon a time, the medallions were bespelled by the Kings’ Mages, so the king could actually speak through them somehow. I’m not entirely sorry that spell’s been lost. Hanging magic around my neck wouldn’t be my first choice. But no matter how much they look like a cocksucker, they’re antique symbols and no one will change them now.”

“You like it though? Your new job?”

“I do.” He shrugged. “I get to ride, see the country, serve my king. And all without killing anyone. In truth, although the leg made me quit, a dozen years on the battlefields had already quite quenched my thirst for the blood of our enemies. Nothing out there is ever as clear-cut as it seems in the history books.”

“Do you ever want to settle down?” I asked slowly. “Find a home?”

“The thought’s occurred, now and then. But walls alone don’t make a home. It’s what’s inside them.”

“For me the walls were what counted. Oh, the books are good, and a bed and a bath. But not essential.”

He looked at me steadily. “I misspoke. I meant, it’s *who*’s inside them that counts.”

“Waiting for the right man, then.” I kept my tone academic.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about King Faro,” I said quickly. “What’s he like? His father was still king when I was in the capital, and by the time news of Faro’s coronation and deeds reached my village it was often a bit bent around the edges.”

Tobin smiled. But he took up the topic, giving me a word-picture of our young king. Tobin clearly liked and respected him. Faro was only a couple

years older than we were, but he'd spent time in every branch of his father's service before inheriting the throne.

A practical man, according to Tobin, and a shrewd one. Less ambitious than his father. "He wants to keep his nation safe but not to expand it. Right now, our borders have natural defenses, in the mountains to the east and north and the river on the south, the ocean west. The old king kept trying to push further into the mountains, but Faro was smart enough to make peace there."

"So things are quiet?" My village was far enough from the borders that affairs of nations rarely came to our attention, even if my news hadn't mostly come via a fourteen-year-old with more interest in cows than kings.

"I wouldn't say quiet. The nomads in Icefeld test the northern borders, most autumns. And there's a new Prince Regent in R'gin that His Majesty has us keeping an eye on. They like to start foreign wars over there, to distract the nobles from mismanagement at home."

"But we have the mountains between us," I pointed out, "And the mountain tribes, who don't like us or the R'gin. Surely they won't look our way." Of course a study of history and languages made me very aware that our ancestors and the R'ginads had flowed through those mountains back and forth over the centuries. And sometimes even taken to ships and sailed around the peninsula, or crossed the broad southern marshes of Canan to meet in battle.

"They might give it another try, if they're looking for a fight. Faro's only been king three years, while the king in Canan is long established and very well garrisoned. They might even see our new treaty with the tribes as indication of weakness. Who knows?"

I shivered. Some of the ancient tales of battles with the R'gin were quite graphic. They believed a warrior gained strength from each man they killed in battle, and took fierce pride in their skills. They took no prisoners and left no wounded behind on the battlefield. There was a time I might have imagined that last detail a kindness, putting the wounded out of their misery, but Tobin was right, curse him. However hard it was to live crippled, I was beginning to believe it could be better than being dead.

Tobin said reminiscently, "I was in R'gin once."

“You were? When?”

“After the leg. It was healing slowly, and I guess I was driving everyone around me crazy. Or so the king claimed.” There was a little smile on Tobin’s lips that for some reason annoyed me, but I just nodded. “So he said I might as well recover while doing something useful. He sent me by boat, all the way around the peninsula. Two weeks going there, with the wind. Almost four coming back beating against it.”

“Why did he send you?”

“To meet a man.” Tobin sighed. “Where there are kings and hostile borders, there are spies. This was a man I’d known, one of my riding instructors actually, from when I was young. He was dark-complexioned enough to pass as a R’gin. Apparently, he’d been sent there years before and managed to work his way into their army command. But he’d sent word he had a problem.”

“So the king dispatched you to R’gin? While you were injured?”

“The man had gotten married and had two small sons over there. He wanted to send his family home before he was discovered. I don’t know how close the hunt was on his heels, but he asked that someone he knew come get them, as proof that it was safe for them. All I had to do was show up. On a boat, no less. That was about my speed at the time. I wasn’t fit for any active duty.” There was an edge of bitterness in Tobin’s voice that made me think giving up his position in the cavalry had been less easy than he led me to believe.

To distract him, I asked, “What was R’gin like?”

“Well, I barely set foot on shore, and even that was in a remote spot far away from anything interesting. It wasn’t so different from our own coastline. A little less rocky, a little more lush with trees, at least in that spot.”

“So you met the man?”

“Yes. Took his wife and children onboard, gave him money.”

“He *stayed behind*?”

“He said he had something important yet to do. I couldn’t dissuade him.” Tobin’s mouth twisted. “I brought the family back to Riverrun, under royal protection.” He hesitated, then added, “I heard the R’gin caught and executed him, eventually. But the boys are safe in the capital. I visit them sometimes.”

I winced.

“It was his choice, and I think... I think, whatever he was up to, he never hoped to outlive it. I saw his eyes when he kissed his wife goodbye...” Tobin gave a little snort. “And isn’t that a cheerful story for you. Never say I don’t know how to liven the atmosphere. Shall we canter a bit?”

He sent Darkwind surging forward without waiting for my answer. As I reluctantly set my knees in the saddle and let Cricket follow suit, I thought that it had been a good reminder, actually. I should recall that Tobin hadn’t been sitting home eating cream cakes while I was facing my own demons. He knew something of pain himself, and not just the pain of a sword-wound.

That night, we stopped in a village to buy a hot meal at an inn, but without comment Tobin had the horses resaddled and we rode another hour on before finding a place to camp. I let him set up again, and light the fire, while I stayed on my aching legs long enough to brush down the horses. Cricket rubbed against me, coating my chest with black hairs. Darkwind slobbered on my sleeve and tried to eat my hair.

“He thinks it’s straw.” Tobin was closer than I thought. “It’s the color of wheatfields still. I thought it might darken with age.”

“It’s just hair,” I said. “I’m surprised it didn’t all go grey.”

“I’m very pleased that it didn’t.”

I turned to Tobin, putting the bulk of his horse at my back. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Would it bother you if I was?”

“Yes.” I said firmly. Then, “Maybe.”

“You let me know when you decide.” He walked away to add wood to the fire.

“Your master’s crazy,” I told Darkwind, perhaps loud enough for Tobin to hear. “What on the green earth does he ever think he’ll get from me?”

Darkwind blew softly against my neck. It was no kind of answer.

It took us three more days to reach the capital. Until we hit the Coolrapids bridge, I’d actually come to enjoy the trip. Nights were still not much fun. I woke often, rarely screaming, more frequently just panting with fears I couldn’t even name, sometimes frozen in place like a bird under the eye of a snake. Tobin always woke too, even when I thought I was silent. He would put another branch on the fire, or hand me a canteen, but he asked no questions, and I didn’t tell him more. So nights weren’t good.

But mornings were fine, coming out of a hazy doze to know that a day of riding was ahead. A day of sunshine, of wide-ranging conversations and easy silences. As my body became used to the routine, I had more energy for debate, and we sparred over the usefulness of the military and the best methods of taxation. Tobin was a lord’s son, not just a simple soldier, and although his education didn’t match my own, he’d become shrewder than I remembered. What I knew in theory, he’d sometimes seen in practice.

So the bridge took me by surprise. We were arguing about whether it made sense for the crown to set up separate hostels for injured soldiers, or to let them depend on the charity of the Sisters of Bian. I said, “Any time you create two similar systems side by side, there’s going to be waste. It makes more sense for the king to just give money to the Sisters directly.” I looked past Tobin and noticed the familiar arch of the bridge come into view. And fell off my horse.

I couldn’t breathe. Tobin swung down and dropped to his knees on the road beside me. “Lyon! What’s wrong?”

Every muscle in my body seized tight like a bad case of lock-jaw. I curled in, until all I could see was the fabric of my own trousers, inches from my eyes. I’d winded myself in a fall before, and this felt almost the same. My chest knew how to suck in air, but it wouldn’t move. I wasn’t even blinking.

Tobin's voice above me had taken a more panicked tone, but I could no longer make out the words above the rushing in my ears. Then the world went dark.

When I came to, my head was pillowed on something warm and firm, and someone's hand was rubbing my chest. I yelped, and scrambled away. When I looked up, Tobin's startled gaze met mine. I forced myself to take a deeper breath, and another.

"Oy, he's better then," A voice behind me said.

I whirled around, tangling myself in the dust. We were at the side of the road, and on the gravel verge a small crowd had gathered. I gritted my teeth so as not to scream at them to all stop looking at me. Tobin stood quickly and put himself between me and the other travelers. "Just a fit," he said. "He's been prone to them since he was a lad. He'll be well enough now."

"Shall I run to the hostel for one of the Sisters?" a woman asked. "It won't take but an hour, and I'd do it for five coppers."

"I'll do it for four," someone else called.

"I don't need help," I ground out through still clenched teeth.

"Thanks for the offer," Tobin said more clearly. "But we'll be fine. We'll be on our way soon enough. Thanks for your concern."

The crowd muttered a bit, but when it became clear I wasn't going to do anything more exciting than sit around in the dirt they headed off on their own errands. I made my way up the embankment away from the road to the trees and sat under an old oak. Tobin coaxed the horses up too, and sat down near me, holding both sets of reins.

I was aware of his eyes on me, as I laid my hands on my knees and consciously relaxed each muscle, one by one. I'd found the technique helpful to prepare for spellcasting, when Meldov first taught it to me. I'd used it a thousand times since then, when my mind was trying to crawl out of my skin.

I focused on my breathing, trying to make each breath just a beat longer than the last, and finally felt my heart slow its frantic beat. The afternoon was quiet, with just a light wind stirring the leaves. A horse passed on the road below, hooves steady, saddle creaking under its rider's weight. Two women

went by on foot, lost in conversation. They barely glanced our way. A flock of starlings rose from the field across the way, spiraling upward with raucous cries. To my right, the ramparts of the bridge were screened by the hillside.

“What was that?” Only a small rise in tone betrayed Tobin’s worry. “I thought you’d been shot. Or had apoplexy.”

“I don’t know.” Although perhaps I did. “Half an hour’s walk further on is Lowbridge, and the Sisters’ hostel. Two hours’ ride on is the city. An hour’s ride between is the mansion.”

“You’re not... it’s not the wraith? Come after you again, after all this time?”

Now wasn’t that a pretty thought, sure to raise my heart rate drastically. But no. “It’s broad daylight, the mansion is miles away, and besides I felt it go. No, it’s just me.”

“You what?”

“Me, being afraid. I’d almost forgotten where we were headed, after all these days riding. Then I looked around and the bridge was there. I panicked.”

“You fell off your fecking horse!”

“Well, yes. It was a rather feeble sort of panic.”

“Don’t joke about it.” Tobin’s eyes were bright. “Your muscles were hard as rock and I don’t think you were breathing. For a moment I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his face with his free hand. Darkwind lowered his head to nudge his master, and Tobin scratched the horse’s wide forehead absently. “Are you better? Breathing okay?”

“Seems like it.”

“Do you think it will happen again?”

“How would I know?”

“Guess,” he growled.

I rolled my head, flexed my shoulders. Nothing seized up. My vision stayed clear. “Not right away, at least.”

“So now what? We can make camp here for the night, if we must. I’d hoped to make it to the castle tonight though. His Majesty told me not to delay.”

“Well, clearly we must keep Faro happy.”

“Don’t be stupid. He’s the *king*. He won’t take kindly to that attitude.”

“He’ll take me as he finds me,” I grumped. “And lucky to have that.”

“Lyon. Please, don’t make him angry.”

“I thought you liked our *dear* king.” Maybe too much. I’d heard a lot in the last few days about what a good king Faro was. Faro had his queen of course, and two sons already. But a king had no choice in that, and a lover on the side was hardly unknown.

“Don’t be an ass.”

I looked over at him, startled.

He pushed Dark’s head out of the way and leaned toward me. “Sure, I like him. I think we could, and have, done far worse for a king. He’s a good man and a good ruler. He’s even a friend, or as close as a reigning monarch can be to one of his men. But in the last extremity, if it came down to him or you, I’d choose you.”

“You what?”

“You’re the best friend I ever had. Now you’re back from the dead. I’d do almost anything to keep you that way. However, if it’s not life or death...” He paused, then resumed more slowly. “If it’s just hard but not impossible, then the king has commanded you to his service and his word is law. Tell me how to make this work.”

“I don’t know.” I looked down at the road. “I was caught by surprise. I’m more prepared now. But, um, this road goes close to the mansion. It might be smart to take some less familiar route, even if it adds a bit of time.” I could

feel my pulse race whenever I thought of the road I'd staggered along that day, with my arm a world of pain, and an old dead thing lingering in my mind.

"I know other routes. You think that will be enough?"

"I think we'd better try it and find out."

We sat a while longer, looking down side by side.

"Soon?" he asked.

"Any time now."

Another long pause.

"Need me to lead your horse, sonny?"

"Screw off, grandpa."

Eventually I took Cricket's reins from his hand, led the gelding down to the road, and mounted up.

Crossing the bridge turned out to be the hardest part. I actually rode up to it three times, and each time Cricket's hooves hitting the first boards sounded like a dying man's heartbeat, hollow and slow. The third time I did have Tobin lead him, so I couldn't turn back, while I clung to the saddle. My heart tried to climb into my throat, and my vision went a little grey. But once we were across it was like something in me gave up the fight.

Tobin turned off the road almost at once, leading us at a walk cross country, between farm fields. He went far enough that the bridge was out of sight and then stopped and came back beside me. "Still with me, lion-boy?"

"Mouse-boy," I said hoarsely. I squeaked at him for good measure. "With you, albeit weak and trembling." I showed him how my hand shook as I reached for the reins.

He raised his left hand toward my face and paused, a whisper away from my cheek. I could feel the heat of his palm across that gap, smell sweat and horse and leather. "I have *never* thought of you as weak."

He lowered his hand, gave me my reins and we went on, riding side by side.

I'd never actually been inside the palace. Although my father was a minor noble, he died when I was small. My mother had hung around on the fringes of the court, but never snared another husband. And once I apprenticed with Meldov, I was on the lowest rung of a new society. Only a few sorcerers ever crossed the king's threshold. Monarchs tended to be wary of powers they didn't understand and couldn't control by force, and Meldov had claimed the King's Mages were jealous of their position, as an excuse why he'd never been inside.

Tobin got us through the outer gates, and then the inner, by showing his cocksucker badge. I giggled each time. I was a little punchy by then, with lack of sleep and stress and a fluttering heart-rate that would have put a sparrow's to shame. Tobin glanced over at me, but said nothing, just moved Dark a little closer to Cricket. Close enough to grab the reins maybe, if I turned to bolt. Once we were through the inner gates, he turned left along the wall and stopped, holding out his hand. "I'll take your horse now."

"I'm not going to try to ride away."

He sighed. "You're also not going to ride Cricket through a bath and into the throne room. Get down and I'll find a groom to take them. Stay here. It won't take me long."

"Oh."

I thought about just sitting there in the saddle for a bit longer. Getting used to the place. Actually letting my feet hit the cobbles seemed like a decisive move. But Tobin had that look of compassionate patience on his face and it irked me. I swung off Cricket and handed over the reins.

"Stay here. Don't move." He eyed me for a moment, as if gauging my compliance. Then he rode off, towing Cricket behind Dark, the horses' hooves clattering on the cobbles.

I put my back to the stone wall, and tried to take comfort from its solidity and bulk. The courtyard was a busy place. I got a few curious looks and after a

couple of minutes a tall man in the tunic of the Household Guard came up to me. “Can I help you, sir?”

“I’m waiting for Tobin.” I cleared my throat to firm up my voice. “He said he’d be right back.”

“Tobin?”

“He’s, um, a King’s Voice? He used to be in the cavalry?”

“*Captain* Tobin?”

“You know him?”

“Of course. I’ll wait with you, sir.”

I wanted to tell him to screw off, and leave me to my solitary patch of wall, but I didn’t dare. I slid a little further away from him and set my teeth and waited.

Ten minutes later, a boy in a page’s tunic came running up. “Excuse me sir, but are you Mister Lyon?”

“Yes.”

“Captain Tobin sent me, sir. He said to tell you,” —the page drew himself up to his full, if rather puny, height and tried to deepen his voice— “he’s been called to attend the king, but he will try to be quick. In the meantime, your bags have been taken to the room and your bath water is being drawn as I speak. He said to tell you you have first chance at the bath. Sir.” He smiled with pride at his smooth delivery.

And I wanted to scream. So much for putting me ahead of Faro. The king crooked his little finger and Tobin went running, leaving me here in a strange place, surrounded by a crowd of people. My logical side tried to remind me that, for most men, an invitation to go inside and take a bath after a long trip wouldn’t be a cause for panic. But I was no longer *most men*, and panic was very near.

As I hesitated, the page reached into his pouch and held something out. “He bade me give you this as a token. And to say twice, he’ll not be long. And I’m to show you the way.”

Hesitantly I took the small hilt from the boy's fingers. It was my own knife. It wasn't much use as a defensive weapon, so he meant it as a sign. That he trusted me? That I could control myself? He clearly had more faith than I did. I had nowhere to sheathe it, but it was a comfort in my hand. "Lead on," I said.

After the third turn, I couldn't have found my way out in a fire. I was distracted by the tapestries and stained glass windows, the slate floors inlaid with marble, and the carved, vaulted ceilings even in the corridors. I followed the boy in blind trust, up stairs and down halls, the knife in my hand. Eventually we fetched up at a door, one in a row of similar maplewood slabs set along a look-alike corridor. The boy swung the door open. Inside was a modest room, with tall mullioned windows, now showing a rapidly-darkening sky. There was one large bed with a fur rug on the floor beside it, a wardrobe and a few free-standing shelves. In the center of the room sat a large, glorious metal bath filled with water that steamed gently in the light of a single lamp.

The boy motioned me inside, and pretended not to notice as I squeezed past as far from him as I could manage. My bags and Tobin's were set at the foot of the bed.

"Shall I send someone to help you with your bath?"

"Hells, no!" I took a breath, and backed up a step further into the room. "Thank you. This is fine. Will Tobin, Captain Tobin, find me here, do you think?"

"These are his rooms, whenever he's here," the boy said cheerfully. "Enjoy your bath, sir."

After he'd given me a sketchy bow, indicating uncertainty about my rank, and left, I closed and barred the door. *Tobin's own rooms*. It was logical that he'd want to keep an eye on me, and truthfully I didn't want to be alone here. After four nights on the road, I trusted him not to be disgusted or dismayed by my displays. Or at least never to show it. But I did wonder what that boy had thought. There was only one bed in here. Did he know Tobin was fay? Could he tell that I was? Would they all be thinking that I was Tobin's lover?

Surely not. He'd been sent to find me for the king, after all. And sharing a bed was not unknown, when space was tight.

The temptation to explore his rooms was strong. But I allowed myself just a look through the archway. There was a second room attached, with similar large windows and a table and chairs set in front of them. There was a rack of maps, rolled in metal map-cases, and several books on a shelf. I couldn't resist the lure of checking the titles. It was a very mixed collection; *The Military Genius of Colonel Lennard* sat cheek-by-jowl with *Tales of the Wood*. I caught my hand back before opening that to see if it was the rare first edition.

Bath. I was supposed to have a bath. Not that the idea was any hardship. I tried to remember how long it had been since I'd had a real, deep, hot bath. I came up with a number I didn't want to think about. I had a bathtub in my garderobe back home, but I was mostly too lazy to fill it full and then have to empty it. I'd typically settled for just enough water to get clean in. That tub in the other room was the height of luxury. *Meldov loved luxury.*

The water had stopped steaming by the time I made myself go back through the archway.

The front room was still empty. The door was still barred. I stripped slowly, my tired fingers fumbling the buttons I had in place of laces on my clothes. Once naked, I scrambled into the water. It was no longer hot, but it was still heavenly. I sank down, letting the water rise to my chin, and closed my eyes. There was soap on a clever rack clipped to one side. I should scrub myself. Eventually.

Water going up my nose woke me with a jolt. I coughed and surged up, soaking the floor, and then sat down fast as I realized I was naked. The room was still empty. Fortunately. I took up the soap and cloth and set about getting five days of road dirt off my hair and body.

It was a decent body, I thought. If you could just ignore the cursed hand, and the way one shoulder had a little less bulk than the other. There was a time when I'd been rail-thin, enough to count every rib, but the last eight or nine years I'd gotten past that, putting effort into eating well and becoming strong. My chest had definition, my stomach was still flat. I ran the soapy cloth over

myself slowly. I had very little body hair, and what there was was as blond and fine as the rest. My skin was pale and smooth enough. *How did Tobin like his men? Did he want them small and boyish, or muscled and furred like he himself was? I was neither of those.*

As if summoned by my thoughts, there was a rattle of the door handle and then a knock. "Lyon? It's me."

I dropped the cloth, knocked the soap into the tub with my elbow, and splashed the floor again.

"Can you let me in? It's me, Tobin."

No joke. Like I wouldn't remember him or something. Unfortunately I was soaking wet and naked, and getting dressed with one hand was not an instant process. I stepped out of the tub, getting the floor even more wet, and grabbed for the towel draped on the handle. It was generous, but I could clutch it around my hips or around my shoulders, not both. I opted for hips, and went to lift the bar.

Tobin raised an eyebrow at me, and the way his eyes trailed down from my wet hair to my face, to my chest and lower, made me shiver.

He said, "I'm sorry. I thought you'd be done."

I cleared my throat. "It took me a while to get started."

"I'd offer to come back later, but our time is limited. Can I come in?"

I backed away from the door. "Sure."

He followed me in and reclosed the door. I hesitated there awkwardly, aware that he was standing close to me. He reached out and snagged another towel from the stack. "You're dripping." His voice was soft, and he raised the cloth slowly to my head, rubbing at my hair. After a first startled moment I stood still and let him do it. His hands cradled my head, through the rough absorbent fabric. I could almost feel his fingers, his palms, but not quite. It was touch without being touch. It was wonderful. I closed my eyes.

After a while he moved lower, drying my neck, my back; when he slid the cloth to my chest I stepped back. "Thank you."

“My pleasure. Truly.” He looked at me steadily. “Too much?”

“No.”

He smiled and tossed the towel over my head. “My turn for the tub anyway.”

“It’s cool and no longer clean. Do you want to ring for fresh water?” I had no real knowledge of castle life, but if they could conjure one bath that fast, they could surely bring up another.

Tobin shook his head. “No time. Anyway I’m filthy enough that second-hand water will be just fine.”

“I was just as filthy as you are,” I protested.

He waggled his eyebrows at me, and began unlacing his shirt.

I turned my back on him, and went to my bag. It was still tied tight, and I couldn’t hold onto the towel and untie it as well. Behind me I heard the water slosh as Tobin got in. He said, “Wait just a minute, and I’ll find you some clothes of mine to wear. We’re summoned to the king right after dinner, and you’ll want to look better than a smallhold farmer.”

“Do we actually get dinner?”

“I asked them to bring up a tray when it’s served. I thought you’d want to avoid the great hall, at least your first night.”

“Oh. Yes. Good idea.”

There were more water sounds, and then he said, from suddenly close behind me, “Are you still doing all right?”

I turned. He was standing naked, toweling his hair with another cloth. His body was different from what I remembered, though there were echoes of the eighteen-year-old in this man. He still had long legs, slim hips, and big feet. His chest was much wider and more muscled, his nipples larger and darker, hiding in a forest of chest hair much thicker than he’d had when we were young. Other things had changed too. I jerked my eyes up to his face, feeling my skin blaze.

He smiled gently. “You can look. I like it.”

My eyes tracked down, willed or no. *Yes, he clearly did like it.* I whirled around.

From behind me, he said, "I'm sorry. I'm pushing you again."

"No. Don't be sorry. If I was a normal man, I'd be flattered."

"A normal fay man. If you were straight, you might punch me."

"Well, that's clearly not the problem." The tent I was creating in my own towel made that quite clear. "But I can't. Not now."

"And a good thing too," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Since we'll have the kitchen maid knocking on the door with dinner any time now. Come on, let's find you something to wear."

My erection flagged fast at the thought of being interrupted by a stranger. I heard him open the wardrobe and turned. He was still unselfconsciously naked, digging around in one of his drawers. He was fine to look at from this angle too, with a broad back only faintly graced with hair, and a smooth, naked ass. I could see the scar on the side of his leg, a deep groove of white, with an arc of rough redness beside it. It was a big scar, but it hardly touched the perfection of his body.

He pulled out a shirt and held it up. "This might fit you. And these." More clothing. "Trews. Or trousers? I wonder if I have any good ones left. I've worn uniforms for far too long."

He tossed several things on the bed and said, "Get the smalls on and then I'll give you a hand with the laces."

I felt better once I had my ass covered. Enough better to watch as he dressed hurriedly in a blue uniform jacket with matching trews. Enough to stand still as he chose a shirt, jacket and trousers for me, and laced me into them. "Sorry," he muttered as he knotted the shirt lace at my throat, and then began on the jacket buttons. "I thought we'd have time to get you something altered, but the king's in a tearing hurry."

"That's all right." I kind of liked wearing his clothes. Even if the jacket was falling off my shoulders, it felt like some kind of armor.

He stood back, looked at me, and clearly smothered a laugh. “Well, it’s better than anything you have, so it’ll have to do.”

“Do I look like a boy, dressed in his father’s togs?”

“Actually, more like a lover who grabbed the wrong jacket in the dark.”

I actually growled at him, and he did laugh. The kitchenmaid’s knock on the door distracted us both. “No time to fight. Don’t get soup on my good coat.”

There was no soup, but there was half a roast fowl for each of us, with good bread and carrots, and a dish of stewed apples. Tobin dismissed the maid, carried the tray to the table in the other room and set it down. We ate well, although fast. A boy brought a pitcher of beer and one of water before we were through. Tobin eyed the beer wistfully. “That looks damned good, but I think we want a clear head.” He set it aside. “Maybe after.” We stuck to the water.

A bell rang somewhere below while we were finishing off the apples, and Tobin startled. “Crap. That’s the end of the meal. Evening court will be next. Come on.” He hurried to the door, and I followed automatically.

The castle wasn’t any less confusing in the full dark, even with lamps along every wall. I stuck close behind Tobin. This was a new route, with three flights of stairs and a long portrait gallery I’d have liked to see better. Twice I lagged behind, and each time Tobin noticed immediately and slowed for me to catch up. Despite his leg, he was faster on the stairs than I was. Although it was something besides fatigue that slowed my steps.

We turned a last corner, and came out into a large hall thronged with people. At the end of the hall, two huge inlaid doors led to yet another room. I recognized the place from descriptions. Beyond that portal was our monarch’s throne room. And in front of it was a crowd of strangers, some of whom were even now turning to look at me. My courage deserted me all at once, and I turned and ran.

Tobin caught up with me at the top of the first flight of stairs. He grabbed my arm. “Where are you going? You can’t leave now.”

I broke free of his hold. “Watch me.”

“This isn’t some game!”

“Do I look like I think it’s funny?” My chest heaved as I fought for breath. “I can’t go back there!”

“What’s wrong?”

“All those people.” I put my back to the wall and slid down it, unable to keep my knees from bending. “Tobin, I spent weeks seeing no one at all. Months sometimes. I left money on the doorstep and they left my food. Even now. The boy comes on Naday and Choday. Just twice in a week. Two days of six. He stays for a few minutes, maybe a bit more. Sometimes I manage to chat for half an hour before I have to send him on his way. *I can’t go down there.*” I started sobbing, harsh breaths that racked through my chest. “Please don’t make me. Don’t let the king make me go in there.”

“Ah gods! Lyon!” Tobin bent over me, his hand hovering above my hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I know you think I’m strong, but I’m not.” I wrapped my arms around my stomach. The king commanded us, and he wanted me to walk in there and stand before his throne. Probably with a hundred people watching. He might ask me questions. I could no more do that than I could fly. I held myself tighter. The chicken I’d eaten was making a bid for freedom. I clenched my teeth on the bile that filled my mouth. That would be perfect—to puke on the king’s inlaid wooden floor. I swallowed hard. “I’m a disaster.”

Tobin touched my hair, a feather’s brush. “Lyon, don’t say that.”

“I’m sorry but it’s true. I’m useless and he can force me, *you* can force me, but I’ll probably throw up on his shoes and he still won’t get whatever he wants from me. I beg you. Let me go home.” I pressed my face to my knees. “I just want to go home.”

Tobin turned and sat beside me. His shoulder touched mine and I let it. It felt almost like another wall. “Let me see what I can do. All right? He wants something from you. He wouldn’t want to break... to hurt you. At least not without getting it first.”

I choked a tiny laugh at the realism of that.

Tobin leaned closer. "I'll tell him you can't abide crowds. I'll ask him to meet you somewhere quiet. The odds are, whatever he wants isn't something he'd spread around an open court anyway. The real work usually comes after. This was probably just to get a measure of you."

"Well, now he'll know."

He bent over me. I felt something, like a brush of lips on my hair, and looked up to find a look of helpless tenderness on Tobin's face.

Or maybe it was just pity. I hid my face again.

"Can you at least do that, lion-boy? If I get him to meet you with just a few advisors around, can you speak with him?"

I shook my head against my knees. "I want to. You know I do. Just like I want to cross bridges and sleep through the night." *And touch you. Gods, I want to be able to touch you.* "It's not my choice. I'll try. But I'd much rather go home."

"At least try."

"I said I would."

Tobin sighed. "Can you find your way back to our room, if I go into the throne room?"

I just raised my head and looked at him.

"Yeah, silly question. Everyone gets lost in here at least seven times, before they get the hang of it." He glanced around. The corridor was empty, which had been a relief during my display of extreme mewling and panicking. But he frowned. "If I find a page, will you let them show you the way back?"

How could I say no? I wanted to. I would have begged him to come with me, to stay with me. I'd have told him I only felt safe when he was nearby. But he had his duties, and I was trying not to be a baby about this. I nodded.

CHAPTER FIVE

I waited in his room, for what felt like hours. His knock on the closed door made me jump. I didn't move to answer until he said his name, twice, and my name. Then I went and unbolted the door. He came inside saying, "I got him to agree..." and then he stopped, looking around.

There was no chalk in his rooms and no charcoal. Pens write badly on stone. But he had ink in plenty, and I had a working fingertip. I'd sketched the runes of protection and exclusion everywhere I could, dipping over and over in the ink-bottle. I'd used up all his black, and most of the blue. Over the windows first, and then the door. Then every bare wall as high as I could reach. I'd heard that the castle had secret passages and that walls could open with hidden doors. I was taking no chances.

He sighed, just loud enough for me to hear it, and then reached for my hand. I was so wrung out I let him do it. He looked at my finger, and then led me over to the ewer on the sideboard. "Here. Let's see if we can wash some of that off." He poured water in the basin and rubbed soap on my indigo fingers, the blue foam rising between his knuckles. He rinsed me, scrubbed, rinsed again. I let him. He raised my hand to inspect it. "You've rubbed the tip raw."

"The stone is rougher than it looks."

"Oh, thank Bian, there you are."

"What?"

"You looked so lost. I was worried."

"Well you said yourself, everyone gets lost in this castle." That wasn't what he'd meant and I knew it. But we both pretended it was. It had been a near thing. When the page brought me back, there had been a very strong temptation to burrow under the covers and disappear into my head. But writing the spells, keeping the symbols clean and proportional, and avoiding drips, had kept me grounded. One can't do sorcery with less than full concentration, not even the spells I knew in my sleep.

I pulled my hand free, and pinned the towel with my forearm while I rubbed it dry. “You were telling me the king had agreed? Will he come here? I made it very safe.”

“No, Lyon, you know that. He’s the king. You go to him, he won’t come to you. But the court was just for introduction. He didn’t much care. Where he really wants you is after sixth bell, in his sorcerer’s workrooms.”

“Doing what?” My voice rose. “I don’t do sorcery any more. He knows that, right? You told him?”

“I didn’t have to. He doesn’t want a sorcerer but a translator. I don’t think he even knows whether you finished your apprenticeship. Whatever he wants you to translate is there, I think. Be calm.”

“I am calm.” The absurdity of that made me giggle helplessly, and after a moment he laughed too. Oddly, it helped a lot.

“Well, I’m looking forward to getting this over with,” I said, determinedly cheerful. I’d had time already to gibber in panic, then bemoan my idiocy, and then pursue the meditation of work. I *was* better. “And maybe I’ll get a look at the castle libraries, before I go home. That could make the trip worthwhile.”

Tobin gave me a warm, pleased smile. I’d have done a lot for that look. He went to the other room and returned with two cups. “Here. Drink something.”

I lifted it and smelled ale. “I should keep a clear head.”

“I watered it. You need to wet your voice.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, but drank obediently. He was right. I hadn’t realized how dry my throat was until that cool liquid went down it. “Blessed Na, that’s good.”

“Finish it fast. The bell will ring soon. We have to go.”

I’d barely emptied the cup before he was taking it from my hand, his brow furrowed. “We need to head out now. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” He reached to adjust the collar of my shirt, where I’d tugged it open in search of air to breathe. The back of his hand barely brushed my chin in passing, but it

felt like a caress. *I will not lean into that.* I froze, not moving a muscle as he tidied me.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.” He glanced around the room. “You did all this work.”

“It wasn’t really for the king. I may be crazy, but I’m not stupid. I knew he wouldn’t come here.” Although some craven part of me might have hoped. “Once we’re done, I’ll sleep sounder, knowing the wards are there.”

“Ah. Good thought.”

“His sorcerer’s rooms will be warded anyway,” I told him, and myself. “Probably better wards than anything I can devise. Almost certainly.” I’d made a study of runes of protection in the last fifteen years, but the Royal Mages were wise and learned men, and had access to far more resources. “It will be safe there.”

“Right.” He gave me a firm nod. “So, shall we go?”

I nodded back, but it still took a long moment, as he held the door open, before I crossed back over that threshold.

The nighttime castle had a different feel. With the evening meal over, and many of the inhabitants retired to their chambers, the halls were emptier and more businesslike. Most of the people passing had a pressing reason to be out, and we garnered no more than a glance or two. Tobin led me across, up, and then down. And down, and down, and down.

It made sense that the sorcerers’ workrooms would be underground. Even Meldov’s had been, as defense against sunlight ever disrupting a fragile working. Here there would be vast cellars anyway, for storage and provisions. There would be room for a dozen of Meldov’s rooms, and more to spare. But it still felt like the air got thicker and harder to breathe with each staircase we descended.

To distract myself I said, “I’d have thought they’d use the mages’ tower to work.”

“Apparently not. If you have the stones, you can ask them why.”

I shook my head hard. *Really not that interested.* Although the curiosity would nag at me later, no doubt. At the bottom of the third flight, we were challenged by a pair of guards. Tobin had to show his pendant and give his name to pass. At the bottom of the fourth, there was another pair. Those knew him by sight and passed him on.

“The king’s security has been tighter than usual for weeks,” Tobin commented to me, as we finally, blessedly, turned left down a corridor instead of taking another flight of steps. “He’s worried about something.”

At the double doors at the end of the hall, two more guards waited. The doors were shut, and I could see runes of power and warding written across them. They looked as though they were inlaid with admagnium, perhaps mixed with silver. Either for show or because it augmented their strength. Meldov had never used admagnium for much. He’d hoarded it though, as a sign of wealth and against some future plan. The only working I’d seen made with it was the handcuffs on the wall...

I paused and took three slow breaths, while Tobin hovered beside me. If I let every glimpse of admagnium overset me, we would no doubt be in for a long night. The King’s Mages could surely afford to use the stuff at will. I took another breath and began walking again. They were impressive doors, all right.

The guards there didn’t challenge us either, but they rapped on the doors rather than opening them. There was a long wait. Personally, I’d have either knocked again or left, but apparently you didn’t do that to kings. When I reflected that there were an unknown number of powerful sorcerers in there too, I decided I could stand waiting.

We sorcerers aren’t able to kill a man with a glare or set your liver on fire with a gesture, like the mages of legend, but we’re nasty, sneaky infighters in a realm where information is a weapon. I did *not* want someone raising Meldov and asking him how he died.

Eventually one of the doors opened and a dour, older man beckoned us inside. I let Tobin take the lead and followed at his shoulder.

Although the room was a dozen times the size of Melov's, it looked familiar. The protective wards were painted on the walls, not inlaid after all, and I couldn't help checking them all for accuracy and completeness, turning on my heel to look behind me too. When I finished my circuit, I realized everyone was staring at me. A tall, thin man with greying hair cleared his throat meaningfully at me, with a superior glare at my antics. "Your attention, sir?"

The smaller man beside him said, "I want speed, not ceremony." I looked at him, and realized I was face to face with my king.

I dropped to my knees, and Tobin did the same, with less speed and more grace. King Faro the Second eyed me for a long moment. I wanted to lower my eyes, and couldn't. I didn't speak either. It was one thing to have mouthed off to him in my mind, in the safety of my rooms. It was altogether a different thing to consider here, under the stare of his intense amber eyes, with the King's Mages beside him. I could almost feel all the power in the room, and none was mine.

King Faro said, without preamble, "I hear you can translate from ancient *kanshishel*."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"What about the hill tribes, the *tridescant* they use?"

"I know a little of the modern tongue. A lot more of the ancient one."

"It's the ancient that I need." He looked at me thoughtfully. "Get up, Lyon of Riverrun, and let's begin."

I stood, but in horror heard myself say, "Not of Riverrun anymore, my liege."

Luckily he was more curious than offended. "Of where then?"

Of a tiny stone house, locked away on the edge of a small village, far from the next town. "Of nowhere."

He frowned. "Very well. Come along." He and the man—the sorcerer, now that I noted his manner—went across the room to a workspace. Against the

back wall, the altar to Na was simple, with a single candle in a glass chimney. The floor was tiled in white marble, slightly roughened to take a mark. A spellworking was laid out on the floor. A summoning. I checked the power vectors and saw they were going after someone, or something, very, very old. I shuddered.

“My liege. Your Majesty, I don’t do summonings.”

He glanced at me. “My sorcerers will do the summoning, of course. I need you to listen and translate. Tobin?”

“Yes, sir?”

He actually smiled at Tobin. It bothered me, even more when Tobin smiled back the same way.

“There’s paper and pens on that table. Keep a record of everything your friend says. We may not get many more chances to call up this shade.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hugged myself, aware my hands were starting to shake. It was only partly to delay things, though, when I said, “Your Majesty, if I’m to translate for a ghost, with time of the essence, the more I know ahead of time, the more sharp and accurate my words will be.” *Translate for a ghost. Na, Lord of Magic, protect me from my own folly.* I fervently hoped these tall austere men with their fine clothes and cool eyes knew what in the hells they were doing. I clung to the thought that at least it would not be me in any of the points of the working.

King Faro said slowly, “I suppose that’s fair. But...” He looked at Tobin. “Captain, you vouch for this man? Completely and on your life?”

“I do, sir.”

He turned to me. “This is a matter of state secrets, in deadly earnest. You must swear to tell no one, not your wife, not your mother on her deathbed, not the mentor your revere.”

“I’ve none of those now, Your Majesty.” When his glare turned molten hot, I added, “I swear, my liege.”

He nodded and then gestured at the cluster of guards in the room. Most of them went to the doors and all but two stepped out, pulling the doors shut behind them.

King Faro said, “This secret is known only to those in this room and my trusted generals. We may soon be under attack.”

I flinched, but bit back my question.

“The Prince Regent of R’gin is massing an army. He’s pretending it’s to attack the Falday to his east, but supplies are moving in other ways, openly toward the coast, but larger amounts in secret west across his country to the mountains. I have more than enough clues to know we are his most likely target.”

I glanced at Tobin, wondering if he’d known about this and hidden it at his king’s command, but he looked startled. Faro raised an eyebrow at Tobin in silent permission to speak, and Tobin said, “Foolish of him, surely, my liege, after the way the mountain tribes beat each of us to a standstill in the last twenty years. To attack by sea is a long, slow sail against the tradewinds, to attack from our east, he’d have to get through their mountains first, and the tribes will not allow it. I don’t think we have much to worry about, until he actually clears the last range with enough men to still do damage.”

“Ah, but we believe he’s not planning to go over the mountains, but under them.”

Tobin frowned, and clearly restrained whatever skeptical comment had occurred to him.

King Faro said, “Remember the legend of the invasion of the NaR’gin, a millennium ago? The Path of the NaR’gin?”

“I thought that was a legend. An old wives tale.”

I’d thought that too. There were fantastical stories of how the army of the NaR’gin, the Mage-God’s chosen people, suddenly appeared this side of the mountains, on the foothills of our western border. There was no doubt they’d shown up in their thousands, and beaten our unprepared western army. The invasion and conquest had lasted for centuries. Eventually, it had become less

invasion and more settlement as they intermarried with us, and R'gin blood was diluted by ours. Darker skin and their smaller stature were still common enough among us.

The various legends claimed that mages of the NaR'gin had transported the entire army by magic on a bridge of air or perhaps a deep tunnel. But every history book I'd read assumed that they'd actually crossed over the mountain passes, in a masking snowstorm or a cloud of illusion at most. The NaR'gin were supposed to have had true mages, who could alter matter with the force of will. But the idea of the Path, a magical tunnel under or over the mountains, was considered aggrandizement and fairytale. The mountains were many miles wide, and towered high. A tunnel would have been magecraft on a whole different level even from creating a stone tower without seams.

The tall man whom I assumed to be Firstmage said, "Well, we're skeptical of the idea that their mages created a tunnel with magic. Those of us who've made a lifelong study of sorcery know that's probably nonsense. But there are ways to tunnel without magic, possibly with armies of slaves. If we can create a mine with miles of tunnels in the span of a few years, they could dig under the mountains, given time and men. Perhaps their mages helped with ventilation shafts or in other smaller ways, to make the work go faster and let an army move through safely. In those days, we knew far less of the NaR'gin, and had fewer spies there, thinking the mountains were impassable. They could have worked on a tunnel for decades without our ancestors knowing it was more than another silver mine."

"If there was a simple physical tunnel, wouldn't they have continued to use it?" Tobin asked. "The whole reason we became separate countries again was because travel between us and R'gin was so hard and long that no one ruler could effectively command both. Or so it's been assumed. If there'd been an easy road, surely it would've been used."

"Roads go both ways," King Faro said. "They may have kept its location a secret, for fear of an invasion in return. Perhaps their mages clouded their soldiers' minds into forgetting where the opening was. And then there was so much turmoil in the years that followed, with the Plague and unrest on our side, and three assassinations and changes of ruler on theirs. Maybe the secret

died with someone. Maybe it collapsed. Maybe their mages hid it from the new rulers. There's no way to know.

"We've obviously assumed either it never existed or it was permanently lost, because we all know that nothing has been heard of it for at least nine hundred years. But now there is a whisper that the tunnel of the NaR'gin has been found. On their side. And that they plan to bring another army through it."

"A whisper? You trust this information, sir?"

"Enough to take it seriously. It came from more than one source, and a good man risked his life in the mountain passes in winter to bring me word of it. I believe that my best agents think it's real. Which is enough to get my sorcerers to take up work on it. Their approach was to call up ghosts old enough to perhaps know the truth."

That rocked me again. True ghosts lost power as they aged, slowly fading. *Unless they were undead. Surely the King's Mages would know the difference.* I took a breath, and forced myself to think it through. They might locate such a ghost. One that was a millenium old would have to be either a very powerful man in life, or filled with emotion strong enough to sear the summoner. I was deeply glad not to be part of the actual working. In fact, I really didn't want to be anywhere near it.

I didn't realize I'd made a pained sound, a whine of "No," until Tobin took my arm in a punishing grip. The king was glaring at me. I said quickly, "You don't want to mess with ghosts that old, Your Majesty. Truly you don't." I pulled my arm free of Tobin's hand.

The king had the gall to smile. "I think my sorcerers can handle it."

I looked at them. There were always three of them, titled Firstmage, Secondmage, and Thirdmage, even though they no longer had powers of true magecraft. That I knew of. Meldov had said they didn't. But perhaps that was another state secret. Or perhaps, as we all assumed, it was just a name. They stood behind the king, three men all tall and lean and grey, ranging from late middle age through elderhood. They all had piercing eyes, which at that

moment were turned on me with the disdainful expression I bet they'd use on a new apprentice who'd spilled soup on a working.

I said to them, "I saw a wraith, once."

"I assure you," Firstmage said, "This is a ghost and no wraith. I *do* know how to identify a revenant spirit."

I could only nod.

