

# THE WINTER KING

*The Silver Mage Series: Book 2*

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## One

Sera was starting to show. Keitlan, the house keeper of Sta-Veron castle had told her so, even though she'd taken little note herself. She sat in the brass tub the maids had lugged up the steps to her room, luxuriating in warm water and studied the distorted view of her belly through soap-clouded water.

The swell was there, a pronounced little curve in her stomach. Slight, for she was slim of frame and Keitlan promised she might not become heavy till the later months of the pregnancy, but enough to feel, when she ran her hands over it.

A two-sided blessing, that blossoming thing that grew within her. On the one hand, it reminded her of *him*, the silver haired progenitor of the life growing within her, and brought on a bone deep hurt that she could not seem to shake. She didn't know if she would ever shake it. On the other, with each passing day, as she spied on the sleeping center of life with her healing magic, she became more and more enamored by it. It became more and more essential to her very *being* and no bad memory of its father could change that.

She climbed out of the tub, fingers and toes wrinkled from the long soak, donning a thick robe while the maids emptied the tub and removed it from the room. She sat by the fire and let her hair dry, warm and comfortable and drowsy. There were still the faint sounds of celebration from the hall below.

Captain Kiro and a squadron of his men had apprehended a band of marauders who had been plaguing the northernmost villages of Kastel's province. They had been feasting since early in the afternoon in celebration of ending a deadly threat. But then, in the dead of winter,

any reason to celebrate was a good one. Sera had not joined in, feeling melancholy and just little off her kilter. Keitlan, who had become very much an ally and friend to her since her time here, had suggested it was nothing more than a pregnant woman's hormones acting up, and that she should stay in bed and relax.

Sera had no complaint with that advice. It had been snowing the last few days and the weather was more biting cold than usual. Staying abed on the orders of the forceful housekeeper was as good an excuse as any to snuggle up under the blankets before a warm fire.

Keitlan brought her a glass of warmed milk with a dollop of honey and sat to talk for a while, discussing the antics of the jovial soldiers down below.

"What will happen to the bandits?" Sera asked. "'Will they stand trial?"

The housekeeper's round face screwed into taut lines. "There's no trials out here for the likes of them. Their bodies were buried where they were caught and most likely it was a kinder fate than that they gave to all the poor villagers they raided. You're too soft hearted, Sera."

"Perhaps," Sera agreed quietly.

Keitlan patted her hand. "Probably why you're in the state you're in."

Sera looked away. It had not been a soft heart that had perpetrated that. She had known exactly what she wanted deep down. Stupidity maybe, to think loyalty was a virtue Dante Epherian harbored, but not soft-heartedness.

"Well, it's late and I've a hall to see cleaned, if all those boisterous men have stumbled off to pass out in their own bunks. To bed with you."

Under the covers, dark night, orange fire light casting shadows that undiluted on the wall. She shut her eyes and tried to think of simple, innocuous things that would not lead her into dreams of him. She thought of the baby, and the things she would teach it. The things they would do

together. The companionship of something so closely connected with herself.

She drifted off and dreamed of a shining, beautiful little face with eyes as brilliant as a sky on the clearest of days. An ageless face, not quite a baby, not quite an adult. Something ethereal and in-between. The eyes seemed to bore through her soul. The lips whispered an endearment and the hands reached out -- not quite at her. *Mother.*

There was a crack. A shattering of glass and wood. Cold air washed over her face. With a startled cry she woke, heart pounding from the sudden waking. Her window swung open, half off its hinges. Her window seat pillows scattered on the floor. She sat up, staring at the darkness beyond it, clutching her blankets to her breast, shocked and disoriented.

Then the shadows moved towards her and she thought of assassins and marauders and bandits and fanatical priests and screamed. She threw up a frantic shield, and had it banished as if it were smoke by a power far greater than hers. She drew breath to scream again and he brushed past the trailing edges of the bed canopy, moonlight making a silver halo of his hair. He bore her back, with a hand over her mouth and half lay atop her to hiss in her ear.

“Sera. It’s me. Calm yourself.”

She shuddered, knowing very well who it was, breathing in the scent of his palm, face tickled by the soft ends of his falling hair, body pressed by the weight of him, all in soft gray and white leather and suede. No matter of mere months might make a body forget Dante Epherian.

Her heart took up a frantic, erratic cadence in her breast. Her vision began to tunnel. He took his hand away and she sucked in air she had been denied and released it in an articulate screech.

“Calm myself?” she cried. “Get off. Get out.”