"This man was a hillstribes leader, judging by the style of the focus. We believe from the artifact that he led one of the largest tribes on this side of the mountains, at the time the NaR'gin invaded. But he will speak only the ancient tridescant of his people and none of us know enough to understand more than a word or two. We brought in a questioner able to ask our questions in modern tridescant and got no responses. It took weeks of work to find this ghost and the chance we'll locate another spirit from that era are vanishingly small."

I had to ask, "How did you choose him? Was there no one else?" I regretted the implied criticism before it left my lips. But the king gestured at Firstmage to answer me.

"We know the date of the invasion, of course, and the plague which followed. The treasury has artifacts from many leaders and artists of the times, whose date of death was recorded. We inspected all that we could find of their possessions, for signs that they still served as focus for a ghost we could call. As expected, over that span of time, almost all were inert. Other than that." He pointed to the fourth point of the working, where the focus object had been placed. From where I was, all I could see was that it looked like some kind of necklace. "That one still had resonance, although its original owner was not one of our people. When we called the ghost forth, none of us could speak with him." It was clear how much that annoyed Firstmage.

King Faro said, "My sorcerers will call the ghost and control him, and compel him to speak. I will tell you what I need to know. You'll ask him, in his own language, and listen to the answers, and translate for us." As if it would be just that simple.

At least I wouldn't have to be close to the ghost, or bound into the working. I still asked, "What's his driver?"

"Driver?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The thing that makes him linger as a ghost, so long after all his people have moved on. It pays to know what it is, because speaking of a ghost's driver can turn them to such grief or hate or fear that they'll rage and cry and speak no more sense."

"What we call the ghost's *motivator*, Your Majesty." Firstmage's tone was superior.

"Oh, that. We don't know, obviously. If we could ask that, we'd be able to ask the rest."

I supposed that was true. My whole body felt chilled. Tobin bumped my shoulder with his, as if trying to compensate for the shortness of King Faro's response. I shivered and leaned against him, hard enough to really feel his solid bulk.

"We're ready, my liege," one of the other sorcerers said.

"Begin."

Without further ceremony they took their places on the working. Because they were three, their pattern was a circle within a square, with a sorcerer in each of three active corners, and the framework of the spell, the focus used to find and bind the right spirit, in the fourth corner. I wondered how a tribesman's artifact had come to be in the palace treasury. Perhaps a spoil of war. The tribes of that time had sniped at both us and the NaR'gin equally, whenever we got too far into the hills, and we'd returned the hostilities. Something which had not changed over the centuries.

The King's Mages worked fast. Thirdmage lit the intersect-candles with brisk economy of movement. Then they turned to building the spell-construct with their chant. A small part of me wanted to join in. My memory supplied the form, the responses, whispering to me that I had done this before, that the magic still sang in my bones. I'd had this power once. A far larger part of me wanted to run far and fast. I leaned harder against Tobin and kept my place.

There were guards on the door anyway, and I knew the king's secrets. They wouldn't let me go. *They might never let me go.*

I was staring at my feet and hyperventilating badly enough that I almost missed the ghost's arrival, but I felt Tobin tense to living steel beside me. I looked up. The ghost was standing there, shorter and browner than a modern hillsman, dressed in simple furs and leathers, with a spear in his hand. I fervently hoped their circle was well wrought.

"*Who calls me?*" he asked, in *tridescant* far more liquid and tonal than the modern. In fact, tone was all-important and the words barely ran under it. Ancient *tridescant* was more like music than speech. I hoped I had the voice for it.

"*We command you,*" Firstmage said, in the modern vernacular.

The ghost turned to look at him, cranking his head further round than anyone could in life. Some old ghosts began to forget their original shape, or perhaps he'd died of a broken neck. "*Who speaks?*"

Firstmage looked at me. Already the word "speaks" had a tonal lift at the end missing in the modern. The closest modern equivalent that I knew would mean, "*Who makes music*", and I could see where they'd needed me. But with every eye in the room turned my way, I shook like a leaf, unable to open my mouth.

Against my side I felt Tobin move, as if getting ready to explain or excuse. To cover for me. Well, to all the deepest hells with *that*. I said, "*I will speak for us.*" I must have gotten it about right, despite the hoarse edge in my voice, because the ghost focused his dead eyes on mine.

"*You speak strangely, man of the plains.*"

"*I learned your tongue late.*"

"*Most do not learn it at all.*"

"What are you saying?" the king snapped.

"Introductions, my liege. He wants to know who we are."

“Tell him as little as possible. He might be called up later by someone in R’gin.”

That was always a possibility. Calling a ghost gave you no more ownership than the time it spent in your circle. It could be summoned elsewhere a minute later, if they had another focus for it. Although you could sometimes wear it down too thin to be recalled by anyone. I hated when the Meldov-wraith had done that deliberately, to keep secrets for himself. For itself.

I gave the ghost a nod. *“My leader wishes information.”*

The ghost seemed to struggle for a moment. But the King’s Mages knew their work—calling a ghost would be of little worth if it could just refuse to speak to you. Compulsion was part of the spell. He said slowly, *“It seems I must answer.”*

“Who are you?” It seemed smart to establish that first. *“When were you born?”*

“I am Xan, leader of the Swiftrock peoples. I was born in the fourth turn of the Hunter’s Year.”

That was pretty useless. Their cycle of years turned over every fifteen. Sixty Hunter’s Years had possibly passed between then and now. But I translated, and Tobin hurriedly left my side to fetch the book and pen. I was more thankful than I could express when he came back to my side to write, brushing my sleeve with his.

King Faro said, “Ask him about the invasion. If he saw it, then his age is settled.”

“Were you there, when the horsemen of the east crossed the mountains? When they poured by their thousands into the land of the west to conquer it?”

He turned and spat, although nothing hit the floor. *“I was there.”*

King Faro straightened his shoulders when I relayed that. “Good. Very good. We should have brought a translator like you into this weeks ago, as soon as we knew it was a tribe artifact. Ask him what he saw.”

“I need to hear what happened then, Chief Xan of the Swiftrock.” There was no harm in courtesy. Although a ghost was constrained to speak truth, the stronger ones could resist in small ways. The stronger the spellcaster, and the weaker the ghost, the more complete truth you got. These sorcerers were strong, but despite his age, Xan was not weak. I added, *“I will go slowly, and ask your indulgence to do the same. Your musical tongue is hard for me and I must translate for those who don’t speak it at all.”*

“You bray like a mule.” That sounded more like dispassionate truth than insult. *“Ask your questions.”*

I didn’t translate the mule part. I had some pride. I’d almost stopped shaking too, in the fascination of this. I was using an ancient tongue, however painfully learned—*don’t think about that*—an almost unknown tongue, at least in this country, to speak to a man a millennium old. The things I’d have liked to ask him, about customs and people, would probably have no chance to be uttered, but it was still a thrill to me. I said, *“Tell me about the invasion.”*

“It was none of our concern. At first.”

“How did it begin?”

“We heard rumblings from across the God’s Horns pass, that things were stirring.”

“In the east?”

“Yes.”

“Ask him how they crossed the mountains,” the king urged me.

“Did the Easterners ride through the mountain passes?”

“No.”

Everyone in the room took a breath when I reported that. I could feel the burning concentration in all of them. My next question came out hoarse and incomprehensible. I swallowed and tried again. *“How did they come, then?”*

“Boiling up out of the earth like ants from a hive. Small hand by small hand. In an unending stream.”

A small hand was four. The king said, “A narrow opening then, but not too narrow, if it let four men come through abreast.”

“Did you see them yourself?” I asked.

“On the second day. For a day and a night and another day they came. Word was brought to me, and I went to see.”

“Soldiers came out of the ground?”

“An army of the East, leading horses, they came. A small hand at a time, massing into ranks in the narrow valley. More men than I have ever seen, and even small wagons.” He spit again. *“Flatlanders need too many things when they travel. But they had good bows, and swords.”*

“Where?” King Faro demanded. “Ask him where.”

I did so.

“On the edge of the plains.”

“That’s a big place, Chief Xan. Where on the edge?”

“Where the foothills rise.”

I thought he was being deliberately unhelpful. Clearly the King’s Mages did too, because I felt the increased force of will that they put into the compulsion. The ghost’s face twisted and his seeming thinned slightly. I could see the floor through the corner of his cloak.

“Tell me about this place. Describe it.”

“There are rocks. There is brush. There is a hidden trail below, but from above I watched them come.”

“How far from...” I tried to think of my history, of a town that would have been known to him. *“from Camrocktown?”*

“A day and a half’s ride.”

Nice and ambiguous, depending on how fast one rode. *“How many...”* I tried to say “miles” or “leagues” and realized that the language I was speaking didn’t seem to have equivalents. My voice faltered.

King Faro growled at me. “Go on. Ask more. We can’t search all the foothills for it.”

A thought came. “*How many arrow-flights from Camrocktown?*”

“*Ah, many and many.*”

That might not be deliberate obfuscation. The tribes didn’t have much use for higher math back then. Even now, they tended to count in other languages than their own. “*How far from the trail head that leads to Eagle’s Pass, beside the Twins?*”

“*Many and many.*”

“*How far from Whitecliff?*”

“*I don’t know that name.*”

It occurred to me that mountain names change too, even if the rocks themselves didn’t. I said, “*The place where the cliff is chalk and gleams in the sunlight, white as snow.*” Or so I’d heard. I’d never been there.

“*Even more days.*” He grinned at me, showing yellowed teeth.

I took a steadying breath. At least this querying with a ghost was familiar territory, although I wished desperately I’d studied more history. I was fast running out of famous places in the foothills of antiquity. “*How many from the Tallribbon Falls, where the river that will be the Snake begins?*”

“*Maiden’s Hair Falls lead to the Snake.*”

“*From those then.*”

He frowned. “*Many hands of hands worth.*”

“*How many?*”

He shrugged. “*Beyond my count. A shaman could count it. Less far than Camrocktown.*”

“*Less than a day’s ride on a good horse?*”

“*Yes.*”

“*A half day’s ride at full speed?*” I tried to make the parameters narrower.

“Yes”

“*Less than two hour’s ride.*”

“No.”

Now we were getting somewhere. Assuming we were actually talking about the same falls, and he had some similar idea of a horse’s pace.

“*North or south of the falls?*”

I could feel him fight the compulsion, and saw one of the King’s Mages sway and put a hand to his head. Xan was strong and stubborn, for a shade. Eventually he ground out, “*North.*”

“Yes.” King Faro’s exclamation came out with a hiss. He took a step closer to me. “Ask for a description, more details.”

“*What shape is the mouth of the cave where the men came out?*”

“*I saw it from above.*”

“*Is there a notable rock formation there that marks it?*”

“*All rocks in my mountains are notable.*”

“*What rock was closest then?*”

“*The one I call the Roadbeast.*”

“*What do others call it?*”

“*Flatlanders do not name rocks, or if they do, the names are wrong.*”

I breathed in and out through my nose, centering myself. The ghost was becoming fainter, his legs fading under the strain of the spell. Tobin bumped my shoulder very lightly.

The king said, “Ask what he could see from his perch then, what landmarks.”

Xan answered, “*From all places, one can see the Horns of the Gods.*”

“*Which mountain was closest then?*”

“*Skygod’s Knife.*”

No modern mountain bore that name, at least that I knew of. Maybe someone else would know it. *“And when you looked out at the plains, what could you see?”*

“Flat uninteresting land crawling with small-eyed people.”

I was just giving him an excuse to insult us. *“Is there a trail into the hills at that place?”*

“No.”

“How far to the nearest trail towards a pass?”

“Two hands of bowshots, or near enough.”

About a mile then. A thought occurred to me. *“Does the place itself have a name?”*

He resisted, grinding out, *“Why are you asking me all this?”*

I didn’t want to answer with specifics but perhaps if he fought me less it would be worth it. *“We fear another invasion, coming soon. Many would die, women and children as well as men.”*

“Flatlanders all.”

“Perhaps not—we have a treaty with your descendants.” It contained nothing but a cease-fire, nothing that would bring them into the fight, but although I could not lie under the context of the spell, I could bend the truth.

“Fools. Treaties with flatlanders end in death.”

I was clearly not going to gain his sympathy. I asked again, *“Does the place have a name?”*

He wavered, going thinner than smoke, even put his hands over his mouth, but in the end he said, *“Beasumblean.”*

It was a jumble to my ears. Most place names held some sense of their main feature—like Riverrun, or Tallribbon—this sounded like nonsense. *“Repeat it.”*

“Beasumblean.”

My mind caught the even-more-archaic term for water—*beasu*. “*By the water?*”

“*Water. Yes.*” He suddenly flung his arms wide. “*Strike me now. I care not. They died, all of them, and could not be saved. I hope you all slay each other and your bones rot in the foothills, food for crows!*” And then he was gone, and all the candles snuffed out as one.

The sorcerers staggered at the sudden release of tension. The youngest sat on the floor, right where he was. The oldest ran a shaking hand over his face.

The king demanded, “Bring him back!”

Firstmage shook his head. “We would only strain ourselves and the ghost, to no benefit. We need to rest and he needs to remain on the other side for a while, to regain strength on both our parts, before we try again.”

“How long?”

“Two days. Perhaps three.”

“Damnation!”

Firstmage said, “We might well get no more information from him in any case. He apparently has no love for us and was being obscure. The harder we press him the faster he fades.”

The king frowned harder. “Any more delay is a risk at this point. The latest news I had from the east had to come around the coast, and the boat trip is long. The intelligence is a nearly a month old. The Prince Regent has had that time to complete his plans while we struggle to catch up with him here. And if he attacks that way this year, it will surely be very soon, before we would expect trouble from that direction. Both sides usually ignore the mountain border as long as the snow block the passes. But in another few weeks he’d expect us to step up our patrols again.” The king paced, two steps away and back, while we all waited on his decisions.

Tobin moved further behind me and I turned fast, so I could keep him in my sight. The motion made my head spin. He frowned, but when I set my shoulder to his, he stood firm and let me lean against him. My knees began to shake. It was over and I’d done what was asked of me. I’d actually queried a

ghost again, and met my king's commands. I'd succeeded. Now other people would do the rest, and I could go home. The relief was making me lightheaded.

King Faro turned to me. "So, scholar. You heard his words directly. You believe there is such a place and that it lies somewhere north of Tallribbon? Less than sixty miles, more than, say, fifteen? That does fit the general area of the first battle of the invasion. And he said about a mile from some mountain path that climbs the hills. And near water."

"Yes, Your Majesty." I felt I had to add, "We don't know what he considers a fast horse. And any path that existed that long ago may be gone now, although the falls appear to endure."

"This name he spoke, that you said meant water. Can you do anything render it any more clearly?"

I cleared my throat and tried to call back my scattering wits. "*Beasumblean*, he said. The first part means water. The rest..." I tried to think. For once my ill-gotten knowledge was failing me when it counted most. *Umblean*, *m'blean*, *lean*. That last word had a dozen meanings in as many tongues. The second, though—"It's possible that *m'blean* means going through or between. There is a similar form in the more modern language. *Shae m'bleanne*—to pass through an archway or door, or between gateposts. I'm sorry. That's as close as I get."

"So it might mean, 'between the waters'? There might be a fork in the river or two rivers there?"

"Maybe. It's no more than a guess, though."

"It's more than we had. My fault." He slammed a fist into his palm. "I should have had faith a friend of Tobin's would know his work, and prepared better. I'd despaired of getting a word of sense from the shade, until all I hoped for was that you could get some hint of confirmation that such a tunnel existed. Now to find he actually saw it firsthand! I should have had a map made ready, with the places of antiquity marked, and all the main features. We might have compelled him to show us the place."

Firstmage said, “We could still try that. We’ll have to think on the best way to do so. We might hold up the map and point, perhaps, if he will not speak plainly. Or play the game of hot and cold. He might be compelled to a simple yes or no.”

The king’s voice was bitter. “We expected the worst and failed to plan for the best, and lost this chance. We *must* make the very clearest use of the next one. We’ll take counsel together in an hour.” He turned to me. “You did well, Lyon of Riverrun—or of nowhere.” His smile was wry. “As you choose. I’m more than impressed with your skill.”

I managed to bow my head and say, “Thank you, my liege.”

He pulled a ring off one finger and held it out to me. “Here, a token payment. You’ll receive a purse later. You have my thanks. Now we’ll work on how we proceed from here.”

I nodded. I managed to hold out my left hand, and he dropped the ring in my palm. It was a wide band, with one small red stone.

The king turned to Tobin, who handed him the written record of Xan’s words. The king took it and gave him a nod in return. “Once more, you’ve found what I needed. Take your friend to his chambers and let him rest. I’ll send word to you later.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go on, then.” He turned his back on us, which I guess freed us to go. In any case, it was the signal for Tobin to head toward the big doors. I was able to follow him on my wobbly legs, out those doors, past the soldiers, down the hallway. At the foot of the first stairs, I leaned on the wall, and to my surprise I started laughing.

“I did it.”

Tobin paused, and then a smile crept over his face. “You surely did.”

“I spoke to a ghost, and Firstmage, and the king!”

“Yep.”

“You know, I used to have to rehearse what I would say to the market boy. How I would greet him. How I would ask after his mother.” I was laughing harder. “There were weeks I spoke not one word. In any language.”

“I was impressed with your talents tonight. So was the king. You were a big help to him, and the mages. They won’t forget.”

That sobered me, like cold water. I didn’t want men of power to remember me. “Now I want to go to bed.” I pushed off the wall and headed determinedly up the stairs.

At my shoulder Tobin said quietly, “Did I say something wrong?”

I jumped at having him behind me again. With Tobin, I already felt so easy that sometimes I forgot... I put my back to the stone, and gestured for him to lead on. “I’m a mass of foolish reactions. You can provoke one just by saying goodnight the wrong way.”

“If you ever want to explain them to me, I’ll listen.”

“Maybe.” I felt my darkness ease a bit. I’d done what I came for, and maybe sometime there’d be a moment for the two of us. “And now I can go home!”

We reached the rooms eventually. Tobin barred the door behind us. I had the impulse to start packing, perhaps even leave right now. But the thought of a night outside, compared to a night on a soft bed with stone walls around me, made that seem foolish.

“Do you think you’ll sleep?” Tobin asked with studied casualness. “You have your stone walls and your spells back. Will that help?”

“They’re worth a lot,” I said. “I never feel as safe as with a wall at my back.”

Tobin nodded, but said, “I prefer a good friend.” He grinned. “Perhaps one with a knife handy, if there’s trouble about.”

“Gods, no. Something solid and unmoving.”

Tobin turned away, shedding his jacket and unlacing his shirt. "I've seen a lot of sieges broken, from both sides of the stone. I don't believe in walls. I believe in people."

"I really don't like people at my back."

"How about at your front?" He turned back toward me.

I said, "I'm not good with... hands on me at all."

He was still dressed, although his shirt was unlaced enough to show the dark hair of his chest. He came closer, until I could feel his presence across a fingersworth of space. "How long since someone just came close to you, Lyon? How long since someone kissed you?"

He waited for me to answer, but I couldn't. My throat was dry from all the *tridescant*... no, that was a lie. It was dry from fear. And from want and from not knowing how to proceed. He leaned forward with his hands locked behind his back, not touching me anywhere else, and pressed his lips to mine.

The first kiss was short and soft. It burned like a brand, but lasted barely an instant. He leaned back and looked at me, his eyes shadowed in the lamplight. "All right?"

I nodded. He leaned in again, and I tipped my head back just a bit, to match his height. He kissed me, sweet and slow, plucking gently at my lips with his, touching his tongue to my teeth. I let him. I stood there and felt it all and let him kiss me. After a minute he stopped.

"Say something, lion-boy. I can't tell if you like it or you're humoring me or I've scared you so much you're about to run."

I said, "Don't stop."

Ah, gods above, that smile. I'd have walked over hot coals for that smile. He kissed me again, and this time, when he pressed with his tongue, I opened my mouth for him. The kiss was still gentle. I got the sense of fires banked and waiting, but everything that he did was slow and careful, and yet warm as a hearthfire on a cold night. I could feel that warmth seeping into me, unfreezing my heart. Until I broke away, because I couldn't breathe for the way my heart was beating.

“Still all right?”

I turned away from him and paced to the window, checking my inscriptions on the sill. There were no smudges. They should hold. I kept my back to him.

Odd, after having told the truth about my fears, that there was one man in all the world I now trusted unseen behind me. I said to the darkness beyond the glass, “Meldov taught me some languages. It was his passion, and also his claim to fame, that he could speak to ghosts and shades in languages no other living man knew. I had a talent. But nothing like you saw tonight. The wraith gave me my ancient *tridescant*.”

Behind me, Tobin made a sound that didn’t become a word.

“It was meant as a bribe. Perhaps the same one that had worked on Meldov. After the first working, the first night, it could touch my mind, speak deep within there. It knew my interests. Somehow, it gave me languages, one after another, whole and complete as I could never hope to learn them. It showed me how many more it knew, how much knowledge would be opened up to me if I just let it in.”

“You said no.”

Said it. Said it over and over. Begged it. Eventually screamed it. “I got a handful of languages out of the deal, before it realized I was not becoming convinced.”

“And you remember them still, even though it’s destroyed?”

“Apparently. Yes.” I’d been terrified by that at first—that the gifts of the wraith lingered. Each morning in my small house, I’d open one of the old books I’d stolen and stare at the words, half-hoping, half-dreading that their meaning would be lost. It never happened. I was still afraid that meant the wraith existed, somewhere. I was so tired of being afraid. “I want to believe that it was a permanent transfer of information and not a sign that the wraith wasn’t destroyed.”

I didn’t realize that I was shaking again, until Tobin said, “Turn around. I won’t come up behind you.”

I turned, even though I said, “You of all people could.” I wanted that to be true. That there could be someone in the world who wouldn’t make my skin crawl if they touched me from behind.

He shook his head, and waited for me to face him, before slowly moving close so he stood a whisker’s breadth away from me all along my front. It was unimagined comfort, my own warm, strong, living, breathing wall. He kept his hands at his sides, and said, “Even if you hate to be held, you can still hold onto me.”

And I did. I wrapped my arms around him and leaned on him and gripped him tight.

I don’t know how long we stood like that. But eventually I raised my head from his shoulder where I’d found rest, and kissed him. His cheek first, with a shyness that felt different from fear. And then his mouth. He opened his lips, inviting my tongue. I tried, unsure, and he simply hummed and licked back at my own, sharing warmth, sharing breath. My mouth wasn’t dry anymore and the kiss did other things for my whole body. I broke away from him, needing a little space. “Thank you.”

“I missed you so much, all those years.” He said it simply. “I didn’t realize how much you meant to me, until you weren’t there anymore. I always thought there would be time. You were busy with your studies, and soldiering was what I’d worked for since I was small. I always thought, *‘After I get home, I’ll have time to be with Lyon’*. Even when I came home when you were sixteen and found you becoming infatuated with Meldov, I knew he’d have no interest. Gods help me, I thought it would keep you safely distracted for a while. Then I was suddenly standing there at the burned mansion, looking at the smoking ruin of that hope. I’ve lived fifteen years imagining you long dead and gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. I understand. Really. You needed time and space and healing. I just wish...” He broke off short.

“What?”

He shook his head. “It was probably for the best. I rode out there to the mansion in a panic, suddenly realizing what was important, determined to throw all my affection and need at your feet if you lived. If I’d found you then, I’d never have had the patience to give you time to heal. Not at twenty. I’ve been hard schooled in patience since then.” He looked straight at me. “That thing inside Meldov raped you, didn’t it?”

My silence was answer enough. *He didn’t hurt me*—I wanted to say that, to reassure Tobin. But nothing was more of a lie than that particular truth.

He took two long shaking breaths and whirled aside. His fist landed on the stone of the wall twice, before I realized he was sobbing. I managed to grab his arm before the third blow. “Holy Bian, stop you fool. You can’t beat bricks with flesh. You’re a soldier, you should know that.” There was a smear of blood on the stone. I’m ashamed now to say I checked that it hadn’t marred the protections I’d scrawled there, before I inspected his hand.

“Idiot.” I turned his arm over to see where the skin was split on his knuckle. I felt strangely older and tender. “We only have three good hands between us. We can’t afford to break one.”

He wiped his face on his shoulder, without taking back his hand from mine. His laugh was shaky. “Good thought.”

“Or who would unlace me from this shirt?”

That stopped his breath. “What?”

I hadn’t meant more than that simple fact, but his arrested attention made me hear my own words. “I can’t, um, do that,” I said. “Not yet. I think. But holding you was very... very warm.”

“I’ll keep you as warm as you’ll let me,” he said softly. When I didn’t move or speak, he added, “Let me clean my hand first. That’s my best court shirt you’re wearing and I’d hate to get blood on it. Then I’ll unlace it for you, and if that’s all, I won’t mind one bit.”

He went to the ewer on its stand, dampened a cloth and wiped at his fingers. Then he came back to where I stood. He reached calmly for my coat, sliding it off my shoulders and taking it to hang in the wardrobe. When he put

steady hands on my shirt-laces I raised my chin to help. He undid the knots. His fingers brushed my skin lightly, warm and slightly rough against my neck.

“Arms up.”

I could have done that part myself, but instead I raised my hands and let him tug the shirt up and over my head. I’d thought he might look closer or touch me then, but he immediately moved across the room, shaking out the fabric, his eyes on the shirt. I felt let down.

I stood there, naked to the waist, my nipples pebbled in the cool evening air. I’d never been so aware of my own skin. He folded the shirt slowly.

I said, “It probably needs washing. I sweated a lot. Sorry. I should probably wash myself again too.”

Turning to look at me, he raised the folded shirt slowly to his face, closed his eyes, and pressed his nose to it. “It smells like you,” he murmured, eyes still shut. “Oh, yes.”

I shuddered but it was a good shudder this time, dragged out of me by the sound of Tobin’s voice and the sight of his lashes dark against his cheeks. He set the shirt into the drawer and opened his eyes. His gaze was steady and undemanding, but I still found it hard to breathe. He came back toward me, step by step. I knew that at any moment I could tell him to stop and he would. When he stood in front of me, he let his gaze move from my eyes to my mouth and lower, and lower. “You’ve more muscle than I’d have expected for a man who spends his days indoors.”

“I have a big garden.” After a moment I added, “I’ve worked to feel strong.”

“I like it.”

He was taller than me. As Meldov had been, and...

As if he’d read my thought, he lowered himself awkwardly to his knees, refusing to take his hands out from behind his back for balance, despite the hindrance of his leg. I could have reached out to steady him. I didn’t. I didn’t dare move and risk breaking this spell.

Kneeling, he looked up at me. The window was dark, but the lamp on the wall was a bright one and it showed me the line of his jaw, his straight short nose, the shape of his mouth. He said, “You have trousers on, and even if you beg me, they are not coming off you tonight. But I want to show you that touch doesn’t have to hurt. Can I do that?”

I felt weak, for having a hard time saying yes.

I felt safe, that he waited patiently to hear it. “Yes.”

I expected him to unlock his fingers and reach for me, but he didn’t. Slowly, watching my face, he rose higher up off his knees, one foot tucked under him, leaned forward, lips parted. A breath away from my tight-clenched nipple he paused. I could feel the heat of each exhalation on my skin. “Say it again. Tell me yes.”

The same and so different. This time I had all the choice in the world, and only one thing I wanted to say. “Yes.”

He touched me with his tongue, just the slightest flick of tongue-tip against me. The lightest brush of wetness on a place I’d not bared by my own choice to another man, ever. And I shook with the sweet pain of it. I was lifted up with the realization that I was able to stand it—no, that I *wanted* it. I’d thought I burned desire out of myself, killed it when I cut the throat of the man I’d thought I could love. But this was desire, oh yes. And need. And still a dark wall of fear. My cock strained against my trousers, but if he’d touched me there, I’d have done my best to kill him.

He made no move to unclasp his hands from behind his back. Slowly he traced my chest with his tongue. His eyes fluttered half-closed as he moved. The touch of his mouth changed, varied, here a lick, there a brush of lips, and then a kiss over my other nipple. He lowered himself back to his knees and rubbed his cheek against my belly above the waistband of those trousers. He was close to where I desperately wanted, and didn’t want him. But he ignored that and just purred like a big cat. His skin was soft on mine, just the faintest roughness from his chin. He must have shaved earlier, before going to see his king. He pressed a kiss above my navel and sat back on his heels. “All right?”

“Yes.” *Three times tell me yes.* The words of an old spell-chant, warning and directions. It didn’t matter. This was Tobin.

“I will never force you,” he said. “I’ll try never to hurt you, but no man can safely promise that. Any hurt I do to you, I will be desperately sorry for and try to repair.”

“I know. I believe that.”

He stood. “Time for sleep then.” He reached to the bright lamp, and extinguished it. The room was cast into dimness, one small light left. He turned away and walked back across to the wardrobe. I watched him strip with his back turned to me. I’d have said he was casual, but I thought he didn’t really have to bend over that often, in removing his trews and stockings. He had a very fine ass.

He got out a nightshirt, laid it on the bed, and then tugged another one on himself. That significantly diminished the quality of the view, but also eased the tightness of my chest. He climbed onto the mattress, still without looking at me, and moved under the covers to the far side, with his back to me. “We can share the bed.” His voice was quiet. “There’s space enough that we don’t have to touch. It’s a big bed. And should you choose to move closer, I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

I was left standing there by the windows, torn between frustration and overwhelming relief. Eventually exhaustion eclipsed them both. I wrestled the button of the trousers open and pulled them down. Leaving my smalls on, I slid into the nightshirt. It was soft and large, and smelled of soap and sunshine.

Tobin didn’t stir as I got into bed. I could tell he was awake, but he held statue-still as I slipped under the sheets and moved around, trying to get comfortable. Comfortable seemed to be lying on my side, looking at the faintly-lit bulk of his shoulders.

I was so tired I’d thought I would fall asleep immediately, but I couldn’t relax. I could tell Tobin wasn’t sleeping either. After nights on the road, I was familiar with the way his breathing eased and deepened in sleep. The thought of not hearing that beside me in the weeks to come was troubling. I was glad to be done with the king’s task, but the safe home-life ahead, that should have

been a relief, seemed dry and empty. I finally couldn't resist asking, "Will you still ride back home with me?"

I saw him tense and it took a moment before he said, "If the king allows me. I hadn't known we were this close to an invasion, but I will beg it of him, to let me take the time."

"And perhaps... visit me sometimes, when you can?"

"That I can swear. Now I know where to find you, you'll see me whenever I can manage it. I do wish you were closer, but Dark has a good turn of speed."

"I'd be pleased. Any time you could get away."

"You might eventually be very pleased." There was a warm note of teasing in his voice, despite the slur of tiredness.

The events of the day spun in giddy circles in my head. Last night we'd camped together under the stars, and life had been simpler. Now the man I'd considered just my friend lay inches away and was... something more. And yet, I didn't think I would trade this confusion for yesterday's simplicity.

Tobin's breathing was deepening at last. I could feel the softening of my personal living wall, but it still felt safe to have him between me and the door. I couldn't lean on him—it didn't feel right in bed like this, with just two thicknesses of linen between us. But I reached out and fisted my hand in the back of his nightshirt, like a child clutching their doll, and pressed my clenched fingers against the strength of his shoulders.

I wished that would be enough to keep away the nightmares, but it wasn't. Through the dark hours, I dozed, and each time, I woke after an hour or two with my heart pounding. I remembered each dream and they were all the same—Tobin knelt before me, entreating me to accept his touch, and each time, after I said yes, he raised his head and his face became Meldov's, revealing the wraith-light in his eyes.

I managed not to scream though, and only woke him once from his well-earned rest, so it could be counted a success of sorts. And it took no more than a moment each time for me to remember who truly was with me, warm against my hand.

A loud knock at the door roused us both. The room was faintly lit by an early dawn. The lamp on the wall still burned feebly. Tobin rolled out of bed fast, reaching to his waist as if for a knife. When he felt only the nightshirt, and saw the walls around him, his tension eased, but he still stopped at the door without opening it and called, “Who is it?”

“Message from His Majesty.”

I wanted to ask Tobin not to open the door. I had a bad feeling about this. But of course he did.

The page on the doorstep held out a well-filled bag, and a folded paper. “A note of explanation, sir. And he bids you both take breakfast and council with him at fourth bell.”

Tobin took the items slowly. Perhaps he shared my bad feeling. He shut the door on the boy’s cheerful face, and glanced at a clock on the shelf above his hearth. “We have twenty minutes. You’d better get up.”

“Surely it’s you that he wants. Probably to stop you from taking off to see me home.” There was clearly an affection between Tobin and the monarch—Tobin was the only man in the room last night to get a real smile, and he called the king “sir.” If I had Tobin at my disposal, I wouldn’t let him hare off from a difficult situation to see a cripple slowly across country.

Tobin carefully unsealed the flap. He read the first few lines and then cursed.

“What?”

“I was afraid of this. He sends us this letter of marque authorizing us to use the crown’s purse to immediately outfit ourselves however we think best, for a journey to the eastern foothills. Both of us.”

“I can’t!”

“It seems you must. He’s planning to head out with speed. He’s cagey in his writing, but he says that *“once there, we’ll repeat our successful experiment.”* Which I take to mean raising the ghost again. Can they do that? Raise it in a new place, that is?”

“Sure. It’s the focus and the details of the working that call the ghost from the aether. Done right, you can haul the same poor shade all over the countryside nightly.” I got out of bed, but muttered, “I’m still not going.” I yearned for my own stone walls this morning, and for time to think in peace.

Tobin didn’t even try to debate with me, just went to his wardrobe and found me a fresh shirt. And eventually ushered me out the door.

We took yet another route through the warren of the palace, which was bustling with activity despite the early hour. Tobin guided us to a small breakfast parlor with, gods help me, a king, a general, three of the most powerful sorcerers in the land, a smattering of other important men, and me. It was probably wise of Tobin to take a firm hold on my elbow, although I could only abide his grip for a moment before pulling my arm free.

The king returned a nod when we bowed, gestured at the buffet against the wall and said, “Help yourselves,” through a mouthful of food as greeting. I guess at some level of power and familiarity, protocol stops being essential. Tobin led me over to the food, where I faced the problem of holding a plate and scooping food onto it. Tobin said, “Let me help.” But instead of ladling food onto my plate willy-nilly, he took both plates and said, “I’ll hold, you serve.” I could have kissed him for that alone. Although perhaps not in front of the king.

The food was simpler than I’d have expected for a high society meal, and we all finished quickly. The king rapped on the table and everyone turned and was silent.

“I’ve consulted with everyone from my Firstmage to the centuries-long dead.” His lips quirked in a quick smile despite the seriousness of the topic. “My decision is that we will ride to the foothills, as soon as we can. I’ll lead a company of archers and light cavalry and my household guard, a few scouts and my Voices, to be the vanguard. General Estray will get the rest of our forces organized, and select those who’ll follow behind us.”

A senior-looking man I didn’t recognize said, “I still don’t like you putting yourself out ahead of your army, my liege. What if the invasion has already

begun, and you arrive to find yourselves outnumbered? If you fall, we are lost. Send the scouts ahead and wait for your rightful place among your troops.”

“If there are decisions to be made in the field, they’re mine and can’t be made by waiting behind. You’ll just have to get that army moving quickly, Estray.”

The man grunted, but didn’t reply. The king added, “My King’s Own guards will be with me of course. And my mages. We’ll call up the shade of Xan, and interrogate him again for further guidance once we reach the general area. If it does come to all-out fighting, I’ll command from behind the front lines, I promise.”

“But not far behind,” Tobin whispered, and gave the king a warm glance.

I hadn’t missed the king’s casual assumption that I’d be there to translate for Xan. What if I said no? Would the king clap me in irons and haul me along? The very thought made me feel ill, and Tobin must have caught something of that because he leaned closer to me.

There was a disturbance in the hall, and then the door to the chamber was thrown open. “Your Majesty, your pardon, but there’s a messenger.”

The man who entered had clearly come from a long, hard ride. His clothing was covered in dust, and his face showed streaks where he had wiped away sweat. He bowed to the king, swaying slightly, and Estray grabbed a chair and shoved it behind his knees. “Sit, man.”

The messenger collapsed into it. The king said, “You’re Fram. You’re stationed at the coast in Calbay, yes?”

“You remember? Yes, Your Majesty. I left there three days ago, and took post horses to get here. I bring word of a possible invasion.”

“At the coast?” The king exchanged quick glances with his advisors. He lifted his own goblet of ale and handed it to the man. “Drink a little and tell it in full, and quickly.”

The man took a mouthful, and made a sound of relief. “One of the local fishermen took his boat much further out than usual—two days’ sailing south-east round the coast and well out to sea. He was in open waters when he

spotted masts on the horizon. He says the hulls were below the curve, but there were many ships, and the rigging marked them as R'gin. He counted a dozen, before making all speed home. He thinks he was probably not seen, with his single boat and much smaller mast. The fleet was sailing out of sight of land, in our general direction. He says most of the sails were furled, so they weren't making all possible speed, even though the weather was fine. He thought they might even have been hove to, waiting for something. He brought word to his village constable, who brought it to me. I also questioned his three crewmen, who told the same tale. They're simple folk and I see no reason to disbelieve them."

Estray said, "Maybe the movement of supplies to the coast of R'gin wasn't just a ruse. Our information could have been wrong. Perhaps a sea-borne invasion is what all the preparations were for."

"Have you any more news than that right now, Fram?"

He shook his head, and looked a bit woozy. "No, Your Majesty. I dispatched other boats to spy out the fleet more carefully and report back, but I thought to bring you first word now, with all speed, and let their reports follow. I left the message-birds for their use, so their information should come hard on my heels."

"Good." The king gave him a nod. "Go now and get some rest. You've done your part."

When the messenger had left and the door was shut, King Faro turned to his generals. "Thoughts?"

An older man said, "This could have been the true cause for the war preparations your spies reported. It wouldn't be the first time the R'gin have come by sea rather than over the mountains."

Estray added, "Perhaps the reports of the mythical tunnel were intended to send us with our forces east to the mountains while they bring in an army to the south-west by boat."

King Faro frowned. "It's certainly possible. Even probable, except..." He paced, and the others made space for him. "Except the reports all fit, of

movement feinted to be all in one direction but actually much of it headed for the mountains, and that part in secret. I trust the men who sent that word. And now the mythical tunnel is at least confirmed as fact.” His intense gaze suddenly lit on me. “It is confirmed, yes? There’s no way that the ghost could have been shading his words to make that seem true when it’s not?”

I bowed my head, trying to get words to come out. “Sire, I, um, I believe he saw soldiers emerge from the ground. Of course there’s no knowing where the other end of the tunnel was—back in R’gin or somewhere closer. But he was certain they hadn’t crossed over the mountains anywhere nearby. Your Majesty.”

“Yes.” He paced another couple of turns. “So we have a probable invasion by normal means on the coast, and the hint of a secret invasion by unlikely means in the mountains. Are both real? Is one a feint to draw us away from the other? Does the mountain invasion even exist?”

“It’s easy to plant such a rumor, Sire,” Estray said.

“I am aware.” The king’s voice was dry. “And yet we’ve obtained confirmation that it’s at least possible, from a source the R’gin could’ve neither corrupted nor deceived.”

“I hold by the coast as being the true threat,” the oldest general said. “Even if that tunnel existed long ago, the odds are far better that the Prince Regent heard of it and decided to use it as bait, than that he actually found it intact and usable after all these years.”

“True. It would’ve been an engineering marvel to begin with, and almost certainly also an arcane one. If it really travels under the mountains it would have to be many miles long, far longer than the best mine ever dug. They’d need fresh air throughout, and if they brought horses it can’t narrow too much anywhere. It does sound like it would have to be magecraft. And then to survive a thousand years?”

“Exactly. Not likely.”

“Except...” Again the king paced. “I keep coming back to two things. First that the movement of goods toward the mountains was reported as very subtle

and stealthy. My informants were proud of their skills in discovering it. Surely if it was purely a feint, the Prince Regent would have wanted to make sure it was noticed and reported to me.”

“Perhaps he trusts the quality of your spies. He has to know you have them. He’s not stupid.”

“He’s a brother-slaying whoreson, but no, not stupid. I don’t think he’s that crafty, though. Of all the men I have in R’gin, only three sent such reports to me. Three of the very best. I think a feint would be more obvious. And then the second thing. The fisherman reported the fleet hove to and waiting. Why?”

“Dark of the moon is in six days,” Firstmage said.

Estray said, “You don’t land an army from ships on a strange coast in the dark of the moon at night. Too dangerous. For a land invasion maybe, but not from the sea. They’d be better off now, with a sliver of moon to light their way.”

“Dark of the moon,” the king repeated. “I wonder if that *is* the key.”

“Sire,” Estray’s tone sounded like Meldov’s, when he was about to correct some error of mine.

The king flashed him a look. “*Not* for a nighttime landing, but as a signal. Think of it. You sail a fleet weeks round the coast, out of sight and out of contact. If this were just invasion, then you would attack as soon as you could, to minimize the risk of being spotted ahead of time, as in fact just happened. But say there was another attack coming from elsewhere. You’d want to have a signal, to time it right.”

Estray was beginning to nod. “Use the moon-phase. And the day after is the spring equinox. If they wanted to coordinate an attack that would make sense.”

“Say the fleet made good time. You’d have to send them out early, to allow for storms or calms along the way. Say they reached position ahead of schedule—there they would have to wait, for the right day to move in.”

“It does fit.”

Secondmage said, “There could be another reason for the delay. Perhaps they had an augury that success was more likely after the dark of moon. They’re a superstitious people.”

“The Prince Regent strikes me as eminently practical, and not one to pay heed to the gods, or he’d not have killed his own brother. But yes, there could be a dozen reasons, even something so simple as the commander fallen ill with a flux, and the fleet waiting on his recovery. The question is, can we afford to ignore either threat?”

Estray said, “I think not. But I’d gauge the fleet a far bigger risk. At least, I think it’s not some decoy but a second prong of the attack. If they’re going to sail dozens of ships, beating against the wind for weeks, they’re going to make more use of them than just show.”

“True.” King Faro stopped pacing and folded his arms. “So instead of following me, you’ll lead two thirds of our forces toward the coast and set up a welcome for them there. Pridal?” The youngest general came to attention. “You’ll follow behind me with the other third as soon as they’re mustered. And get a company of mounted archers ready to ride now in my first wave, along with one of light cavalry.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“General Vio, you have the home defenses and coordination here in the capital.”

There was a brisk fifteen minutes of discussion with maps and much taking of notes, as the military members of the party conferred of who and what was going where with what speed. Most of the names meant nothing to me. All that was clear was that I’d somehow been drafted to ride at speed to the mountains, there to extract truth about ancient magecraft from a reluctant ghost, while the whole R’gin army might suddenly appear out of nowhere. And no one was bothering to ask if I was willing.

I desperately craved my stone walls. And yet there was a thrumming of excitement behind my fear. Once I was that man, the one who stood on the edge of a summoning circle commanding the spell and waited to see what would appear there, and what new knowledge might be found. That man

would have been willing, even eager, for this venture. Was I that much less than I had been?

I hugged myself and whispered to Tobin, “You’ll be coming with us? With me?”

“Absolutely.” His hand found my elbow, and this time the warmth of his grip was comfort. “You’ll be in my personal care.”

Even in a room full of powerful men, he made that sound suggestive. I had a memory of bare skin and lamplight.

“And then I’ll take you home afterward and we’ll have time to get to know one another again.”

I craved that far more than excitement, or safety. Time with Tobin. Well, if we were both headed out with the king, at least Tobin wouldn’t be sent away from me on some errand, as I’d half expected. I tried to be pleased about that.

The discussion around the table petered out and the king rapped on the wood for attention. “Time is short, if we’re to reach the mountains before dark-moon night. My advance party will ride out at noon.”

CHAPTER SIX

Riding out with the king and company was very different from riding alone with Tobin. It was crowded, unsettled and noisy and dusty. Too many people, strings of horses, voices calling back and forth. I felt like I couldn't breathe. The dust got up my nose and I coughed, and despite the easy gaits of the new horse I was riding, it wasn't Cricket and it felt all wrong. I entertained fantasies of reining around and dashing for home. Of course, that wasn't likely to work, with the whole company of soldiers riding behind me.

Tobin kneed his horse next to mine, took my reins from my hand and passed over a canteen. I drank, expecting water, and almost choked on the hard-fermented cider instead.

"That's better. You were looking a bit pale there."

"You thought I'd look better turning blue?"

His horse jostled mine, and he grinned. "I remembered you liked the stuff. The kitchen had some put by."

I was struck by that. I had liked it, back when we were young. Meldov had scorned any drink that wasn't wine, and I'd not had cider since then. Not even lately, in the village, where it was a common tippie in the fall. Why not? *Because it made me think of easier days?* "Thank you." I tried to hand it back but he hung the canteen on my saddlebow.