She flailed her limbs like a wild woman, dislodging sheets and quilts in efforts to get him off her. “How dare you come here? How dare you tell me to calm myself, you unconscionable bastard. Leave me alone.”

He rolled off her, but not off the bed, and she scooted back to press against the headboard, glaring at him with hysteria frothing over in her.

“Damnit, Sera, just calm down. I want to talk to you.”

“You want to make me insane,” she cried, and put her hands over her ears. He hissed in exasperation and grabbed her wrists, prying them away effortlessly, holding them prisoned between them.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were with child?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were an incorrigible whore who had to run and jump into bed with the first woman who made eyes at him?”

The last words ended with another high-pitched screech. She felt the subtle magic of an intrinsic probe and knew he sought after the life within her. She wriggled and fought to free herself, sobbing at an intrusion she could not repel.

“It’s not yours,” she declared the first thing that came to mind. He gave her much the same look he might a lunatic child who claimed to have seen tiny little men dancing at the bottom of her mug.

“Oh, you had an affair with a logger in the forest that I was unaware of?”

“Oh, shut up. Go away. I hate you.”

“You should have told me.”

“When should I have? One of the few times you were out of Kheron’s tent? When she was all over you? Should I have interrupted that to tell you the joyful news, you -- you liar.” She was going to loose her mind. She felt the edges of her sanity fraying. Why was he here? What did he want of her? To torment her further? To laugh at her pain? Where was Kheron? Would he go back and tell her how he had tortured gullible, naïve Sera?

“I did not lie to you.”

She wanted to hit him so bad her nails bit into her palms.

The door to her room slammed open hard enough for the handle to knock plaster from the wall. The doorway was filled with the large, sword wielding figure of Gerad. He had been roused most recently from sleep, from the look of him, tousled and shirtless and wild about the eyes. His gaze took in the room and her tormentor with a single glance and his lips curled in anger.

“Goddamned you. Leave her alone.” The sword leveled, humming with threatening magic.

Dante snarled, cried out a word and the air between himself and Gerad thrummed to life, shimmering as if from heat distortion. The Master of the Divhar cried out, struck by some great force that slammed him back into the wall of the hall outside. He hit so hard stone crumbled. The door fell off its hinges and the wood frame that had held it splintered and cracked.

Gerad slumped bonelessly to the floor, the blade hitting the carpeted hallway with a muffled thump. Sera cried out in dismay. There were startled cries in the hallway outside, servants awoken by the disturbance and most certainly shocked by the sudden expelling of Gerad from her rooms.

“Fuck,” Dante swore at the sound of people summoned by her screams and his own burst of magic. The servants did not venture past her door, though.

Kastel did. Just like Gerad he had come from his own bed, with an embroidered robe tied about him and an icy look on his face. He stopped by Gerad, hesitated long enough to see if the man were alive and stalked into her room. Dante was on his feet by that time and surging forward to meet the challenge.

“How dare you--?” Kastel got out before Dante hissed a word and Kastel staggered backwards, holding up an

arm reflexively to shield himself even as he threw up a shield of a more magical nature.

“You little son of a bitch. You knew and you hid it from me. You took her away when she carried my child.”

Kastel snarled and something of equal and violent nature as what Dante had thrown at him slammed into Dante. Dante shielded it.

“You invade my castle. You attack my guests. I do not wish a battle with you -- I swear I do not -- but you force my hand.”

“You think you’re up to it, Kastel? Maybe wake up Gerad and see if the two of you together can take me?”

Sera couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t stand the violence and the anger and the indignant sound to Dante’s voice. As if he were the one slighted. She crawled off the edge of the bed. Pushed her feet into her slippers and slipped along the wall and out the door with neither wizard the wiser, the both of them too consumed in the facing of each other. How could he do this? How could he come back when she was just starting to live again?

\* \* \*

The entire, frenetic journey to Sta-Veron, Dante had thought about what he might say to her. How he might explain, without explaining, what he had done. Why he had done it? All the things he would do to cajole her into forgiveness.

He had a talent for talking his way into women’s good graces, even women who knew better. He had forgotten that Sera was for all intents and purposes immune to it. One forgot the sound of her screech and the heat of her glare after not being on the receiving end of it for a very long time. The sweetness of her embrace washed all of her more shrewish qualities away. He had not expected her to become hysterical. He didn’t deal with accusations

and verbal abuse well. So all his sweet words got shuffled aside as his defenses came up.