"Keep it. Just stay sober enough to stay on your horse."

The afternoon passed in a blur of horses and men and sweat and dust and the taste of childhood. The canteen had been large, and full. I had to pin my reins under my bad wrist to drink, but the horse followed the rest and I didn't let the difficulty hamper me. I was perhaps a bit tipsy when we finally stopped for the night.

Tobin led me somewhat apart from the main bulk of the company, around the lee of a hill. The king's tent was set up on the top of the rise and men went back and forth on various errands. Tobin found us a place sheltered by some

rocks but flat enough to sleep on, and unrolled his bedding and my own. He made up one pallet with both of them.

“You would share a bed? Here?”

He shrugged. “We won’t be the only ones. And there’s not much exciting that can be done with all our clothes on.” His smile was wry. “Even if you weren’t about to collapse.”

“And you’re not worried about appearing fay?”

“Lyon, they already know I’m fay. It’s not a problem.” He layered the bedding thicker on the hard ground, and laid one blanket over it. “There. You stretch out and I’ll go fetch us supper in just a minute.”

I should have protested, and insisted I could see to myself, but instead I collapsed on the bedroll. My head was still jittering with the rhythm of hooves, and my eyes were sore and dry. I closed them, just for a moment.

I woke to something wet on my face. Just a week ago, that would have made me bolt upright in panic, but I could smell Tobin’s skin and knew his touch. Still, pride made me sit up and take the cloth from him, to clean my own face. I opened my eyes, and began wiping the grit from my hand as best I could, working the cloth between my fingers.

Tobin took it from me and passed over a hunk of bread stuffed with ground meat. “Here, eat something.”

I wanted to please him, but just the sight of food after hours lurching and jolting made me ill. “I’m not hungry, really. Can you eat both?”

He paused, mouth full and then nodded. But when he’d finished his portion he took mine and pinched a bit of bread off the outside. “Open your mouth.”

I did, and he placed the bread on my tongue. It was simple and flavorful, and somehow I got it down. I said, “I’m not some chick you have to feed. I’m just too tired to eat.”

“Indulge me.” He broke off another piece.

He fed me half a slice that way, before I really could take no more. I forced off my new riding boots and lay back down, pulling the covers around me.

Beside me Tobin sat down too. I heard him swear softly and glanced up at him. He said, "I'm so sorry. You shouldn't have to be out here in this crowd. I promised—one job and I'd see you right back home."

The painful regret in his expression drove me to lighten my own. "And so you will, when this is over. And now I'm having an adventure. I'm just a bit too worn out and drunk to really appreciate it at the moment."

His smile was forced. "Riding out with the King's Own. A tale to tell your grandchildren."

I snorted. "What grandchildren, oh fay soldierboy?"

"There is that. Maybe you'll regale Dag and his sister with it."

I sighed. Before this week I'd never spoken more than a few words to little Guinna. My life had changed so fast that something that would have been almost beyond me, now sounded wistfully easy.

I needed sleep. I rolled over further and closed my eyes. Tobin moved around for a while, sorting things out and then slid under the covers. I could feel his warmth, although he didn't touch me. He said, "If you don't want me behind you, you'll have to turn over."

I did so, and found his face inches from mine. His eyes caught the moonlight. There were little flecks of gold in the brown, like warm stars in a russet sky. He just looked at me with that steady gaze as I moved slowly closer and kissed him.

His mouth was cool, his lips slightly chapped and dry. But when he opened for me, his tongue was warm and he let me in softly. We kissed, without demand. I was tired enough that I almost drifted off in the simple pleasure of lips on lips. The second time my eyelids fluttered shut in fatigue and not passion, Tobin chuckled softly against my mouth. "Lucky for you I'm too tired to be insulted. Go to sleep, lion-boy."

He rolled over, so his back was to my front. After a moment's hesitation I moved in close. The night was cool, and Tobin was warm and strong. I wrapped my good arm around him, and closed my eyes. And all through the night, whenever I woke from nebulous dreams of pounding hooves and

something bad coming, coming nearer, coming louder... he was there. I pressed my cheek to the back of his neck and breathed in the sweat and dust and scent of Tobin, and drifted off again without a sound.

The morning dawned cold and clear. I felt sore, but not as badly as I'd expected. Either the cider, or the days riding with Tobin, had eased my muscles enough that I only groaned and stretched, and didn't come close to falling over. Improvement indeed. Tobin got up as soon as he felt me stir and he smiled to see me up and moving. "You look better. I'll fetch water and breakfast. We won't have long. The king travels fast when he sets his mind to it."

I couldn't help asking, "Why do you call him '*sir*', when everyone else calls him Sire?" I wanted to ask why the king smiled at him differently, why they were so easy together. That was the closest I was willing to come to the real question.

"He was my field commander, back when he was just the prince. He began to consider me his favorite aide and when the damned leg happened, he insisted that I should move to the Voices. I'm not going to claim friendship with His Majesty, but we're easy together, and he likes me to treat him more as commander than lord, unless we're in formal court."

Tobin's tone was so ordinary, so unconcerned, that it eased my mind somewhat. I said, "What do you think about this mad dash across the country? He really got us moving fast."

Tobin laughed. "That's my commander. Once he sees what needs to be done, he doesn't wait around. I do think he's right—if anything is going to happen out in those hills, it will be soon. In a few weeks the mountain passes will be open, and the Prince Regent knows our sentries will be watching closely by then. If he wants to benefit from surprise, he has to do it before that. If that tunnel exists and is that small, he needs time to get his people through it a few at a time. What did the ghost say? It took two days last time? That has to happen while we're looking the other way because we think the mountains are still impassible."

"If we have to fight them... I'm no kind of soldier."

“If you try to join in a battle I’ll beat you myself. That’s not your role, or mine for that matter, anymore. We’re here to give our king the best information we can, so the active forces can do their job.”

“So you won’t have to fight either?” My pulse beat faster, waiting on his answer.

“Let’s hope not. It’s been years since I swung a sword in earnest.”

I hadn’t realized how terrified I was of having to watch him go to war, until I felt that weight fall away. I was less afraid of being killed than of losing Tobin. I told myself it was because he was my oldest friend, possibly my only friend, and I’d just found him again. But I knew that was a lie.

He was my safety and my wall, the mirror in whose eyes I somehow looked brave and desirable. If I stayed with Tobin long enough, maybe I could become a man worthy of what he saw in me. It was more hope than I’d had in a long time. As he turned and headed toward the cookfires to fetch us breakfast, I sent up a petition to Samal, a god I’d never spoken to before, for Tobin’s safety. He was every soldierly virtue in the flesh—he must surely be loved by the soldiers’ god.

When it was time to mount up, I was surprised and oddly pleased to see Tobin approaching with Dark and Cricket in tow. “I thought we left them at the castle.”

“Not likely. With the speed the king wants, each man has a remount. We’ll switch off during the day from now on. But I thought these two could use the first day unburdened, after the trip they’d already had. Dark is raring to go this morning.”

“I’m just as happy if Cricket isn’t raring.” I put my foot into the stirrup and managed to haul myself up on the first try. I was apparently getting the hang of this. “But I’m glad to have him.”

“Didn’t you like the mare? She’s also one of mine. Her name’s Bess.”

I chuckled. “You weren’t the one to name her, were you?”

Tobin swung onto Darkwind with his usual skill. “What makes you say that?”

“She’s named something sensible, not all fancy and not after an insect.”

“Ooh, smart man, just for that you can eat my dust.” He whirled Dark in a tight circle that did raise the dirt from under the stallion’s hooves, and lit out downhill, but it only took a few strides before he reined back to ride beside me as usual.

And so began another day like the last, only worse because I was out of cider. Men and horses and dust and aches. It was so foreign to who I was that I fumbled the reins once, trying to pinch myself and prove it wasn’t all some fever-dream. Although why a pinch should be more proof of reality than my aching thighs I really don’t know.

Tobin had friends in the army and among the Voices. The soldiers mainly greeted him with a call and a wave. I guess they couldn’t leave formation. But several of the other King’s Voices appeared out of the maelstrom to ride near us for a stretch and talk to Tobin. At first Tobin introduced me and tried to draw me into the conversation. But by the time three of the other Voices had failed utterly to lull me into joining in their banter, and ridden on, Tobin gave me a sideways look.

“They’re good men, all of them. Handpicked by the king.”

“I’m sure.”

“Friends of mine. Some more than others, of course, but Doyd there is a close friend. If I happen not to be around, you can trust him to help you out.”

My expression must have told him the likelihood of that, because he sighed softly. “I wish there’d been time to introduce you, in less chaotic circumstances. I think you’d like him. He’s solid as a rock, and speaks sense. Most of the time.” A quick smile flickered over his face, at some memory, no doubt.

I said roughly, “Having me nodding a greeting and not running for home is as good as you’re going to get right now. You go chat with them, if you like, and leave me be.”

I was ashamed of my ill temper as soon as I said it, though I had no more control over that than anything else in this insane day. But Tobin just said,

“Surly cur,” with a grin that seemed more fond than annoyed. And stayed by my side.

Oddly, as the day went on, I found myself becoming more at ease. Cricket’s gaits fit me well, my muscles gave up fighting the saddle, and I was learning to ride off to the side when the men ahead raised heavy clouds of dust. Tobin’s good cheer was contagious and I began to look around me more.

Now a day’s ride out from the capital, the land was already becoming more open and rolling. There were fewer trees, and the tops of the hills were often tallgrass and not cultivated fields. We saw fewer people too, although everyone we passed did stop to stand, openmouthed or frowning, to watch our company go by. Ahead of us the mountains stood along the horizon, seeming to grow no larger despite the hours of travel.

I turned to Tobin during a stretch of walking. “Have you been out this way before?”

“Oh yes, I think I’ve traveled most of the major roads in this country, either as a soldier or as a Voice. I did a couple of seasons in the eastern patrol. Boring work for the most part, wandering around looking menacing and keeping the hill folk worried enough about us not to ally with the R’gin.”

“You didn’t fight the R’gin though.”

“Lords and ladies, no. Where’s your history gone, lion-boy? The R’gin haven’t sent a force over the mountains since before we were born.”

“The battle of Trimount,” I remembered.

“Right. That was the last one. Not that I think they wouldn’t have loved to try again, but the hill tribes learned their lesson about alliances with the R’gin then, and it hasn’t been long enough for them to forget it. I did fight in the north when King Olan decided to try our borders. And in the campaign to push forward the boundary far enough to discourage him ever doing it again. Shit work, that was.”

He fell silent, and I realized that was the time he’d mentioned, the one that put sadness in his warm eyes. I quickly said, “I know nothing about the

mountains, really. Are there truly goats that can climb steep cliffs? I assume that's an old wives' tale."

"No, that's true enough." He began to tell me about the wonders of the Rockcomb range, about waterfalls that dropped two hundred feet down sheer rockfaces and the eagles that nested high on the crags above. "Gallim and I once climbed to an eagle's nest and stole a chick for King Faro's collection. The head falconer said it was a rare Bronzed Eagle and was pleased, but Gallim panicked on the top of the cliff and it took me hours to talk him down. Meanwhile the mother eagle showed up and began circling over us." Tobin grinned. "I teased Gallim for a season afterward about sounding so like a bleating sheep that the mother decided we were harmless and went to look elsewhere."

We stopped briefly for a cold noon meal, and to change horses. Tobin stayed close, and gave me a smile that was almost proud when I swung up easily into the mare's saddle. His bright grin, and joke about sacks of potatoes having more grace, were my reward. And we rode on again, with Tobin still animated and at ease at my side.

I could have listened to Tobin forever, hearing the adventurous boy I'd known echoed in the deep tones of the man. But bit by bit, whenever we slowed enough for conversation, he began to drag out my story too. Not the hard parts. We each shied away from moments that cut too deep. When I said how I respected Meldov's passion for languages, and then reflected on where that dragged him down to, Tobin was quick with a funny story about a loose girth. When Tobin talked about a friend who'd fought beside him, and said, "He fell," in a thick voice and paused, I filled in with the time Dag set the market basket down and a mouse got in, only to leap out at me when I unpacked it in my kitchen. The day passed faster than I ever would have expected.

The king pressed forward until the sky was dark and it was hard to see the men ahead of me. When Tobin finally led the way to our space in the camp, I once more fell off Bess more than dismounted. Tobin caught my arm and I leaned against him for a moment. "You're doing well," he said. "This speed is taxing everyone."

I cursed him out halfheartedly for still looking strong. He laughed and leaned close to murmur, "Since I'm going to fetch your food and make your bed, you should be glad of it."

I saw the shock in his eyes as I brushed the smallest of kisses on his cheek, and said, "Oh, I am."

When he'd laid out the bedding, and led the horses away to the picket line, I sat down, and tried not to look around and see who might be staring at me. *I kissed Tobin, just like that.* I gave up the struggle, and let myself glance around. He'd found a sheltered place for us again, but there were a few men nearby. However if any had seen that kiss, or cared, their attention was already on other things.

That night, bundled together, I kissed him much more thoroughly. And when he'd have rolled over to give me his back, I pressed my face to his throat and murmured, "No. Stay." He froze and then very slowly put his arm around my shoulders. I felt its weight and didn't run away. I fell asleep to the slow ruffle of his breath against my hair.

The next day was easier still. It was as if this forced immersion in a crowd of men was doing what fifteen years of solitude had not, to make me human again. Or perhaps the solitude had been necessary to get me to the point of being able to ride out in this company. As I grew familiar with all of it, with the sound of hooves, the creak of leather, the rise and fall of men's voices, and the dust and the smell, it became a backdrop for Tobin.

This was where he'd been, all those years I'd spent away from him, at first sleeping days and working for Meldov at night, and later ensconced in my stone walls in my own personal darkness. Tobin had been riding out in the light.

It astounded me that he had any interest in my life, where the most exciting moments had been no more than ferreting out secrets carried by the dead. But he listened with attention that didn't seem feigned to my story of the Lady Anella and the missing body of the heir to Caraclo. As I told him how we'd tracked the right ghost to get an answer in the end, his laugh was of triumph

and pleasure, not mockery. And although he'd seen and done so much more, he would time and again stop his own tales to coax me into one of my own.

We were so different. We always had been. As teens, we'd both loved to climb to the rooftops and wander through the town, but for him it had been for the adventure. For me it had been the secret glimpses of other lives. I'd wanted him then, at thirteen and fourteen, and spent many a night in my cot thinking about his laugh, or the way his hand felt rough and strong, held out to help me over a steep pitch. I'd never imagined he might be interested too, and never dared reach out or say one single word that might change the way we were, as friends.

Now he was the one reaching out. I was determined to stop holding back, if I could only convince the cowering fool I'd become to take the chance.

I slept each night in his arms now. Clothed of course, but warm and safe in a way I'd never known. I still woke often though, my breath tight in my chest. Old dreams and new ones merged. It was Tobin now, who was manacled to the wall while the wraith used my body against him, and I was trapped, silent and screaming in my own head. Or the mansion was burning, and there in the ashes the throat-cut body was not Meldov but Tobin. At least the dreams were dispelled fast. No better cure than waking to find him alive and solid, still asleep or perhaps whispering comfort against my cheek. And now that I could tolerate his hold, his arms tight around me seemed to keep some of the darkness at bay.

On the fourth night we drew rein earlier than usual. At the top of one of the rising hills was a strong manor. It looked huge and old, its weathered greystone walls rising against the sunset-hued sky. Tobin said, "Deepwell Keep." I stared at him and then took another look. This place was a legend, the one keep that had held out against the army of Prince Kal, over a century ago. Besieged for almost a year, they were saved by their water that never ran dry, and the foresight of their lord. With food stores exhausted, they'd still managed a mounted sortie against the flank of the Prince's army, when he thought they were fully subdued, and killed his best commander. That action was the start of Kal's downfall.

I'd read of it in history books, and even once spoken to a ghost from that era who'd sworn to tell the truth in the name of the Lord of Deepwell, as if he were a saint. And now here the famous keep was.

"No comment?" Tobin teased me. "I'd have expected you to be thrilled. It's kind of a storybook place."

"I'm speechless," I admitted. "Deepwell. Do you think we'll get a chance to see the famous well, or the cellars where they hid those last remaining horses for the sortie, so they wouldn't be eaten. Or..."

He laughed. "Maybe. There won't be a lot of time for tours, but I can ask."

I shrugged, trying to be casual. "Odds are we won't even see the inside, right?"

"Now there you're wrong. The regular soldiers will camp in the field, right enough, but the king and all the upper staff will have quarters in the keep."

"We're upper staff?"

"I am. You're baggage."

I laughed and kneed Cricket against Darkwind's shoulder. At least that was something to come out of this trip—my riding skills were all brushed up again.

It turned out Tobin was right. All of the King's Own Guard, and the King's Voices were among the guests ushered into the courtyard. So were the sorcerers, which made me feel less like I was hanging on Tobin's coattails. He spoke aside to someone, and we were met by a dapper little man in servant's livery. "My lord asked me to escort you to your chamber. Would you like to go the long way round and see a little of Deepwell Keep as we go?"

Tobin said, "You must be too busy for that."

The man's teeth were surprisingly white in his tanned face. "Never too busy to show off my keep. This way, sirs."

The tour was a whirlwind of the cellars, where the deep well was guarded day and night by two of the keep's men, to the parapets where the army of Prince Kal had been monitored through narrow archer's slits. Tobin asked a

few questions but I just took it in, and concentrated on keeping my saddle-worn legs under me. We finished up at a door on a fourth floor corridor.

“Not what you’re used to perhaps, sir,” the servant said, opening it. “We’ve seldom had so many worthy guests at one time and the lower apartments are all full. But you said you’d take quiet over luxury.”

“That’s fine.” Tobin handed him a small coin. “Thanks for the tour. Any chance at all of a bath?”

“Maybe. I’ll see what I can do.”

When the man had left, I closed the door and looked around. The room was small indeed, probably a mid-ranked servant’s chambers. There was a narrow window, set in the outer wall. The window-fabrics were plain and worn, the lamp on the wall smoked slightly when Tobin lit it, but the bed would hold two, if they were willing to stay close. After three nights on the ground it looked heavenly.

I said, “This is quite a place. You haven’t been here before?”

“Not inside. I’ve been here once with my men, but I chose to sleep outdoors with them. I was a young officer, and intent on winning their respect.”

“I bet you didn’t have to sleep on the ground to do that.”

“Perhaps not, but sharing their state in good times and bad did make them more willing to follow me. Still, I’m glad to have the chance to see Deepwell now. Those cellars are something else.”

“Yes.” I brushed futilely at my rump to remove the road dust and then sat on the edge of the bed. “Imagine being the Lord back then. You have horses there, safe under guard for a sortie, but above you have the people of your keep growing weak from lack of food. How long do you hold off on slaughtering them for meat? Or if you were the common soldier, asked to keep his lord’s mounts safe while his family starves. Imagine the temptation to lame one and then suggest it go for food.” I shook my head.

“It’s a much better siege I’m contemplating now,” Tobin said, his voice half an octave lower. “We have privacy here and a little time and a bed. And it seems as if my arms are not as distasteful to you as they were.”

I pushed to my feet and went to stare out the window. The sun had fully set, but the sky still held streaks of lavender and gold. “You were never *distasteful*.”

“I’m sorry.” He was close behind me now. “I misspoke. I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

I shook my head. “It’s my fault. I’m abnormal.”

“You’re wounded.” He was closer still. “Turn around please.”

I did so, and he closed the distance between us. I’d been irked by his command, but now I realized he was still holding to my request not to come up behind me. In front was better anyway. He kissed me slowly. As sweet as the last few nights had been, this was better, standing and awake with no one to see us. His mouth tasted of the dust of the road at first, but no doubt mine did too. After a few minutes there were no tastes between us but our own.

A knock on the door, broke us apart. Tobin went to answer. Two servants stood there with large water jugs. One said, “We’re so sorry sir, there’s not a bath to be had. But we brought some warm water and towels.”

When they were gone, Tobin said, “A pity. I do love a bath. And it eases getting naked.” He glanced at me.

With a dry mouth, I said, “I’m dirty enough to need washing all over.”

“That could be arranged.” Tobin set one of the ewers on the floor and dropped a towel beside it. “Let’s get your boots off and you can stand on that.” He knelt at my feet and took hold of one boot and then the other, as I dragged my feet free. He would have reached for my socks, but I said, “Now *your* boots. Sit on the bed.”

He did as I asked, gravely raising one foot, although his eyes danced.

“Don’t make fun of me,” I muttered.

“Never.” His voice was soft. “Tell me what you want.”

“To be equal. To take turns.” I couldn’t do this if there was a master and a servant in this room, even if the master was me. I helped tug his boots off, although with just one hand I was perhaps more hindrance than help. Still we managed it. I backed away when that was done and set hands to my own shirt.

“I can...” Tobin began.

“Not this time.” I averted my eyes as I stripped off my travel-stained clothes. I could hear the sound of him doing the same but I couldn’t look over there. When I was down to my small-clothes I hesitated. *What did I want?* I wasn’t yet sure. I trusted Tobin, but didn’t trust my own responses. I felt hot and then cold, and was only half aroused, despite knowing that Tobin now stood less than three feet away, unclothed and waiting.

For the first year in my little house, I hadn’t even pleased myself. Every attempt was aborted in images of wraith-light and the panicked feel of being a passenger in my own body. Gradually I’d gotten past that, but pleasure had remained a fast and furtive thing, a matter of touch and friction and hard breaths—impersonal and unemotional. I drove my body to release, but without letting myself think about it, without engaging my mind or emotions.

This was different. This was Tobin. He was worth time and thought. And yet there was still a gibbering terror beneath my determination that said he would take me and harm me and control me. I *wanted*, and I was still afraid. I kept my eyes on the floor as I pushed my smalls off, walked over and stepped onto the towel.

“Lyon, look at me.”

My eyes were fixed down, staring at my own near-hairless legs and arched feet, standing on the bleached-white cloth. I heard Tobin approach, and then he knelt, lowering his head to come into my field of view. I turned aside, staring at the smooth-worn boards of the floor.

“Lyon, if you don’t want me to come so close without clothes, say so. I won’t leave you or think less of you. It’s been what—barely a week since I forced you out of your safe shell? I’ll understand if you don’t want me to touch you at all. Or if you prefer, let me start slowly, and you can call a halt whenever you choose.”

“All right.” I wasn’t sure he could hear that, so softly did it come out. But there was the sound of water as he dunked a cloth and then he stood and reached out toward me. Even looking to the side, I could see his strong arm, all muscles and tan and dark hair, as he laid the cloth on my shoulder. The water was clean and good. He wiped gently up my neck to my jaw and around. Then he rinsed the cloth and gave it into my hand. “Do your face. I don’t want to blind or smother you by accident.”

I scrubbed roughly at my cheeks and forehead, and then over my eyes, glad of a reason to close them. When I opened them again I looked at him and handed the cloth back. Tobin smiled, and then took his time, rinsing my shoulders and arms. He held the ewer up for me to dip my hands, and then he wiped them both, good and bad, with equal attention. When the cloth moved down my chest and brushed a nipple I shivered. I remembered clean lamplight, his dark eyes flecked with amber, and the touch of his mouth, and my breath came faster.

Tobin knelt and continued. He washed me to my waist, and then very slowly lower. Over my hips, and around down the outsides of my thighs. Each time moving a little closer and a little closer to... I grabbed his wrist. “Enough.”

He took just one deep breath, and then said in the same quiet voice, “What now?”

I dropped another towel from the stack onto the boards. “You stand there.”

Tobin glanced at me and then smiled slow and wide. He stepped onto the towel and held his hands out at his sides. “I’m yours. Do what you will.”

Mine. What was I that this man should give himself over to me? And yet, what a gift. I took the fresh water and began with his face, even though he’d not done mine. I wiped to his hairline, where the day’s sweat had caked the dust in dark runnels over the tan of his brow. He had faint lines there from squinting. I carried on, over the straight nose, the high cheeks, the wide mouth. He was trying to be sober and still, but I saw him hide another smile as I scrubbed a spot from his chin.

I moved to his strong shoulders, wider than my own. To his arms. His hands. His chest. That chest... If you'd asked me a month before, I'd have said I preferred a man with less hair, with the planes of muscle clearly seen. But this was perfection. His curls were silkier than they looked, and as I wiped and rinsed, the flat arcs of chest muscle were outlined by the wet hair. His nipples were larger than mine and darker, and as I watched they tightened. I dared to press the wet cloth against one, rubbing in small circles, and Tobin made a soft sound.

And that was all. I shoved the cloth into his hand and stepped back. He stood still and let me look at him. He was fully hard now, and larger than any of the boys I'd traded touches with, as a teenager in the streets of Riverrun. His wet chest rose and fell in short breaths. His thighs were strong. He was mine, and I couldn't take him.

I turned away, toweling myself off roughly, and muttered, "If you wish to do something about that, or find someone else who will, I won't mind."

"Tell me that's a lie."

I jumped because he was suddenly close behind me. But when I turned his eyes held no apology.

"Tell me you'd care if I went and buggered some willing soldier."

I took a breath. "All right, yes, of course I'd care. But how can I ask you not to, when I can't even touch you below the waist."

"You don't have to ask. Just don't push me at someone else unless you mean for me to go."

I gritted my teeth. I'd been off balance since the moment he showed up on my doorstep. What was one more fall? "Don't, then. Don't go."

"Thank you." He took a step back. "As for the other. Would it please you to watch me get myself off, or bother you?"

I stared at him. "I really... don't know." But my body felt warm at the idea, and my own cock stirred.

“Get into the bed under the covers and keep warm,” Tobin said. “I’m going to finish washing up.” He waited until I was safely beneath the blankets and then picked up the cloth. Moving slowly, each action deliberate, he soaked it, wrung it out, and bent to wash his feet. The curve of his ass in the lamplight was a work of art. He cleaned himself slowly, washing up and around his legs, along his thighs, and higher. Then he looked at me, as he laid the wet cloth on his erect shaft.

I shuddered, but couldn’t look away. He wiped slowly, tip to root and back, and then into the nest of curls at its base. He spread his legs and washed over his sac, hanging low and full between his thighs. He turned, and squeezed out the rag on his spine, so trickles of water from the small of his back ran down into the hidden recesses of his ass-crack. I watched the shimmering stream disappear, and then fall below, drop by drop, to the towel at his feet.

He turned back, and fixed his eyes on mine, as he let the cloth drop to his feet. With one strong hand, he grasped his shaft and tugged, circling the tip with his palm. His breath quickened and he did it again, faster. Up and around. The head of his cock grew shiny and purple in his fist. He moaned softly and then quieted, making no sound but his ragged panting as he stroked himself off.

I was mesmerized, watching that hand. I could almost feel the firm, dry touch. Under the concealing blankets, I was getting fully hard. I shifted restlessly, feeling the fabric of the blanket rasp against my sensitive skin.

“Still all right?” Tobin asked calmly, only a hint of the effort it took in his tone.

“Yes.”

He worked himself faster, almost roughly. “Please say my name.”

“Tobin.”

He rubbed himself hard, pumping his fist in swirling strokes. He spread his legs slightly and cupped his sac with his other hand, squeezing its shape under the curls of his pubes. “Say it again.”

“Tobin,” I said. And added, “You’re beautiful.”

He came then, the cream spurting in small arcs and dripping on his fingers, as he grunted and shuddered. And laughed. “Ah, Lyon. Beautiful. Gods. Hardly.”

“You are,” I insisted.

He picked up a towel and wiped his hands and softening cock. Then he pulled on a clean shirt and trews.

“What? Are you going somewhere?”

“I’ll go see if I can find someone to come get the dirty towels. Including this one.” He picked up one from the clean pile and tossed it to me on the bed. “It’ll probably take me fifteen minutes or so.”

He slipped out the door, shutting it firmly behind him. I was left both grateful and bereft. *Why didn’t he stay?* Of course I knew why. I hated that I’d made him so careful of me. But as I slid a hand under the blanket and took hold of myself I knew I wouldn’t have done this with him in the room.

I stroked my length, feeling my cock harden more with each pass of my fingers. I slid the foreskin around, and that silken caress sent echoes through my groin. I closed my eyes and, for the first time in longer than I could remember, imagined not some nebulous sensation, but the touch of another real man.

Tobin’s hand would be rougher than mine, and warmer, as he always seemed to be. Like he carried the heat of sunshine inside him. He would smell of horses and dust and skin. He would breathe fast and hard, and get that rasp in his voice I’d only heard once, but now would never forget. He would touch me, oh gods, he would touch me and want this, want my pleasure, want the way I was whining in my throat as desire rose in waves, almost painful, until I crashed through to climax. It burned. All that heat leaving me felt like death. And like a beginning.

I mopped up as well as I could with the towel. Stupid of me not to have put it in place first, but the memory of Tobin had been too urgent for me to be rational. I wiped my fingers and pitched the thing back into the damp pile on the floor.

It was closer to half an hour before Tobin knocked, called my name and came back in. “Not asleep yet?”

“No.”

“Good. I bespoke supper. They’ll be up soon to clear the room and bring us a tray.”

A thousand things I wanted to say, but all I managed was, “Thank you.”

He grinned lasciviously, “Oh, my pleasure, definitely.”

“Not for that, you knobhead.”

“No?”

“Well, that too.” I grinned, still lightheaded with emotions.

“Anytime. Well, perhaps not *any* time.”

I threw the pillow at him and he ducked. Then he dug in my bag and passed me a shirt and treads. “Get dressed. The servant will be here soon. You need to eat and keep up your strength.”

The tray arrived shortly after, and we ate in companionable silence. The food was good, although simple. I said, “Do you think they gave the king this same bread and turnips and mutton?”

“Probably not. Although he’s eaten worse in the field. I’m just as glad to have this as my portion, and not to have to stay awake through five courses of dainties while making polite conversation. Poor Faro.”

I was replete and mostly relaxed and so was able to ask, with assumed calm, “Did you ever fancy him?”

“Faro? Gods, no. Well, maybe a bit right at first. He’s good looking and a good leader. But he *is* my king and he’s not *fay*. And he was already married. The old king made sure of that, and a babe in the cradle, before he let him command in the field. For all that it was a political marriage, Faro loves his queen.”

I relaxed all the way. “I’m stupid.”

“Were you jealous?” Tobin grinned. “That’s excellent. There were a few men I did have a thing for, over the years. Let me know if you want to hear about them.”

“No, thank you.”

He laughed, but then set his plate aside and asked quietly, “What about you? Were there other men? Besides...”

“The wraith?” That hadn’t been Meldov, it *had not been Meldov*. I swallowed and said lightly, “A few boys, when I was just an apprentice. None after that.”

“Did you...” Tobin rubbed his mouth. “I’m just going to ask straight out, because I want to know what you’ve done. Physically, that is, so I don’t scare you moving too fast.”

“It’s not the physical part that really bothers me,” I said, and it was only half a lie.

“Nonetheless. Boys in the streets, or an empty room. I did that too, once or twice, but it was no more than a quick hand job.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever, um, use mouths?”

“No.”

“Anything but hands?”

I looked down. He leaned close, still careful to watch for my reaction as he kissed my temple. “You’re safe with me. I was already planning to go as slowly as you need. This is just one more piece of the puzzle.”

“Mostly we just stroked off together, side by side and watching,” I said. It was both intimate and uncomfortable to talk about this with Tobin. “Sometimes we did it for each other, with our hands. That was all I did, before.”

“Oh, lion-boy, do I have plans for you. Eventually.” He kissed my cheek, and then used the back of his fingers to turn my head for a real kiss. “Tonight, though, we should get some sleep. The king wants to head out at dawn. We

have a day and a half yet to travel, and in two nights it'll be darkmoon. We're cutting it pretty fine."

He stood and set the tray outside the door and then looked at me. "I either need to put smalls on under these trews, or strip naked to sleep. Your call."

I said slowly, "It's a small bed. We'll have to sleep really close together."

"And that's easier for you if we're dressed? Not a problem." This time when he took off his trews to add smallclothes, he didn't flaunt his taut ass or draw the process out. And I was grateful. We came together in the bed, and he put his arms around me without a word of complaint. I rolled over and pressed my back to his chest. I could at least give him this, that I trusted him behind me. Because I did.

He gathered me in close, and we quickly fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A day later we began really getting into the foothills. The mountains seemed to suddenly grow, looming against the sky now in crisp, hard-edged shapes of purple-grey rock and white snow. The lower slopes were covered in the greenish haze of brush and shrubs, and the dark-green arrows of conifer trees marched in ranks toward us. The hills we climbed were still mainly grassland, but the rises were becoming steeper. Clumps of trees were more common and the air tasted clean and thin.

At noon, we halted beside a small river. I dismounted and we led the horses to drink downstream. I stood back, and let Tobin shoulder our mounts in with the rest, where they snorted and drank, cooling their hooves and muddying the bank. Then Tobin headed us back up the river and we found a place out of the way to tether them to a fallen log. I was hot and sweaty. I knelt by the water and loosened my shirt, wondering if there was time to wash a bit. Tobin smiled at me. “Taste it first.”

I scooped my canteen full and took a sip. It was good, but so cold that it froze my teeth.

“Snowmelt,” Tobin said. “Not that I’ve never swum in it, but it will send your balls screaming for cover.”

I poured water on a cloth and managed a wipe-up, and then refilled my canteen. “Do you know where we are?”

“We’re getting close to the end of the ride. This is the Snake River. Tallribbon Falls lead into it, about twenty miles south and east. If we cross the ford going northeast, we’ll come to one of the Mage’s Fingers, Gullywatch. That’s where the king plans to set up camp.”

The Fingers were even more ancient than Deepwell, a series of stone towers built a millenium ago to keep watch on the eastern border. “I thought they were just outlook towers, not true keeps.”

“That’s right. No hope of a real bath or even a well-cooked meal. There’s just a garrison there. But Gullywatch is as close to the area the ghost named as we can get. And it has a cellar.”

I forced my mind away from that. I’d been carefully not thinking about another session with the sorcerers and the ghost of an angry man, down in the dark. *Not now. Not yet.* “So we’ll set up camp there, and then what?”

“That’s for the king to say, but I imagine he’ll send out patrols. And then consult with the ghost tonight.”

“Right away?”

“If it’s going to be done at all. Tonight is darkmoon.”

I’d lost track somewhere. “This could all be a wild goose chase. The real invasion could be just the one on the coast.”

“It could. But the king trusts his intelligencers enough to come here, and he’s a good judge of men.”

“And if there is a tunnel and we find it, what then?”

Tobin flashed me his grin. “If we find it before they put an army through it, then we’ve won. We can blockade the end of it with little trouble. Like a cat keeping a mouse in its hole. Something like this tunnel is an advantage only as long as it’s secret.”

“And if we’re too late?”

“Well, that’s what the archers and cavalry are for. We’ll slow them down until the army behind us arrives.”

That sounded optimistic, but I didn’t say so.

The company ate quickly and we were soon on our way. By mid-afternoon I saw the stone tower of Gullywatch rising up on a hillside, and an hour later we reached its foot. The company set up camp on the hillside around the tower. Tobin found us a place apart, but before we could unload our saddlebags a man came over to us. “Voice Tobin and Translator Lyon? You’re summoned to a meeting in the tower. I’ll take care of your mounts.”

We left him to tether the horses and untack them, and made our way to the tower. Gullywatch was larger than it seemed from a distance. It was built of pinkish-grey stone rising a hundred feet above the top of the hill, with the same uncanny smoothness as the mage's tower back home. At its crown was an open viewing deck. Below that windows studded its walls, many not much more than arrow-slits, particularly in the bottom floors. The door was reinforced with iron, and fronted by a portcullis, but both stood open now. We passed the King's Own guard at the gate, walked under the ironwork and into the main hall.

The king looked up from where he stood peering at papers spread on a long table. "Oh, there you are. Good. Come on."

He led the way out briskly, not pausing for courtesies, and everyone in the room followed along, with Tobin and me bringing up the rear. We went down two flights of narrow, curved stairs and ended up in what appeared to be a storage cellar. The walls were lined with casks and boxes. The King and his sorcerers prowled around the room while I stood bemused at the foot of the stairs. I wasn't hiding behind Tobin's shoulder. Much.

"We can clear all this out," the king said, turning to Firstmage. "What do you think, will it do?"

"Well enough," The old man said. I thought he looked drawn and ill. The trip had clearly been a strain on his endurance. Secondmage hovered nearby.

"And you still think it can be done the way you planned?"

"Yes, sire. It will not be my first transference. I'm familiar with both theory and practice."

The king waved at the military man to his left. "Go on up and guard the stairs now." When the man had gone, King Faro looked around at us. "So now that we're here and we beat darkmoon, if only by a few hours, it's time to make plans. We will of course send scouts out tonight across the area, and man the watch-tower. If the R'gin come through in the dark tonight they'll need torches or lanterns. We'll keep watch for any light in the hills."

“If I were them, I’d wait till morning for exactly that reason,” a man in colonel’s insignia said. “If they’re even coming at all. I’d start pushing through at first light.”

“Yes. And they may also. Or they may have started coming through today. We’ll use bigger mounted patrols tomorrow. But it’s my mages’ hope that we can pinpoint the location more precisely.”

“By calling the ghost?”

“That, at least.” The king nodded to Firstmage.

“We’ll call the ghost and question him again,” the old man said. “We’ll show him maps, and a couple of drawings of the mountains, and try to induce him to mark the location of the tunnel for us. But the hillpeople don’t use maps and never have. If he can’t or won’t give us the information, we have one more resort to try. We will do a transference.”

“A what?” the colonel asked.

A cold feeling started in the pit of my stomach. According to Meldov, there were things that could be done with ghosts besides confining and questioning them. None were simple, and few ended well for either party. He’d never given me the details.

Secondmage spoke up. “In a transference, the ghost entity, the consciousness if you will, is sent into the mind of one of his summoners. For a day and a night, the ghost shares his body and speaks directly to him.”

“What happens after the day and night?”

“We use the spell to banish the ghost, performed at daybreak. The ghost is usually quite weakened by then anyway. The process drains its strength. This is a technique of last resort, because once banished the ghost is gone forever. You can only do it once.”

“You’re crazy if you do it at all!” I only realized I’d spoken when everyone stared at me.

Firstmage said, “I have practice with this spell, young man. It’s delicate and powerful work, but I’ve carried two different ghosts myself. If it’s done right, there’s nothing to fear.”

And if it’s not done right? They were crazy to even think of it! I kept silent with an effort, but couldn’t help sidling toward the stairs. Tobin moved to keep his shoulder against mine.

Secondmage said, “I will carry the ghost, should it be necessary. Of course, we hope that it isn’t, but if we can’t get the information we need by questioning, I’ll stand ready.”

The general asked, “How much information will you get if you go through with this... transference? Will you know everything that the ghost knows? Can you lead us straight to that tunnel? If so, surely that’s worth simply doing without any delay, messing about with questions.”

“It’s not that straightforward,” Firstmage said. “If we do a transference, the spirit is housed within the host’s body for that brief period. There the ghost is safe from outside influences. It can’t be summoned away by another, cannot be harmed by daylight, and is tied to the host for the duration of the spell. However the ghost will merely speak to the host, mind to mind, much as they speak to us here. They share what knowledge they can be induced to share, a word at a time. It’s an extension of questioning, no more.”

“Then it’s just a way to ask more questions?” The general looked as disappointed as I was relieved to hear it.

“There’s no deep transfer of knowledge, no real touching of minds. Otherwise it might be done more often. Because it’s only an extension of questioning, it’s seldom considered worth the risk. In this case, however, to be able to walk the ghost outside in the daylight and show him the mountain landscape is worth trying. What he won’t or can’t identify on a map, he’ll surely recognize in real life.”

“What are the risks?”

“Few when it’s done right. The host could be overwhelmed by the presence of another entity speaking in his mind, or be confused, unable to do his part.

Or even driven mad by the oddness of the situation. In this case, that isn't a concern." Firstmage gave Secondmage an approving nod. "Or the ghost's strength may be too taxed to complete the spell without losing the spirit completely and permanently before the transference takes hold. The process is a strain on both sorcerer and ghost. That's why this is a last resort. If we try it, and cannot bind Xan to Secondmage, we'll have no more chances to speak with him."

"No risk of having the ghost decide to stay in the host permanently?"

"No, not at all," Firstmage said. "Ghosts are ephemeral. They don't have that kind of power. Unless you've summoned a far different spirit, a ravager or wraith, one of the undead, then the biggest problem we have is keeping the ghost around long enough."

"And we're sure this ghost isn't, um, those undead?"

"Positive."

Firstmage turned to me. "Translator Lyon, if we perform the transference you'll be required to stay close to Secondmage, since you alone speak Xan's language. As the ghost speaks to him, Secondmage will render the sounds aloud as closely as he can, and you'll have to translate. Then when we decide on the next question, you'll have to render it in *tridescant* for his ears and hence the ghost's."

I blinked. "You mean, he's going to take this ghost into his head and then not understand a word it says?" I didn't know what the wraith's first tongue had been, but when it spoke in my mind I'd understood each nuance of its thoughts. Of course, it had used more than simple words, with its hooks set deep in my thoughts. It had been no powerless passenger.

"Transference is very limited. The host only hears what the ghost chooses or is compelled to say. And vice versa. Any closer bonding of mind to spirit is an abomination."

You can say that again.

I swallowed a surge of nausea and tried to be diplomatic. "I will of course help with any translation I can." Even though the thought of a ghost in a man's

head made me feel like turning and running. “If Secondmage knows modern *tridescant*, then rendering the sounds of the older tongue shouldn’t be too hard.”

Secondmage shook his head slowly. “I know neither, but I’m skilled in several other languages.”

Tridescant was different though. I said, “Perhaps it would be wiser to use a host who does at least know the modern version. There are sounds, inflections, the use of sliding pitch, that carry over from the old version to the new. There are three levels to that language—the phonemes, the rhythm, and the pitch. All of them carry meaning.”

“The host must be a sorcerer involved in the rite,” Firstmage said.

The king said, “Do any of you three speak the modern language at all? I know we had Doyd try it before, for fluency, but have you any skill with it?”

“I think you’ll find Secondmage quite capable.”

The translation by proxy idea sounded unwieldy and doomed to failure. I was the only person in the room, apparently, with the language skills needed to effectively host this spirit. I’d rather die first. *Would Tobin expect me to step up and volunteer to help with this madness? Would the king?* I said, “I’ll do my very best with the translations, then.”

There was a pause, as I looked at my feet and hoped fervently that I was imagining their eyes on me. Finally the king said, “So we have a course of action. Patrols are already out. Those of us in this room will meet here again, an hour after sunset, for the summoning. You’re all free until then.”

I didn’t run for the stairs, but I did walk fast. At the top of the steps, one of the King’s Own was waiting. He said, “Translator Lyon? The king has assigned a room for you here in the tower. And for Voice Tobin, of course. He wants to house everyone he needs close at hand.”

I turned toward the main tower door anyway. Outside, the late afternoon sun gilded the long grass. I could smell the cookfires burning, and hear the murmur of soldiers. The guard gestured away from the door toward the stairs,

and Tobin bumped against my shoulder lightly. I turned and followed the guard.

He led us up six flights, and then into a short curved corridor, opening the first door on the left. “The tower’s small, and this is what’s available.” The room behind the door was very cramped, with one curved wall, a small window, room for the narrow bed and not much more.

Tobin said, “Better than a patch of dirt in a field. Thank you.”

The guard gave him a little salute and went out. As soon as he was gone I rounded on Tobin. “Did you know what they were planning? This transference insanity?”

He raised both hands, “Lyon, come on, how could I have known? What do I know about sorcerers? If anyone could have expected that twist, it would have been you.”

“The king tells you things.”

“His sorcerers don’t. And His Majesty has been far too busy to be giving me updates.”

“It’s madness. Inviting a ghost into your mind!” I whirled away to stare out the window. It was so narrow and deeply recessed that it showed only a tiny slice of the world outside—a patch of grass, half of a grazing horse, a slice of sky. Narrow enough that no one could come in. It didn’t make me feel safe.

“Firstmage seemed pretty confident it would work.” Tobin hesitated, then asked, “Is it something you’ve heard of, this transference?”

“No. Although I was still in the early stages of my education when, when Meldov was lost.” *And also when he died. Six months later.*

“This sounds different from what you, um, described.”

“Yes.”

“More limited”

“Yes.”

“So it could be safe.”

“He’s going to have a thousand year old ghost in his head. In what way does that sound safe?”

“Well, if it’s just for a day. With nothing more than conversation.”

...the dense, smothering feel of the wraith’s thoughts as it spoke to me, eager, wanting, hungry— “Say yes...”