Stupid. Stupid, to let her goad him into anger when he desperately wanted her exoneration. When he desperately wanted to tell her it had all been for her own good, to escape the terms of an unwanted bargain made with *Mother*, before he'd known Sera pregnant. *Mother*, being the essence of life itself, had obviously had inside knowledge.

Then come Gerad and Kastel, threatening, when his back was already to a wall higher and sharper than they could imagine. What did they expect? For him to act meek and shamle away with his tail between his legs. Little chance of that.

Kastel was glaring at him with wide, ice blue eyes, breathing hard and looking torn between misery and stubbornness. He still had his shield up, though Dante had dropped his, daring Kastel to throw something else at him. Kastel didn't. Kastel hated fighting him. He knew that well.

"This is not your business, Kastel. Stay out of it."

"It is. I offered her my protection. She took it. That means even against you."

"Oh, does it? That's too bad for you then, isn't it?"

A middle aged, broad boned woman appeared in the doorway with a rustle of night skirts. She looked about the room in disgust-laced fear, then glared at both wizards.

"Well isn't this a fine thing to wake up to? And in lady Sera's own room. Look at the window," she cried and stalked past the two of them as if they weren't there. Then turned and shook a finger towards them.

"I don't know what all this clamor is about, but if it in any way concerned that girl, then you're both unobservant clods, because she's flown and in this weather."

Dante whirled. The bed was empty. Sera was nowhere to be seen. Kastel's eyes widened and his shield faltered.



“Sonuvabitch,” Dante hissed. He stabbed a finger against Kastel’s shoulder and suggested. “Don’t get in my way.”

Then whirled and stalked for the window, because he knew deep down that she had fled the castle. He hit the cold winter air, flew over the courtyard and the castle walls. The streets outside were covered with a light film of snow. She hadn’t gotten far. A shivering, white gowned form stumbling down the street outside the castle gates. He floated down into her path. She didn’t even see him, her head down, her arms wrapped about herself and shivering so hard he could hear her teeth clatter, until he caught her arms and stopped her forward momentum.

“Are you insane?”

Her head snapped up, eyes wild with what very well might have been a touch of insanity. Bits of blown snow caught in her hair. White against dark auburn. Tears streaked down her cheeks. Her face was wet with them.

“Let me go,” she whispered. He shook his head, hesitated a moment, then did. He reached up to unclasp his cloak and flung it around her shoulders. She did not reject it. Just kept walking, as if he might give up and go away if she ignored him. He walked beside her, thinking desperately what he might say to make her listen to him. What he could and could not admit to her to make her understand.

“I’m a fool sometimes. I act and I don’t take the time to rationalize what I’m doing -- and sometimes I’m -- wrong.” That was not an easy thing to admit. No one in the world would ever hear it but her. She made no response to it. What if she didn’t? What if his ploy had worked too well?

“That’s what happened. I got my powers back and it was like -- euphoria. Like some kind of drug and I wanted to destroy Angelo and that army so bad it hurt. You stopped me. You had that power and I still can’t understand how you got it -- but it -- frightened me.”

The word was distasteful, but he forced it out. He drew an uncertain breath, mind scrambling desperately for excuses and realizing even as he said them that they were truths.

"After being powerless, I found that the thought of someone holding power of me – was unbearable. I *wanted* to destroy that army. I wanted to send the lot of them to hell -- and I couldn't because it would have hurt you. The only thing at the time I could think of to protect myself was to chase you away. You've been my conscience since I've known you and sometimes the things I need to do are better accomplished without the shackles of morality."

"Shackles?" She whispered. "Well, then you are best rid of me. I wouldn't want to ever bind you against your will. You've had enough of that."

He shut his eyes, saying prayers to gods he'd never worshipped that she was talking to him. "But it was just that moment. I wasn't in my right mind with my powers back and Angelo slipping through my grasp. I didn't mean it. I regret it. I wish I'd never done it."

"Done what? Treated me like the lowliest dog, or slept with Kheron before my eyes? Though, it is not like you haven't done that before."

"I explained to you about Kheron," he said quietly.

"You explained nothing I want to hear." She glared up at him balefully. "You want her -- fine. I don't care. She doesn't seem to have a problem with your whoring."

It was the second time she'd called him a whore and he had to suck in a breath to quell the irritation.

"I don't want her. I want you."

"Liar. You want whatever you fancy at the moment. Me, her, Rejalla – Goddess, she'd jump for your bed if you even glanced her way -- any other girl that catches your eye."

"Not true," he said vehemently.

"I'm not blind."

“I don’t need them, if I’ve got you.”

“Goddess, Dante, you’re not capable of fidelity. And I could deal with it then -- when -- before we -- “  
“Made love?”