“It was far more than conversation for me.” *My hand rising without my control, against my desperate will, to slip the open cuff off my wrist...* I took a deep breath and reminded myself that the wraith was long destroyed. Well, long gone, definitely... I leaned into the window. There was no glass in it, and the smell of the wind carried heather and grass and woodsmoke to my nose. I took another breath.

Tobin sighed. “I’m a simple man. I don’t understand sorcery. If my king and Firstmage tell me it will work, my place is to stand behind them.”

“I’ve never been one to take orders.” I liked to know the whys and wherefores, to question and doubt and test things out. The mark of a true sorcerer, Meldov had once said. Although he’d added, *“Or a true librarian.”* He’d claimed the difference was the courage and will to make the bold experiments. Something I’d clearly lost along the way. I didn’t want to see this experiment happen, ever, to anyone.

I asked, “Tobin, what is it you see in me? Besides the old friend who kept you from falling through Widow Baker’s roof?”

“I don’t know what you’re asking. You’re my friend.”

I shook my head roughly. “That’s no explanation.” I turned to face him, putting the rough stone of the tower at my back. “Look at you. You’re strong and patient and kind, and brave. I’m such a coward that I can barely get through each day. I’m useless, a sorcerer who won’t do sorcery, a fay man who won’t... I’m a librarian. Not even that, because if a patron came to ask me where to find a book, I’d probably hide behind the desk.”

“There’s nothing wrong with librarians. I like a good book. But there’s more to you than that.” Tobin reached out to lay his hand against my cheek, his rough palm warm and steady. “Sure, you’d been hurt until you hid inside

your stone walls and iron bars. But you were winning your way back, even before I came. You replaced bars with glass, and started going to town.”

“Baby steps that took me fifteen years!”

“And look at you now. I asked you for help, and here you are, speaking with kings and hobnobbing with the most powerful sorcerers in the land, riding badly-named horses, and letting me kiss you.” He did so, a swift peck. “And kissing me back.” He waited, and I wanted to kiss him, more than I wanted to prove him wrong.

But when our mouths separated, after a long satisfying moment, I said, “There has to be something more. You protect me and help me and keep me going.” *And make me feel, make me want, when I thought that was gone forever.* “What do I do for you?”

“You make me see,” Tobin said. “You always have. When we climbed a tree as boys, I’d rejoice at how high up we were, but you were the one who’d look out beyond the branches and see some tower, or a bird soaring in the sky, or a woman burying something in her yard. And you’d show me, and make up a story about it. Or speculate. *What’s she burying? Could it be money? Perhaps her husband drinks, and she has to keep their money hidden. Or her ne’er-do-well son is coming to town, and might steal it.* A hundred explanations you had sometimes, and each more fanciful than the last, and yet with a grain of sense.”

“I talked a lot.”

“Well, yes. But I liked it. You made me look beyond the immediate thing to the larger world, to a realm of possibilities. I liked that.”

“And now?”

“And now? You still do. With your talk of languages and cultures, of books and sorcery. Worlds I know nothing of.”

“You’ve traveled far more.”

“If you’d been with me, I’d have seen all those places better. I thought of you sometimes, when I was far afield, and tried to imagine what you’d have noticed.”

“I’ve done almost nothing in my life.”

“You survived. You overcame darkness. You sacrificed and won your freedom. And then you recovered enough to find your way back.” He kissed me and said, “Also in the meantime you got damned pretty.”

“I’ll show you pretty.” I bit his lip, and then his neck, hard enough to leave a mark.

He laughed. “Desirable. Fine. Strong.” He fended me off and kissed my throat, and then my chest. “Edible.” He slid down my front to his knees. The friction of his body down mine was sweet pain.

He rubbed his cheek against my belly. The rasp of his stubble on my shirt was flame across my skin. He slid his hands inside the front of my shirt, and stayed there.

I put my hand on his head, feeling the texture of his hair between my fingers. His breath warmed me through the fabric. He made a small sound that might have been a laugh. “I’m pushing again, aren’t I? Gods, Lyon, you have no idea what you do to me. I’m just going to stay here for a minute. Don’t mind me.”

I stroked his head, then laid the fingers of my dead clawed hand against his cheek. I wanted to pretend it wasn’t a test, but knew it was. He just leaned into my touch though, and then, turned and pressed a kiss to my thumb. It warmed me. That hand might be useless, but I could feel the heat of his mouth.

He murmured, “This is good. Just to know it’s you touching me. I used to make up stories in my mind sometimes, where you’d lived through the fire. I never dreamed they could be true.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No!” He tipped his head back to look up at me. “I regret none of it, except that I wasn’t there when you needed me. But I’m here now. And so are you. That was how the best dreams started.”

He freed a hand from my shirt, reached up slowly and cupped my bad hand in his. I said, “That’s so ugly.”

He kissed it again, slowly, drawing lips and tongue over those frozen joints. My fingers twitched at his touch. He asked, "I know you can't use it, but does it still feel?"

"Yes."

"Good." He returned to his exploration, his mouth becoming frankly lewd on the end of my bent thumb. I watched as he sucked me into his mouth past the knuckle, then slid off with a wet pop. My whole body yearned toward that touch. I felt the heat in my groin rising to match the heat of his busy, licking tongue. The way he curled his tongue-tip round my thumb and over... I groaned softly, and tightened my other hand in his hair.

"You like that."

"Mm."

"So do I." He took my other hand, pulling it away from his hair to suck my forefinger in deep. His eyes drooped half-closed as he made slow, lascivious love to every finger on that hand. By the time he was done, my hips were jerking toward him without conscious intent. I was hard and aching, and when he let my hand go, I was glad of the wall behind me for support, not protection.

Tobin's voice had that rough quality when he said, "Now what? Shall I pleasure myself again for you? Because it will be a very short but enthusiastic show."

I couldn't say what I wanted, but I took his hand in my turn, raised it to my mouth for a kiss, and then moved it to the waistband of my treads.

His eyes were honey in the late sunlight. "You're sure? Yes?"

I wanted this more than I feared it. "Yes."

He opened my buttons and slid the fabric down off my hips. Then my smalls, pushing them to my thighs. I leaned hard on the stone wall at my back and watched him. He locked his hands behind himself again and leaned forward, to place a soft kiss on my belly.

I said, “I don’t mind your hands if they’re not behind me, pinning me. I mean, I want them.” Somehow it had become true.

The smile he gave me was soft with affection. He reached out slowly, so slowly, and ran his fingers from my hips down to where the scant blond curls started at my groin. There he flattened his palms against me. My cock rose a little at his touch, but I was still far from hard. He kissed the swelling tip, plucking at my foreskin with his lips, and I whimpered. That touch was like nothing I’d ever felt. My cock hardened further, begging for more. Gods above, his mouth was soft and wet and gentle, sliding over me in a way a boy’s hand never could. And his face!

I looked down at him, and for all my vaunted breadth of vision, I could see nothing except Tobin. His eyes were half-closed with pleasure, his cheeks rough with a day’s worth of beard, his mouth touching me. His lips were parted to pluck at the rim of my cockhead, slowly rising from the foreskin. His tongue emerged to swipe across me, smearing a silver trail of my preslick that caught the light. Then his jaw opened as he enveloped the whole head and shaft in his mouth.

I gasped with pleasure, and he pulled off me with a slurp, looked up, and grinned. “More?”

“Please.”

“Thank the gods.” He bent back to his task. I had no idea those sensations were possible. The feel of his tongue in the sensitive places under my foreskin, the suction of his mouth drawing me in, the pressure of his throat around me. I put my palms against the rough stone, and watched Tobin pleasure me until I had neither voice nor breath nor sense left in my head.

As my wordless cries got louder, he sped up. He pressed his palms on my hips, without taking hold, and bobbed his head, working my hard shaft deep in his mouth. I felt my release rushing toward me, the heat boiling up from my balls and spilling outward. I tried to tell him, but managed only a deeper groan. And then I came. He swallowed it down, eyes closed and throat working as he milked me dry. When he finally let me go I just slid down the

wall on wobbly knees, sat hard on the floor, and kissed him. His mouth tasted of my spend, and he smiled against my lips.

It was a long time before I found words. Wonder filled me, at the sensations, at the fact that I'd been able to permit that, at the most wondrous thing of all—that he'd enjoyed doing it. With me. "That was... astounding."

"First time, right?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Very much my pleasure. You make wonderful sounds." When I would have turned away, embarrassed, he caught my head between his hands and kissed me again. "That was praise, lion-boy. I liked it, a lot."

He hugged me, moving carefully as always, and I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close. I wanted to be part of him, and have him part of me. I was dizzy and content and too satisfied to be afraid. I nuzzled into his hair behind his ear and he laughed. "That tickles." But he pulled me in tighter instead of pushing me away.

After a while, my ass started to get cold on the stone. I said, "How long, do you think, till sunset?"

He glanced at our window. "An hour perhaps, not more."

"And an hour after that until we're needed. There's a bed."

"So there is."

"We could be more comfortable."

"I'm liking this."

"Come to bed and I'll make you like that more."

He pulled back to look at me. "Is that an offer?"

"Maybe." I had to admit, "I'm not sure of what."

"I'll take whatever you've got." He stood and reached a hand down for me.

I was half undressed, shirt pushed up and treads at my knees. It was easiest just to strip and get into bed, scooting over close to the wall. Tobin stripped fast, got in beside me, and then lay on his back, arms folded behind his head.

“I like this,” I said, rolling up on one elbow to look at him. I had my bad arm supporting me, so my good hand was free to reach out and touch him. I explored his textures. His stubble was rough under my fingers, his throat smooth. His lips were dry, but as I ran a finger over them he sucked it into his mouth, and I felt again that wet clinging softness. Even though I’d just come, the touch and sight of his working mouth made me breathe harder.

I pulled my hand free, and stroked over his chest, letting his soft hairs brush my palm as I made ever wider circles on those fine planes of muscle. When I came to a nipple, I explored its texture, plucking and wiggling it as it crinkled tighter between my fingers. His nipple was pliable but his chest was so hard. I tried to dig my fingers into his pecs, and he tightened them until it was like pressing into sculpted stone. I slid my palm lower, over the washboard of his stomach. And lower yet.

The wet tip of his cock slid across my wrist. “Touch me there,” Tobin whispered. “Put your hand on me.”

I met his eyes. He said, “I’ll keep my hands locked behind my head. I’m all yours.”

How could anyone say no to that? I slid my hand lower, to where his curls became coarser and thicker. The shaft of his cock stroked over the back of my hand. I bumped it slightly, on purpose, and Tobin hissed. *What was I waiting for?* I’d done this a dozen times when I was fifteen and sixteen, meeting Jol or Dallan in some dark corner, both of us eager and ready to explode. We’d gotten each other off with more speed than skill, panting in the darkness. This was far better.

I turned my hand over and cupped his cock in my palm. Slowly I closed my fingers around him. He made no sound as I stroked him upward, inch by inch, but I felt his whole body arch toward my touch. I changed positions, bracing over him to kiss him. Tobin’s mouth still tasted salty, and for a moment it seemed unpleasantly strange. But under my flavor was his familiar presence, and the strangeness faded. I gave him one more kiss, and then positioned myself above his groin, where I could look, and touch.

All those years of solitude might not have made me an expert, and I had only one hand to use, but my fingers were bigger and stronger than when I was a boy, and with Tobin I was unhurried. I let my mind go back, back *before*, to the time when I'd dreamed of this at night, and put the thought out of my mind by day. This was Tobin here under my hand, asking for something I *did* know how to give him. I was damned well going to do this right.

I began slowly, feeling his size and textures against my fingers. His shaft was veiny and hard, the head pliable, the foreskin slippery satin. I changed to a faster firm grip that soon had him writhing and breathing open-mouthed. His gaze dropped to where I'd pushed back the sheets, and he watched my hand avidly. My fingers circled him, pleasuring him, and the head of his cock rose red and damp from my fist.

"That's so good," he muttered. "More. Gods and goddess, Lyon, that's good."

He was at my mercy, under my control. I felt powerful and tender at the same time. I wished I had my other hand to add. But one would have to be enough. I watched intently as he bucked his hips off the bed, pushing into my touch. He was panting now, each fast breath ending in a whimper. Every stroke made him shake and jerk, and my hand was eased by his preslick.

I paused, my fingers wrapped tight around him. He shivered, and muttered, "Don't stop. Oh, please." I looked down at him, as another drop welled free. I wanted to lick him. I wanted to take him in my mouth and do for him what he'd done for me. But the thought of it made my heart speed up, and not in a good way. I wasn't ready to be that vulnerable, to give over my mouth and breath to this. It was all I could do to lean over him and place a tiny kiss on the wet, shiny tip. He groaned, deep in his throat, and came in spurts that hit my face and neck, and barely missed my eye.

"Oh, gods." His voice shook with passion and laughter. "Oh, yes. Sorry, lion-boy. I didn't plan to drown you in it. Your own fault. So good."

I'd felt inadequate, with that one silly kiss. But there was no doubt it had done the job. I grabbed the corner of the sheet and wiped myself off. "I'll do better next time."

“The heavens help me. I may not live through it.” He pulled me back down beside him, grabbed the sheet and took over the job of cleaning my neck and cheek. He was still laughing softly, but it felt like a good kind of laugh. I didn’t think he was mocking me. It sounded like joy.

I shifted, brushing against him, and he shook with echoes of pleasure. I’d done that for Tobin. Until now I’d mostly been a burden. This time I’d set my fears aside and I’d made him feel this good.

He quit rubbing at my face, tucked the sheet around us, and snugged me in close against his side. “We should rest,” he murmured drowsily. “You especially. It’s likely to be a long night.”

That sparked the anxiety that lingered like smoke in the back of my mind. “Do you really think they’ll try that transference? Secondmage can’t even speak effectively with the ghost. It makes no sense.”

His voice became clearer. “I don’t know. But I’m here to stand at your elbow if they do.”

“So I can help your king,” I said bitterly.

“Well, yes.” He paused and then said more coolly, “If you’re suggesting something different that I should understand, please just say it.”

I missed the drowsy warmth from him. I wasn’t even sure why I was irritated. He wasn’t trying to convince me it was my logical job to take Secondmage’s place. If it hadn’t occurred to him, I didn’t want to bring it up. Or perhaps he’d thought of it, and realized I could never stand to do it. I didn’t want to know I’d already failed in his eyes. I wished I’d never heard of transference.

I would pretend that was true, and grab for one more hour of safety and comfort with Tobin. “It’s nothing. I’m just worried about how tonight will go.”

“I can imagine. But you can only do the best translations you’re able, and hope it works. We’re here in the foothills now, anyway, and thanks to you we’re probably near the right place for the tunnel. If they are coming, then being even this prepared is already more than the R’gin bastards are expecting.

We'll be waiting for them. That's huge and it's due to you. Anything more is a bonus."

I closed my eyes and pressed closer to him again, until we were settled back together. He was so solid. Did he not feel the same fear, of letting a ghost move into the body of a man of power? Or had he learned through years as a soldier to let go of what he couldn't control? I was so grateful to share this space and time with him. Which brought another question to mind. I said, "Does the king know about you being fay? Does he think we, you and I..."

"Are lovers? Possibly. Even probably. He certainly knows about me. I told you I haven't hidden it. There are plenty of us in the forces who are fay, and not a few who favor women in town, but are more than willing to roll with a man when in the field. King Faro does know we're old and close friends. I wasn't sure if you wanted to have it known you're also fay, but he may have guessed. The king's a very good judge of men." Tobin glanced across the room and back. "The size of this room suggests he does think we're together."

It didn't really matter, and if it gave me the right to have Tobin in my bed in the dark nights, I was more than willing to have it known. "What else does he know about me, about my background?"

"He's aware you were apprenticed to Meldov. He knows I thought you were dead, and just found out you survived the fire. I told him you were burned and retired to a quiet life. No more."

I was grateful to have my confidences kept. I trusted Tobin with my weakness, but no one else. But if that was all the king knew, with not a hint of my fears or their source, he must be wondering even more why I'd failed to volunteer for Firstmage's mad scheme. Although... he called me "Translator". "Does he know I was a qualified sorcerer myself, before the end?"

"I didn't tell him." Tobin's voice was dragging, slow and thick. "He might know."

Too many possibilities, so much potential for disaster, and my panic lying in wait—I took slow calming breaths and tried to let it go. Tonight would come, no matter what I did now, and perhaps Xan would simply tell us what we needed to know. If not, then we'd see if the old sorcerer truly had the skill

he claimed or was deluded. And if he managed a transference, and didn't have the vaunted control... I trembled, and even though he was dropping off into post-climax stupor, Tobin felt it, and murmured something. I took more slow breaths. At least if Firstmage failed to restrain the ghost, it wouldn't be my knife slitting Secondmage's throat. I burrowed in harder against Tobin and tried to sleep.

We rested fitfully. Once, a boy woke us with a knock, bringing food and drink, and later we dressed in preparation, and went back to bed fully clothed to wait for the summons. We spoke very little, but touched often. Tobin made an effort to seem calm, but I felt a tight-strung tension slowly building in him as well.

As the sky outside our small window darkened, we reluctantly got off the bed. Tobin stretched, which was worth my pausing to watch. He limbered up deliberately, like a fighter preparing for battle, spending extra time stretching and working his bad leg. He saw me standing staring, and gave me a thin smile. "I stiffen up so much faster in my dotage here."

"Hah." For that foolishness he had to be kissed, until he sighed under my mouth. I said, "You're such an old man."

"Less so with you pressed up against me." He held me still, and returned my kiss with interest. But neither of us could keep our attention on the pleasures of touch, and we drew apart again. Tobin slipped on his boots, then lent a hand under my elbow as I forced my feet into the sweat-damp confines of my own. He hooked his knife on his belt and checked that it moved easily in its sheath.

"That's not making me feel better," I muttered.

"How about the thought that it will only be drawn on your behalf or the king's?"

"I guess. High company I'm keeping these days." I felt queasy, and was regretting eating.

There was a loud tap on the door, and one of the King's Own Guard glanced in to tell us, "Time, sirs. I'll follow you down."

The cellar had been cleared and lined with extra torches, but it somehow felt smaller and stuffier. The King's Mages had already laid out their square and circle, with all the right runes, but there was no power of sorcery raised in them yet. The king and his officers stood to one side, talking quietly. When we came in, they all looked up. I tried not to react to that scrutiny.

A final soldier came in close on our heels and closed the cellar door, setting his back to it. The flicker of the torches sent shadows dancing across the wall. Tobin was steady at my side. The king said, "We're ready then."

And I said, "Wait."

If I'd thought they were looking at me before, it was nothing to the glares I got now. But I'd been thinking this over and over and *over*, and if we could avoid mistakes before it got complicated, so much the better. Before someone rented out space in their mind to a dead man. The thought of that sent cold fingers down my spine. Not something I'd *ever* be able to do, and not something I wanted to even witness, unless the chance of success was really high. I said, "I want to say something in ancient *tridescant* and have Secondmage repeat it back. See how close he can get."

The king nodded. "Good idea."

Secondmage turned to me and raised an elegant eyebrow, waiting. His superior attitude washed away my hesitation and I said, "Repeat after me, '*I see only five men*'."

He tried. He said something that sounded like uninflected word-salad, with the terms for "see" and "men" understandable. Maybe. If I tried hard. I shook my head. "That would be worthless. Try again. Listen to the way my tone rises and falls, as well as the sounds." I went for short and simple. "*I saw a horse.*"

His repeat said, *Mumble-sounds* "*a feather.*"

I laughed shortly. The king stared at me. "What?"

"If you want to go finding men mounted on giant birds, just say the word. This isn't going to work."

Secondmage said, “You’ll have to show me how to get it right. Give me some guidance to the language.”

I shook my head. “If we had a month, or even a week, I might try to teach you. But in an hour, all you could learn would be enough to confuse your words more effectively. The transference won’t gain us anything this way. We should stick to regular questioning.”

One of the King’s Voices, a short, middle-aged man with a weathered face that I remembered vaguely from recent days, said diffidently, “You know I speak modern *tridescant* fluently. I agree with Translator Lyon—Secondmage is clearly not hearing the inflection and pitch components of the language. But perhaps I could do this. I could render the sounds more clearly.”

“The transference host must be a sorcerer,” Secondmage snapped. “Unless you’ve developed new skills in the last month, Doyd, I doubt you qualify.”

The king slammed his hand down on the table in frustration, and I felt Tobin move restlessly behind me. “There must be a way,” the king said. He turned to Secondmage. “Could you perhaps ride out with the transferred ghost in your head, and have him just point out the right direction without speaking?”

Firstmage said, “The ghost won’t have that kind of ability, to do anything physical. It can only speak as a disembodied voice to its host. Anything beyond mere speech is possible only if a revenant has an unhealthy grip on the host’s mind and the strength to go with it, to break through that barrier. That’s possible only for undead, wraiths and such. Which this ghost is clearly not.”

All praise to the gods and the goddess for that. I gritted my teeth, and heard Tobin clear his throat at my shoulder.

“Damnation. Then we must do our best with just the questioning, I guess,” the king said. “Unless Firstmage or Third have more skill with *tridescant*?”

Both men shook their heads with reluctance, and Thirdmage said, “I could try, I suppose. Translator Lyon?”

I opened my mouth to give him a test phrase, when Tobin grabbed my arm and squeezed hard enough to silence me to a squeak. He said, “Your Majesty, by your leave, I’d like to speak to Translator Lyon alone for a minute.”

Before King Faro even nodded, he was propelling me toward the door. The guard stepped aside, staring at us, and Tobin pushed me through and up the first flight of stairs. I recovered enough to pull my arm free. “What in the hells, Tobin!”

“Not here,” he muttered. He looked around, spotted a door and dragged me through it. The small room was some kind of root storage, dank with the earth-musty smell of potatoes and turnips. He pushed the door half-shut, letting just a sliver of light come in the crack.

“Okay,” I said with what felt like miraculous patience, in the sense that I hadn’t hit him yet. “What are you thinking of, you maniac, dragging me out of the room in front of King and company?”

“Don’t do it.” His tone was low and urgent.

“Do what?”

“Volunteer for that transference thing. I could see you were about to say something about being a sorcerer yourself. Just don’t, all right? They don’t need it that badly. Not badly enough for you to let another dead man into your head.”

I was silent, stunned. Stunned by Tobin telling me not to do something that would help his king, and even more by his casual assumption that I’d been about to offer. I wasn’t sure if it bothered me more to see his faith in my courage, or his lack of faith in my strength. Or maybe it was my stability he doubted. “It can’t be that dangerous, if Secondmage was willing to do it. He seems like a man with a healthy regard for his own skin.”

“You don’t know that. He’s bound to serve the king to the best of his skill. Maybe he thought he had to volunteer. Anyway, it could be more dangerous to you than to him.”

“I know I don’t have his skills.”

“And he doesn’t have your past.”

“Is that what worries you?”

Tobin sighed, and held my head as he pressed his forehead to mine. “I just got you back. That wraith took you, and you needed fifteen years to recover from it.”

“And that means I’m too weak to do this for our country?” I pushed him away.

“Not weak. Gods, Lyon, anyone would have been damaged by what happened to you. But maybe you *are* more vulnerable. Maybe having had the wraith changed something. The point is, we can’t know that. I don’t want to take a chance.”

“So you get to put your life on the line in battle, but I should avoid taking any risks?”

“You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“Then tell me what you really are saying.”

“I...” He paused. “All right, sort of. But when I fight, which I don’t really do any more, all I’m risking is death. Not losing my mind.”

“You could lose a leg, or your eyes, or anything, really. And Firstmage will be protecting me, not trying to put a sword through me.”

“It’s not necessary, though! We’re here in the right part of the hills, waiting for them. And that’s thanks to you. If there’s an invasion, we won’t be distracted and off at the coast. We’ll stop it. We don’t need the last location details, really. Or you might succeed with just questions. You don’t need to offer this.”

“But it would save lives, wouldn’t it? To be waiting at the exit of the tunnel, rather than finding them already emerged and an army strong, two days too late?”

He was silent for a moment. “Yes. It might.”

“And one of the lives I save could be yours.”

“I don’t want you to risk it.”

“You don’t get to make that choice for me.” I stopped, suddenly dizzy. How was it that three minutes ago I’d been absolutely determined to remain silent and a coward forever, and now suddenly I was committed to offering this? It was all Tobin’s fault, for his unquestioning belief that I’d been about to volunteer. I’d rather be eaten by the ghost than let him see I wasn’t the man he’d thought I was.

“Lyon... lion-boy, I hear you still scream at night. I know how often you wake up shaking. You haven’t put the wraith behind you yet. What if this brings it all back?”

“Then I deal with it. Again.” Because the truest thing I’d said was that the life I saved might be his. I *did* have to offer. If I didn’t, and Tobin was killed, it would damage me far more than the wraith ever had. “With your help?” I made that a question.

For just an instant he shook his head, but then he pulled me into a hug. “If you have to... Damnation. Hells, yes, any help I can give.”

I clung to him, cursing even more violently, if silently, in my head. How had I come to this? He always made me want to be more than I was for him. But my blood ran like ice water in my veins.

“You’ll keep watch on me, right? No one knows me better than you. If I act... not like myself, you’ll stop me somehow. Tie me up. Kill me if you have to. I won’t be a tool for a ghost again.” I felt it, horribly, vividly, that unstoppable puppeting as my hand moved at the wraith’s command and I could only watch. One inch more of control and it would have had me, body and soul. It could have made me cut Meldov’s throat on command. Although, in the end it hadn’t needed to...

Without easing his grip, Tobin said in my ear, “Are you truly set on doing this?”

“Yes.” My mouth was bone-dry.

“Well, no matter what comes, I won’t kill you. Not ever. You can’t ask me that!”

“I’d rather be dead than... taken.”

“Then, by all that’s holy, don’t volunteer!” His arms tightened until I could hardly breathe.

“I have to. You know I do. You would, if you were able.”

“That’s different.” He sighed and rubbed his cheek on my hair. “Gods, Lyon, *I don’t want to lose you.*”

I tried to joke, my voice coming out hoarse. “Oh, nice. That’s showing a lot of faith.”

“It’s not a matter of not having faith. Or maybe yes, but not in you. In those old, grey sorcerers.”

I swallowed hard. I was placing my fate in their unknown hands. “They’re the best in the land, right?”

“Right.” I felt his heart beating fast against my chest. “Damn. All right. I can promise to restrain you, if need be, and find a way to free you. That I do promise.”

“The King’s Sorcerers act like it’s pretty routine.”

“Yes.”

“I can do this. Chat with an old ghost for a day, get the information, then have him banished. I can.” I was trying to convince myself more than him, but Tobin didn’t hear that.

“I don’t doubt you. I’m just scared. There’s always something that can’t be anticipated.”

“I do doubt me,” I admitted. “But I hid behind my walls and iron bars for so long. I’m tired of hiding.”

For another moment we stood there, pressed together in the musty, cool, little room. Then I set Tobin away from me and pulled open the door. We went down the stairs calmly, with Tobin at my shoulder. In the work-room, the king had been in conversation with one of his colonels over the maps, but everyone looked at us as we entered.

I said thinly, “Your Majesty, I’m also a sorcerer.”

Secondmage said, “An apprentice is not...”

“A full sorcerer,” I cut in over him. “Apprentice for two years with Meldov of Riverrun, and then his qualified trainee for two more. I’ve done summonings before.”

I waited for the king to ask why I’d taken so long to mention it, but instead his expression simply lightened. “Well, that’s a bit of good luck. Thank you! Firstmage, what’s needed to include Translator... Sorcerer Lyon in the working?”

Firstmage stared at me for a long minute, then said, “I suppose we could redraw the summons with the five-point star, rebalance the equations. About fifteen minutes work, Sire.”

“Do it.”

“If I may, Sire, I’d like to examine, um, Sorcerer Lyon’s knowledge first. To be sure he’s really capable of carrying out his part.”

“Swiftly, then. Let me know when you’re ready.” He bent over the map again, and resumed a discussion of where to post scouts for the best view of the terrain in question.

Firstmage beckoned me with an imperious finger. I went to him, with Tobin trailing me. The sorcerer shook his head at Tobin. “Not you.” I gave Tobin a reassuring glance and then followed the old man into a corner. There he quizzed me up, down, and sideways, about basic theory. I think I did well, although the answers came less quickly than they had during my apprenticeship. When he reached the theory of transference, I said, “We never touched on that aspect. I have no experience with that. But...” I didn’t want to discuss the wraith with this man, but I knew that balance was all, in writing the summoning equations. And my past might have to be factored in. I added, “Meldov did summon a wraith once, and that’s what killed him.”

“He’s fortunate to have just died,” Firstmage muttered. “Criminal carelessness. No amount of information is worth that risk. Were you in that working?”

“No. But I, um, encountered it before he, they, died.”

His eyes seemed to pierce me. “Encountered. How closely?”

My courage failed. “It spoke to me. Through him.”

“Ah. Well, that’s not too bad then.” He nodded. “You’ll do. Nothing that a few weeks retraining wouldn’t improve, but at least for this, you need only lend your voice and strength to the summons, and then stand ready to receive the transfer. Nothing difficult.”

Nothing difficult. I tasted acid in the back of my throat, but stood tall and tried to look unconcerned as he ran through all the technical details.

The three King’s Mages and I... lords above, I can’t believe I said that sentence. But it’s the truth. The four of us, working together, erased their circle in a square, and created a new working, consisting of circle in a five-pointed star. We placed Xan’s necklace in the focus point and took our places on the other four. The men around the room turned from their own discussions to look at us, and quieted.

Firstmage said, “We’ll summon Xan again first and simply try more questions, but if he cannot give us the information we seek then we’ll proceed to transference. Sorcerer Lyon will be the ghost’s host, and I will anchor the sorcery.”

I deliberately didn’t look at Tobin at all. If I saw any doubt in his eyes, I thought it might undo me. Here I stood, where I’d sworn I never would again, on the edge of a summoning circle with the power of sorcery humming in my veins. In the past, it had made me feel strong and in command, to hold the reins of a working. Now it just made me feel ill. But I was committed.

Firstmage said, “We’re ready, Sire.”

“Begin.”

Thirdmage lit the candles, one at each intersection point. They were fine beeswax, burning smoothly with almost no smoke. We raised the star first, containing the working, and then the circle, to contain the ghost. Working with these three men was an order of magnitude different from working with Meldov, less familiar, but filled with power. As we chanted the invocation, linking the necklace on the ghost-point as the focus for our summons, I could

almost feel the pull in my own chest. No surprise that even a thousand-year-old ghost would heed it. The only surprise was that it took several minutes for him to appear.

When Xan did materialize in our circle, he looked less solid than the last time. Firstmage frowned but didn't comment. The sorcerer nodded to the king, who approached the edge of the circle. Beside him, several men brought papers and canvases.

The king said, "Chief Xan, our need is serious and immediate. We must find the end of that tunnel before the invasion from the east begins."

I translated, and Xan turned to look at me. He said, "*Why should I care?*"

We were back to this. How could I get this man long dead to care about the fate of living people he didn't know? "*Is there anything you want?*"

He ran a hand down his side, and then held it in front of his eyes. It was transparent enough we could see each other through it. "*What could I want now?*"

"*For your people then?*"

"*I have no more people. They died, long ago.*"

"*There are still tribes in the hills.*"

"*No more of mine.*"

"*If you answer my king's questions, we will trouble you no more.*"

Xan smiled and it was feral. "*Oh, it's no trouble at all to watch you desire something I will not give you.*"

The king held up a painting of the Rockcomb range, clearly done from the vantage of the top of this very tower. "Chief Xan, tell me what boon I might offer to have you direct Sorcerer Lyon to a location on this picture." He nodded to me to translate.

"*Bring back my wife and my sons. For that, I'll walk you to the very mouth of the cave from which the invading army issued into the daylight.*"

The king said to Firstmage, “Can we offer to raise them as ghosts for him to speak to?”

“No, Sire. We have no focus for any of them. Moreover, it’s very unlikely that any of them died with enough will and emotion to hold them on this side of the veil for a millennium. You recall how hard it was to find *anyone* from that era, even among heroes and rulers.”

I told Xan, “*We don’t have that power.*”

“*Of course not. You would have to be gods, and not small, impotent men.*”

Firstmage said, “Sire, he’s growing fainter. If we want the transference to work, we must begin soon.”

“You believe Sorcerer Lyon will be able to get more from Chief Xan that way?”

“I don’t know. But it will preserve the ghost longer, using Lyon’s body to shield and protect it. It’ll give us time, and the chance to question him outside and in daylight. Even that may still fail, but I see no other better choice.”

I felt my fingernails cutting into my palm. *Using Lyon’s body.* He hadn’t meant that in the way I heard it, like a knife sliding through my skin. I’d agreed to this. I could do this. It occurred to me that it wouldn’t take much now for me to let Xan’s ghost escape the working and fade away. I could sabotage this and perhaps not be seen as anything but clumsy. But I forced my feet to stay fixed to the floor at my correct station. I didn’t scuff the smooth elaborate lines drawn just inches from my toes.

King Faro turned to me. “I’m reluctant to ask you to do this. I wouldn’t want to have another person inside my mind. And yet, the gain seems worth the risk, if you’re willing. Sorcerer Lyon, do you consent to this?”

I hated that he was giving me another choice, that he was making me fight my fears and say yes yet again. But I also would have hated to be forced to do it without that chance. I managed to get my thick, spitless mouth to shape the word, “Yes.”

The king nodded to Firstmage. “Proceed.”

I caught one glance of Tobin's worried face, and then made myself look away. I fixed my gaze on the center of our working and the ghost prisoned there. If I was going to do this, I was damned well doing it right. I wasn't risking my sanity, only to mess things up by not paying attention.

The process was basically simple, although the spell-working that had been set up to permit it was not. I took a deep breath, and then another. In front of me, the curved wall of our containment circle was visible to me, although I knew it was invisible to those outside the spell. At most, they would see an unnatural curling of the faint candle-haze, marking its place. That translucent barrier, humming with energy, stood between me and Xan, between present and past, living and dead. And I would have to cross it.

Quickly, before I could change my mind, I said the triggering words that opened my way and stepped into the circle.

Xan reared back as I crossed, his expression shocked. For a moment I stood and looked at him. Through his thinning chest I could see Secondmage, reciting the words that kept the rest of the barrier intact. Xan said, *"No one has ever come into the circle with me, and I've been brought here to the living world a hand of hands times. What are you doing?"*

"What I must." I stepped closer to him, and reached out to touch him, my hand just brushing his bare arm, feeling an odd, crawling, stickiness of not-flesh. Then I pushed against the other side of the circle, moving into the focus point, and bent, and picked up his necklace. Around me the circle bowed and stretched. I could feel it deform, trying to contain me. Then it snapped, the two candle-flames at my feet went out, and with the suddenness of a slap to the face, I *felt* Xan arrow home to my mind.

-By the Skygod! What have you done, witchman?

I was too busy dropping to my knees to answer, teeth clenched, trying not to throw up all over our elegant working before it had done its duty. I heard Firstmage's rapid chanting, designed to stabilize the new arrangement, to hold the ghost inside me, outside the circle's confines.

Standing a bare foot from the limits of the spell, Tobin demanded, "Can I touch him?"

The mages' voices rose together, blended, echoed in completion of the spell, and cut off. I heard the sizzle as Thirdmage snuffed the remaining candles hurriedly with dampened fingertips. Then Firstmage said, "Now, yes." Tobin's arm around me was sudden support and anchor. I retched again, then vomited bile, the dizziness almost overwhelming me. Through the buzzing of my ears I heard the king demand, "What's wrong? Didn't it work?"

"I don't know, Sire." Firstmage bent over me. "Sorcerer Lyon, look up and answer me. Are you all right?"

I managed to raise my eyes to his, leaning against Tobin. "I'm... not sure." I could feel Xan, in my head—his panic and wonder and grief and an ill-defined bottomless hunger.

Tobin said urgently, "Lyon. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes. Tobin. But... But my head hurts and it's not just me. His head hurts too. I can feel it! He's angry and afraid, and yet so curious." I glared at Firstmage. "You swore to me! You swore that he could do nothing but speak to me. Oh, gods."

"I told the truth!"

"Then why do I *feel* him? Why can I tell that he's both terrified and thrilled at this event? How do I know that he has the most hatred for you because you're the image of someone he loathed?"

"Perhaps it's your imagination," Firstmage said calmly. "It takes a prepared mind to not be overset by hearing another's voice inside."

-He's a fool, Xan's voice told me. He looks like the one who threw the stone. You felt the truth of my hate. This is strange.

I gripped my head with both hands, pulling on my hair. "This is more than just words. I *feel* him."

The king said, "Can you bear it? Must we get him out of you?"

Firstmage said, "If we do that, we'll lose Xan completely. That ghost won't stand up to any more manipulations."

“Does that matter?” Tobin’s growl was fierce. “If he’s harming Lyon, we won’t learn anything anyway. Get him out!”

“Wait.” I unclenched my hands from my hair. “Just wait. Let me see what’s what.”

They all froze, looking at me as I blinked hard. I moved one hand and then the other, touched my face. Everything worked. I didn’t feel as if this invader controlled me. But he might just be biding his time. The thought nearly sent me into a panic again.

-Calm down, young witchman. You’ll have us both overset. Be calm, so we can figure this out.

I said aloud in the modern vernacular, “Can you understand me?” How deep in my brain was he? I felt only puzzlement mixed with the roil of his other emotions. I said, “Your wife was a money-grubbing whore.” His emotions didn’t shift. Could I trust that? Could I believe that he knew only what I spoke in his own language? I said, “I’m going to slit our wrists.”

It was Tobin who grabbed me fiercely in his arms. The ghost didn’t react to my words, although he did send waves of surprise as Tobin’s arms went around me.

-Are you mare to this stallion then?

I gritted my teeth against the double emotions in me. To Tobin I said, “Stand down. I’m testing.” And to Xan, aloud to the room, but in his own tongue that only he would understand, “*Don’t call me a mare!*”

-I meant no insult; it’s a common phrase for the half-souled man who receives.

His mind-voice was in fact dispassionate. Inside my head, I formed the words, *-Half-souled?* Despite all of Tobin’s assurances, this I didn’t want to discuss aloud in front of these men, even in a tongue none of them knew.

-Yes. Don’t you say it that way? The single-souled folk look for their match, man to woman, woman to man, to join and have children. But the half-souled yearn for the one of their own kind who completes them. Sometimes,

once they find their other half, the two will then seek a third, and also have children. But some do not.

-We say fay. Or synfay, for two women.

-Do the words matter? The old man already felt calmer, more curious and less panicked.

-I guess not. But I don't like "mare." In my youth, the term bandied about had been "bitch" and I hadn't liked that one either.

-He is yours, though?

-Yes. I suppose he is. Tobin supported me still, his arms pinning me as if afraid to let go. He said nothing, but his eyes asked a thousand questions. Talking about him had taken the edge off my panic, anyway.

I turned to Tobin. "He's in here. In my head. Chief Xan. More than just words, but I don't feel... possessed. I feel like my body's still my own. Mostly." I tried a smile.

Tobin didn't look enormously reassured, but he did relax his death-grip on my arms. The king came and knelt in front of me to meet my eyes levelly. "Sorcerer Lyon, Chief Xan, I greet you."

I said, "Sire."

"Can you bear to continue, Lyon?"

"Yes." I couldn't say differently with his hopeful gaze on me.

He waved behind him, and the painting was hurriedly thrust into his hands. He held it up in front of me. "This is still the answer I need."

-Does he think you command me now? I'll still not help him. But I could feel a different emotion from Xan, a kind of wistfulness.

The king held the painting closer, and Tobin let go of my left wrist. I reached out and touched the painted mountains. The king drew a sharp breath. "There?"

"No," I told him. "Wait." I ran my finger across the scene, over the glacier-white slopes of The Twins, past the rounded crown of Sugarloaf, and then to

the sharp spike of The Fang. I felt Xan surprised, puzzled, and yet comforted. A mash of emotions came and went too fast to catalog. He was clearly seeing what I saw, interested in the painting and something more than just interested. But there was no jolt of “there, that spot.” After a couple of minutes I pulled back my hand. “Sorry, Sire. He’s not going to tell me.”

“There must be something we can offer him.”

I could feel that Xan’s attention was still on that painting. As a test, I moved my gaze away, staring at a boring bit of floor. I felt his irritation, but he either couldn’t or didn’t force my eyes back.

After a minute, he said, *-Child’s games*

-We’re neither of us children

The king waved and had the map of the frontier brought and laid out in front of me. Even to my unaccustomed eyes, the shapes of the mountains were unclear, and Xan’s reaction was puzzled scorn. I said, “I don’t think a map will be helpful. The picture was better. Or the real thing.”

-What now, witchman? You can’t hold my feet to the fire, since they’re also your feet. I felt grim amusement from him.

-Now I bother and badger you for hours, and when dawn comes we climb the tower or perhaps ride out and look at the mountains.

-Ride out? In the daylight?

-So Firstmage claims.

-He’s a man of power, all right, if not of wisdom. Why does he not craft a spell to find what you seek?

-A spell?

-Yes. A strong mage should have far more tools than just one lone ghost at his fingertips. Why not use his magic to help your king directly.

There were plenty of stories about all the things mages could do, back when we had mages. Now we were not only more limited, but had no doubt forgotten half of the tales. The librarian in me longed to pursue the topic with

this living relic, but that wasn't why we were here. *-Magic has changed*, I hedged.

The king said, "Lyon? Are you still all right?"

"Hm? Yes, Sire. I'm just... talking with the ghost."

"What does he say? Anything useful?"

"Not so far. He's noting that the world has changed."

"In what way?"

-What are you saying to him?

Having to translate doubly would drive me crazy. I said, "Sire, I need to talk to him without stopping every sentence, but I will let you know if he says anything to the point." I didn't bother to tell the ghost the same. If he was frustrated, so much the better.

"I understand." The king sat back on his heels, trying to look patient. It was a pose I'd seen from Tobin. I wondered if it was an army thing. "We have ten hours until daybreak."

Ten hours. So far, Xan was a lot more inert and less scary than the wraith, but some part of me was tight as a bowstring, waiting for that to change. I wondered if ten hours of this tension might not burst my racing heart. But I nodded.

-Why are you so set against helping us, Chief Xan? What would it hurt now, to give us aid?

-It would dishonor my kin, break my vow.

-What vow?

There was a wave of bitter anger so intense that I was rocked by it. Tobin, who still held me, said, "Lyon? All right?"

"Yes." *-What vow?*

-The one I swore before I stepped off the side of Eagle Ridge.

I shook against Tobin. There was a whirling echo of fear/hate/despair, then falling/darkness/darkness/darkness. I said, *-Would you tell me about it? So I can understand?*

-Why would you care?

-Because it's history? Because it's keeping you from perhaps saving Tobin's life? Because I feel how you felt, when you did it, and it hurts my heart and I don't know why?

-It's not a pretty tale.

I snorted and deliberately thought of slitting Meldov's throat. I hoped he would catch that emotion in return. It would only be fair. *-My life hasn't all been pretty either.*

-Few are. His emotions changed again, more sad than angry. *-It's a long story. We might choose to be more comfortable than this stone floor to tell it, especially if we must ride tomorrow. Somewhere more quiet and less crowded?*

-Yes, all right. I turned to Tobin, my mouth almost brushing his cheek. "Let me up."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

He gradually let go of me, and then set a hand under my elbow to help me stand. The king rose easily too, his eyes on me. I said, "Chief Xan wants to talk about other things. About his life. I'm hoping that as he does so, I might get clues. Or perhaps he'll be persuaded to help us after all, but it won't happen fast. Is there a place I can go to sit, that's not this... cold and distracting?"

"Yes. Come this way." The king gestured toward the stair.

"We should come along," Firstmage said, stepping closer. "In case."

-I won't talk around that man

I said, "Chief Xan expresses a dislike for you. Do you have to stay in the same room with me for the transference to hold?"

“Well, no. Not absolutely. The enchantment is set and running, and while my strength maintains it, I don’t have to be close to you.”

“Then better not,” I said quickly. “Xan wants privacy.” I could feel that, despite his strength of will, he shrank from the thought of telling his past in front of so many eyes, whether they could hear him or not.

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” Tobin said.

“I’d like to come too. If that’s workable.” The king didn’t seem like he’d had to ask permission very often, but he did it without more than a faint flush across his cheeks.

-Xan? My chief wants to hear you too?

-That one has no ears to understand me.

-True. I’ll tell him what he should know, though. Is that all right?

-It’s no concern of mine. As long as he’s quiet.

I cleared my throat nervously. “Of course, Sire. So, um, he—Xan—is going to tell me about his life and times. He wants to do it in comfort. I’ll translate anything that’s relevant. I think perhaps he’s curious, and enjoying simple conversation after so long.” I’d felt his panic gradually transforming into interest as the minutes passed. Mine was doing the same. “Perhaps we can get something from him eventually after all.”

“I’ll show you to my rooms,” King Faro said. “They’re well-guarded and not as far away as your own.”

“Is that wise, Sire?” asked the captain of the King’s Own.

“I think so. Tobin will keep him from attacking me, right?”

Tobin muttered, “Yes, Sire,” but looked harassed.

The captain said, “I’d feel better with at least one more man in there. Myself, by preference.”

-What are they arguing about?

-Whether they need very many men to protect the king from us. I thought the truth might amuse him, and increase trust.

I could almost hear his dry chuckle. *-I'm not at my most dangerous right now.*

I looked down at my right hand. *-Nor I.*

-Tell them I've no objection to two or three men. But I'll not weep in front of a horde.

I didn't like the sound of that. How linked were we? If he cried, would I do the same? I didn't like to ask. I said, "He's fine with you there too, Captain. Can we go?" I could feel the stares of the three sorcerers on my shoulder blades and they were making me twitch. I was already shaky enough. I wanted stillness, less light, less noise, less pressure. I couldn't coherently explain it, but I needed fewer eyes upon me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It took a bit more negotiation, some enchantment-checking from Firstmage, and climbing three flights of stairs with my heart hammering rapidly. Eventually I slid down into an upholstered chair in the king's own apartment. Tobin stood beside me, ignoring all my suggestions that he rest his bad knee. The king sat in a short lounge by the window, looking stiff and wearing his short sword. The captain stood by the door, his hand on his sword hilt.

There was blessed stillness. The room was well lit, with lanterns on the walls and oil lamps on several tables. I could feel Xan's curiosity coming to the fore, as he took in the details. Curiosity tinged by a bit of frustration. *-Can you look over at that soldier by the door, mage?*

-Can't you see him?

-Not unless you turn your head. I seem to be limited by your body.

That was hopeful. I stared down at blank floor instead, and felt his irritation grow.

-What would it hurt you to just look around?

I did nothing, said nothing, waiting. But despite the slowly mounting anger on his part, I felt no ghostly control. My eyes didn't rise of their own accord. My head didn't turn. My breathing *did* speed up, but whether it was his emotion or my own I couldn't say.

-Shall I tell you my sad tale then? Will you give me more than two flat boards to look at on this rare visit to the mortal world, if I entertain you? Although his words were light, I could feel that heavy emotions lay behind them.

Did I really want to know? I wasn't sure I could handle someone else's tragedy, and I was certain it *was* tragedy. And yet, knowing more about Xan could only help. It was promising that he was willing to make any kind of trade for anything.

King Faro said, “Are you talking to him? Can you translate?”

“We’re, um, negotiating. If I keep him better entertained, he might tell me more.” I added to Xan, *-We can trade our interests then?*

“Entertained how?” Tobin said suspiciously.

Xan *laughed*. It felt so strange, but it lightened things between us. *-The look on his face. Tell your stallion that as much as I might enjoy feeling touch again, I won’t ask you to jump him in front of his chief.*

I could feel my blush. *-I’m sure he wasn’t thinking of that.* “He wants me to look around the room, to show him things.”

King Faro said, “That you can surely do. If there’s anything that he particularly wishes to see...”

“Let me ask him. It may take a while.”

I turned my attention inward. *-Will you trade then? Your story for a good look at the world here?*

-It’s been a long, long time, since I said more than a dozen words to anyone. Perhaps I will.

-Perhaps isn’t good enough. My curiosity made me add, *-You’ve been summoned by others before then?*

-Not in... well, I don’t know how long. I was drifting an eternity in the grey, before your old mage brought me forth. But long ago, not much after my death, I was called to speak time and again by the witchmen of other tribes. With tokens taken from my body, they asked for help and advice, for aid against illness and enemies. I had very little to give. And then they stopped calling.

I said aloud, “He was summoned by hillfolk in the years after his death. But not recently.” I wanted more than anything to explore this topic. What was the grey? How did it feel to be dead? What was summoning like? Did we harm the ghosts we brought forth that way? Or was it a blessing to wear them out or banish them to some further place? But this wasn’t the time for my curiosity. Maybe, after this was done, if we rode out tomorrow and found the tunnel,

then I might have the next night, before he left me, to ask all my questions. Now, I said, *-Does it please you to be back in the world?*

-Not 'please' exactly. But it is at least something to be doing, something to remind me there is more than waiting, and hating.

I looked slowly around the room, at the Captain, in his riding uniform with sheathed dagger and sword; at my king, his eye fixed on me, grave and intelligent; at Tobin.

-He is your soul's other half.

I wished I was as certain, but I said, *-I hope so.*

-You feel it. I can tell.

I let my eyes move slowly over the scant furnishings, the tapestry hung up to curtain the window, the books and map cases on the table.

Eventually, Xan said, *-So much the same, and yet much that is different. Although I've never been in the home of a flatlander before. Perhaps it's only that which makes it so strange.*

King Faro said, "Do you want to drink something? Or eat? Would he, um, taste it? Firstmage said you'd only hold conversations, but this seems like something more."

"Yes," I said tensely. "It is more. And I don't know."

The king poured a cup half full of wine from a bottle on the table and passed it to me. "Try that."

I took a careful sip. The taste was luscious, deep and rich and beyond any wine I could have afforded. In my head, Xan said, *-Ah, yes, that's good.*

I dropped the cup, spilling the wine across the floor. "He tastes it. Or feels me taste it. Or something." My voice squeaked at the end of the last word.

Tobin grabbed a cloth and knelt to wipe up the stain, leaning his shoulder against my knee as he did so. The steadiness of him soothed me. Xan said, *-I didn't mean to startle you. It was good wine.*

-Yes.

-This is strange for me too. One more strange thing in an eternity of strange, since I threw myself off that cliff.

-You did what?

-Do you want the story now? Or perhaps you might eat first?

My stomach definitely vetoed that idea. *-Story*

-Very well. I thought he was less reluctant to talk than he pretended, because he felt like a man settling in before a fire, comfort over pain.

“He’s going to tell me about himself. I’ll translate at the end.”

“Do that,” King Faro said, but he relaxed back in his seat to wait.

-I am Xan, leader of the Sheergoat Clan, last Chief of the Swiftrock people. Hear my tale.

In the years before the Easterners came through the mountain, I led a thriving tribe. We were many hands of hands, men, women and children, three clans within the tribe. Each year, the clans split up to climb to our summer ranges, and each fall returned together to our winter home in the Valley of the Mist. That year, my clan included my wife, our daughter and three sons, and others dear to me. My youngest son, Nav, had seen but two summers. My clan always climbed highest of the three, living and hunting in the crags in summer, like our namesake, the sheergoat.

My people lived well apart from the flatlanders. We traded, yes, in their markets. A few times a year we would bring down furs and baskets, horn carvings, and perhaps a flamestone. We traded for grain and cloth, steel knives and oil. But we were not friends.

Three times in my father’s lifespan, the flatlanders had come into the mountains with swords raised against us. Once they were only seeking to cross to go to war. Twice, greedy men were trying to get the source of our flamestones from us. They tortured my uncle to death, but he wouldn’t tell them where the stones could be found.

I felt his mind voice shift from narrative pain to a mild curiosity. *-Are the gems of my people still known and prized among you?*

I lifted his necklace from my chest. *-This one would buy food and housing for a year in the finest inn in the land, and more besides.*

-Mine! I felt his shock. *-I thought it was lost, taken. Well, of course it was. That's how it came to your hands.*

He was angry and distressed. I waited, unsure how to proceed. Eventually he said, *-What's a stone against lives? When I found my chiefstone, it was the largest one my tribe had ever seen. My mother said it meant I was destined to be a great leader. I believed it too. More fool I.*

King Faro said, "Does he recognize the necklace?"

"Oh yes. He's angry about it, or about me having it. I'm not quite sure."

"Tell him that, if he asks, we'll gladly return it to his people in exchange for his help."

I relayed the information and felt Xan ease back a little. *-At least your king also puts lives before stones. Many of your people didn't. Many of mine died for flatlander's greed for shiny things.*

-I'm sorry. I tried to let him feel that it was true. I'd never been truly next-meal poor, so perhaps it was easy for me to scorn wealth and its trappings. But then, the kind of men who killed for gems were rarely the poorest of the poor either.

-Long past. Well, the easterners came before the snowmelt, the next spring. I was in our winter home when word was brought of fighting men coming up out of the earth. I traveled a day to see if it could be true. When I arrived, they still were coming out. It was a large army, but their eyes were turned away from us toward the fertile valleys below, and the distant coast. Still, we climbed to the summer pastures early that year.

I told the king, "Wherever they emerged, it's a day's ride from the winter home of his clan."

"I'll get Doyd. He's my expert on the tribes. Perhaps he'll have some idea." He waved to the Captain at the door, who stepped outside to run the errand.

-The flatlanders fought each other all summer and into the fall. It was no real concern of ours. It kept them out of our mountains. They killed off the game in the foothills, but hunting was still good higher in the mountains. We didn't trade at the flatland markets that summer, and the women complained about the lack of ground corn for bread, but we ate as our ancestors had done and all was well.

All through winter, we saw little of the people from the plains below. Then, in the summer, the Great Sickness came.

My heart sank. The plague had followed the invasion, close on its heels. We'd suffered far more from it than the NaR'gin did, and I'd heard it was even worse in the mountain tribes. There'd been a lot of claims back then of an enchantment, a vile spell used to level the last of our resistance. But men had died of Plague on all sides, if not evenly. Modern historians believed it was a natural illness, perhaps brought by the NaR'gin soldiers as they swept across our land. There was an illness like it they called the Summer Shakes, in their home, but although this began the same, it was far worse, and often ended in death. I'd read accounts of those next three years. They'd never failed to make me deeply glad not to have lived back then.

-I can tell you've heard of the Sickness.

He'd felt my distress. I said, *-Yes.*

-Hearing of it and seeing it, those are two different things.

-You don't have to tell me.

-Ah, but you wanted my story, didn't you?

I'd thought perhaps I could glean information from it that might help us. I really didn't want to hear about a death so bleak that it kept him lingering as a ghost for a thousand years. I asked, *-What town did you trade with?*

-I'll not name it. I thought he was just being obstructive, but he added, -I pray to the Skygod that it was wiped from the face of the earth.

I swallowed hard. My mind was a dark enough place, but the corrosive sadness and hate that Xan carried was drowning me. I didn't realize I'd put out a protesting hand until Tobin took it in both of his.

“Lyon, what? Do you need to stop? Is there anything I can do?”

Some scholar I was. Faced with a first-hand account of the Great Plague, and desperate to spare myself the hearing of it. I stiffened my spine and shook my head. “No. But... he’s telling me of deaths and... stay close?”

“Always.” He sat on the floor beside my chair, still holding my hand, and braced my knee with his shoulder. The warmth of that touch dispelled a little of my darkness.

The King asked, “What deaths?” but I couldn’t tell him yet.

I said to Xan, *-Go on.*

-We were in the high mountains. The clans were split, each to their own pastures. It was a lovely summer, with rain to keep the grasses green. The goats were sleek and fat. One day a runner arrived. It was Pak, of the Kestrel clan of my Swiftrock tribe, and my wife’s brother. He was thin and ragged, and he came into camp and collapsed at my feet. And told me the Kestrel clan was no more. They were all dead.

-All of them? I knew that the Plague had been fierce, but still, a whole clan?

-Down to the babes in arms. He described it, how the Sickness came upon them, and within days half the clan was suffering from it. How it waxed stronger and stronger, the healthy trying to care for the sick, and then falling ill in their turn. Until all were dead but Pak. He said he burned the bodies in the end, and came to find me and bring the news.

I had no words for that. I felt his grief and disbelief, and the ominous welling up of worse to come.

-My wife took him into our tent. He slept a night and a day. When he woke, I asked if he’d heard from the Marmot Clan. He had not, for weeks, and nor had I. I decided to set out to find them.

Acid regret made my eyes burn. My fingers tightened on Tobin’s and he squeezed back.

-I should have sent someone else, but... they were my people. If they too were suddenly stricken, too ill to send for help, it was my duty to know that. And if they were not, there had been Marmot daughters and cousins among the dead. It was my place to carry the news. Further, our tribe's witchman was with Marmot, and I urgently wanted his advice. So I set out the next day.

When I found them, the illness was there too. Five had already died, and half the rest lay shaking and sweating in their bedrolls. The witchman had no cure for them. But he said the flatlanders did. He'd heard of the Sickness. He'd been told that the flatlanders fell ill of it too, but had a miraculous root that could save the dying.

I had a bad feeling where this story was going. -Corms from the root of the spreadtree, I told Xan. I'd heard of how that had been used. -It helped. It was not a cure.

-It was more than we had. We agreed that I would return immediately to my camp and gather our stock of flamestones, and offer all of them to the flatlanders below, in exchange for this miraculous root.

It had taken two days for me to climb down to the camp of the Marmot clan, and a day spent there, three more to climb back up to our own. Six days. And in those six days, my wife had died.

I said aloud, "Goddess give her rest." And to Xan, -May the Earthmother hold her safe.

-The Earthmother failed us all. When I reached camp, seven of my clan, including Tia, already lay dead. Many more were ill. My son, small Nav, had the first flush of fever on him. Pak said that it took three days or four or perhaps five, from that moment until death. I put Nav in a pack on my back, took the three flamestones we'd found so far that season, and Goli's best horn carvings, better than any we ever sold, and headed down the mountain.

I stopped for nothing but to give Nav a little goat's milk. And when he stopped taking it, to trickle water in his mouth. I reached the grazing grounds and got my pony. Then I rode when I could, led the beast when I must. In four days I stood on the outskirts of that accursed town. Nav was limp in my arms, his heat like a stone laid on the fire, but he still breathed.

I felt ill at what would surely come next. I could imagine the town, with the Plague loose and a ragged, alien stranger at the gates. No matter how many flamestones he brought. Spreadtree corms had been prized above diamonds in those years.

-The man who spoke our tongue came out. I told him of our need. I showed him my son. He said, perhaps they had the medicine. I laid all the goods I'd brought on the ground for him. He laughed. I added my chiefstone, that same stone you wear. He was silent a moment then. I'd bet he'd never in his days seen the like of that stone. He picked it all up and told me to wait. I stood at the gate, with my child in my arms. In the hot sun, but that was like ice compared to my son's fever. I waited. Until they began throwing stones.

I begged them. I, who'd never asked for so much as a stalk of grass from another, dropped on my knees and begged them. A stone struck Nav's face, bringing blood. He was too ill to even know it. I held him up, for them to see what they'd done. When the next stone flew, I left.

A day back into the hills, I burned the body of my son. Two days in, I fell ill myself. I welcomed it. Better dead than to return a failure. But I lived. Three days I lay fevered and then it passed. I was weak but I climbed, night and day, until I reached the summer camp. There were only a few left alive, and all but Pak and I were sick.

We tried. I climbed to find snow and we packed it around them, until it steamed away in the heat of their fevers. We laid Col in the stream when he began to convulse, but even the snowmelt couldn't cool him. Day and night we nursed them, and day and night they suffered and died. One morning I laid my head down, just for a moment, just to close my burning eyes, and fell asleep. When I woke, the camp was silent. They were all gone. My sons, my daughter. And Pak lay among them, dead by his own hand.

I could feel my own chest heave with Xan's emotions. Or maybe mine. There was no way to separate them. His mind-voice was steady, but each word heaped pain upon anguish.

-I climbed to the top of Eagle Ridge. The sun was bright. A soft wind kissed the bare rock, and in the air above a hawk soared. All was as it ever had been,

but below me, all of my clan lay dead. I stood on the edge and I spoke to the Skygod. I asked him, if ever he favored my tribe, to let one of my people someday hold in their own hand the way to save the lives of flatlanders. Let my kin laugh in their faces and deny them. I begged my revenge, in my son Nav's name. And then I stepped out onto the air.

There was a long pause, as I fought for breath, and then he added, *-This was not what I envisioned, and yet, it feels like the answer of the god.*

“Crap. Shit. Mother of us all.” I tried to think of better swearwords, but all I could do was cry for a dead child and an eternity of hate. Tobin reached up for me and I leaned down so he could hold me. It was safer and less dark in his arms.

King Faro said, “Tell us what went wrong.”

I took a shaky breath and said, “A moment, Sire.” I rubbed my face on my shoulder and tried to give Tobin a smile. The words that came were from our childhood. “This stinks worse’n a dead mole-rat.”

His return smile was tentative. “Can you explain?”

“I found our ghost’s driver. The thing that kept him on this side of the veil for a millennium. Ready for it? He begged a god for the chance to say no to a flatlander in desperate need. Isn’t that perfect?”

King Faro said, “Crap. Shit.”

I actually laughed, and he gave me a tight return smile.

“Sorcerer Lyon, do you think there’s a chance he might change his mind? Or that you might change it for him?”

“Not by force or sorcery. Maybe by persuasion. He’s not an evil man, or uncaring. A big wrong was done to him before he died, and he’s been seeking to balance the scales. Maybe I can change the game.” I pulled back out of Tobin’s hold.

-Chief Xan, I apologize for the actions of my people.

-That’s worth the spit in my mouth

-It’s all I can offer. I can’t bring back the dead, yours or mine.

For a while I/we just sat there, contemplating the truth of that. Slowly his bitter anger ebbed.

-I feel empty, like the hate has leached out of me. And yet, if I'm not meant to deny you this, what am I still doing here?

I was on tricky theological ground, and didn't want to annoy him, but I suggested, *-Maybe the god allowed the anger to preserve you this long, so you could give up your hate before crossing to the other side.*

-Sounds more like something the Earthmother would do.

-Yeah. My mother too.

Xan felt tired, resigned, bitterly amused. *-Tell me then, if you'd been in that village, would you have shared the cure with a man of the mountains and his small son?*

I wanted to lie and say, of course, I'd have made sure they got what they needed. But although I wasn't a historian, I had enough interest to have read accounts of those desperate days. And he would know if I lied.

I said, *-Probably not. I'd never throw a stone at a child, but... you have to understand, the Plague hit my people hard too. Not like yours, killing everyone. But among us, one in four died in the next three years. And one in ten of the NaR'gin. Spreadtree corms were worth more than gold, more than any price. Boiled and eaten early in the sickness, they brought down the killing fever, enough to prevent the convulsions and damage. They saved many lives, but not all. And there were never even close to enough to go around.*

I tried to recall the words in the old texts, to give him the feel of it. *-People went crazy looking for them. Almost all the spreadtrees in the populated lands were cut down and uprooted, and the corms clinging to their roots were taken. The trees grow slowly, and only in wet, low-lying places. A person who had a tree on their land might wake one morning to find it had been dismantled in the night, and their friends and neighbors were digging around like demented badgers, searching for every last corm.*

So out in the dry foothills here, a town likely had few, if any, local sources, and no way to get more. They'd have had many sick and dead of their own. If

there was any root left, by the time you came, it would still have been less than their own needs. And if I'd been there... no, I probably would not have taken the cure from my family's mouth to give to yours.

I felt him go still and silent. It was a relief to be free of the burning flame of his emotions. I sagged gratefully against the back of the chair. Tobin said, "Still all right? Better?"

"His whole tribe died of the plague. He chose to die with them."

King Faro inclined his head in a shallow bow. "My condolences, Chief Xan. The whole ruling family of this land died then too. Those who were not killed by the plague were put to the sword by the NaR'gin, down to the smallest babe in arms." I translated that, word for word.

The door opened and Doyd came in tentatively. He saluted the king and said, "You sent for me, Sire?"

"We're negotiating with Chief Xan for any bargain he might make with us. I thought having someone familiar with the modern tribes would be useful."

I had a sudden thought. "Doyd, are there still Swiftrock tribesmen?"

"There is a tribe by that name."

"What are the clans?"

"Um, Leehawk, Ringfox, and Marmot."

"Marmot." Xan hadn't said he ever went back to the camp of his third clan. I asked, *-Chief Xan. Did you have word from the Marmot clan, before you, um, died?*

-No.

-There is to this day a Marmot clan of the Swiftrock people. No Sheergoat, no Kestrel, but there is a Marmot clan.

-Truly! I could feel doubt and hope and disbelief surge up in him. *-It need not be the same clan*

-But it might be. Would a new clan take the old name?

-There are only so many animals in my hills. Still there was no doubt that hope was overrunning his doubts. -I never went there. They had the witchman, and I could give them nothing more. Perhaps some did survive.

I stayed silent for a while, and let him wrestle with the idea. Eventually he said, *-I'd give much to hear their ancestor chants. But no, you say I've been dead a hand of hands of generations. The best chants rarely reach that far back.*

I said, "He's asking about ancestor chants."

Doyd said, "They keep an oral history going. Not a millennium back though, I don't think. And while I could try to arrange a meeting it couldn't happen before sunrise tomorrow, even if I rode night and day."

I passed that along. Xan said, *-Well, I will keep it as a hope. My sister and her sons were Marmot, and still lived, last I saw them there.*

There was another long pause. I swayed, feeling more tired than I could remember since the early days inside my stone walls, when sleep came only as a collapse when I could stay awake no longer. I said, *-Could you give up your grudge against people long, long dead and help us now?*

-I'll think on it. But... I'm not sure I can change my nature anymore. There's not much of me left.

There was a knock on the door. At the king's command, one of his colonels came in. "Begging your leave, sire, but there's news from the west." He glanced around at all of us.

King Faro said, "Just tell it."

"A message-bird came to Scarphill and they sent a runner on to us. The R'gin ships landed three days ago now. General Estray engaged the enemy. It's a serious attack, but when the message was sent, the fight was just beginning. They promised more news soon."

The captain said, "Will you head back there, Sire?"

King Faro shook his head. “The die is cast. I decided this threat in the east was a risk that needed investigating. Knowing that there actually is an army attacking in the west doesn’t change that.”

“A true attack weighed against an unlikely one?”

“No. And it still fits the pattern we considered. If we’d been in the capital when news of the R’gin ships came, we’d have ridden west, two days ago. This part of the border would have been scantily manned and out of my mind. We might even have summoned some of the existing patrols away. That could still be the Prince Regent’s goal.”

“As you say, Sire.” The captain bowed his head.

King Faro turned to the colonel. “See that the messenger is cared for and I’ll meet you in the map room soon.”

When the colonel had gone, the king turned to me, asking simple questions, seeking any kind of clue. I felt no anger from Xan, but when I translated, he simply gave me no answer at all. He seemed to have retreated, far into the distance. Eventually he said, *-Can you leave it until morning? I’d give a lot to simply see the sun again.*

I said to the king, “I think we’re better off not pressing him now. Perhaps in the morning. Can you please find out from the mages whether I can safely sleep? I don’t think things will change tonight, and I can’t seem to keep my eyes open. I’m so tired...”

The king looked displeased, but there was little he could do. He sent the guard outside the door to inquire. Firstmage came back himself, and checked me. He worked another binding, and I could feel it pull at Xan, like reins on a horse. Xan muttered, *-I do not like that mage.*

-He’s trying to keep me safe.

-He’s trying to compel me.

-You have my word, I’ll do nothing until the morning.

Firstmage said, “I’ve never slept when I had a transference in place. There’s so much to potentially learn and do in this situation. Sorcerer Lyon, if

he won't discuss what we need most to hear, have you at least asked him about the world beyond the veil? About what it's like to be summoned? Any of the details we all speculate on? I've not found a ghost who could, or would, give me an answer, in a circle or in my mind, but I ask them all. It could be vital information for our craft."

I felt a deep reluctance to examine Xan like a bug pinned to a board. "He asked for time and quiet. I want to give him that."

Firstmage clucked his tongue at me, like I was some disappointing apprentice. "Well, it should be safe to sleep, I suppose. It's not what I would choose to do."

I looked past him at the king. "If we ride out tomorrow, I'd prefer not to fall off my horse." My muscles felt like jelly, and just sitting upright was an effort.

King Faro said, "Certainly. Use my bed. I have other arrangements to make anyway. Tobin, you'll watch him of course."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll also stay, if I may," the captain said. His expression was cool. "I'm not certain Voice Tobin could do what might need to be done."

Tobin rounded on him with a snarl. "Nothing will need to be *done*."

"We hope not."

The king sighed. "Don't argue, gentlemen. You may both watch. Everyone else, let's retire to the workroom and the maps."

Firstmage was last to leave, looking disgruntled. But his king held the door open, and perforce he went through it. The king gave me a last long look, a small nod, and closed the door. Tobin, the captain and I were alone in the room.

Ignoring the captain, Tobin said, "You want to lie down?"

"Oh, yes." I swayed on my feet.

He took my arm. “This way. Ten steps. You lucky bugger, you’ll be able, all your life after this, to say you slept in the king’s bed.” At my snort, he added quickly, “Not like that, of course.”

The captain muttered, “You’d better not.”

Tobin didn’t so much as look at him. He eased me onto the bed, and tugged off my boots. The mattress was wool-stuffed and comfortable. The sheets were soft. I closed my eyes, but it made me dizzy, as if I’d been launched into empty space and I snapped them open again. Tobin said, “What?”

“I don’t think I can actually sleep. Don’t go too far.”

“Not going anywhere.” He gave the captain a shark’s grin and said, “We could share the bed.”

Whether he was tweaking the captain’s coattail or not, it sounded like heaven. “Yes, please.”

He sat and removed his own boots, and then got onto the bed beside me. I slid over to give him room. He put an arm across my shoulders, warm and steady at my side. In my ear, barely a breath, he whispered, “Pity the captain’s there, but I’d hate to give him apoplexy by making out in front of him in the king’s sheets. What a lost opportunity, eh lion-boy?”

I snorted.

-What does he say?

-Something rude about the soldier.

-I like your man.

I did too. I pressed in closer to him and kept my eyes open. The night passed slowly. I felt Tobin eventually give in to sleep, perhaps fooled by my immobility into thinking I’d done the same. I couldn’t. Every time I thought of letting go, panic yanked my attention back and my eyelids open. But getting some rest, at his side, was far better than nothing.

The king returned in the pre-dawn light. He pushed aside the window tapestry to look at the sky. In the east beyond, the first shading of lavender and gold blushed the sky behind the mountains. Tobin had woken the instant the

door opened, but he stayed at my side. The king smiled at me and then at him, and it seemed like genuine affection.

“I’ve bespoken breakfast, any minute now. The horses will be brought around in half an hour.”

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. Xan said, *-What now?*

-We eat and then ride out.

-I look forward to both.

I wasn’t so sure. The odd sense of being doubled, of having two of each sensation, was worse this morning than last night. I wondered what it would be like to have Xan with me as I tried to sit a horse, or to eat a piece of bread. But I did feel hungry.

The food arrived shortly. Tobin had barely finished tugging on his boots. It was simple fare, bread and cheese and dried fruit. Xan’s attention was fixed on the plate. I nibbled at first, waiting to see what my innards would think of this oddly intimate sharing. Xan said nothing, but I could in fact feel his pleasure at the sweet-tart taste of the fruit. It bothered me to know that, but not enough to keep me from taking another.

Tobin said, “What’s the plan, sir?”

“We’ll ride out, with the transferred ghost in Sorcerer Lyon along. We plan to ride along the border, starting north at Bridal Veil, which should be the limit of the range Chief Xan named. We’ll move on south toward Tallribbon and the mouth of the Snake River. That stretch has the most caves, and several streams and waterfalls. The ghost called the place “between the waters” and said it was north of Tallribbon, so we’re hedging our bets as best we can. Firstmage hopes that, given the unexpected depth of this transference, even if the ghost won’t tell Lyon any more, he may react in some way that Lyon can sense, if we get near the right place. The scouts went out last night. I have other troops riding out along that and other stretches of the borderlands here. Even if we don’t catch the R’gin emerging, we should be able to spot those bastards before they have a chance to fall on us from behind.”

“So this morning’s effort isn’t essential, really,” Tobin said without looking at me. “For Lyon to do this.”

“Shut up,” I hissed through my teeth. “I promised Xan.”

Tobin frowned, but said no more. The king gave me a nod. “If you’re ready, we’ll mount up in ten minutes.”

I went in search of the garderobe, and Tobin squeezed in behind me. I grumbled, “What, you need to keep an eye on me while I piss, too?”

“We can take turns.” He bumped against my shoulder. “Don’t be angry with me.”

I couldn’t help softening. “I’m not, really. It’s just too late to do anything but see this through.”

“I know. But... there’s a chance we’ll come up against the R’gin, somewhere out there today. And you’re not a fighter.”

I’d forgotten that. One more danger. I don’t think my body had it in me to react to that. “I’ll run away fast then.”

“See that you do.”

I knew I couldn’t ask him to do the same. He was oath-bound to protect the king. I’d been worrying all night about myself, about what if the ghost was just biding its time to take over my mind, or what if Firstmage couldn’t banish it, or what if it tricked me into giving the king the wrong information. I’d forgotten to be afraid for Tobin.

I washed my hands awkwardly as usual, and then gripped Tobin’s bicep and, despite the ghost in my head, I kissed him fast and hard. “And if need be, you fight well, hear me? You dragged me out of my refuge of stone and bars. You can’t abandon me here.”

“You were pretty much out of there on your own already,” Tobin said. “But no, I promise.”

I didn’t correct his faith. If he’d forgotten that night when I sat with a knife pressed to my skin, I wasn’t going to remind him.

When we emerged from the door of the tower into the early morning, I felt Xan's pleasure and a touch of surprise. *-I didn't think I'd ever see the sun again.*

-It's not up yet.

-Soon though. He noticed the waiting horses, and added, *-Fine beasts, those. Although they'd not last an hour on our steep mountain tracks.*

-Hopefully they won't have to.

-We'll have to reach the high hills though.

I tried not to react with satisfaction to that hint, but Xan said, *-I cannot guide you.*

-Can't or won't?

-Both. For so long I've been made of unyielding hate, and though you're not the townsfolk who stoned my son, if I gave aid to you, beyond what you've already forced, it would be the end of me, I think.

-You'll end at tomorrow's sunrise anyway. I hoped it would be to move on to something better, but could offer no assurance of that. *-End this existence, anyway.*

-So says the mage. Do you trust his word?

I felt ill, but said, *-I have to. And he wouldn't lie about this to his chief.*

-Perhaps. Maybe tomorrow then, before the sun comes up, I'll be able to say more.

The captain held Cricket's reins as I mounted. Then instead of passing them to me, he swung up on his own horse and took me in tow. Tobin spurred Dark over close. "What are you doing?"

"Being careful." The captain barely glanced at him.

King Faro said, "It makes sense, Tobin. You wouldn't want the ghost to ride off with Lyon, would you?"

I glanced over at the archers waiting to follow us, and said vehemently, "If you see that happening, just shoot me."

Tobin muttered to the captain, “Keep the damned reins then.” He added to me, under his breath, “If you ask anyone else to kill you, I’ll knock you out, tie you up, and stuff you in the garderobe until tomorrow.”

King Faro, riding up on my other side, overheard him and laughed. He turned to me. “Do you have any suggestion that would change the direction we ride out?”

“Up into the hills somewhere?” I didn’t have much to offer.

“Bridal Veil first then. It’s well up there. We’ll work our way back over toward the Snake.”

The morning gradually brightened as we rode. Xan was mainly silent, although he asked the occasional simple question, like how long Faro had been ruler, or what our horse was called. I thought about not answering, of giving him silence for silence. But I decided to try for goodwill instead.

We came into the valley of the Bridal River less than an hour after the sun cleared the peaks. The higher we climbed, the sharper Xan’s attention became. With his thoughts in mine, I noticed the tang of pine trees and the slight bitterness in the wind. *-Storm coming, with snow down to the foothills. Two days off. Maybe less.*

I hoped fervently we’d be done before then. I’d felt so cold for so long that snow held no appeal.

The waterfall was worth seeing though. From a ribbon of glacier-blue stream, high on the mountainside, it fell a hundred yards to a rock shelf, and then fanned out in the lacy wide spray that gave the place its name. The moving water was hypnotic and I stared at it until I realized Xan was saying for the fourth time, *-Look up.*

I tracked higher, up towards the peaks of the mountains, still heavily clothed in snow. The rounded sides of Sugarloaf were frosted evenly white, but the steep flanks of the Fang showed runnels of darker snow and stretches of bare rock. I could feel Xan’s heart leap at the sight of the peaks.

-What are the grey stripes on the Fang from? I asked.

-The Fang?

-That sharp peak, the pointy one.

-Ah, the God's Knife. Those are avalanches. The snow lets go and races down the slope, carrying all with it. The color comes from the broken surface, and the rocks and trees tumbled along by the snow.

I couldn't picture it. Snow lay flat on fields in my experience. When Xan talked about avalanches he sounded like a man discussing army-wagon racing, excitement and alarm mixed.

Xan said meditatively, *-This is... worth all the pain of the summoning. Just this, to see those mountains again and to know that my people, if not my clan, are up there still. You'd better hope that mage of yours knows his stuff. I'm not sure I could give this up of my own choice.*

That sucked all the air out of my lungs. I grabbed the pommel of my saddle, and bent forward trying to draw breath. Tobin said, "What's wrong."

"Get him out! I want it out of me!" I grabbed at my head, pulling my hair in some ridiculous attempt to empty my brain. My bad hand fumbled uselessly at my temple, while my left yanked my head sideways, wrenching my neck.

Tobin grabbed my wrists. "What? Did something happen?"

-BE CALM. Xan's voice was loud enough in my brain to cut through the panic. *-Stop hurting yourself. I only spoke my thought aloud. I have no control here. In the morning I will be gone.*

-Unless you can prevent it!

-Your mage was strong enough to pull me in across all those years, and stuff me into your hard head. I imagine he's strong enough to get me out again. Him and his cronies.

I looked behind me. Secondmage and Thirdmage rode ten feet back, abreast on matched greys. Firstmage had remained in the tower, to guard and maintain the working itself. But neither of the other two looked worried in the least.

Tobin shook me lightly. "Lyon. Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I just... panicked for a minute. I'm fine."

He kned Dark to stay close and didn't let go. "You're sure."

"Certain. I think. Unless I'm wrong."

That got a faint smile. "Now that sounds like you." He let my wrists go, but stayed beside me. "Be sure though."

King Faro reined back to join us. "News?"

"Sorry, Sire." I quickly asked Xan, *-What do you call this place in the old tongue?*

-Kielbeasu. Widewaters.

-Not Beasumlean then.

He said nothing. I told the king, "I don't think it's here. This place has a different name."

The king nodded. "We'll leave scouts here, then, and move south."

We turned and rode up a steep hillside with the peaks on our left. The air was still quite cool, and the sun low enough that most of the ground was in shade. The trees were only scrubby evergreens, but in the depths beneath their boughs, I saw glimpses of snow. Despite the jacket I'd been given, I shivered.

-Flatlander. Xan's voice was almost teasing. *-This is like a summer's day up in my mountains.*

I was just as glad not to be climbing higher then. I didn't say so. Xan's mood brightened with every glimpse of those bright peaks. I kept my eyes on them for his sake, and let the captain lead Cricket onward.

An hour later, after a rough scrambling ride that the king and Tobin seemed to relish far more than I, we reached the next stream. This one fell in tumbling rivulets down the rock face, dividing again and again into narrow threads of water. The advance men waved to us, and we moved down from the ridge to the gully where the waters rejoined into a sizable stream. The king reined in and turned to me. "How about here? When you said, 'between the waters' I thought of this place. The water divides again and again around the rocks, and one of those openings could be far deeper than it looks. A cave surrounded by water could be that *Bausumblin* thing, right?"

“Perhaps.” I looked around, forcing Xan to do the same. His interest was sharp, but tinged by a hint of unfamiliarity.

-Is this the place? Beasumblean?

-In my day this was a dry hillside. Xan seemed exasperated. *-Look up, witchman. I want to see where the water comes from.*

I complied slowly. His interest was caught by the cliff face above us, and the tumble of rock at its foot. *-It looks like there was a major rock fall here. Not recently, the tracks of the water are already worn deep. After my time though. Perhaps that diverted the stream.*

“I don’t think this is it,” I told King Faro. “If he’s still constrained to tell the truth, then it’s not familiar to him.”

“The terrain might indeed have changed over the years,” the king said slowly. “Which could make this a useless exercise. No other part of the hills have more caves than here. Have him look again.”

“He says there was no water here back then.”

“Ah. Well then, onward.” The king wheeled his horse on its haunches and waved the advance guard forward. The captain, Tobin and I splashed across the wide stream in his wake, and headed up the next ridge. The sun was rising and taking some of the chill from the air. If you could ignore the troop of cavalry and archers riding behind us, this might have been a pleasure-outing.

Xan said, *-Tell me about your chief. Is he a good man?*

-Tobin likes him. I don’t know him well.

-And his nemesis. The one who may come through these mountains? What of him?

I shrugged irritably. *-What do you want me to do? Plead our case again? The Prince Regent of the R’gin is a devil of a man, evil in every way, who breathes fire and eats small children for breakfast.*

-Don’t play the fool. What do you know of him?

-In truth? Not much. It’s said he killed his elder brother who was ruler of their land, to become guardian for his small son and take command in his

place. And that he now looks for foreign wars to distract his people from his crime. But our side is capable of misinformation large and small. It could all be lies. All I really know is that the R'gin have invaded before, and that they aren't kind to those whom they conquer. This is my home and I don't want to see it in their hands. And that would be true even if they were the kindest overlords the world has known.

-We tribes of the mountains aren't fond of overlords, Xan said slowly.

We climbed another ridge, and the steep, slippery rocks forced me to pay attention to my riding. At first, when my head ached, I thought it was from the jerking motion of Cricket's hooves on the rolling gravel. But the next pain was sharp and sudden. I cried out and grabbed the saddle. And then I was falling. The captain and Tobin both grabbed for me, and the captain got a hand on my knee as I slid over the side, enough to at least slow my fall. I landed on the rocks in a ball, arms wrapped around my head.

Tobin leaped down from Dark, and half-fell on his knees beside me. I heard other shouting. Something about mages. The sound rang in echoes through my head. Tobin lifted me against his lap. "What's wrong!"

Faintly through the noise I heard Xan say, *-M'blean means "through"*. And then his presence in my head faded.

The king loomed over me. "Both my sorcerers are unconscious. What happened?"

I managed to rasp, "Don't know." I felt lightheaded, but it seemed to be easing now, not worsening. "If I had to guess, I think something happened to the working." We'd all four of us been tied into that piece of sorcery. It had hung there in the back of my awareness since we set it in motion. Now it was gone.

The king grabbed my arm roughly. "And Xan?"

I yanked free of his hold, trying to get away but managing no more than a feeble scrabble of my heels against the ground, as I rolled off Tobin's knees. "Don't touch me!" Tobin aborted his own reach for me, but stayed kneeling at my side. I curled up tighter, breathing through my nose, quelling my panic.

The king glared, but stepped back. “The ghost?”

“Gone, I think.” I tried to feel for him. But there was no human sense for that, no eyes I could open to look around inside my head. I didn’t feel his presence as I had for hours, but how could I be sure? I said, *-Chief Xan? Are you there? Can you still speak?*

Silence answered me. But if the summoning-working was gone then so was his compulsion to talk to me. Which didn’t mean he was out of my head. I tried not to think of that, but a decade of nightmares hovered. I pressed my forearms to my skull. “He’s gone. I think he’s gone.”

“Gods and goddess damn it!” The king straightened. “Now what? Hoy, medic? How are the sorcerers?”

“Coming around, Sire.”

Tobin put an arm under me, moving slowly. When I didn’t reject his touch, his frown eased. “Can you stand, Lyon? I’d like to get you off this damned slope.”

“I’ll try.” I struggled to my feet, and with his help started back down the escarpment. Below me, men were helping the King’s Mages do the same. We made it to the meadow at the foot of the slope and stopped on the more level ground there. The captain had brought our horses down with him and he hovered nearby, the three sets of reins in his left hand to keep his sword hand free. He stared at me with a wealth of suspicion. I tried to give him an evil look, but it probably came out just painful. My knees were still weak and Tobin was my rock. But I was tired of leaning on the poor man all the time. I tried to stand straighter.

Secondmage said hoarsely, “The working collapsed. I’m very worried about Firstmage. The rebound will have hit him even harder than the rest of us.”

“He, at least, is safely in the tower,” the king said. “The question is, what now? Is it worth continuing as we have been, or do we just go to the back-up plan and array watchers all along this stretch and wait for a sighting?”

I realized they were all looking at me. Saying, “How would I know?” was probably not going to be popular. I tried to think about it. A recollection of Xan’s voice lingered somewhere in my head, although whether it was just memory or some continued presence I couldn’t tell. I finally said, “I think we should go on. I don’t sense him anymore. I don’t hear him in my head. But still, I think there’s a chance I might recognize something or feel something. I don’t see how it can hurt to try.”

“Can you ride?” the king asked.

“I think so.”

Secondmage said, “With your permission, Sire, I think my colleague and I should ride back to the tower. With the working broken, we’re of little use to you or to Sorcerer Lyon out here. If Firstmage has been injured we can at least help him, and perhaps investigate the working and see what went wrong.”

“Lyon? Your choice. Do you want them to stay with us?”

For a moment I relished the look on the two sorcerer’s faces, as the king put them in my hands. But I really had no desire to have them close by, if they wanted to be elsewhere. “Whatever they think’s best, Sire.”

“We’ll go assist Firstmage, then.” Secondmage turned toward his horse, but was clearly unable to mount it. The king called for a complement of guardsmen to assist the two sorcerers on the ride back.

The captain led Cricket back over to me. I felt like I was made of pudding, but I dodged his hand under my arm. Tobin’s strong grip and a hearty shove to my butt got me back into the saddle. Cricket stood still, bless him, and let me get settled. Tobin set my foot into my stirrup and looked up at me. “You’re really all right for this?”

“I’m fine. It was just the shock.”

“And the ghost is gone?”

He expected a quick affirmative. I saw the lines around his eyes become drawn as I failed to answer him. After a moment he limped around to the other side of Dark and swung himself up.

Riding out felt different without Xan a strong presence in my head. I hadn't realized how much of my enjoyment of the morning had been colored by his delight at seeing his beloved mountains. Without that, I was exhausted and cold, a little scared and a whole lot intimidated by the impossible task of finding one specific cave mouth in a hillside littered with them. As we rode along, a contingent of men peeled off to explore any opening we saw. Most were apparently shallow, and the men returned fast. A few were deeper, deep enough that a cursory look didn't find the end of them, and there men were left behind to keep watch.

The next waterfall we came to was a low tumbling affair of wide shallow water. The king looked at me. I could only shake my head. I felt nothing, saw nothing, one way or the other. Perhaps Xan truly was gone. We continued, up and down hills. My knees were getting raw from bracing against the saddle, and my back ached. As we topped the next ridge, the king waited for me. Pointing up ahead he said, "That's the Cascade. It's a hard place to get to the base of. The river runs through a narrow canyon before coming out of the deep rock. But there are caves around the outsides of the canyon. What do you say?"

I stared at it. The water fell from one ledge to the next, going from a deep tumbling torrent to wider and flatter, before disappearing from view behind the trees on the ridge. "I don't think we can count it out."

Tobin pointed further along the skyline. "The Silverwend comes out about three miles further on. If that odd name meant 'between the waters' then perhaps the opening is in that three mile stretch between them."

"Good thought." The king waved an officer over, and a large contingent of the cavalry moved off at a good clip. "They'll start looking." He glanced at me. "There's no visible cave mouth in the canyon of the Cascade, but it's quite a sight. At least you'll get a look while we're here."

The captain said reprovingly, "This is hardly a time for sightseeing, your majesty."

“Indeed. But if we cross the Cascade River at the high point instead of the lower ford, Lyon will see one of the local wonders, and we won’t have lost any time.”

“As you wish, Sire.”

The king waved at his forward guard and we turned east from the route the cavalry had taken, and up a narrower trail. The king rode close beside me. “I love this area,” he said. “Although the first time I passed through was after the Badlands campaign, and I was too tired to appreciate it. We were here again six years ago though, Tobin. You remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There was a rumor then too, that Prince Miacosta was bringing troops through the Skyfield pass. It turned out to be false, but we had a good summer patrolling here.”

“It got damned cold by the start of winter, though.” Tobin said reminiscently.

“Yes. Father could really have called us off the scent a month earlier than he did.”

I listened to them talk in low voices as we climbed higher. The air was thin, and the clumps of pine trees were full of birds. After fifteen minutes we crested the ridge.