“Yes! But I can’t now. I’m not Kheron. I can’t stand by and watch you -- do what you did with me with someone else. It hurts too much. Maybe you should be with her. She needs you so much that she’ll endure the pain just because she’s afraid of losing you. Because she’s afraid that if she calls you on it, you’ll just give her some flippant remark and leave her for someone more flexible.

“I don’t need you that much. Not so much that I can ever endure that. So just go away and leave me to raise my child where neither it or I will ever have to go through that. I don’t want you anymore. I *can’t* want you anymore.”

“I want you.”

She hurt him. Her words stung with the lash of truth. Of Kheron, of him and worst of all, of Sera. He felt sick from it.

“It doesn’t work like that,” she cried, stopping in exasperation and staring up at him. “You can’t have something just because you want it. Goddess, I wish there was somebody strong enough to pound that through your thick skull. Oh, you made me hurt so much. You can’t even realize what you did to me. I wanted to be dead. Dead!! I would rather die now than go through it again. Do you understand? Can you understand?”

She stood there, shaking, her arms clutching the cloak about her body. And he stared, profoundly shocked at such an admission. That he had injured her so badly that she contemplated death. For a moment he hardly saw her, imagining the world without her in it. And he had a vivid and widespread imagination. A dozen visions of her lifeless body. Simply the thought of it sent ripples of unfamiliar pain through his chest.

“What do you want of me?” he whispered, stripped of subterfuge. “What vows shall I say that will make you happy?”

“It doesn’t matter. You wouldn’t keep them. Remember what Glyncara said? She said she didn’t think you could keep an oath. She was right.”

“What oath have I made to you that I’ve broken?”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me.” The tears rose again in her eyes. Her chin trembled, dimpling with the sorrow.

He reached out as if to touch them, then drew his hand back.

“I didn’t mean to.” But he had, and he had a reason that she would never understand. That he, despite all his power, was terrified to tell her.

“I need you.”

“You don’t need anyone.”

“I need you to hold the demons in check. Without you, I become something all together darker than what I am with you to make me try and be better.”

Truth again. Naked truth that left him cold and shuddering and wishing desperately he were anywhere else but here, baring his soul on a cold, miserable northern street. And she rebuffed him at every turn. She shattered his arguments and made him seem trivial and childish. He looked away from her, hair sticking to his face. Wetness on his lashes made him blink. She reached up and touched his cheek, eyes wide in wonderment.

“Is this a tear?”

“Its snow,” he murmured.

She rubbed it between her fingers. “You lay the welfare of the world on my shoulders, do you? I’m the buffer between it and your good behavior?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Didn’t you?”

“I love you.”

She sighed. “I know. I just don’t understand the ways you show it in.”

“Don’t let me get away with it.”

“As if I could stop you.”

“You could.”

She looked down at the snow covered stone between their feet. “I don’t know what to do, Dante.”

“Forgive me.”

“I’m confused. I’m so confused I can’t think straight.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Let me make it better.”

She stood there, shoulders haunched, shifting from foot to foot. Her face was pale and her lips devoid of color.

“I’m cold.” It was a tiny little whimper. A miserable little admission. She stepped towards him, defeated or victorious, he wasn’t sure which, and he wrapped her in his arms and in a cloud of heat that melted the snow on the street in a ten foot radius about them.

“Don’t do it again,” she said against his shoulder. “Don’t hurt me again.”

“Never. I promise.”

“Don’t promise. Just don’t do it.”

There was no arguing with that. He just nodded, elated, relieved, terrified of what would happen when this baby was born and Mother tried to collect.

“And apologize to Kastel.”

“What?”

“He didn’t want to keep the baby a secret, but I made him promise. He was only protecting me.”

“I will not.” Indignation rose like a flash flood to wash away dread.

“Then you and I are going to be at odds, I swear.” She shifted to look sternly up at him. There were still traces of tears in her eyes. He met her glare, gauging how serious she was in that declaration. He decided she was very serious. The vision of facing off against the pregnant woman to whom he had just bared his soul and declared his undying love almost made him laugh.

He did laugh. He pressed her face against his shoulder and carried her into the air back towards the dawn silhouetted bulk of Kastel's castle. In light of this monumental achievement, one could be a little magnanimous with one's forgiveness.