“We’ll work down at an angle to cross the river.” The king pointed out a route. “And search the caves south of it. But first, take a minute to look at the Cascade. Isn’t that a sight?”

I peered down into the dimness of the narrow canyon. At our feet the water of the river burst forth from the rocky canyon sides into a tumbling shallow river along the ravine. Upstream, it ran silent and deep, between high rock walls. And at the cliff, it fell, a hundred feet of free drop in a glistening rippling sheet. I stared at it, hypnotized. The water was like a solid living thing, shimmering on the surface, with undreamed-of motion in its depths. Behind the sparkling waterfall, the cliff was dark with spray and mysterious.

No. Not dark with spray. I grabbed Tobin's arm in a grip that must have hurt him. "M'blean means through," I said. "The tunnel is through the waterfall."

"It's *what*?" Tobin and the king both turned to look more closely.

"There's something moving behind the water. I swear it." I broke into a sweat. The air on that wide hilltop felt close and still and silent. Not even birds sang. "That's the place."

As we watched, we all saw it. A flicker of light showed in the darkness behind the water. Just a moment and then gone. But we were certain then. The king turned to the officers behind us, snapping out orders. The archers were sent to find vantage points, guarding all exits from that canyon. The remaining cavalry were sent elsewhere. Voices were hushed. I leaned toward Tobin. "Why are we whispering?"

"The more of them we can trap at the mouth of the cave, before they know that we've spotted them, the better."

"Do you think...?" I was going to ask if we were in time, when the sound of fighting suddenly broke out to our left.

Tobin swore. "Some of them must have already come through before we got here. Come on, let's find a more defensible spot."

A horn blew loudly, and then another. Off down the valley, a faint reply was heard. Tobin made Dark jostle Cricket toward a field of boulders. "Over there, lion-boy. Get some rocks at your back. They may have archers too."

I let him guide me. The king was beside us for a moment, and then a different horn call made him raise his head. "That's Cliban. He's in trouble. Come on." He whirled his horse and plunged off to the right. The captain gave me one glance, and then he and the rest of the King's Own charged after the king. Tobin and I were left alone on the hill. I saw Tobin looking frantically back and forth, between me and the route the king had taken.

"You should go help," I said.

"They'll do fine. I'm not leaving you alone."

“I’ll be safe here.” I steered Cricket into a narrow space between two big boulders. “See. Hidden and protected. I can wait here for you.”

“Not a chance.” He turned Dark to put himself in front of me, his sword in his hand.

There we stood still, listening. The hilltop was quiet. Downslope the sounds of fighting moved further away. There suddenly was a loud cry, like a growling roar, and then distant voices calling, “The king! To the king! He’s down!”

Tobin quivered like a horse struck with a whip. I said, “Go. I’ll be fine.”

He whirled and stared at me, his eyes boring into mine. “You’d better be. Stay hidden.” He and Dark leaped forward as if shot from a bow and disappeared from sight.

I was left shivering, sitting on my patient horse, in a damp, cold, blind pocket of rock. I whistled tunelessly, then remembered I was supposed to be hiding. I could hear nothing intelligible. Above me the open sky was blue and cloudless. I said, *-Xan? Are you there?* There was still no hint of his presence in my mind.

I wondered where Tobin was and what he was doing. There was still the ring and clank of a distant clash, and shouting. There must have been quite a few R’gin around, to still be engaging the king’s men. If I’d managed to persuade Xan to bring us directly here, perhaps there would have been fewer. Perhaps Tobin was dying right now because I failed to control a ghost.

No. I wasn’t going to picture Tobin dying or even admit that he could. He was perfect and immortal and was even now smiting the king’s enemies, after which he would return to me and... Something scraped over rocks, down and to my right. Tobin had ridden off to the left.

I froze, trying not to even breathe. Cricket seemed to catch my mood and raised his head, flicking one ear back and forth uneasily.

The sounds came again, louder. And then I barely caught a voice, in modern *r’ginian*, saying, “*fan out, clear it and go down...*”

Shit! Giving orders meant there was more than one man, and I had no illusions about taking on even one. Maybe they wouldn't find me. But Cricket was awfully big. My safe niche felt like a trap. The sounds grew louder. I slid off Cricket's back, squeezed between him and the rocks, and glanced around wildly.

The hillside was littered with rocks and trees, and plenty of places to hide. But as the sounds increased, they suggested several men on horses. Could I hide that well? My fear rose, echoed inside me, a drumming in my head that made it hard to hear and almost impossible to think. I looked around frantically. Behind me, a cliff face reared another hundred feet up to the rock pinnacle. It was steep, but rough, with hand- and foot-holds aplenty. Flatlanders never looked up.

With a touch of apology on Cricket's shoulder for leaving him, I kicked off my boots and wriggled out of the niche. The R'gin wouldn't hurt the horse. Although they'd probably steal him. My stomach lurched, and my pulse sped still faster. I told myself to take a breath, be calm. Tobin would just have to steal him back. At the base of the cliff I paused, but the sounds of the R'gin in the trees below spurred me on. I began to climb.

It was a challenge with my hand. I couldn't grab the handholds properly. But fear drove me upward. I would find a way. I had to. I could jam my curled fingers into gaps in the rock, and apply pressure at just the right angle to keep them there. It worked, if I chose my spots carefully. Yes. There, and there. I was doing it! Despite the danger, I began to feel an exhilaration in the climb. My bare toes were soon sore and bleeding, but they found their way from one outcropping to the next almost without thought. I was fifteen feet up before I knew it. Twenty feet. Twenty-five. Thirty. Thirty-five.

Past my braced feet, I saw motion. I froze again, plastered against the rock. A brief flash of dark armor, a man's shoulder, alien in its details, moved below me. I was out of his line of sight, but a sitting duck for arrows, should any of them actually look up. There was an outcropping to my left, with a dark sliver of shadow beside it. A deep fissure in the rock, almost a chimney although it petered out barely twenty feet higher. That might hide and shelter me. Thank the Skygod it was to the left, because I needed all the strength of my good

fingers to pull me sideways across the rock. I jammed my scraped right hand into a narrow fissure, torqued it to the side, and swung a foot over.

Inch by painful, slow inch, I moved into that shadow. I found places to put my feet, enough support to take the strain off my tiring arms. I pressed my back to the stone behind me, worked out the most comfortable positions to hold onto, and took a slow, steadying breath. And looked down over my shoulder.

A shout from below startled me, but luckily I was well braced in my niche. A R'gin came into view, tugging Cricket out from between the rocks. I bit my lip hard. The horse would be fine, even though he was fighting the rough pull on his bridle. And thank the Earthmother I'd moved to safer ground when I had the chance. The R'gin soldiers scattered, searching, but sure enough, not one ran his eyes up the near-vertical cliffside. I set my feet more comfortably, to wait. I wished I could give my left hand a break, but didn't dare. I did slide my right hand out of its crack and flexed the elbow for a moment. Using it that way to climb was the most useful thing I'd done with the damned thing in months, but it ached in unfamiliar ways.

Below me the R'gin were still failing to find the owner of that fine horse. They gathered for a discussion in hushed whispers too low to make out. I saw six of them, but thought I heard others moving downslope. They were all lean, wiry men with smooth beardless faces and darkened armor. The horses were dark too, blacks and two bays without white markings, sleek-coated and smaller than Cricket.

There was a sudden clash of noise on the hillside. I heard shouts, and the ring of metal. The men below me raised their heads, and then whirled. A group of our soldiers charged out of the trees, weaving through the boulders at a gallop. The R'gin met them, swords swinging. The bulk of the battle heaved and roiled, in and out of my range of view, men and horses jostling. The sounds were loud and yet thinned and attenuated by the air below me. I saw a R'gin fall from his horse, saw one of our soldiers slumped over his saddlebow, blood on his back.

I felt detached, most of my attention focused on remaining still and bracing myself on the rocks. The sounds were moving off a bit. Below me, Tobin suddenly came into view at a gallop. He reined Dark in on his haunches, staring into my empty hiding place between the boulders. He hissed what was probably a curse, and looked around wildly. He too never looked up.

Tobin turned Dark slowly, his eyes scanning the ground, and the spaces between and under the giant boulders on the hillside. I hesitated, not wanting to attract attention yet. The fighting clearly wasn't yet over. As I watched, I saw an unmounted R'gin soldier pull himself up onto the large boulder behind Tobin, holding a short sword. From the way he moved, I thought his leg pained him, but he was alert, the hilt steady in his hand. Slowly and silently, the R'gin slithered forward over the stone's massive flat top toward Tobin.

I could call out. But Tobin would probably look up my way, which would distract him and put his back to the R'gin even more. I needed to throw something, a stone, to guide his attention. It was doable. Probably not to hit the R'gin, but to at least turn Tobin that way, to warn him. I could jam my right hand in again and let go with my left, grab a flake of stone and, and...

The knowledge of how to brace my useless, stupid, fecking right hand fell away from me. I felt a *presence* withdraw from my mind. I found myself high up on a *fecking cliff*, clinging on for dear life. Alone and up in the air crazy, unbalanced, frozen and useless, with Tobin *about to die down there*...

-Xan! Dammit, Xan!

-Perhaps this is the moment I prayed for. His voice was dispassionate. *-Not the knowledge of the place where the men issued forth, but this moment, when a flatlander needs my help to save another, and I can deny it.*

-Help him! Show me how to help him! I was too terrified, watching the R'gin below sliding into position behind Tobin, to even care that Xan was still there in my head. He could stay, could have all of me, if he'd just let me warn Tobin. *-All of me, forever. Whatever you ask. Help him!*

Below me, Tobin turned Darkwind in another slow circle. The R'gin flattened himself to the rock, waiting. Tobin's gaze didn't rise. He was looking

for me, no doubt assumed that with my hand, I'd never have been able to climb. *Without someone guiding each move.*

Tobin completed his circle, turning his back again to the R'gin. The man on the rock drew himself forward, raising his blade, leg-muscles bunched under him to leap. My heart tried to beat itself out of my chest, and my vision blurred. Tobin would die, and then I would fall. By then it wouldn't matter. I bit back a sob. That bastard Xan wouldn't hear me cry. Maybe I'd come back and haunt the mother-raping mountain man until the ends of time for this...

My right hand slammed into a crack with enough force to break a knuckle. I didn't even feel the pain. My left hand let go of its grip, reached out, and plucked a loose flake of shale from the cliffside like a man picking a flower in his familiar garden. I threw the shard out and down, with aim I never in my life possessed. It struck the R'gin on the arm, before clattering to the stone. His startled movement scraped his boots on the boulder, and Tobin whirled and pulled Dark up on his hind legs.

The R'gin couldn't halt his leap. He crashed against Dark's raised shoulder, instead of Tobin's unprotected back. Dark lashed out with his hooves, and Tobin's blade flashed. Both men yelled. There was blood running down Dark's neck, but Tobin struck again, and again, and the R'gin fell flat, and lay still. Tobin stood in his stirrups, blade raised, looking around, finally looking up. "Lyon!"

I had to clutch at the stone with both hands again, gritting my teeth at the pain in my finger. I couldn't wave. I could hardly breathe. So at first he missed me, in my stone shelter. But the second time he searched the cliff-face, I moved my elbow just enough. I saw him catch the motion.

He rode Dark over right underneath me. It was harder to see him there, but easier to hear.

"You crazy man." His voice echoed my relief. "What are you doing up there?"

"Hiding?" I said it thinly, but he caught the words.

"Good thought. Interesting choice of a hiding place."

“People don’t look up.”

“I certainly didn’t.” He hesitated. “Are you going to come down?”

“Almost certainly.” Then I added in bitter honesty, “One way or the other.”

“You climbed up there all right.”

“Well, yes. But I had help. And down is harder, I think.” Especially if Xan left me to my own devices.

“Help? You...?” I heard his voice change. “The ghost isn’t gone.”

“Not yet. Fortunately.” I tried to make it sound light, and indeed I would forever be grateful. But promises made in a life-or-death moment are harder to keep in the stillness of the aftermath.

“Goddess, Lyon. What can I do?”

“Watch your fucking back, until I can get down and do it. There were a bunch of those bastards roaming about.”

“True. I think we got most of them. Obviously not all. Maybe you should stay there, until I get some company to guard you. Can you do that? Just stay safe there?”

“Probably.”

“And will... will the ghost help you down?”

Good question. I stayed silent. Tobin stared up at me for a long time, his gaze intense and worried. Trying to look down over my arm at him was too hard on my neck, or maybe on my heart, so I turned my eyes to the rock in front of me. Eventually he said again, “Just stay put. I’ll bring help.”

I heard him ride off.

I turned my attention to the cliff face. How hard could it be? I just had to retrace my steps. I’d come up here fast and easily, well, sort of easily. Surely I could do the reverse. I pulled my aching hand out of its crack, and tried to remember where I’d put it before that. That little ledge thing? It didn’t look safe enough. My left fingers were clenched white on the stone and I wasn’t sure I’d ever have the nerve to let go.

-You have to read the stone. Xan sounded like Meldov in a pedantic mood.
-The shape, the cracks, see where the shadows mark depth. Flow across the stone like water.

I laughed bitterly. *-Waterfall, you mean.*

-You won't fall.

-Will you guide me down then, to keep this body intact?

-I'll guide you. Do you wish to wait for your stallion man to return?

-Goddess, no. If I fell, I didn't want Tobin to see it. Bad enough for him to pick up the pieces afterward. And every minute that passed made me shakier.

-Very well then.

The climb down turned out to be far harder than up. One move at a time, Xan guided me in placing a foot, and then a hand. Jamming my right hand correctly was frustrating agony. Over and over, Xan said sharply, *-No! You're not braced right.*

What felt like hours later, and less than halfway, I snarled *"Just take over, damn it! Just do it!"*

-I can't.

-The hells you can't. You did on the way up.

-I didn't. I whispered to you, guided you, yes. You felt my reactions—relief whenever I saw a move was well done, concern when I feared disaster. And you were focused on climbing and followed each detail, since you thought it was unsuspected skill. But I can't move a muscle of one of your fingers on my own.

-Well, feck it. I wasn't sure how I actually felt about that, or even whether I believed it. I'd have jumped for joy, I suppose, if I hadn't still been twenty feet up above a field of boulders. I tried to reposition my hand instead.

At some point I became aware that there were people below me. I couldn't look down. The absence of arrows suggested it wasn't the R'gin, but even if it had been, the minutes of clinging that I had left in me were dwindling. My world narrowed down to the face of the rock, and Xan's steady voice. *-To the*

left, a hand's breadth. Down a hair more. There. Brace your toes further right. Now the left hand. Lean.

I eased myself down the rock, inch by inch, and didn't fall.

Eventually Tobin's voice said, "I'm going to touch you."

It barely penetrated my concentration, but his hand on my right calf almost made me fall. He guided my foot lower to another outcropping. Then my left foot. And then as I slid my left hand downward, his palm braced my butt. The relief made me sob. But I didn't fall backwards onto him as I longed to. Tobin had been catching and propping me up for too long. I was going to come back to him this time with both my own feet on the ground.

The last moves were fast and rough, and perhaps his grip did help. But finally I stood on flat stone with both feet. I turned.

Tobin grabbed me and wrapped me tight against him, knocking the breath from my chest. "Holy Bian," he groaned against my cheek. "When I saw them leading Cricket with an empty saddle... and then the cliff."

My arms were too sore to even raise them. I leaned against him. "I was safe. You were the one with a R'gin behind him with a sword. And with..." I leaned back to get a better look. "Tobin, you have blood in your hair, and on your jacket. How bad is it?"

He didn't ease off enough for me to see much. "Mostly not mine. A slice on my shoulder, maybe. It doesn't matter."

"The hells it doesn't." I tried to shove him away. "Let me see how bad it is, hero-man."

I think even then he wouldn't have let go, but the king rode up, with his guardsmen behind him. "Tobin, we're mopping up now. How's Lyon?"

"I'm fine, Your Majesty," I said. *And able to speak for myself, thank you.* Although I didn't say that aloud. "Did we get here too late?"

"Not on your life." He gave me a tired but exultant grin. "About fifty of their advance party had come through. They weren't even set up in their positions yet when we rode in on them. We caught another fifteen or so before

they realized we were waiting for them. The bulk of the Prince-Regent's army is now down in that tunnel, trying to turn themselves around." His grin got wider. "In the dark, after hours, maybe days, of walking. With tired spooked horses, and lanterns running low on oil, I'd bet."

"So it was worth all this?"

"Absolutely. Another two days, and we'd have had thousands of enemies in these hills, maybe more men than I have with me. Even a few hours more and they'd have had their scouts out to protect the beachhead. We'd have lost a lot of men, driving them back. Of course, once we knew they were coming, the attack became likely to fail, but this way saved hundreds of lives on both sides. We've got archers set up across from the waterfall now, and all along the little crevasse that leads from behind it out to the valley. That terrain works in our favor now. They're bottled in and they know it. It's over."

I sighed, and let my eyes close for a moment. Tobin alive. Hundreds of men. Worth it.

Tobin said, "Lyon needs rest and, um, a consultation with the sorcerers."

I shook my head. I didn't really want to talk to those old men. But the king and Tobin were speaking rapidly, spilling all my secrets like marbles from a pouch, strewn across the ground. And I was too tired to pick them up. I heard, "...still in his head... was possessed before... ghost.... wraith... maybe affected... sunrise."

I bestirred myself enough to knee Tobin's thigh and say, "Big mouth."

He turned his attention to me. "What? Oh, I'm sorry. But it's the king. He needs to know."

"Not *all* my secrets." There was darkness that was no one's business but my own. I couldn't remember now how much Tobin knew of it.

"Not all, I swear. But enough to get that ghost out of you, goddess willing."

"I guess." I sat abruptly on the ground, sliding out of his surprised hold. "I'll wait here while you figure it out."

Tobin knelt behind me. “Do you need to lie down? Are you hurt?”

That reminded me. “No, you are. Go get a medic to look at it.”

“It’s not important.”

The king said sharply, “Tobin?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you wounded?”

“A scratch, sir.”

“Well, get it seen to. And Lyon’s hand too. Then mount up and we’ll head home. We’ll consult with Firstmage on the situation with the ghost.” He whirled his horse away and rode off.

Tobin gave a short laugh, and took my battered hand in his. “And I didn’t even see this. Come on, let’s get us both to the medic as my king commands.”

“It’s a good thing you listen to someone,” I grumbled. Together, we got ourselves up off the ground and went in search of someone with a medic’s white tunic to see to our hurts.

CHAPTER NINE

I'd have been pacing around the room, except I was far too exhausted. I lay on the bed and let Tobin do it for me.

Tobin said, "So you thought the ghost left when the enchantment broke, but he was still in there. *Is* still there."

"Yep." We'd been through this a dozen times. At least.

"But he doesn't control you. Not really."

"Not at all. So he says." Who knew? Could I really have just been following his directions on that fast smooth ascent? Xan had been silent since getting me off the cliff wall, but I hadn't asked him anything more either. I wasn't sure I wanted the answers. What was my consent to his possession worth, in this situation? Had my impulsive offer on that cliff bound me to him, or him to me, or neither one? I hadn't told Tobin about that part.

"And it doesn't..." Tobin came and sat on the side of the bed, looking at me. "It doesn't *hurt* you?"

"No."

"But he hears us talking."

"He doesn't speak the language, remember? That's what got me into this mess in the first place."

"No, it's not. I did. If I hadn't ridden out to fetch you..."

"Then I might well be already dead." I took Tobin's forefinger, and ran it along those straight scars that lined my wrist above my bandaged hand. "Remember? I'd been locked in my own version of safety so long, I was seeing only one way out. I regret nothing." Almost nothing.

"You said you weren't trying to kill yourself."

"I wasn't trying. But I still might have succeeded." I could remember the seductive darkness of it, the feeling of controlling one vital thing in my life, the pleasure-pain of skin parting under the blade, as that first drop of the rest

of my life rolled free. Now, deep in my mind, I felt Xan stir uneasily. *-Don't worry, I told him. -I've found something better.*

Tobin took my face between his hands and stared into my eyes. "That's over with though, right? You're going to make every effort to live for me?"

"I promise."

He leaned forward and kissed me warmly, then hesitated. "Does he feel that? What we do together?"

"I guess so."

-He kisses well, for a man.

-Don't do that.

-What?

-Talk about him. Or him and me. At all.

-You needn't fear I want him myself. I was always one-souled, and then two-souled with Tia.

-Either way, it's private.

-Very well.

Tobin was eyeing me. "Was that a conversation with Xan?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He thinks you're sexy," I said provocatively.

"Oh. Um." He looked nonplussed. For once I'd shut Tobin up cold.

I closed my eyes, although my brain was still racing. "I'm going to sleep until the sorcerers come up here."

Whenever that might be. We'd arrived back at the tower to discover that Firstmage was dead. He'd simply fallen over onto the working, halfway through the morning. Which explained why the thing failed. His colleagues were busily trying to figure out if the working killed him, or just strain and old age. And if it was in fact the sorcery, then what went wrong and how to fix it.

Until they thought they had some answers, I was “resting”, which technically meant confined to our room under guard. That was fine with me. I kept discovering whole new levels of exhaustion. Maybe I’d write a treatise on the topic someday.

At some point, my lie became truth and I slept. I woke with a start, thinking I’d heard thunder, and laughter. But the only real sound was someone knocking on the door. Tobin rolled away from my side, where he’d apparently been lying, and went to answer it. I’d expected the King’s Mages, but instead it was the king himself.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course, sir.”

Behind him the captain said, “I don’t think this is wise until your sorcerers examine him.”

King Faro said over his shoulder, “I’ll take that under advisement.” He stepped into the room and closed the door on the captain.

Tobin said mildly, “He’s only looking out for your safety, sir. It’s his job.”

“I’m aware of that. Sometimes he needs to have a little faith though.”

Tobin’s lip quirked. “In you or in me?”

“All three of us.” He pulled up a chair at my bedside, and waved Tobin back onto the bed. “Hello, Lyon, how’s the hand?”

I cleared my throat and sat up against the headboard. “Fine, Sire. I mean, it’s broken, but nothing that won’t heal.”

“That’s good.”

There was an awkward silence. King Faro added, “The Crown is well aware of the debt We owe you, Sorcerer Lyon.”

Tobin muttered something very softly about, “...stick up your butt.”

I was apprehensive, but King Faro laughed. “I miss you when you’re not around, Tobin. I really do. But I was trying to offer Lyon the protection and gratitude of his king.”

“Then you could try saying thank you.”

King Faro smacked Tobin’s shoulder, but gave me a warmer smile. “Thank you, Lyon. Is there anything that I can do for you?”

I tried to imagine it. Fix my head? He was no sorcerer. Make Tobin resign from the Voices, or post him to my remote farming village? Where he would no doubt go crazy in a week? Anyway, as long as Xan was in my mind that was irrelevant. “I can’t think of anything, Sire.”

“How refreshing.” He shrugged. “Maybe it will come to you. Secondmage and Thirdmage are still down in the workroom, muttering and pacing about. But they said to tell you, either way, they want you down there before sunrise.”

“All right.” I’d lost track. “How long?”

“Two hours now.”

That soon? More of the night had passed than I’d realized. “Have they said what might happen then?”

“Not in detail. I know they intend to do something to end the transference.”

Tobin said, “Without killing Lyon in the process.”

“Of course. I gather an enchantment that keeps working after it’s broken is a big puzzle. No doubt, Sorcerer Lyon, you’d understand them better than I.”

“If they were even talking to me about it.”

“Ah.” King Faro looked brighter. “That I can do. Order them to include you in the work. Would you prefer that?”

My first impulse was to shout yes. The thought that two other people were going to determine my fate in arcane ways without consulting me made me want to scream. At the same time, I had no illusions about our relative talents and experience. Having to explain everything to me might slow them down. I let my good sense prevail. It helped that what I wanted most was to spend the next two hours with Tobin. “If you could just tell them that once they decide, I want the whole final working explained to me, in every detail, before they perform it.”

“I’ll do that.”

Tobin said, “Any new word from the coast?”

“Oh, yes. Got another bird. There’s serious fighting. General Estray is doing well, though. If we’d split the forces evenly, or had not had warning, it might be different. But the extra archers give him enough strength to keep the R’gin pinned on and near the beaches. He expects they’ll eventually give up and retreat.”

“Especially since their second front has failed.”

“Yes. Although they probably don’t know that yet. Communication is all.” He reached out and tapped Tobin’s badge of office. “Back when mages could do that kind of work, a man’s words could be heard across the country. It must have been nice. Instead of relying on riders and carrier-birds.”

“If uncanny,” Tobin said, and it made me laugh.

The king glanced at me, and then as if deliberately distracting me, mused, “I’ve always wondered why so much has been lost.” I could have told him it was the subject of fruitless debate whenever two sorcerers got together. Why the physical magics had vanished from the world, leaving only the command of the dead behind. He said, “Talking with Xan reminded me of how devastating the Plague was. I wondered if that perhaps made the NaR’gin deliberately close and hide the tunnel—perhaps they covered it up and hid it on the R’gin end so men here couldn’t bring the really lethal version of the sickness back home?”

Tobin said, “Maybe. It might have been deliberate for that reason. A sick man wouldn’t survive the long voyage by ship, or weeks through the mountain passes, to bring the Plague with him. Maybe they thought to bottle it up here. Or even thought that the tunnel caused it.”

“There’s a small chance it might have,” I pointed out. “We don’t yet know if that tunnel was made and maintained by magic. Or why the Summer Sickness suddenly became the Plague. Maybe the tunnel magic acted on the illness in the soldiers passing through, strengthened it somehow.”

“Gods.” The king looked stricken. “I hope it wasn’t that. We just had eighty men come through there. What are the chances none of them was sick with anything?”

I shook my head, and gave an unfortunate snicker. “Another nice conundrum to set to your sorcerers.”

“Not funny,” the king protested.

“No. But we can hope it’s not true.” Unlike the millennium old ghost inside me. I said, *-Xan, was there true magic in the world, when you were alive?*

Any hope he wasn’t still around disappeared when he said immediately, *- Yes. Spells for finding and keeping things, spells to warn of enemies approaching. But our witchmen said it was nothing compared to what had been possible generations before. They said the magic was fading from the land.*

-Did you ever actually see anyone work a spell?

-I knew a man who could find water with a forked stick. I don’t know if it was true magic, but it seemed so. Our witchmen used spells to keep the herds safe. But we still lost a kid to predators now and then. They said nothing was perfect. Mostly, the witchborn spoke with our ancestors, for wisdom and help.

I refocused my eyes to see the king watching me. “Xan says the magic was fading even in his time. So it wasn’t all due to the plague.”

He nodded. “It must be interesting, to talk to someone so old. To hear about those times first-hand.”

“Yes.”

“I have an itch to set a real historian on you, to ask questions until morning comes.”

I recognized the impulse, but said, “I’d rather you didn’t.” If my last hours were coming, it should have been gratifying to spend them adding to human knowledge. But I had other wishes.

He shrugged. “I don’t have one handy anyway. And most of the burning questions the palace historian spoke of in my lessons were about the settled lands, and not the mountains.”

Tobin said, “Sire?”

The king turned, startled by the formality. “Yes?”

“Would you tell your sorcerers that if this process will harm Lyon, in any way, I’d rather have the ghost around forever. Much rather.”

“I’m not sure that’s a choice.” The king turned to me. “What about you, Lyon? Could you live like this forever?”

I hesitated, and asked Xan, *-Did I bind myself to giving you a place forever in my body, when I was desperate there on the cliff?*

-You offered. I didn’t accept it. I’m not sure I could. I feel very stretched and thin.

-You let me save Tobin. Helped me.

-Not because of your offer. Only because you love him, and I would not see that end. The hate was finally burned out of me, and I let it go.

-Thank you.

-Each moment of love in the world lifts us all up. Any kind of love. I miss my Tia. Very much now.

-Perhaps you’ll see her again when you go.

-That would be a true blessing of the Skygod.

I reached out and put my palm on Tobin’s cheek. His stubble rasped my skin. I felt Xan notice the texture of it, with a little hitch of surprise from a man used to a woman’s smooth face. He was a good man, but... I couldn’t bear it. I said, “I want the ghost gone from my head. One way or the other.” I didn’t move my hand from where it lay.

The king said, “I’ll leave you for now. Someone will fetch you early enough for a full explanation, before the working of the new enchantment begins.”

I didn't even hear him open the door, because Tobin turned his head, and pressed a kiss to my palm. "What now?"

"Let me hold you," I said. "I can't do much more, or won't, not with him in my head. But let me put my arms around you."

"Gladly."

We lay down again, fully clothed, and Tobin came into my arms. I found a way to hold him that kept my bandaged, throbbing hand clear. Not that the pain really mattered now, but it was a distraction. Fortunately one I had years of practice at ignoring. I laid my cheek on the pillow, facing him. He kissed me slowly, and looked into my eyes. "We'll have lots of time, after today. We'll go slowly, get to know each other as grown men without a crisis blowing down our necks."

"Yes." I explored his mouth. Xan was silent and still. The bad hand was nothing. I could focus only on Tobin, on the soft slide of his tongue, the little gap in his teeth, the sweet stretch of his lip, taken in a gentle bite.

He said, "Come back to Riverrun. I'll show you the palace and the grounds. The libraries. There are three of them. You'll enjoy the libraries."

I licked his neck and the angle of his jaw, loving the drag of his unshaven skin over my tongue. "I can't live there though. Not yet. I'm better, gods and goddess, miles better than I thought I would ever be. But it's still too many people."

"I know. We can explore it at night, when all the world's asleep. And then I'll take you home."

It made such a nice fantasy. For right now I'd go along with it. We had two hours. "You'll come visit me in my house. I'll learn to bake you cakes."

Tobin laughed. "Don't strain yourself."

I said in a hurt tone, "You think it'll be hard for me? I'll have you know I'm a decent cook."

Tobin nuzzled against my neck. "I won't be visiting you for your cakes. I'll bring some from town."

“Five days stale,” I teased. But immediately my heart ached at the reminder. Five days out and five days back. How often would he come?

“You could move closer,” he said. “We can look for a place.”

“Yes.” I could do that. Surely I could. My stone walls had saved my sanity, but there were other solid houses out there. “Something similar. Something safe.”

“Ah, Lyon.” He kissed me, feverishly and then gently. “I hate that you still need a place to feel safe.”

“I’m just glad if I can find one,” I said softly. “For a long time, nothing felt safe. Not for a moment.”

He wriggled carefully out of my arms, to take me in his. “Let me...” He pulled me in tighter, throwing a leg around my hips too, as if to engulf me. “Does it feel worse again now, with Xan in there?”

“Well, it’s not better. It’s different. It’s, it’s not the same.” Xan had not compelled me to do anything. Xan didn’t feel hungry for my life. But he was alien and in my head and I couldn’t get him out. I COULDN’T GET HIM OUT.

At first, I didn’t realize I was fighting Tobin, until a guard shouting, “What’s wrong?” startled me from my blind panic. I was still on the bed, still wrapped in Tobin’s grip, with my eyes squeezed shut. Tobin said fiercely over my shoulder, “Just a nightmare. Close the door.”

I froze, still as a rabbit under the hawk’s hunt, until the door clicked shut. Then I slumped, all of a heap. Tobin rocked me against him. “Did I hurt you?” He reached for my right wrist to rub it with his thumb. “Sorry, so sorry, I shouldn’t have said it. I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

I shook my head against his shoulder. When I could speak past my gasping breaths I said, “S’all right. Not your fault.”

“Another hour, beloved. Another hour and he’ll be gone. I swear. I’ll *make* them do it.”

I imagined Tobin with drawn sword, compelling the King's Mages to fix me, and chuckled weakly. Although... "What did you call me?"

He kissed my eyelids, and when I opened my eyes he was gazing into them from inches away. "Too soon, I know. But someday, when we're free of ghosts and armies and invasions and magic tunnels, I'll call you that again."

I kissed him to silence him. An hour was already too far to look ahead. I took two more slow, steady breaths, and gave every scrap of my attention to kissing Tobin. Kissing was pure and simple, untainted, warmth and need. The wraith, for all its foul desires, had never... I looked deep in his eyes, and kissed him some more.

The workroom was well lit, and no doubt was actually warm enough. The king sat in his chair in his shirtsleeves looking comfortable. It was only in my mind that frigid air pooled around my feet on the threshold, sucking the heat from my flesh. It was only imagination to hear whispers, and see shadows dancing in the corners.

Tobin entered slightly ahead of me, and looked around before stepping aside to let me in. The two remaining King's Mages stood in front of a new working sketched out on the floor. This one had been scaled back down, not just from star to square but to a triangle with inscribed circle, meaning just two working points for sorcerers. I frowned. It wasn't that I wanted to be part of another working, pretty much ever. But at the same time, I hated the thought of being a passenger in one of theirs.

Secondmage said, "Ah. There you are." As if we hadn't followed right on the heels of the guard who summoned us. He gave the king a small bow. "We will explain the basics, Your Majesty. Then if Sorcerer Lyon has more technical questions he can ask them."

"Go ahead."

"Put simply, the problem is that we have a ghost who has taken up residence in a living person. The spell structure intended to keep him there failed with the death of Firstmage, and yet the ghost remained. We speculate

that it was the pressure of daylight around the subject that prevented the ghost from escaping.”

“His name is Sorcerer Lyon,” Tobin growled. “Not *the subject*.”

Secondmage gave him a small nod. “My apologies, Voice Tobin.”

I thought it would have been nice if he’d apologized to *me*, but I didn’t want to slow down the proceedings.

“In any case, Your Majesty, we speculated that the onset of night might cause the ghost to leave. However that didn’t happen.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “Correct?”

“He’s still here,” I said shortly.

*-Someday he’ll be stuck with his face twisted that way, Xan said dryly. -
What does he say?*

For once, I was on the side of the tribesman. *-He thought the night might call you forth from my body, but it didn’t. Could you go now, if you chose?*

-No. I’ve tried. I wouldn’t stand between a man and his lover for hours, if I had a choice.

-Not even to remain in flesh?

-I’m tired, young man. I’ve seen and felt enough. But I have no idea how to begin to leave. I have no form but yours.

“He’s still here,” I repeated. “He’ll leave if he can, though.”

Secondmage’s expression wasn’t one of belief, but he let my statement stand. “We have concluded that the death of Firstmage was natural and not a result of the working. It was a cause, and not a consequence, of our current difficulties.”

“But you have an answer?” the king asked.

“We hope so. What we intend to do is to set up a summoning for Chief Xan with Sorcerer Lyon inside the circle.”

“Inside!” I couldn’t help exclaiming. “A sorcerer never steps inside the circle during a summons. It invites... contact.”

“Well, yes, normally. But first of all, we will be the sorcerers guiding the summoning. You will not be part of the call, but only hold the focus, the necklace. And then, Chief Xan is already inside you. So the harm that could result is minimized.”

“Minimized.”

“Well, this particular spell structure is new to us. Possibly there are books back in Riverrun in our working libraries that might offer alternatives, but here we must work with what we know. There are no guarantees.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait, then?” King Faro asked. “See if daybreak does anything. If not, then ride back and consult the libraries?”

“We thought of that.” Secondmage’s superior tone really invited a violent response. I clenched my fist, and pressed my bad hand against my thigh. “Our investigation of the existing spell-remnants showed a strong probability that if we don’t separate Chief Xan from Sorcerer Lyon before the end of the original span, meaning sunrise, then we may not be able to do it at all. Instead of separation, the rising of the sun is likely to complete a binding.”

“How sure are you?” I demanded. “That sounds like a strange outcome.”

“We will of course show you the energy calculations. It’s a rebound effect from the breaking of the original binding.”

“Show me,” I insisted.

Secondmage heaved a barely-concealed sigh, but gestured to Thirdmage, who brought over their working notebook. He went through the logic symbols with me, showing where they thought the binding had inverted with Firstmage’s death. I wasn’t skilled enough to have made that conclusion, but once shown the flow chart, I couldn’t argue with it either.

“Satisfied?” Secondmage asked.

“I see the possibility,” I admitted.

“Our plan is to perform a summoning, slightly modified, to call the ghost already inside your body, and then have you toss the focus through the circle

to the usual balance point. You *can* toss a necklace into a square of floor accurately with your existing hand?”

I gritted my teeth.

Tobin said, “He hit a R’gin with a rock while clinging to a cliff-face forty feet in the air.”

Secondmage inclined his head. To Tobin. *Again*. Feck it, I was going to surprise the bastard somehow if it was the last thing I did. Of course, in this situation it might be.

“Once the focus leaves the circle we anticipate that the ghost will be forced to manifest within the circle as usual, outside of Sorcerer Lyon’s person. At which time we will banish and close the summoning. The banishment should get rid of the ghost but should not affect a living person.”

“Should,” Tobin said.

“Yes. This is all theoretical. But I assure you that I have an excellent grasp and decades of training in the theory of summoning.”

“And yet you’ve never come across this before.”

“Transference is rarely practiced, due to the complexity and energy control needed. A sorcerer dying during a working is even more rare. The two together? Well, it may have an historical precedent, but I haven’t heard of one.”

I asked, “What about just the closing and banishing with a person in the circle? Has that been done before?” Clearly, Meldov had only touched on the basics with his “never, ever do this” lecture. I had visions of my spirit being sent elsewhere by the banishing, while my body fell over uninhabited.

“The technique has been used for the wraith-ridden. That’s the source for the template we’re using.”

“And did it work?”

“If you can get the spirit out of the person, yes. That’s more difficult with a wraith than a ghost, of course, since they can compel their host not to remove the focus. It’s not unknown to have to weaken and then bind the subject in the

circle, wait until the host collapses and hope that the focus for the wraith rolls free, clear enough to be reached from outside the circle.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“You can dismantle the working without banishing and try again. Or just perform banishment and closure.” He looked slightly uncomfortable.

“Which does what?”

“Well, if the wraith is still within the host, it kills the host. But it does banish the wraith.”

“Lovely.”

“That hardly applies in this case. You stated time and again that Xan has no control. We’ve examined you and there’s no sign he’s one of the undead. And we were the ones who summoned the ghost originally. You only have to watch when Thirdmage cuts an opening for you to the focus point, and then toss the focus out where it belongs. It should be simple.”

Meldov had been fond of saying when you are told something is simple and obvious, start looking for the catch. But I couldn’t argue with anything Secondmage had said. “I want to see the equations. I need...” I needed to know it would work, but I was never going to get that certainty. And really, what were my choices? Refuse to let them try, and take a chance, a good chance, on being bound to old Xan forever? He was no wraith, but he was in my mind, inescapable. And he stood between me and Tobin and a future. I knew there were some people who could have a three-sided relationship. I would never be one of them. And if one of the sides was a dead man? Just no.

So it was either trust the talents of the two most capable living sorcerers in the land, or... nothing. I pressed my palm to my forehead for a moment. “Just show me how it will be done.”

Thirdmage turned to a new page in the notebook. I ran through the code and diagrams. “That’s a lot of power in the circle.”

“This is the technique used for wraiths. There has to be really good confinement. Probably not necessary in this case, for Xan, but he’s deeper in

your mind than we anticipated, and we didn't want to change the known parameters where it wasn't necessary."

"I guess that makes sense." Unlike the previous time, I wouldn't be able to just walk through this circle with a ghost in my head. Thirdmage would be cutting an opening in it briefly with his working knife to let me in, and then the focus out. I didn't like the thought that I'd be trapped in there, held at his will, even if it would be temporary and more metaphysical than physical. But I could hardly blame them for being careful. If I'd had a wraith in me, that strength of circle would have been a good thing.

I turned the page. "Wait. Here. I have to be naked?"

"Other than the necklace that's the focus, yes, of course. You'll be inside the circle during a summoning. You should have nothing on your person that might be a focus for another dead spirit. What if the cobbler who made your boots has died and lingered? Or the seamstress who stitched your drawers? It would be unfortunate if your smallclothes served to draw someone to you."

And Tobin had to snicker suggestively. Which made me laugh in the startled sorcerer's face. I would *kill* Tobin when this was done. "Sorry, Thirdmage. A stray thought. But I do see the point." I might not like standing there naked, but I'd enjoy sharing my body with a seamstress even less. A randy seamstress. I pressed my lips together. Tobin would *die*. *The dear man*.

"This part is the separation." Thirdmage pointed to the diagram. "And here the banishing and closure. You see that the working should collapse around you, taking the dead, leaving only the living with intrinsic energy signatures like this."

I could see it. I could believe it. I *would* believe it. "Yes."

"Good. We'll get set up, and you get stripped and we'll begin. There's only an hour until sunrise. Although if this works it really shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

Oh, hells, he had to say "if." I ducked my head in mute assent, and turned away. The sorcerers put their heads together, checking all the inscribed lines for precision. I turned my back on them and moved toward a corner of the

room, almost unaware of where I was going. Naked. I needed to be naked. I reached for the buttons of my jacket, and realized my hand was shaking.

“Here.” Tobin was at my side, reaching to help. “Let me. You need everything off?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“I’ll consider it practice.” He slid my jacket off my shoulders.

In my head, Xan said, *-What happens now?*

-They’ll try to separate us. Set me free and send you... back.

-Will it work?

-I certainly hope so. I paused. Where would Xan go when he was banished? I’d never seen any real answer other than “the far side of the veil” or “across the veil”, lovely meaningless euphemisms. *-Do you remember anything about where you go when you’re... not here?*

-No. You say I’ve been dead for so, so long. But when I’m with the living, all I remember clearly are the other times of summoning. A handful of snatched hours in dark places, and now one rather interesting day.

-I’m sorry. There’s no way...

-No. I meant what I said. I’m tired, and my fire is all burned out. Maybe this time I’ll cross, to somewhere.

-I hope so.

Tobin said, “Will he fight it? Try to stay in you? Do you trust him?”

“I think he’ll go. Trust? I’m not sure, but I believe him when he tells me he’s tired.” I could feel the truth of that. Xan’s hate and anger and fear and disdain had all faded into a deep sea of exhaustion. All he longed for now was rest.

“And you think those two old sorcerers have it right?”

“If they don’t, I can’t imagine who would. It looks right to me.”

Tobin pulled my shirt over my head. I shivered with the air on my bare skin. He knelt, reaching for my boots. Looking somewhere around my knees,

he said, "If there's danger... I don't mind sharing you with Xan. Even if we never, um, do anything more, I'd rather have you in my arms like we just were this last hour than lose you."

"But I wouldn't." I laid my hand on his hair. "I wish I could say that was possible, but I think if I go for much longer without being alone in my own head, I'll go crazy. Xan isn't malicious, but he is *other*. I sometimes want to claw my eyes out, to dig him from my brain." My voice was shaking by the end of that. I hadn't realized how close to the edge I was, until the words tumbled free.

Tobin took hold of both my wrists and kissed them behind the screen of my body. "Hold on. You'll be all right."

"Yes."

He let go to undo my belt. I put my hands back on his head. They felt safest there.

I was down to my smalls when the king stood and came over to us. I resisted the impulse to put my hands over my privates. He'd been a soldier; he'd seen far worse. Hells, he was going to see me completely naked in a moment, if he stayed. I said as casually as I could, "Will you watch this, Sire? Or retreat and await a report?"

He looked steadily at me. "You saw the plans. Do you think there's danger to onlookers?"

"No. Or I'd have sent Tobin away already."

"Like I'd have gone," Tobin muttered.

"Then We will stay," King Faro said. "You went through this at Our request and on Our behalf." I could hear the stately capitals in that. Although he spoiled the effect by adding meditatively, "And curiosity has always been one of my besetting sins."

Tobin stood and said, "It's not a bad thing in a leader, sir, to want to know the why of things. In moderation, of course."

“Thank you, I think.” The king held out his hand to me. “Best of luck. If there’s anything I can do to make this work better, let me know.”

There was an awkward moment, as he worked out why I was holding out my left hand, inverted, instead of my right. Then he shook it gravely.

“Think good thoughts,” I suggested. “If you happen to be beloved of a god, you might ask for a favor.”

His mouth twitched. “Sorry. A simple petition might have to do.”

“Not unless it’s to Na.” The other gods and the goddess generally had little patience with sorcery.

“All right.” He retreated back to his chair, well away from the working. His captain moved slightly ahead of him, as if he might have to fend off an attack, but the king reached out and pushed him over to the side, out of his field of view. I imagined that protecting King Faro might be a bit of a challenge.

Then I forgot about the king, because Tobin reached for the drawstring of my smalls. I looked down at his broad hands, saw his fingers fumble, surprisingly clumsy with the simple slip knot I used. “I can do that,” I said.

“Let me.” He eased it open and pushed the fabric down. I set my hand on his shoulder to step out of them.

I had a moment of a different regret as I straightened. I should have hugged him before. Now, fully naked, it was a different thing and I couldn’t do it. I gave him a smile instead and turned away. But he grabbed my arm and muttered, “The hells you do.” He pulled me close, leaning forward so only our shoulders touched. He murmured in my ear, “Don’t feck it up.” And then he let me go.

Thirddmage said, “Take off the bandages too. Better be safe.”

Silently, Tobin untied and unwound them, revealing my paralyzed and swollen hand. The curved metal brace for my finger, bent to shape by the medic when he couldn’t get my hand to straighten, had left an imprint in my wrist. I rubbed at it fitfully, feeling the ridges and thickness of the scars there. My whole hand ached badly.

I straightened my shoulders, raised my chin, and dropped my hands to my sides. My fingers brushed bare skin on my thighs, and I shivered. Xan's necklace hung heavy against my bare chest.

Secondmage said, "Let's begin." They raised the chant first, building the structures as we watched. The room fairly hummed with power. I gave Tobin one last look. His eyes were wide and dark, but steady.

After a minute Secondmage added, "Sorcerer Lyon, take your place outside the circle now and prepare yourself."

It was time to focus on the sorcery. I turned away from Tobin, and took one long slow breath, counted to three, let it out. Then another. With each breath I took a steady step toward the working. One more breath and I stepped into the focus point. I touched the necklace and looked down at the rim of the containment circle. And saw how they managed to push that kind of power into it. This circle was scribed by a metal cable, laid on the floor. The runes and lines of the charcoal working wound over and around it, but the cable drew all of my attention. It was grey steel, made of cunningly woven strands like rope, but mixed into each strand were silver-white threads of admagnium.

Thirdmage stood close by, his working knife ready. He would cut my way through the power-barrier into that circle and then those two old men would chant it closed. I'd be trapped, inside admagnium-laced steel, until someone let me out.

Admagnium doesn't alloy. It holds its properties, remaining separate, in shimmers of light within the dullness. That material was so familiar. How long... how many hours... how many days had I stared at the manacles on my wrists? They were made like this. This same blend of steel and magic, the near invisible tendrils winding around each other, admagnium seeming to flow and move, to write words that might release me, if only I could read them, if only they stopped dancing before my eyes...

I stepped back out of the focus point. "I've changed my mind."

Secondmage said, "You what?"

“I changed my mind.” I thought my voice was admirably steady. “I don’t like the chances of having this not work, after all. I can put up with having Xan around, if he doesn’t fade. Think of all the history I might learn. I can get used to it, to sharing with him.”

In my head, Xan said, *-You’re lying. What terrifies you so, that you’d rather have me around forever?*

I ignored him. “Sorry for being a bother and all. We can just put everything away.” Starting with that cable, coiled like an obscene snake to trap me.

Secondmage said, “Nonsense. Everything is prepared.”

Tobin said, “Lyon, are you sure?”

Thirdmage said, “Why?”

I turned to him, my mind racing for a way to explain without exposing myself. But... but maybe the time had come to be truthful. I could dodge around and lie, and pretend I wanted to keep Xan, but it was no doubt clear to everyone that I was simply afraid. I could make up reasons for that, in desperate search for one that didn’t brand me a simple coward. Or I could just tell the truth. I heard Secondmage huff impatiently, but Thirdmage’s expression was more curious than condemning.

I said, “I hate to be trapped. I hate to be held against my will. And it’s worse when that trap is made of admagnium and steel.”

I heard Tobin draw a sharp breath, and knew he understood me. After one nightmare, I’d told him about those manacles in more detail than I’d ever planned. He said, “Could the circle be redone without the metal there?”

Secondmage sniffed. “Not before daybreak. Come now, Sorcerer Lyon.” He gave my title a twist of scorn. “Surely you can stand inside our circle for a few minutes without breaking down.”

Had I said I would surprise him one day? Ha. He was right, I was weak. “I can’t. When you let me in and then seal the circle, seal it from the outside...” I hugged my arms around myself and shivered, naked and exposed and such a fool.

There'd been no need for admagnium in those manacles, to keep me prisoner. Iron would have held me just as well. Would I have then cowered in fear from my cooking pots?

Xan said, *-Perhaps I can steady you for this, if you let me.*

It did *not* make me feel better to have a dead man whispering in my ear. I shook my head hard.

Thirdmage asked, "What makes it hardest for you?"

"That I can't get out!" The answer was ripped from my throat.

Over Secondmage's response, Thirdmage said clearly, "What if you could?"

Secondmage and I both stared at him. He said, "What if I give you the scribing knife? You cut your way in and take it with you. You cut the opening to the focus point again when it's needed. You control it."

Secondmage said scornfully, "That's unheard of. Why do a circle like this, and then give the entity inside the ability to break it? The sorcerer controls the blade. That's nonsense, Third."

"Hardly nonsense. Usually, yes, of course we wouldn't give a wraith-ridden subject the means of escape. But Sorcerer Lyon isn't going to try to escape. He wants this to work correctly. Why not let him have the ability to do it himself?"

"And if it goes wrong, and the knife is locked inside the circle?"

"We can take the whole working down without the knife, if we must. It would be no worse than not making the attempt."

Secondmage turned to me. "Surely you see this is a poor choice. Banishment is always controlled from outside, and all the more so if there is a case of possession."

I could only shake my head. I'd been controlled. I couldn't do that again, not even when my own brain was screaming at me for being foolish and calling me every name in the book.

Thirdmage said, “If there’s only one way open, what do we lose by trying it?”

Secondmage gestured to him urgently and they retired to a corner of the room, consulting in sharp whispers. I stood where I was and looked at the working. The energy of that containment was a whole different level from any I’d done, although it rose in a wall as colorless as any other. I let my eyes glide around the diagram, noting the inscriptions, the protections, the way the energy should flow. When they raised the chant again, the rest of the spell would take shape. It was all as I had expected, except for that silver noose, waiting.

Xan said, *-I don’t know that metal. Is it truly so fearsome?*

-Only in my mind. Knowing I was wrong didn’t make it any more possible to take a step forward.

After several minutes of argument, the sorcerers returned. Secondmage said, “We have decided that there is no intrinsic reason why Sorcerer Lyon couldn’t be the one to open the circle. If that’s the only way for us to proceed.” He frowned at me. “I trust that will be enough to allay your... concerns? And you will follow directions explicitly? You do remember the procedure?”

I swallowed. My mouth was full of dust and my heart pounded, but when Thirdmage touched his short blade to the tip of his work-point, and then held it to me, hilt-first over his forearm, I took it.

He said formally, “This blade built the working, scribed the lines that bind it. This blade can force the circle to open for you.”

A sorcerer’s blade was forged new for him and tempered in the flames by him, so that no one else’s energy would be tied to it. The hilt came sweetly to my hand, and the short silver blade caught the light. I turned it over, familiar in my hand. A thought occurred, and I wasn’t delaying, or not much, when I said, “Don’t you die and become a ghost while I’m doing this.” I was only half joking. “Not while I have your knife in there.”

I expected a frown for my levity, but he said, “I’ll try not to. Your head’s already crowded.”

At least he had a sense of humor.

The sorcerers stepped back into their points. After a long, long moment I did the same. Their chant brought the power up once more. I looked at each sorcerer in turn, and when they nodded, I lifted the blade and sliced once down the side of the power-bounded space.

I directed my cut where the energy visible only to its makers must surely be, over that gleaming cable. From head height, downward, stopping only a finger's breadth above that metal boundary. Then I lowered the knife and stepped forward through that opening, naked, into the confines of the working.

It was reluctant to let me in. The power crawled over my skin, thick and clinging. But its builder's blade had demanded entrance and it let me through.

At the center I stopped and turned around slowly. From inside, power visibly shimmered in a cylinder around me, floor to ceiling. Through it, the other people in the room had a wavering unreality. The king's curious intensity, Tobin's focused attention, the guard captain's alertness, all seemed faded. The space inside the circle was the most real thing in the universe. The shining line I'd cut for access thinned, dimmed, and was gone.

I hefted the knife for a moment, feeling the hilt comforting in my hand. I wasn't trapped. I had control. I believed that. The impulse to cut again, to claw my way back out, was almost a live thing in my chest.

Xan murmured, *-Steady now.*

I held the knife, until the shape of the hilt was printed in my palm. I could do this. I would. I kept my eyes away from the circle itself, and watched Thirdmage instead.

Xan said, *-It feels different from before in here. Stronger.*

-This is a stronger design.

-Ah. I won't be sorry to leave it.

Time to continue. Daybreak was no doubt approaching. I knew what was required. Very slowly I uncramped my fingers from around the hilt, and laid the knife at my feet, the tip of the blade pointing toward the focus point. As

directed, I closed the flamestone on its chain between my left palm and right wrist, holding it steady away from my chest. I saw both sorcerers in their supporting corners take a deep breath to begin the next part, looking enviably calm and composed. Of course it wasn't their ass naked for the taking inside this circle. ...don't think about that, don't think, don't...

They took up the chant, raising more power. I tried to breathe along with it, letting the familiar words of summoning wash through me.

-It hurts. It pulls at me, but I'm already here. Xan's mind-voice was labored.

The chant built. The flamestone between my hands felt warm to the touch. Its heat radiated through my skin, built slowly higher, sparking to raw agony against my damaged wrist. I hung onto it, not wanting that heat to hit my chest if I let go. It felt like it was burning me, a familiar pain, but there was no smell of singed flesh. I did know what that smelled like. Twice in my life, I'd had the tang of my own seared meat in my nose. Once of my own accord. Once before that...

I cried out as the hurt stabbed me deep to the bone. Cried out, dropped to my knees, and closed my eyes. Deep in my mind I heard Xan shout, *-What's this?*

And in words not nearly as ancient, I heard Meldov's familiar voice say, *-Boy, what have you done?*

And then the wraith, silky smooth as butter sliding along my bones. *-Ah, yes, second chances. I adore second chances.*

I'm sure I screamed. I couldn't hear the sound. My eyes were closed, and yet I found myself in a grey misty landscape. Less than twenty feet away, every detail faded to a haze. But within that space stood three figures. Xan, in the leathers and fur I knew well, Meldov, as I'd seen him a thousand times, in the black trousers and long coat he favored, and a tall, thin man with eyes glowing red as hunger.

“No. No. No. I’m not here.” I chanted it aloud, battling the pain in my wrist to get the sounds out. “I’m not here. You’re not really here. I’m not. I’m not. You’re not.”

“Unfortunately we are, Lyon. What kind of mess have you got yourself into?” Meldov’s expression was disapproving and familiar.

I couldn’t help answering him. “Me?” I glared at him. “You’re the one who said yes to a wraith. It was you!”

“I don’t remember.” He looked around. “Where are we?”

Xan took a step toward me. “Who are these two?”

Meldov said, in the same tongue, “I’m his master.”

The wraith smiled, slow and sharp as a knife, and said, “No. In fact, I am.”

I shook, and the whole world rocked, the dry earth beneath our feet heaving and trembling with me. Meldov staggered. The motions startled me, but in a good way, making it seem like I mattered in this place.

Xan braced himself against the motion. “You both can understand me?”

The wraith said, “I have a gift of languages. I like to share it. With the *right* people.”

Xan peered more closely at him. “I know what you are. Wicked undead, creeping stain on the ancestors. Begone.”

The wraith laughed. “Creeping stain. Oh, I like that. I haven’t heard that in ages. The little witchy folk of the hills called me that. Usually before I ate them.”

“You’ll not eat me, foul blight.”

“I have no interest in you at present. You’re already dead. What I’m in the market for is a live host. And I know just the man.” It showed me its teeth.

Xan stepped between us. “Leave the boy alone.”

Meldov said, “You can’t protect the boy. No one can.”

“I’m not a boy!” Not anymore. Not for fifteen years. “And I’ll drive you all out. Out!”

They turned to me as one. The wraith just kept smiling. Meldov began to look confused. But Xan glared at me. “You must go back. Go back and tell them what happened here. Go back.”

The wraith put his arm around Meldov’s shoulders, and Meldov let it lean against him. My mentor’s expression didn’t change. His arms hung at his sides. The wraith was taller than Meldov, and it set its pointy chin on Meldov’s hair, and gave his cheek a little slap. Meldov didn’t react to either gesture. His face became steadily paler. The wraith winked at me. “He’s been fun, but I seem to have eaten him up. What a pity.”

Meldov said to me, “Boy, what have you done?” He didn’t seem to notice the undead draped against his shoulder. His voice had lost its depth, though, and his *tridescant* was flat and hard to understand.

I wrenched my eyes away to look desperately at Xan. “What do I do?”

“Go back. Go back and ask them.”

“Ask whom?” I couldn’t remember where *back* was. This place was all I knew.

“Back to the circle. Back to the sorcery, the tall, old mages.” When I shook my head slowly, Xan added, “Back to Tobin. He’s calling you. Can you hear it?”

“Tobin?”

I listened and heard something. A man’s voice, deeply familiar, calling “Lyon? Lyon? Can you hear me? Wake up. Lyon?”

I needed to close my eyes. It was hard though, with Meldov’s puzzled gaze on me, and the hot, hungry eyes of the wraith meeting mine. I couldn’t take my attention from him long enough to think. I didn’t dare turn my back on him. On *it*. Not for a moment. Never turn, never let *it* get too near.

Xan stepped in front of me, breaking the lock between my eyes and the wraith’s. “You should go back. Quickly now. I’ll stand between you and him as long as I can.”

I stared at the old hillsman. His face was weathered, his eyes deepset, his strong nose, once broken, jutted above thin lips. He was ancient and unlovely, and wonderful. “Why would you do that?”

“It can’t truly hurt me now. And I’d like to see us all go home.”

The wraith bent sideways and waved at me over Xan’s shoulder. “Hurry back now. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Xan’s growl reminded me vividly of Tobin’s. Tobin... I closed my eyes. He was still calling me, his voice getting hoarse. I ignored everything else and followed that sound, followed, until I could smell lamp oil and charcoal, and piss. I blinked my sticky eyes open.

I was lying on the stone floor in the middle of the circle, curled in a ball, clutching the necklace to my chest. I was damp and cold and stiff, and nauseous.

From somewhere, Tobin kept saying, “Lyon? Lyon? Can you hear me? Lion-boy, come on. Come on!”

I mumbled, “I’m not a boy.”

“Ah, goddess, thank the heavens.” Tobin’s voice came from behind me.

I could see the lines of a working on the floor not far from my nose. I turned over carefully, pushing myself off the stone with my good hand to sit up. There was a circle around me, up and running. I could see the shimmer, feel the hum, see, oh gods, see a metal cable that underlay it. I feared that cable, but I couldn’t remember why. My naked ass was cold on the stone, and outside the circle, just far enough not to touch its surface, I saw Tobin, and the king, and... oh, hells! I put my head in my hands, remembering.

“Sorcerer Lyon.” A voice I disliked broke through my distress. “Speak to us, now!”

“What?” I snapped.

“What happened?”

I gave myself one more moment to look at Tobin’s worried face and then turned to Secondmage. “You invoked the summoning and somehow...” My

voice broke. I tried again. “Somehow I’ve ended up with Xan, *and* Meldov, *and* the wraith.”

“You what? Who? Impossible.”

I clenched my fist in my hair. “Tell them.”

“Your imagination, perhaps. Overwrought, confused.”

“Not likely.”

“But that’s impossible.”

In my mind, I heard the wraith’s delighted laughter, and Xan’s deep voice.

“Well, they’re in there. The wraith said... it said, ‘second chance.’” I pulled on my hair. The pain was real and present, on my scalp and not somewhere off inside my mind.

“This is the same wraith that took Meldov?”

I stared at Secondmage. “You know about that?” Had I shared that secret with them? And not remembered?

“I told them,” Tobin said painfully. “I had to. You were unconscious for over ten minutes. They were trying to guess why. It seemed like the time to explain. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “It’s done. You were trying to help.” But I felt angry and very naked in every way, in front of this audience. I turned away from him and said, “Now I have all three of them in my skull.”

“But there’s no focus for them.” Secondmage leaned as close to the circle as he dared to get. “You have nothing on your person, correct? No objects beyond the necklace? No rings, toe rings, ear studs, nothing?”

“Nothing.” The wraith’s laughter was getting closer and I let go of my hair to wrap my arm around my middle. “I swear. I’m not stupid. I understood the reasoning. I have nothing.”

“It makes no sense.” Secondmage’s tone became dispassionate, like a lecturer. It made me angry, but in a way, that anger anchored me here, listening and not floating off into the grey.

“Even if the necklace had gained secondary significance for some other spirit, it can hardly have been important to Sorcerer Meldov. He didn’t visit the palace, and that necklace was locked away in one of the vaults, until we went looking for a piece of the right vintage.”

“In any case,” Thirdmage said, “We’ve used it more than once before. If it had the pull to bring in another ghost, we’d have noticed. Definitely if it could hook a revenant spirit like a wraith. We’d never have missed that.”

“It can’t be the necklace,” Secondmage concurred. “Which means you should be able to at least get Chief Xan out of your head, by sending that focus out of the circle as planned.”

“Not yet!” I pressed my arm harder against my stomach. “If any of them are on my side, it’s Xan.”

“He’s hillfolk. Surely Meldov...”

“This is Meldov’s fault in the first place! And he just stands there.” I dragged in a ragged breath. “He stands there and the wraith touches him. He lets it touch him.”

Behind me, Tobin breathed, “Oh, Lyon.”

I didn’t turn. Secondmage said, “We have to be logical about this. The laws of the working cannot be broken. There must be a focus. Something you ate...? Unlikely. You didn’t swallow a coin for luck, or any such superstitious nonsense?”

“Of course not.”

“A tattoo?” Thirdmage suggested. “Perhaps with bespelled ink? It would take a lot of ink to be a focus, but I suppose it could be done.”

“No tattoo.” I clutched my wrist. The throbbing in my broken finger was matched by the bounding heat under my fingers. “But... how about a burn? A brand?”

“I don’t see how,” Thirdmage said. “There must be a physical token to serve. A brand, even if a metaphysically significant one, has no physicality. It is only your flesh, shaped to another’s will perhaps, but not an object.”

“How was the brand done?” Secondmage asked. “Was it Meldov’s doing?”

“He was the wraith then,” I said. Secrets were a lost cause, here bound in a circle of light while the undead gibbered their amusement in my brain. “He... I don’t remember.” I tried to think back. It was hazy, unreal... the burn on my wrist, the look in the wraith’s eyes. “He pressed his thumb to my skin.”

“His *thumb*? Was it true magic then? Surely not.”

I rubbed hard across the thick irregular scars. “I don’t remember. He put his thumb there. It burned, deep and black and clear. His symbol on my skin.” I rubbed faster. “I guess I thought it was magic.”

“How about acid?”

“What?”

“Aqua regia? A solution perhaps, painted on.”

“I don’t know.”

“Did it burn, or perhaps bubble?”

“I didn’t... I don’t remember. The wraith spoke to me. It held me for a while. When I looked down at my arm, the brand was deep and set. Clean edges, but swollen around it. Like he’d set his heated seal ring there, but I saw no ring.”

“Was his hand bare or gloved? Do you remember?”

I tried hard to think. The wraith and the ghosts were silent for a moment, but they pressed against me. Hot/dry/warm/sticky/cold too much there, too close. “Maybe gloves.”

Secondmage turned to the Third. “A powdered metal solution in the acid? Or perhaps a thin carrier coin, for the edges of the burn to be sharp? The bookbinders in Anthay used to use acid stamps to mark the leather bindings of their books. It would have had to be finely judged, in the amount of acid and the delivery. Or perhaps simply a heated coin pressed deep, although that would be harder to deliver and control.”

“You think it could have been done that way?” Tobin demanded.

Secondmage said, “Show me your wrist.”

I held it up for him, all the wreckage of tight-drawn tendons and thick scars and the thin parallel lines of my despair. I had nothing left to hide now. Except maybe that knife, drawn in desperation across Meldov’s throat. That I still held back.

Secondmage peered at me through the circle. “You destroyed the markings on purpose?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I burned over it.”

“Not cut it away?”

“No.” I’d had one moment of free will, and one tool before me. How could I have known? Would it have made a difference? Could I have spared myself a decade of nightmares by cutting it free?

“That’s it then.” Secondmage looked pleased to have solved the puzzle. “I would bet that somewhere in there, under the surface scar, there’s something metallic that was used to create the burn. Something still present in your flesh and strong enough to bring Meldov to you. And the wraith followed along. Or perhaps the other way around. It makes sense.”

“So what do I *do*?”

“The only chance I can see is to do the same thing we planned for Xan. Toss the focus out to the balance point and as soon as the spirits separate from you, collapse the working. Banish them, and leave you standing.”

“But the focus is *in* me.”

“You’ll have to get it out.”

There was a moment of shocked silence all around, and then Tobin’s snarl was the loudest. “What are you saying?”

Secondmage shrugged, although I thought his attempt to look unconcerned failed. “There’s no other way. *If*, mind you, this is truth and not some crazed

fear, brought on by Sorcerer Lyon's admittedly difficult past. *We* cannot, after all, see these new spirits."

I *hated* that for just a moment everyone looked at me with speculation, even Tobin. I managed to say, "Test the power equation. You should be able to tell how much weight is in your circle, *if* you know what you're doing."

Thirdmage had the grace to look abashed, but Secondmage, damn his eyes, went ahead and pushed more power into the binding while I waited. "Well, young man," he said after a few minutes. "It seems you have indeed caught an undead spirit."

I wanted to say "*I told you so*" but I didn't have *time* for that. "So tell me again what to do."

"You'll have to locate the focus in your wrist, get it free, and get it out of the circle into the balance point."

"Cut it out of me."

"Yes, I suppose so."

To my surprise, it was the guard captain who said, "That's asking a lot. Setting a knife to your own flesh is hard. I've known hardened soldiers who let an arrowhead fester because they were shot while scouting alone and couldn't bear to cut it out. There's no way for us to help him?"

"Nothing can cross the circle right now, except in the order and the manner we've designed it for. We might kill Sorcerer Lyon, or worse yet, set loose the wraith."

"Worse yet," Tobin sneered.

I said, "Yes." Which silenced him.

They all watched as I pressed the fingers of my left hand over my wrist. I could feel the lumps and ridges, the marks of pain over pain. And in the center, as I'd always been able to feel it, the round dense scar that had been the wraith's mark. Maybe still was. I said, "If it's still there," and had to pause to fight a surge of nausea. "If it is, then why did the burning help me get free last time?"

Secondmage said, “Maybe you warped it, changed it enough to alter its function as a spell equation. Not enough to get rid of it. Does it matter right now? Time is getting shorter.”

I glanced at him, hearing strain in his voice, and saw a fine sheen of sweat on his face. I realized that holding containment on three contentious spirits, in a working designed for one calm one, was probably demanding a lot of energy. Most of which would come from him as the prime sorcerer. And dawn would be approaching outside. I picked up the knife. Put it down again. Took a fast breath.

Tobin said quietly, “At least I finally see a good side to your favorite old pastime.”

I glanced at him, startled, and he drew the tips of two fingers across his own wrist. Heat and then cold washed over me. He was right. This was nothing I hadn’t done a dozen times. Perhaps a hundred. It would just be... a bit more.

I sat up straighter, and picked up the knife. My hand was steady. I laid my wrist upon my knee, the straining tendons up, a familiar, oh so familiar pose. Slowly I breathed, centering myself in that dispassionate place where a drop of blood rolling free across my skin was art and release and opportunity, not pain. Then I set the tip of the blade at the edge of that old spot, and pressed in.

At first, I felt almost nothing. The tissue there was thick and dead and there wasn’t even any bleeding. I traced a circle around where the brand had been, wide enough to encompass it, and saw the white and purple skin part open under the blade. A second circle, and now red droplets welled behind the knife, forming a thin trickle down my hand. Still no pain.

None in my wrist. In my head though, the wraith screamed, and its voice went through my skull like jagged glass. I dropped the knife and clapped hands over my ears. It did nothing to shut out that sound. My ears grated into my skull, burrowing deep, my brain seemed liquid, churning, incapable.

“Lyon! Lyon!” Tobin’s voice cut through the sound. “Look at me. Lyon.”

I opened eyes I'd obviously shut. Tobin squatted in his familiar pose, just outside the limit of the circle. "What's wrong? Is it the wraith?"

I'd have nodded, but I thought that moving might make my head fall off. "Yes! It's shouting."

"Attacking you?"

I turned my attention inward for a moment. Closed my eyes, looked for... for Xan. On that grey plane in my head, Meldov slumped on the ground, his head burrowed in his arms, shaking like a man taking a fit. Beside him the wraith stood, head thrown back in a wholly inhuman posture, its mouth open in that scream. The sound was worse here, so loud it rang in my bones. But Xan was still on his feet, a short knife in his hand pointed at the wraith. He glanced at me and said, "*Hurry. I can hold him yet a while. Go back, now!*"

I opened my streaming eyes, and wiped them on my arm. Tobin's teeth were bared in a grimace but he kept his gaze fixed on me and didn't move. His face relaxed slightly as I shook my head. "Not physically attacking."

"You can do this. Keep going. I want the chance to be with you without an audience of three dead men."

If this failed, the three would be more than just an audience. But I tried to smile. And he had distracted me a little from the scream knifing through me. I said, "Keep talking to me. Tell me things. Tell me about your horses. Or the ocean. Something." I fumbled to pick up the knife. My fingers shook, and I was clumsy and slow, but I set it again at my arm. "Talk a lot."

It was far harder to do this with the wraith shrieking in my head. My hand trembled, and the knife slipped. I couldn't find my quiet place, couldn't make the pain and blood feel good. It just hurt. Like the first time. But I kept cutting and kept listening to Tobin, and when the wraith gave up wailing and began threatening, describing tortures, maiming and burning and rape, I tried to fill my head with Tobin saying, "He was the most willful colt I ever had. Dumped me in the mud five times before he ever let me ride the full length of the arena."

I touched something hard under my skin, and dropped the knife again. Tobin said, “Lyon? Doing all right?”

“Keep talking.” I pried under the thing in there, cutting, reckless now. It was in me. Something in me, a piece of the wraith, of the presence I thought I’d scoured and doused from my body over and over and over, day after day. IT WAS STILL IN ME! I cut deep, uncaring that the blood welled faster, flowing to the floor.

Tobin said, “Lyon, be careful. Don’t kill yourself, after all this. Lyon, please.”

I didn’t care. I could feel it coming loose. One more slice, my hand shaking, ears near to bleeding, wrist on fire. Then it came free. A small, small flap of skin for so much pain. And as it hit the floor, it flipped to show, embedded in its underside, a thin sliver of metal, fire-warped out of shape, but still recognizably, once upon a time, a circle with a feathered plume.

I sat and stared at it. So many years. So many nightmares and it had been festering inside me after all. I stared at it.

A loud scream pulled me out of that contemplation. Not from the wraith, but outside the circle. I looked up slowly, to see Tobin on his feet, yelling at me. “Lyon! Damn you, son of a weasel, listen to me! Lyon!”

“What?” I said slowly. The dark metal, the red blood, the white dead skin, drew my eye back down.

“Lyon! Keep your eyes on me, you mother-fecking bastard.”

I glanced back up. Oh, yes. Tobin. His face was flushed and red, his eyes snapping with heat.

“Good. Look away again and I’ll beat you. Now listen. You have to pick up that thing and put it in the balance point.”

I cleared my throat, twice. “I don’t want to touch it.” I swayed tiredly, started to look at down it again, but Tobin’s voice whipped at me.

“Look *up*!”

I did. He was paler now, but he gave me a nod. “Secondmage says pick it up with the tip of the knife. Bring it to the boundary. Cut the way through. Drop it out. Do it now.”

“I’m tired,” I said. My head felt thick. There were voices in there, but I’d stopped listening. Nothing much mattered, but Tobin’s voice was worth hearing. I kept my eyes on him.

“You’re bleeding,” Tobin said. “A lot. You need to do this now. You can rest afterward.”

“Promise?” I tried to smile.

“You can do nothing but sleep and eat for a week. I’ll cook for you myself.”

He looked so worried. I said, “Is that a threat?”

He snorted. “There’s my Lyon. Get that thing and get up. Now.”

It was hard but I picked up the knife, and then used it to scoop that obscene lump of flesh and metal off the stone. Two shaky steps, and I stood at the boundary of the circle. I set the thing on the floor there, and almost touched the tip of the blade to the energy. At the last minute, I paused and wiped it as clean as I could on my thigh first. Blood mixes oddly with sorcery sometimes.

Then I knelt. Tobin said, “Lyon? Keep going.”

“I am.” I cut into the barrier with the knife, not a dramatic slice at face level, but a little mousehole, right at the floor. And then with the tip of the knife, I pushed the wraith’s token to it. The thickness of the admagnium cable stopped it for a moment, the braided metal shining balefully at me, keeping the wraith inside me. *Not this time. Never again.* I lifted that scrap with the knife, flipped it through and into the balance point.

It burned me, as the focus passed through. My whole body felt dipped in fire, stretched, pulled apart. But Tobin said, “Yes!” And when I could turn my head to look over my shoulder, the wraith stood behind me, translucent and circle-trapped, with Meldov’s ghost stretched out on the floor beside it.

I fell over, turning around so fast. *Not behind me, never behind me!* The wraith smiled at me, as if it knew what I was thinking. In my head, I heard Xan say, *-Well done.*

From off to my left, Secondmage said, “Now the necklace. Quickly.”

I slid the chain of the flamestone from around my neck, and put it behind me, pushing it toward the barrier. It slid and stopped. I could feel the circle energy buzzing against my fingers. The edge of the cable marked the space. I forced my fingers along it, seeking. The hole had to be somewhere. The wraith took a step toward me and stretched out its hand. “Still a good-looking boy. We could do so much together.”

I shivered, pushing at the necklace behind my back, unable to take my eyes off that *thing*. It was Meldov, and yet not. Features like his, stretched and elongated, thin hands, long legs, burning eyes. A smile like a trapspider’s lair.

“Swiftly! Get it through.” Secondmage repeated. “I can’t hold the binding much longer.”

Tobin said fiercely, “Hurry, Lyon!”

My wrist throbbed. I laid my useless hand in my lap, and I could feel the sticky wetness of blood soaking my legs. Behind me the barrier buzzed and hummed. The opening should have been right there, right *there*, but I couldn’t feel it. The wraith’s gaze burned into me, making dark promises.

-Let me. Xan’s voice was cool wind off a glacier, dry as a stone cliff

-What?

-If you can’t turn and look, then give me leave to guide you to the opening. Though I see only with your eyes, I can feel the energy of it, better than you do, I think.

-Guide me how? I was NOT turning around.

-As we did on that cliff. Give me trust and listen to me.

Could I? Did I trust that he actually wanted his time in the living world to be over and done with? Would he guide my hand away from the opening

instead of to it? If the working collapsed now, I might be free of Meldov and the wraith, and Xan could have me forever.

I should just turn and look. Just for a moment. That's all it would take.

The wraith took another step closer. I couldn't look away. *-All right.*

I tried to relax enough to feel his whisper in my bones. That sense of rightness and wrongness as I moved. *-Left. More left. Back a bit. There. Lift it and push now.*

My hand slid, fumbled, and then found the opening. The necklace slipped through. For a moment the big gem caught on the lip, and then I gave it a firm push, and it slid out on the stone point.

This pain was familiar, welcome, the flesh-rending rip and pull as Xan left me. For just a moment I saw him, faded and thin, his lined face drawn with effort. He gave me a nod, and stepped between me and the wraith. I smelled the dank wool of his shirt and the leather of his trews. The wraith stared at him, and shouted, "What have you done?"

And then the world fell.

It filled my eyes and ears with rushing tumbling darkness, threaded through with chanted words and whips of flame. There was pressure that dropped me flat to the floor, the buffets of strong winds, coming impossibly from all directions. The wraith screamed again, vicious and shrill, but fading into an impossible distance. Meldov's voice whispered, more human than he'd sounded in a long time. "Oh? This?" And then softly, "Oh." There was one more blast of sound, but clean sound, like a waterfall crashing to the rocks below. Then the chanting stopped. There was blessed silence, cool stone against my cheek, and the smell of fresh blood, candlewax, and dry dust. Someone with a hoarse, low voice said, "All right. Now."

Tobin grabbed me and rolled me over, searching my eyes with an intense gaze. I tried to smile. For a second he returned it, and then swiftly he jerked me around like a puppet against his chest, closing his hand hard over the most agonizing part of my wrist.

"Ouch! Damn you!" I tried feebly to get free.

“Stop, you fool. I’m holding off the bleeding. Only you would open a vein like that and think nothing of it. Hold still.” He glanced up. “The bandages! Quickly!”

It was too much work to fight him. Too much work to keep my eyes open. But I had to ask, “Is it over? Done?”

“I think so.”

Thirddmage leaned down to look at me over Tobin’s shoulder. “We performed the banishment. We saw three spirits leave, and felt them pass out of the working. You should be free of them now.”

Should be. I knew that was just his way. No sorcerer ever claimed absolute certainty. It was part of the practice of sorcery, to perform the work as if you had no doubts, while holding to the knowledge that we could never encompass all of it. There was always a risk. For now I tried to take ‘*should be*’ as enough, as I fell into the darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

I woke slowly, to an unfamiliar sound. There was a cat, purring in my ear. A different rumble somewhere in the vicinity of my chest was deeper, far less melodic, and beautifully familiar. I'd know Tobin's snore anywhere. I opened my eyes.

I was lying on a comfortable bed, in a small stone room flooded with afternoon sun from a narrow window. There was a brazier in one corner, but it was unlit, and the room held a slight chill. I was loaded down with something soft and heavy. I turned my head, and the cat beside me made a *hmpf* sound and jumped away off the bed. I caught just a glimpse of orange fur as she went, and then Tobin grunted and snuffled against my chest, and leaned over me into view. "Hey, you're awake." His smile was soft and fond. "There you are."

I licked my dry lips.

Tobin said, "Wait." He raised me with an arm at my back and held a cup to my lips. I took a sip. The water was the best thing I'd ever tasted, cool with a hint of bitter herbs.

"How long did I, um, sleep?"

"Two days. I know I said you could rest, but you were becoming really boring."

"I'll try to do better."

He smiled, and bent to kiss me, persisting even when I tried to keep my something-died-in-my-mouth breath to myself. "I was just a little worried," he whispered against my mouth.

"Sorry."

He sat back. "Here. Drink some more." He held the cup for me again, and its astringency rinsed the foul fuzz from my mouth. I drained the cup.

"Well done." Tobin set the cup aside, shoved more pillows behind my back, and settled himself more comfortably on the bed beside my hip.

I wanted to talk, but exhaustion sucked me under. I closed my eyes, aware of his steady solidity against me, and dozed. It might have been a few minutes, or an hour. When I woke, he was still there. For a while, I just looked at him, which was never a hardship, while I tried to get the past events ordered in my mind. I still felt light, floaty, cotton-cloudy. I blinked, and touched his hip with my fingers, trying to anchor myself in the present. “Am I on some kind of medicine?”

“The medic had us giving you poppy, for your wrist. When you could be roused enough to swallow it.”

At his words, my hand gave a hard throb, pain lancing from my finger through my wrist. I winced. “Damn. Don’t remind me.”

“Sorry.”

I raised my arm, with difficulty, to look at it. My broken finger was once again padded and wrapped. Above that, bulky bandages encased my forearm from knuckles to elbow. It was a mess, but... “Is it my imagination, or does my wrist look straighter than it was?”

“The king sent his best medic to put you back together. Once the bleeding had stopped, the medic said, since you weren’t stirring, he might as well see what could be done to improve the healing. He cut some things, pulled the skin around. You’ve got more stitches than a wedding gown under there. But he said you might have a bit more use of it, now that the scar tissue is eased somewhat. He gave me detailed instructions for how you’re to exercise and stretch it, once the real healing begins.”

“Truly?” I tried to move my fingers. The middle ones twitched a bit. Which was more than I’d had in a decade. “It might be better?”

“He said it’ll never be much use to you. The tendons are badly damaged. But yes, he thought it might get a bit better.” Tobin gave me a steady look. “He asked me how long you’d been trying to kill yourself. I told him the best part of fifteen years. He said it was a good thing you were such a poor hand at it, although this last effort wasn’t bad.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tobin laughed roughly. "Shall we apologize back and forth a dozen times and have done with it?"

"What are you sorry for? It was all my doing."

"I rode down after the king and left you on a hilltop with the R'gin around. That for starters."

"No." I reached out with my good hand and he folded it between his own. "It was your sworn duty. And the king was in trouble. Anyway, if you hadn't, I might not have had to listen to Xan. And then not have dared to follow Xan's guidance again, there at the end."

Tobin raised my hand to his mouth and brushed a kiss over my knuckles. "Someday I'll want to know what in the hells that means. For now, all I care is that you don't hate me for it."

"Gods and goddess, no, Tobin, never."

He pressed my hand against his cheek.

I dozed again then. The next time I woke, the sun was lower, but Tobin wore the same shirt. When he offered me the cup, I was able to raise it with only a little help and drink well. My head was finally free of the haze.

I said, "Two days. Can you tell me what's happened?"

Tobin tucked the covers closer around me. "The king is gone, riding west to the coast with half the archers and all of the cavalry. Now we have this end guarded, he wanted to give Estray some help. There was another message-bird, and although Estray's confident in the outcome, he's still fighting. He had our navy come and blockade their ships at the landing. He wants a victory, not a retreat, so perhaps we can come to terms with them and put an end to this."

"Terms with the Prince Regent?"

"Or his successor. The strategists think his status was heavily invested in this attempt to conquer us. If it fails, and fails badly, he might be replaced as Regent. Anyway, the king wants to be there to direct how it falls out."

"He's a good man," I said slowly. "I can see why you serve him."

“He’s not bad, for an obsessive tyrant.” Tobin’s smile belied his words. “He offered you his rooms, but I thought you might feel safer up here, in a smaller space. So he left you his mattress and furs, his thanks and a letter.”

“Hand it over.”

Tobin got up and fetched a folded paper off the dresser. “I could read it to you.” His waggling eyebrow and finger hovering over the wax seal made his curiosity clear.

“Just open the seal and hand it over. He might be giving me the tools to blackmail you into doing my bidding.”

Tobin flicked the seal open and passed the paper over, but held onto his end for a moment as I took it. “I will always do your bidding.”

“Unless you think you know better.”

“Well, that, of course.”

I smiled at him. “Wouldn’t have you any other way.” I shook open the page, ostentatiously turned it so he couldn’t see the text, and squinted at it in the fading sunlight.

“Sorcerer Lyon,

“We regret that the demands of Our office force Us to depart with your recovery uncertain. If you are reading these words, then Our concerns are eased. We hereby acknowledge that you did place life and liberty in the service of the Crown, for which you have earned Our unending gratitude. More substantial rewards will follow.”

The writing became sloppier, as if penned in haste.

“~That’s the formal part. Just a few more things I wanted to say for now. First, do pick out some kind of reward or I’ll pick one for you. And Tobin says I have horrible taste.

“Second, Chief Xan’s flamestone is yours. Do what you like with it—sell it, put it on display, drop it off a cliff. I had Secondmage test it, and it doesn’t seem to work as a focus

anymore. He says Xan's ghost probably didn't last through the banishment. Hopefully the old man is in a better place."

I fervently hoped so too. May he have found his Tia at last.

"Last, Tobin. He's a good man, a better man than me, although I'll consider it treason for you to tell him I said so. Ever since I've known him, when he would get really drunk, he'd talk about you. When he came to me in the palace, after finding you again, he was happier than I've seen before. I thought you might be doubting that, so I wanted to make it clear. It would please me to see you together.

"I hope to get to know you better, but this is not the time. Let Tobin take care of you, and bring you back to Riverrun. It will comfort him, and I look forward to seeing you there.

His Majesty Faro II, Duke of Umbria, Lord of Westmarch, etc. etc."

"Hm. A letter from the king himself." I folded it in a small square, and slipped it under my pillow.

"Is there a reason you're treating it like a love note? Anything I should know?"

I smacked Tobin's thigh weakly with the back of my good hand. "He told me all your secrets."

"Ha. He doesn't know most of them."

"He gave me Xan's flamestone."

"Really? That came out of the palace treasury. Which I suppose does mean the king can give it away if he chooses to." Tobin tilted his head, seeming to calculate something. "That's one hell of a gem. You could do a lot with the money. Or will you keep it as a memento?"

It was tempting to sell it. I had some new dreams, and a fund of cash would help immensely. But I thought I owed Xan more than that. "I want to give it to the Marmot clan. Chief Xan gave it in trade to us flatlanders for something he

never received. I'd like to see it go back where it belongs. There may be descendants of his still there."

"That's admirable, if a little unworldly of you."

"I owe the old man a hell of a lot more than that."

"Can you..." Tobin hesitated. "Is it too soon for you to tell me what happened?"

I pleated the coverlet between my good fingers, folding and unfolding it until Tobin covered my hand with his own. "You don't have to."

"I want to. But I may leave some things out." I tried to explain what the transference had been like, and the feeling when it broke. The sensation of climbing the cliff with Xan's subtle help. The way he guided me in throwing the stone at the R'gin. I didn't mention the moment of agony when Tobin's life hung in the balance, weighed against a millennium of bitter anger. Xan had helped me in the end. Let him be an uncomplicated hero.

Tobin sat still as stone, while I talked about the summoning circle and the wraith. I said, "When I felt him, saw him, saw it, I thought... Oh gods above, I thought everything was over. But we beat it—Xan and I and you."

Tobin said painfully, "I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did. You brought me back from the grey, and kept me sane enough to do what needed to be done. Your voice was my anchor, through it all." I had a cold thought, slithering through my gut. "What happened to that, um, token thing?"

"The one that was in your arm?" At least Tobin could say that without an apparent waver, although his eyes were serious. "I asked Thirdmage what to do with it. He stayed, by the way. I'm guessing he'll want to examine you at some point."

"For further residue." The good thing about being so tired, and dosed on poppy, was that it blunted things. I didn't manage more than a shiver.

"Yes. He said there was a hint of activity to it still. He said a wraith could not be banished forever the way a ghost can be. They're creatures of the grey.

But he said the more changed that thing was, the less of a focus it would be. So I gave it to Doyd, and he took it to the blacksmith, had it melted and hammered into a lump, with all of, well, you, burned off it. Then cased it in iron. I'd have done it myself, but I didn't want to leave you still... sleeping. But I trust Doyd. He stuck around because he's heading up into the hills soon, to talk to the current tribes about the tunnel and about the guard tower King Faro is going to erect to watch the entrance. Wouldn't want them to take that the wrong way."

"And now where is the *thing*?"

"Doyd has it for now. I didn't know if you'd want to dispose of it, or lock it away safe, or have him take it into the mountains with him and drop it in a crevasse?"

I thought about it, about having that thing, even cased in iron, lurking in a safe somewhere, always there. "Would he do that? Drop it somewhere really deep?"

"Absolutely."

"Then yeah, sounds good. If you trust him. Maybe he can return the flamestone to Marmot Clan too."

Tobin grinned. "Put temptation in the poor man's way, would you? Luckily he's a good friend, and as honest as the day is long, so yes. That might even be a good opener to his conversation with the tribes. You know, '*Here, my king wants to return this fabulous gem to you, and talk about a tower we're building.*' Could be good."

"That's settled then. I'm glad you did that. Thank you."

"Any time. Anything. Will you feel better now? Do you think that thing was giving you the dreams?"

I didn't know. Maybe. But the specters and threats that had stalked my nights had felt nebulous and fantastical, not deliberate. "I hope it helps." I didn't want to talk about it anymore, though. Even in the bright sunlight, I could hear a laugh, dark and dry as grave dust. "So, once I'm doing better

we'll head back to the capital? Has the king given you leave from your job to escort me there?"

"I didn't give him much choice, but yes, we have as much time as you need to heal and travel."

I said, "Lying here in this comfortable bed, I'm actually looking forward to riding out with you again, at our leisure and at a sane pace. It sounds like fun. Of course, my first night on the hard ground may dispel that illusion."

"I'll pack a few luxuries. We'll have the extra horses for baggage. The king left our remounts."

That reminded me. "How's Darkwind? I saw him kick that R'gin soldier in the chest, but I thought Dark might have been cut up in the process." I remembered bright blood on the sleek coat. I'd been too caught up in my own problems to remember until now. "And Cricket? We got him back safely?"

"We got Cricket without trouble. He's eating his head off in the meadow. Dark's fine too. Yes, he got a bit of a slice on his neck. But it'll heal, even if it gives him one more scar."

"No amount of scars could make that stallion less than beautiful," I said fervently. He'd defended Tobin at need. He was the perfect horse.

Tobin smiled. "I'm glad you think so. I agree, and someday I'd like to breed horses with him as my foundation sire. He's only eleven, so there's a bit of time yet to do it."

"Is that your dream? To raise horses?" I was getting tired, and my hand throbbed wickedly. I slid lower on my pillows, and let my eyes droop half shut. "Tell me about it."

"Someday, yes, I'd love to have a stud. A small breeding farm, with Dark's colts running around, and maybe a few ginger cats, and somewhere on it a small stone house with thick safe walls." He hesitated and then bent to kiss my lips. "Waiting for you, for whenever you're ready to join me there."

"Sounds nice." I sighed, and tipped my face up slightly, inviting another kiss. Tobin's lips met mine again, soft and skilled, claiming my mouth and breath and all my thoughts. I was drifting, sliding down into slumber, but

kissing Tobin was the best reason I could imagine to stay awake a few more minutes. I nipped at his lip, without opening my eyes. “You would miss your post with the Voices, though, wouldn’t you? The travel and being the king’s man?”

“Maybe. I might do both, hire a stud manager. But the lure of travel and excitement is reduced when you have someone to come home for. To stay home for.”

“Wouldn’t want you to get bored,” I murmured.

“It’s a pipe dream, anyway. Until I raise more money. But the part about coming home to you? That I want, any way I can have it, any time you’re ready.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders to pull him closer, and the brush of my wrist across his arm woke the pain still more. “I’m a poor bet. Battered and scarred and half-useless.” I waved my hand near his face.

He caught it gently in his own hands and kissed me, on the one exposed square inch of skin over my last knuckle. “No amount of scars could make you less than beautiful.”

Ah, goddess, that caught my heart and squeezed it. That this man could believe that, of me. When I could breathe, I said, “You don’t really know me. Who I am now.”

“I know enough. I’ll learn more, take all the time you need. But from the moment I saw you again, I knew. You were older and bigger, scarred up and hurt and afraid and so damned gorgeous and strong under it all. I needed you, and you needed me too. You gave me back the light I’d been missing so long, and I could give you a wall at your back wherever you went. We just fit. We always have.”

I surely didn’t feel strong, not back then and not now. I didn’t feel gorgeous, and I didn’t feel like light. But when Tobin looked at me like that, how could I doubt him? “You’ll have to teach me to believe it too.”

“Now there’s a job I can really put my heart into.” He smiled, soft at first, and then he let it slide into wicked. “And also other body parts. Rest up, lion-

boy. It's a week's slow ride back to the city, and I have plans for every day of it."

EPILOGUE

I stood at Tobin's high window and looked out into the palace courtyard. The sun was still high, and the space was full of people hurrying about. Riverrun was bustling with activity today. Below me, a running page collided with a man carrying a saddle over his shoulder. A nearby guardsman caught the saddle and steadied the man before he fell. From the look on his face, he said something sharp to the page, who barely hesitated before dashing off. I winced. *So many people.*

I wanted to love this place, I really did. Tobin fit here. He knew half of them by name and the other half by sight. Most of them liked him a lot too, although I'd caught more than one crack about "fay bastards" from an old man in the stables. I tried to tell myself it was sour grapes. The stallion the man owned was no match for Darkwind, even with its flashy bay coat and long mane.

We'd been here two weeks now. Two weeks and three days. And every day I hovered between wanting to leave and promising to stay. And in the end did neither. Tobin was probably ready to have "Give me time" tattooed on my forehead, even if he never betrayed his impatience.

The trip here had been... well, lovely. Perfect. Just me and Tobin, and four horses who knew how to mind their own business. Thirdmage had offered us his company and the protection of his guard, when he'd left the tower to return to Riverrun. I'd had an *unfortunate* relapse of weakness and been unable to leave at that time. So sad. We'd followed a few days later.

We traveled lightly the first day, covering far less ground than I thought I could have managed. But when Tobin said he wanted me to have lots of energy that night, I'd found his logic compelling. We stopped early, in a sheltered spot away from the trail. He set me enthroned on a boulder and made me stir dinner in a pot while he took care of all else. After dinner we lay together, with the stars overhead, and talked in foolish whispers, and kissed. His arms were around me, his body hot against mine. We moved together, softly at first and then urgently. And came, just like that, with his mouth

eagerly swallowing my cries. I'd slept for a while, afterward. And found through that night, and the ones that followed, that waking in the dark could be put to very good use.

I sighed, and moved away from the window. That was another thing. The damned nightmares hadn't gone away with getting the token out of my arm. They'd just multiplied and mutated. My favorite now seemed to be one where I perched, unmoving, high and safe on a cliff, while below me a R'gin soldier hacked Tobin to bloody bits. In that dream, Xan cursed me and then the wraith crept in and told me how much it relished watching... I woke crying from that one.

Tobin had begun to learn the sounds I made when demons stalked my dreams and he was getting good at waking me early. But sometimes he failed. Sometimes, in fear, I hit at him, and although he laughed at the idea I'd ever really hurt him, there had been a few days when he wore a bruise on his cheek from my fist. And more than one night, early on, when our nearest neighbors down the hall came pounding on our door in alarm at my cries. So damned embarrassing. If Tobin would have let me, I'd have been tempted to wear a gag to bed.

What I really needed was my own space. A place alone, where I couldn't hurt anyone or alarm them or rob them of sleep. Every day I vowed to tell him that, and every day he brought me delicacies from the palace kitchen and led me through evening-quiet corridors to some new museum room or library.

The first time I'd picked up an unfamiliar old book, I'd been unable to open it. I stared at the cover. Cutting out the token from my wrist, banishing the wraith, hadn't cured the nightmares. But what if it had taken my skill with languages from me? What if they in fact had been lingering whispers of the wraith?

I set the book on a table, and stared blankly at the shelves. Picked it up again. The title on the binding was still clear, in *kanshishel*—*Native Fauna of the Mountains*. I opened it, flipping through with half-glazed eyes, not trying to see more than the drawings. There was a picture of a woolly goat, high on a crag. I paused. The text read, "*The mountain goat, or sheergoat, is known for*

its unusual skill in navigating the high places of...” I read no more, as my eyes blurred with tears. The words came easy and clear. I hadn’t lost that skill. Good sign or bad, I didn’t know. But it had been my solace so long, I’d have desperately mourned the loss.

In the evenings, once I regained confidence, I came into my own, finding treasures to show Tobin. I’d even located two pictures of elephants wearing structures on their backs not unlike little houses. After a scurry of delightful research, we decided that my favorite travelogue was less fantasy than I’d thought. Tobin and I discussed what would be involved in making a trip to the Southlands, and regretfully discarded the idea. But I found a translation of another traveler’s journals, and read it to him that night while he lay with his head on my shoulder. And once more, I said nothing about leaving.

We went riding out into the palace park, and saw the herd of white roe deer that the king raised there. We even took a boat on the river. Tobin rejected the boatman’s help and poled us along upstream himself. We anchored by the bank, and ate early strawberries and soft cheese and new bread. I showed Tobin a pair of shy willowlarks, flitting branch to branch. He’d never seen one and I twitted him that the noise soldiers made would scare wild things from miles away. And then we floated back down on the current, lazily fending off the bank when needed. That, I’d even been able to do one handed, and Tobin had napped for a while in the stern, a hat pulled down over his eyes, while I kept us safe in the channel. And every night we went to bed, together.

How could I leave? Nights with Tobin were a revelation. He hadn’t been joking about wanting to show me things. Despite my lingering fears, I’d at least had my mouth on every part of him by now, and discovered the flame-hot pleasure of his skilled tongue on me, most places. I was past the worst of choking and spitting—able to have him come in my mouth and to find it a pleasure I hadn’t imagined. There was more that he promised me, when I got up the nerve to try. And then there were the long, soft hours, in velvet darkness, folded into his arms.

How could I go? But how could I stay?

King Faro had finally come home two days ago. They'd fought to victory on the coast, although with significant losses. A first surrender had been signed by the R'gin commander, and prisoners were already set to work at repairs. A treaty with the Prince Regent would be a far slower thing.

We'd heard the king had decided to keep the tunnel in the hills open, although guarded. According to R'gin prisoners, it took only four long days of march to pass through it. The other end was somewhere deep in their own foothills, many miles from the nearest city. Still, compared to the sea route or the high mountain passes, it was a very fast path from our land to theirs.

Tobin said the king hoped to someday open it as a trade route. But we needed that treaty first. And maybe a less rabid leader for the R'gin.

I hadn't seen King Faro recently, other than a brief moment two days ago, as we lined the road to the palace to cheer him and his soldiers home. He'd seen Tobin beside me in the crowd near the gate and reined back. His eyes had tracked to me, and he'd given me a little salute, fingers flicking his forehead. I bowed low, and before I straightened he'd ridden on. Since then, Tobin had met with him twice but I hadn't. I'd sent him a note, though...

There was a quick triple tap on our door in Tobin's rhythm, and then he came inside. We'd instituted that signal the third time he'd seen me leaping to a corner at an unexpected servant's knock on the door behind me. He was so good at finding practical solutions to my problems. Sometimes I wanted to cry at his patience. Sometimes I wanted to hit him really hard, for his unwavering faith that it all could be surmounted.

For now, I smiled and did neither. "Hey, he let you go early?"

"Yes. Meeting's done. He's having a formal court tonight, and we have to attend, on pain of pissing off our monarch. But he said if you wish, you may sit up on one of the balconies pretty much by yourself. I told him you would rather be boiled in oil than mingle with the crowd on the floor."

"Not quite that bad."

“Anyway, I’ll show you where. But I have to be down there. Apparently he’s awarding me something, in full public view. I couldn’t get him to tell me what it is, or call it off.”

I hoped I knew the what. And that it would make him happy. “Well, you’ll find out, I guess.”

“Mm. I hope it’s not some badge or ring or something. I’ve no fondness for jewels.”

“If it is, you can still sell it, and put the money towards your stable someday.”

“Selling a gift you were given by the king is frowned upon, but yes, I would. For a stone house first. Then the stud.”

I shrugged. We’d looked at houses nearby, just a few times. Neither of us had the kind of money that a solid stone place close to the palace would command. In any case, all of them had cellars, and I’d realized I could no more live over a cellar than I could live in a house built of lathe and wood. Not yet anyway. I’d have to retreat to my little cottage and try to either earn a boatload of money, or become less cowardly.

“Maybe he’ll find you a better reward than some jewel.”

“I can hope. He has the most gods-awful taste. Look at the Voice badges.”

I hid a smile. “I’d heard that about him. Although some ancestor is responsible for the badges.”

“Hereditary bad taste. Whereas you...” He took my shoulders between his hands and pulled me close. “You taste good.”

I kissed him thoroughly. I was getting practiced at this. Then I looked over his shoulder. “You maniac, close the door first.”

“I’m not hiding how I feel about you.” But he went and did it, and then came back to me. “I missed you.”

“In the whole two hours you were gone.”

“Longer than that. Did you find the book you were looking for?”

“Yes. That old librarian in the antiquities room was very helpful.” It had been peaceful there, and the old man had wanted to talk about really ancient history and books. I’d actually managed a nice long conversation. But after that there’d been crowded hallways to navigate, to get back here. Spending time there at night would be far more pleasant, even if the librarian would be gone to his bed.

“Good, I’m glad he did well for you. King Faro said he’d given instructions that all the libraries were open to you.”

“That was kind of him,” I said, and meant it.

“You can thank me for it.” Tobin smirked. “I suggested it. I can suggest ways to express your gratitude.”

“To the king?” I teased, lowering my voice.

“To me,” he growled.

“Oh, yes?” I moved closer to him and took his jaw in my hand. A hint of beard rasped my fingers, already regrowing from his morning shave. I kissed him there, feeling the slight roughness catch my lips. I touched my tongue to the sensitive skin below his jawbone, to hear him catch his breath. Then I kissed his mouth, probing with my tongue. He opened for me on a sigh. I knew how this went now, how much he loved to have me cup the back of his head with my hand, and take his mouth.

My Tobin, so strong and yet so soft and pliant when the mood was on him. I wrapped my other arm around his back and walked him toward the bed, not breaking the kiss. He cupped my ass with his hands and drew me tightly against him, proving that both of us were already hard.

At the bed we paused. I stepped back and said, “Strip for me.” I liked taking his clothes off, bit by bit, with kisses to trail over exposed skin. My hand had just enough function now that I could untie laces, given time and a bit of patience. But I also liked watching him undress for me, in the mellow afternoon light.

He smiled, and the sun caught amber lights in his eyes. His hands went to his jacket buttons, popping them free one by one. He slid it off, swung the

collar around on one finger and whipped it in the direction of the chair. The jacket landed on it, but in a heap. When I would have shaken it out for him, he said, "No. Leave it." He tugged his shirt-laces looser, and moved his hands to the hem.

There was no reason to look anywhere but at him. He slid the fabric up slowly, exposing inch after inch of toned stomach, ornamented with dark hair. So strong, so male, and so mine. I reached out and laid my palm flat on that firm, warm flesh. He whispered, "Oh, yes," and pulled the shirt swiftly over his head. He whipped that to the side too, and I didn't even bother to see where it fell.

He stood there half clothed, his strong shoulders bare in the daylight. None of us had come away from the foothills unmarked, and there was a new scar on him too, pink and scabbed at one end still, but healing well. It joined the host of others, all marking him as a soldier, a fighter, a man of courage. All adding to his beauty. Being with Tobin was truly teaching me not to worry about outward scars.

I traced his sternum upward with my hand, feeling the soft crinkle of curly hair. Then I slid my touch sideways to cup the hard shape of his chest-muscle in my palm. His nipple was a firm bud under my thumb, and I rubbed it and saw the other side tightening too. I pressed, mounding his flesh, and he took a sharp breath.

When I reached for my own buttons, though, he put his hand on mine to stop me. "Not yet. Wait."

He finished the show, toeing off boots, stockings, sliding his uniform trews down his strong thighs. When he stood in just his smalls, the linen tented with clear evidence of his desire, he said, "Would you take them off me?"

I touched him through the fabric. His cock jerked into my palm, and a small bead of moisture dampened the cloth. Slowly I traced the length of him, the hot, hard rod under the slip and bunch of his smallclothes. He moaned at my touch, and I kissed his mouth again, leaning forward and keeping his cock gripped in my fingers.

His kiss was hungry, starving. He sucked my tongue deep with needy little whimpers. As I probed the soft, wet space, filling his mouth, I fumbled my hand inside his waistband and pushed his smalls down to his thighs. His hard sex brushed against my wrist, silk and steel and mine to have. I wrapped my fingers around it, cupping and twisting in the way I'd learned he loved. His eyes, blurry inches from my own, closed with the pleasure of it, and he clung tightly to my shoulders. His fingers dug into me. Then he tipped his head back and said, "Wait. Go slower."

"What? Shall I undress?"

"No. I..." He took a shaky breath and stepped back from me, kicked the smallclothes away, and waited for me to look at him. I happily complied, running my gaze over every part of him. He was flushed, rampantly erect, his chest rising and falling with his breaths. His cock jerked with just the heat of my glance. "Would you take me, really take me this time?"

"You mean...?" I felt hot and then cold with the thought. He'd mentioned this, often enough, and dropped it immediately when I shied away. "You want me to...?"

"Be inside me. Yes." He came close again and cupped my face in his hands. "I wish you would. You make too much of a big thing out of this. It doesn't have to be pain. It doesn't have to be possession. To all the hells with an old man's talk of mares and stallions too." He kissed me swiftly. "Do I look like a mare to you?"

I choked a laugh. He was all man, even naked here in my arms. Maybe especially here.

"This can just be pleasure. Just another way to touch and feel and be together. It's something I love. Top or bottom. Something I'd like to share with you, if you feel able. There's something special about having someone inside you..."

He paused, probably seeing the spasm of chill that went through me. I'd *had* people inside me, in various ways, and it had never been a good thing.

“Hush, Lyon, I’m sorry.” This kiss was soft apology. “I know that means something else to you. And I’m not asking you to let me inside, not ever. But I’ve been aching to have *your* cock in *my* ass, if you’re willing to try.”

“You truly want this?” I still couldn’t imagine it, even though in my mind I knew men did this, and took pleasure from it. Even though he’d told me a dozen times over that he liked it.

“I’ve been ready to beg for it, with you. Yes. But tell me again if it’s too soon, and I’ll wait some more. I want us both to love it, not to push you if it will be bad for you.”

“I don’t know. How can I know?”

“Do you want to know? Or am I being selfish?”

I touched his face. I couldn’t imagine a more generous lover. “Not selfish. I admit I’m... curious. And I do like, um, looking at you there.”

“Then will you let me try?” He knelt down, there, naked at my fully-clothed feet. “Please? Let me show you?”

“Gods, Tobin.” I grabbed his elbows to pull him up. Inadvertently I used both hands, and my half-healed wrist and elbow twinged. But my fingers had actually curled a little to hold him. It was a good thing. I said, “Don’t ever beg me for something you want. Just ask.”

“I’m asking then.”

“I’ll try.” I shifted from one foot to the other. “What do I do?”

“Will you feel safer clothed or unclothed?”

My mind brought up a sense-image of the wraith, opening his treads as I stood chained naked to the wall. “Please, naked. Let us be equal.”

“Hush.” He kissed me slowly. “Remember, it’s not a big thing. It’s another road to pleasure. Naked it is. Let me.”

He undressed me slowly and sensuously, but without stopping. As the clothes came off, he kissed me all over, in oddly sensitized places. Why his tongue in the bend of my elbow, or his teeth scraped over the point of my hip,

should set me afire I didn't know. But by the time he stripped off my smallclothes I was as hard and damp as he was.

He said softly, "Come lie down with me." He guided me onto the bed, and slid onto the mattress beside me, then bent over the side, reaching to the floor. He came back up with a small stoppered flask in his hand. "Let's try this first."

"What?" Even I could hear the quaver in my voice, and my cock softened a bit, in spite of being on a bed with Tobin naked and waiting.

He laughed, although not unkindly. "The dreaded massage oil. Lie on your back, keep your eyes on me, and let me start."

I did so, and he tugged the bedclothes out from under me until I lay on just the undersheet. "No need to make more work for the laundress. Lie flat now and relax."

Tobin pulled the stopper from the jar, and tipped it slowly over my chest so a thin stream trickled out and dripped on me. The oil was clear gold and smelled faintly of fruit. He set the remainder on the table at the head of the bed, and carefully replaced the plug. "Callofruit oil. It has a nice, um, sliiiiide to it." He set his palms flat on my oiled sternum and then slid up and out with firm pressure, until he reached my shoulders. There he dug his fingers in, kneading tight muscles until I groaned with a different kind of pleasure.

"Oh, yeah. I like that sound. Relax." He worked my flesh, stroking and pressing, smoothing the oil over my chest and down to the flat ridges of my stomach. "I love how little hair you have," he murmured, stroking in firm circles. "I love your skin. I love the way you feel under my hands." He moved lower, pressing slippery fingers into the grooves of my hips, until he closed his hands around my sex. My hips came up off the bed to meet him.

Till now, we'd mostly gotten by with spit, or the dry friction of eager hands, until the spill of the first fluids from our arousal smoothed the way. But he'd done me once with a little saddle oil on his hands, out under the stars, and the memory of that slippery, glorious touch was almost enough to bring me now. He laughed with pleasure, and ringed the base of my cock with hard fingers. "Not yet. Damn, I should have bought some of this two weeks ago for you, just for this. But today I don't want you going off early."

He stroked me in less responsive places a while longer. I stuffed an extra pillow under my head to watch his strong hands, shiny with oil, gliding around and over my needy skin. Twice he stopped to let me catch my breath, before finally bending over and just kissing my tip, where clear fluid welled from the slit. “Mm, fruit and salt. But I think it’s time to trade places.”

I got enough control back to scoot around and give him space to lie down on the bed. He stretched out and folded his arms behind his head. His sex reared up, long and thick, straining towards his belly. He grinned at me. “Pet it. It wants your touch.”

“Hah. Disclaiming responsibility.” But I bent to kiss him, exactly where he’d kissed me. I loved that taste, the thin, almost sweet slick of his arousal. The taste of his actual spend, or perhaps the texture, still occasionally caught at my throat, but this was pure bliss. I gripped his shaft upright and took slow, regular licks, as drop after drop welled free.

Tobin groaned. “Lyon, you’re killing me. Try the oil.”

I reached across for the jar. Removing the stopper one-handed was a trick, and when I pried it free, it dropped onto Tobin’s tight abdomen and bounced to the floor. A large dollop of oil followed it, pooling in the grooves of those strong muscles. Tobin laughed breathlessly. “That should do the job.”

I set the open jar aside, and stroked my fingertips through the oil on his stomach. It was slicker than I expected, turning even Tobin’s furry skin to silk under my hands. I smeared it around, enjoying both the shimmer of reflected light on Tobin’s body and the helpless little sounds he made whenever I accidentally-on-purpose brushed his cock.

“You’re mean. Heartless. A cocktease. Ah!” He gasped as I closed my fingers tightly around his cock.

I squeezed just a bit more, holding him in a rough grip. “A what?”

“A prince among lovers. A genius. Move your fecking hands a bit, lion-boy.”

I laughed and began stroking him off, sliding my hand up him from base to tip and then dropping loosely down again in a steady rhythm. He pumped his

hips upward into my hand and his face grew flushed. “Wait. Stop.” He wriggled around, raised and separated his legs and grabbed his shins to pull himself open further. “Go lower.”

I paused, looking at him there. He was so clean I knew he’d prepared for this. His skin was paler in between his cheeks, with a dark pink rim at his opening. His balls, heavy and furry, hung low, the soft skin of his ballsac wrinkled beneath the coarse curls. I let go of his cock, and it bobbed against his stomach, a thin thread of slick dripping from the tip.

“Touch me, Lyon. It’s all right. I want you so much.”

I reached out again, carefully, and fondled his balls, feeling the firm rounded shape sliding under thin skin. This I’d done before, kissed him there, even taken them into my mouth more than once. I curved my hand around the tender forms and he moaned. His eyes were fixed on my hand where it touched him.

I let my fingertips trail lower, down the soft skin beneath his sac. He had hair there too, but it was short and thin and silky, disappearing as I reached his... I snatched my fingers away.

“Lyon, it’s okay. I’m yours. Every part of me is yours, because I want to be. That felt good.”

I touched him again, circling him with a now-dry finger. His pucker clenched and relaxed at the brush of my fingertip, clenched again. I felt my own ass clutch tight in sympathy.

Tobin said, “It’s not such an important thing. One more bit of me that you can play with. Like this.” He let go of one knee and rubbed his fingers in the oil on his stomach, then slipped his own hand between his legs and pressed his fingertip inside. He made no sound, although I saw his stomach tighten as the knuckle passed in. He rubbed back and forth slowly, opening himself. I couldn’t look away. I couldn’t reach out.

Tobin said, “All right? Too much? Here, try this.” He removed his hand and pulled me over him, braced on my arms, then closed his oily hand around

our cocks together. “Come on, we’ve done this before. Rub on me, this is good too. Mm, nice.”

I pumped my hips, thrusting into the tightness of his fist, feeling his erection sliding against my own. It was so good. My body *knew* how this went, and I began driving a hard, plunging rhythm.

This was what Tobin wanted in his body. Why couldn’t I give it to him? It would be easy. Slip a little lower, find the place, push inside. I braced on my right elbow, reached down, and guided my tip lower. Tobin smiled up at me, his thighs spread wide. It would be just there.

My wrist sparked with pain, and I had to catch my balance. The pain moved up my arm. *Right there. Just shove up inside him.* I fumbled, feeling my cock softening in my hand. I closed my fingers tighter on myself, trying to line that rubbery head up with that little hole, where Tobin said he wanted me to go, where I could invade and take him. I tried harder, with no leverage, no force, bracing differently, squeezing my shaft so hard I saw stars trying to keep it rigid. I was softening so fast, shrinking in my hand. It wasn’t going to work.

I didn’t realize my panting had become sobbing until Tobin grabbed my arms, and pulled me down against him, forcing my hands up to cradle them at his chest. “Stop. Lyon. Stop. It’s all right. You don’t need to do that. It’s all right. I don’t need it like that.”

I collapsed on him, hiding my face in his neck. “Sorry. I’m so sorry. So useless.”

“Oh, no.” He pressed little kisses to my hair, my temple. “It doesn’t matter. Really it doesn’t. Even if we never ever do anything with asses, sex with you is still better than I’ve ever had.” He rocked me against him, and kissed my hair again. His voice lightened. “Best ever. And I’ve had a lot of sex. Lots of guys. Maybe hundreds. Some hung like horses. With decades of experience.”

I sniffled and laughed against his skin. And then bit him on the neck. “Bastard.”

“That’s better.” He wrapped his arms around me. “What happened there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was your arm hurting?”

“A bit maybe. Not much. I just...”

He kissed me for a while and then prodded me, “What? Just what?”

I said through a tight throat, “I felt like I was forcing you.”

“*You* were forcing *me*?” He pushed me off enough to meet my eyes. “Seriously? Even with me pulling myself open and sticking my own fingers in there for you?”

“Yes.” It sounded stupid but it felt like truth. “I wanted to do it, because you wanted it. I know you did. But when I thought about pushing, just shoving inside you... goddess, I’m so incapable.”

“No, wait, let me think.” Tobin hugged me hard and settled me back against his shoulder. He stroked my hair, his legs wrapped over my hips, pulling me in against him. I could feel he was still hard, although not the way he had been.

After a while he said, “I figured you would need to be on top, so you wouldn’t feel trapped. But that made you feel like you were trapping me.”

“I guess so.”

“Was it only when you tried to push in that you didn’t like it? It’s not the idea that disgusts you, or the look of my ass, or anything?”

“Oh no.” It had been very arousing to watch his thick finger sliding up inside him. He was beautiful all over, including there. It was just my stupid flesh that wasn’t willing.

He nodded, sliding his cheek against my forehead. “Okay. I think I know what I want to try another time. So. What would you like right now? Because we still have two whole hours we can spend in bed and I don’t plan to waste them.”

I breathed in the scent of his skin. The slight fruit tang of the oil blended with sweat and arousal. His legs were heavy on me. His arms were strong. I knew that for all my work making myself muscular, he could always take me in a fight. Why did I fear hurting him so much? Physically, at least. I knew

there were other ways I could hurt this man, but not with my body. Not when he wanted me in every way. I said, “Can we try whatever it is now?”

“My idea, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Well... I suppose so. I thought you’d like to just relax and make each other happy.”

I thought before saying carefully, “I want to try. You know, I may never be able to let you do *that* to me.” The thought took me places I couldn’t bear to go. “But I want to trust myself with you. It’s important to me.”

“All right,” he said, with reluctance in his voice. “We’ll start slowly. You know, sex isn’t supposed to be serious, though. It’s supposed to be fun, and arousing and pleasurable and maybe curl your toes a bit. But never make you cry. So if something isn’t working, let me know. I have a whole list of other things I still want to show you. It doesn’t have to be this.”

I said, “Please.”

“Well, hells, yeah, if you’re willing to give it a try. Get on your back.”

Tobin worked for a bit, getting me positioned on my back, my shoulders propped up partway on pillows, with my legs together. Then he straddled my thighs. “Now let me know if you feel pinned down or trapped at all, right?”

“Yes.” I shifted around—his legs were spread enough not to restrict me.

He leaned forward over me, braced on his arms, and kissed me. “First, we need the mood.” He kissed my cheek, nipped at the end of my nose. “Lots of kissing.”

I was tense at first, wondering what he’d planned, but Tobin, intent on kissing me silly, was impossible to ignore. After a while, I could barely remember my own name. This pleasure was so uniquely his, not something I’d done with the boys before, or anyone else. His mouth and tongue claimed me, in safe, sweet, climbing heat.

After a while, he reached for the oil and I tensed again. He said, “Quit undoing all my work. You’ll like this.” He filled his palm with the stuff and

then leaned forward again, bringing his engorged cock against mine. He slathered the oil on us, stroking his skin and mine, under our foreskins and over the red helmets of our emerging cockheads. “So pretty,” he murmured, squeezing and molding us together.

I looked down, and bit my lip, my hips starting to flex up of their own accord. Tobin closed his fingers and pushed down at the same time, driving us together into his hand, through the gloriously slick caress of the oil. It was so good, so damned good. Tight and hot and snugly arousing. His sex and mine, sliding and kissing within the confines of his fingers. This was one of my favorite things, made even better by the slippery glide of the oil.

And then he shifted up on his knees, let his own cock go free, and drew mine down, erect and upright underneath him. For a moment he paused, pressing my tip against himself, right there. “May I, Lyon, please let me?” His voice was hoarse and breathless.

I said, “Yes,” and watched as he sank slowly down upon me.

This was a different and altogether overwhelming tightness. No ridges and bumps of fingers, no uneven hard shaft against mine, just unbelievably hot, gripping, satiny pressure everywhere around me. Tobin sat slowly but steadily, impaling himself deeper and deeper with my cock. His eyes were bright and eager, his own cock hard and bobbing and unafraid.

He murmured over and over, “Oh, yes. Gods, yes. So good. So damned good. I want this, Lyon. I want you in me so, so much.” It was reassurance, and yet, hearing the heartfelt yearning of it, I couldn’t doubt that it was also the truth. He arched his back, and spared one hand to stroke down his own abdomen and out over his hard erection. He was so incredibly stunning, like that, like sex and want and pleasure carved in living stone. He pushed himself lower, and I groaned at the feel of it. Groaned again at the sight of the smile spreading on his face. His look of need and relief and *joy* went deep into me, deeper than I was in him, and healed something there. Filled a space that had always been empty.

Then I had no place for deep thoughts, because Tobin began to move on top of me. Little circles first, and tiny slides up and down. His insides clung to

me, despite the oil, in the most intimate caress. My toes did curl, and I think my eyes crossed. “Oh, Tobin, it feels so good.”

“Feels amazing.” His smile widened and became more wicked. “I’m going to drive us both blind.” He rose higher and dropped fast, drawing a harsh grunt from both of us. “Touch me, my cock. Feel how much I like this. Feel what you do to me.” He pulled my hand to his hard shaft. “Please.”

I took him in my grip. It was probably the clumsiest hand job I’d ever given anyone, nothing more than a clench of trembling fingers against the thrust of Tobin’s hips. He rode my cock vigorously, now up and down, now around in erotic motion. We both gasped and shook with the push and slide of my flesh in his. He braced his hands on my ribcage and used the leverage to shove me so deep inside himself that I groaned and shook with it. “Gods, Lyon, I’m close,” he grated through clenched teeth.

All I had breath for was, “Yes.”

He leaned forward. “Sit up. Sit up more.”

I did so, and he wrapped his arms around me. I slipped out of him part way, but bracing my knees stopped the slide, and our bodies pressed together, his sex trapped against my stomach, his hands on my back, his mouth locked to mine. His movements were slower like this, more constrained, but oh so sweet against me. We kissed and arched and rocked and drove together, with Tobin seated deep on my lap, holding me in his hot core. We loved one another, and came. And came.

We sat like that for a long time after, wrapped together, sharing breath. Finally Tobin wiggled and I slid out of him with a groan. He said, “Lie with me now,” and pulled us down on the bed together.

Gradually I became aware of the world again. The air moved cool over my bare skin. In the courtyard outside, someone shouted and a set of wheels rumbled over the cobbles. The sun gilded our bedroom wall at an angle that suggested the dinner bell was approaching. The mellow light brought out the flecks in the grey granite, and the little ridges and hollows of the rough stone.

Tobin sighed contentedly against me. I said, “Fourth bell can’t be far off. When is the king’s court?”

“Not till Fifth. I bespoke a supper for us up here. We’ll go to court afterward.”

“Foresighted of you.” I stretched in luxurious sloth. “I’m not sure I can get up yet.”

“Me either. In fact, I may be walking crooked in front of court and king.”

A shadow of anxiety passed over me. “Did I hurt you?”

“Gods, no. Ploughed me good though. Exactly what I was craving.”

“Really?” I still had a hard time wrapping my mind around Tobin wanting that from me. “Have you ever, um, done that before?”

“Done which? Been the bottom from on top?”

“Yes. I still don’t know what’s possible. You say you like that, but I have a hard time picturing you...”

There was a little smile in his voice as he asked, “Playing mare to another stallion?”

I smacked what I could reach of him, with the wrong hand, and said, “Ouch.”

He caught my hand. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“You said, no mares, no stallions.”

“That’s right, none of that crap. It was just a joke. And of course I’ve been on the bottom before, plenty of ways. Did you think I was lying about liking it? Face up, face down, straddling a man, bent over a table. Or a boulder, for that matter. I like it all. More than being the top, actually, although I enjoy doing both.”

“Oh.” He really hadn’t bent himself out of shape just for me, then, choosing that role because I couldn’t. I was torn between relief, and an ignoble desire to cut the cock off every man who’d had him before me.

I thought I'd controlled my reaction, but he reached for me, turned my face his way and kissed me. "In all those times, it never felt quite like that before." He grinned. "Spoiled me for anyone else, you have. You'll have to stay with me now."

"I want to." I really did. But it wasn't that simple.

He kissed my forehead. "I know. It will be all right."

We dozed for a while. Until a sudden knock on the door caught me on the edge of sleep, and I reacted by rolling off the bed and tight into the corner of the room. Tobin grabbed for me, missed and then sat up. His eyes fixed on me, he called out at the closed door, "Who is it?"

"Your dinner, sirs."

"Set it there by the door, thank you."

The messenger's feet retreated down the passageway.

I stood up, trying not to look shaken. "Sorry. I fell."

"Uh huh." Tobin got up too, wrapped the sheet around himself, and opened the door enough to retrieve the tray. He gave me a good effort at a smile and sniffed at the covered dish. "Stew, I think. That should hold for a bit, while we wash up."

"Good idea."

"I'd love a bath, but with a formal court tonight, they'll be in demand. I'm betting by the time we'd get any hot water it would be too late to take it."

"Probably."

He set the tray on the table and came to me. "Doing all right?"

"Oh yes. Except you covered up my view." I waved at the sheet.

Tobin's expression lightened. "That ship has sailed, at least for now. Share the wash water?"

"Sure."

We took turns cleaning up, and put on smalls and shirts before eating. It was decadent to sit around in my underclothes with Tobin, sharing a meal and

remembering how he'd felt, wrapped around me. I shifted restlessly in my chair. Tobin glanced cautiously at me and then read my expression and grinned. "I gather you're not upset with me."

"Counting the hours until we can do it again."

"Praise the gods." He sucked a piece of carrot off his spoon in a deliberately provocative way. "Later. The night is young and so are we."

"Optimist." I hadn't felt young for a long time, but with Tobin I did. Young and soft and foolish and, yes, optimistic myself. Maybe I was fixable. Maybe it would just be a matter of time.

We dressed in court clothes, Tobin in his uniform with his sword at his hip, me in a dark suit I'd had tailored after we got back from the east. If Tobin was going to openly acknowledge me around the palace, then I wasn't going to embarrass him by appearing ill-dressed. Tobin took over my buttons, and tied my neckcloth. He tugged and straightened, and then gave my shoulder a pat. "All the court maidens will be weeping, because you only have eyes for me."

"I think you have that backwards." I looked at him. The uniform suited him well, emphasizing his trim waist and the width of his shoulders. He'd shaved again, and combed his hair with water. He looked every inch the officer and gentleman.

"We're a handsome couple, if we do say so ourselves." He gave me a nod. "Ready? The balconies are one floor up, so I'll take you there before going down to the scrimmage on the floor of the ballroom."

"Thank you."

We made our way through the busy corridors. The palace was in a bustle with the hour for court approaching. This was going to be a big ceremonial thing, held in the grand ballroom instead of the smaller, working King's Court. It looked like everybody in the palace was headed that way, and a few more besides. Finally we turned aside, down a side hall, and to an anteroom. Several doors led off it, and behind them I could hear the hum and susurrations of a gathering crowd. A few fashionable couples stood around the room, and they

glanced up as we entered. Tobin ignored them. He said, "The blue balcony. This way."

I followed him through one of the doors. On the other side was a small box-like balcony, jutting out above the crowded, noisy floor of the ballroom. There were six seats, four of which were filled. Tobin gestured me to the one on the other end, leaving a space open beside me. "Sit there."

I lowered myself carefully, my knees shaking. The two men and two women in the box looked at me, and Tobin gave them a nod. "Lord and Lady Cairnsgrarden, Lord and Lady Freemantle? Sorcerer Lyon."

We all inclined our heads at each other. Tobin pressed my shoulder. "Just stay here, all right. Promise me?"

"Yes."

"I'll come back and get you afterward."

"All right." I grabbed his arm. "Be careful."

He smiled sweetly at me. "It's just an awards ceremony. I think I'll live."

I tried a joke. "Depends on what the king is giving you."

"True. See you later." He hurried out.

I peered over the rail. There was a raised dais at the far end of the room, hung with colored bunting. An ornate chair suggested a throne, but it was currently empty. The room was packed with fashionable people and men in uniform. As I watched, they began arranging themselves in some kind of order. I saw Tobin hurry in and set himself up against the wall to the left of the dais. He looked up, searching for me, and gave me a nod when he caught my eye.

The man next to me, whose name I'd already forgotten, said, "Are you a friend of Voice Tobin's?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Now there's a young man who is going places," he said with a nod. "Very high in the king's favor."

“Yes.” I didn’t want to think about the places Tobin might be going. We’d had over a month together now, and half of it off duty. That was bound to end soon.

Before the man could comment further, a horn-call rang out. In the silence that followed, the speaker called, “All rise for the king, His Majesty Faro the Second, Duke...” He ran through the king’s list of titles, as we all got to our feet. Down below, the back door of the hall opened, and King Faro came in, resplendent in carmine robes and fur, wearing the crown of state. He moved easily, powerfully, looking every inch the monarch. It was hard to imagine this was the man who had told me to feel free to throw a gem off a cliff. The man I’d written a casual note to yesterday. My face flamed, imagining what he’d thought of my presumption. Although... he *had* written me that letter.

The king sat on his throne. That appeared to be the signal for those of us with chairs to seat ourselves too. I perched uneasily on the edge of mine. Down below, Tobin moved from ramrod straight to some kind of parade rest, with his hands behind him.

King Faro said, “This is a happy occasion, a celebration of victory, in the east and in the west. But We are well aware that victory always comes at a price. So We have chosen to begin this night with a moment of silence, in remembrance of those who fell to keep all of us free.” He bowed his head, and everyone in the room did the same.

I thought of Xan. Of Firstmage, even if I hadn’t much liked him. Of our soldiers who had no doubt died out of my sight on that hilltop. Of Meldov, fifteen years a ghost, but perhaps moved on out of the grey at last, and even the R’gin soldier, dead at Tobin’s hand because I threw a stone... I was glad when the king began speaking again.

“Tonight it’s Our privilege and honor to thank, and to reward, Our loyal subjects, whose bravery and attention to duty made those victories possible. Beginning with Our right hand in battle to the west. General Estray, please step forward.”

The king gave Estray a singularly ugly jeweled pin, or so I surmised from the little smirk Tobin threw me when it was pinned on the General’s chest.

Also a courtesy title and some lands somewhere. I only half listened. A dozen other men were rewarded for bravery and heroics against the R'gin ships and the invasion. The fisherman who brought first word of the fleet was there, and was given a bigger boat, new nets, and a handful of silver.

When that was done, the king spoke of the campaign in the east. Word of the tunnel had long since spread, so there were no cries of surprise. King Faro thankfully didn't seem to feel the need to share any details of how that tunnel was found. He said, "In doing the enchantments to bring Us this vital information, Firstmage, chief sorcerer of Our realm, overtaxed his strength and burst his heart."

I wondered if that was an official diagnosis, or just poetic license. Not that it mattered a lot, but if it was truth, it might make transference an even less popular spell. I couldn't be sorry about that. King Faro confirmed the promotion of Second and Thirdmages to First and Second, and called for a conclave to choose a new Thirdmage. He awarded the brother of the fallen sorcerer some valuable recompense, and gave other rewards to the surviving pair.

"And now, the man who saved Our life, when We were unhorsed and sorely beset on the field of battle. Voice Tobin?"

I sat there, stunned, as Tobin strode forward to stand before the king. I'd known Tobin had charged off to the king's side when it sounded like Faro was in trouble. I'd had no idea the trouble had been that dire, or that Tobin had been so vital in the rescue. He hadn't said a word. I suddenly was less angry at him for deserting me on that hillside, an emotion I'd have denied existed until I felt it go. Of course, I became more angry at him for not telling me the details. Did he think I wouldn't like to know he was a hero? *Damned man.*

King Faro said, "We owe you Our life, Voice Tobin. No reward is enough for that."

Tobin said, "It was my duty and my honor, Your Majesty. That I succeeded, and that we both survived, is all the reward I need."

King Faro gave him a smile, fast and fond. "Perhaps. But it's not all the reward you're getting. So listen well. About half an hour's ride from the palace

there is a farm. The land is called Sweetmeadows. There's a well laid-out stable, and good grazing. The fences need repair, and there is no house upon it, but it's fine, fertile land."

I saw Tobin lose his amusement. He drew even straighter, staring intently at the king. I hugged myself. The absolute monarch of the land apparently did read notes from lowly translators, telling him what reward would please *me* most.

Tobin seemed about to speak, but the king held up his hand. "Now a farm, suitable for a breeding stud, is only small recompense for saving Our life. About two miles further on there also stands an empty stone house. The owner of the land has another manor, and no use for this house."

My stomach fluttered in panic. I'd checked out that farm I'd asked him to give Tobin, and so I also knew the house he spoke of. In fact, I'd looked at the house with Tobin, which was how I'd stumbled across the farm in the first place. But I'd only suggested giving Tobin the stud. Not this. It was a fine house, solid, a little big but well-made. But it had deep cellars below that made my skin crawl. King Faro was going to give it to Tobin, and then he'd expect us to live in it, and I just *couldn't*. I bit my lip until I tasted blood.

King Faro glanced up at my balcony, and then said to Tobin, "You'll want to live on your own land, of course. So We hereby give you the stone of that house, and all its furnishings. You may command the labor of a company of Our troops, whose lives did not have to be spent in battle in the east because of how we prevailed there. You may also command the expertise of one or two of our Royal Engineers. They will move that house for you, stone by stone, and rebuild it in the style you prefer. Is it well?"

Tobin said, "I'll rebuild on solid bedrock, then. I am most grateful, Your Majesty. Most grateful." He didn't glance my way, but I knew he said that for me, to show me he understood. I blinked hard, biting my lip. We *would* make our future work together, somehow. Tobin clearly could see it no other way.

The king nodded. "It's little enough. Is there anything else you need?"

Tobin hesitated. He turned sideways, so as not to put his back to the king, and looked quickly up at me. I could have stayed in my seat, and shared his

secret smile. But something pulled me to my feet, and I took one step to reach the balcony rail. I looked back down.

The room was almost silent, with just a rustle here and there of a woman's skirts, the scuff of a man's boots on the marble floor. Tobin seemed surprised and then very pleased to see me stand. He kept his eyes on my face. Everyone's gaze gradually turned toward me and I gripped the balcony rail, feeling dizzy. On his throne, King Faro II gave me another tiny salute, no more than the brush of two fingers against his hair.

Tobin looked steadily up at me, and I straightened. I would stand there for him gladly, for all the court to see that I was his. Tobin said clearly into the silence, "Lyon? What do you think, beloved? Is there aught else that we need in our house?"

I looked down at him, that man, in his formal uniform in front of his king, but with every ounce of his attention fixed on me. I had to clear my throat, but then I found voice to say, "Tobin." My endearments would have to wait for privacy, and maybe darkness. But I could give him this. "It sounds good to me. Perhaps a large kitchen window, with no bars, just glass, so I can look out and see our kitchen garden in the moonlight."

THE END

Author Bio

Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal, and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories about what guys like Starsky and Hutch really did on their days off. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, loved, in any quiet moment she had. But the stories rarely made it to paper. Serious authorship got further sidetracked by ventures into psychology, teaching, and a biomedical career. And by a decade enthralled by the challenges of raising children.

Then around 2006, when the kids were more independent, her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She began putting words down in print again, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested if she was going to spend that much time on the keyboard she ought to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first submission, Life Lessons, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has over twenty novels and short stories in print, including Amazon bestseller The Rebuilding Year, a contemporary m/m romance released by Samhain Publishing in March 2012, and several free stories available on Smashwords and elsewhere. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy little omnivorous white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Goodreads Author Page](#)