## Two

Gerad's head hurt. His shoulders ached, the muscles in his back felt as though they had each and every one been ripped out, stomped on and haphazardly stuffed back into place. People were being very, very loud and inconsiderate of his pounding head. The maids were buzzing with speculation. Kastel's housekeeper was complaining bitterly about the disregard men in general had for women's feelings and welfare. Captain Kiro and the house guard were mulling about, clanking of weapons and armor, wanting badly to do something about the dishonor placed upon their lord and castle. Kastel wasn't saying anything, other than initially and sternly prohibiting Kiro from sending anyone out into the streets after Dante, thus effectively saving lives.

Gerad prodded at the egg sized lump on the back of his skull, wincing at the sharp little stab of pain that contact brought. There was no blood. Not anymore. There was blood on the wall where he had hit. His connection with the Great blade had always sped the recovery of his injuries. It was a symbiotic relationship of sorts. It drew life force and power from him at times and in return it kept its bearer in exceptionally good health. Though not enough to banish the aches and pains.

Ten years ago and he would have had little discomfort to complain about. He should have been quick enough to see it coming and avoid it. Ten years or thirty minutes ago he should have expected Dante to strike out at such an intrusion. His own fault for letting surprise make him rash.

He was in Kastel's study, the closest large room on the floor with a chair for him to sit down in and enough room for Kiro to pace about and fret. Kastel looked out the window, his back to the confusion that had entered his private sanctum. Keitlan had said, when she had been

fussing over the lump on his head, that Kastel and Dante had been ready to fight. Gerad wondered if she knew what such a fight would consist of. Of what such a clash would do to this castle and this city. She couldn't know. Not if she mentioned it so casually, as if a fight between wizards was as simple as a fight between sailors in a seaside bar.

Kastel knew. Kastel had to be fretting over the welfare of his city if they had a vengeful and irrational Dante to deal with.

A maid came running into the study, skidding to a stop before Keitlan and curtsying frantically before blurting out. "The door's back up on lady Sera's room. Nobody put it up. Its sealed there like somebody melted it to the frame and it can't be budged. It's hot to the touch. Its not natural." As if anything in this whole situation was.

Kastel turned around. Gerad lifted a brow.

"Well," Gerad said. "Personally, I'm not for kicking down any more doors on him. If they're back and she's not screaming bloody murder, let her deal with him. She does it better than the rest of us."

The guard were staring questioningly at their lord. Keitlan was frowning mightily. Kastel waved a hand and said quietly. "Leave it. Go back to your beds, all of you."

"But, my lord --" Keitlan complained.

"I said leave it."

She looked distressed, but did not argue further. She left the study, the last to heed her lord's orders. Gerad sighed, rubbing his neck and not quite able to work out the kink.

"I don't understand him," Kastel said quietly, when they were alone. "Is he playing some game?"

"You ask me? My head hurts too much to try and figure how his mind works. He never did make sense."

"He went to such efforts to abandon her and now --"



“Now, he’s changed his mind. Worse than a woman.” Gerad sniffed. “I was complaining the other day that being snowed in here was getting boring. Remind me to never wish boredom away again, will you?”

\* \* \*

She sat with her knees to her chest with a quilt wrapped about her, before the roaring fire in her room. He leaned against the wall next to it, one boot on the wall, his face half obscured by moonlight silver hair. With sorcery he had sealed the window against the freezing cold outside, and the door inside against intrusion to their privacy.

Their conversation was halting and uncertain after the truce. She told him about her desolation, her bereavement and the budding joy of the child that grew within her. He admitted to being able to think of little else but her from almost the moment he had made the ill fated decision to separate from her. He admitted to remorse over her pain, which astounded her. He never felt guilt. She hadn’t thought he was capable of it. She asked him about Kheron -- what state he had left her in -- and he looked away, honest strife on his face. Honest, torn emotion that she could not fault him for.

She could not, at this moment, summon up the energy to do more than stare into the fire and listen to the crackle of flames, and the sound of his voice when he spoke. She was numb. Part of her cried out not to trust him, to shun him as he’d shunned her, but that wasn’t a part close to her heart. Those warmer places swelled with relief that he had come back for her. Those places close to her heart were convinced that his repentance was for real.

Her head drooped and her fingers loosened their grip on her blanket. She snapped to drowsy awareness, shifting the quilt.

Dante bent over her, whispered at her ear. “Go to sleep, Sera.”

And swept her up, blanket and all to carry her to her disarrayed bed. She half struggled, not sure of his intentions. He laid her down and when she stared warily up at him, he merely shook his head and said.

“I should have waited until day to find you. I’m sorry I robbed you of sleep.”

He looked as if he had not seen it himself in quite a while. She wondered how long he had ridden without stop to reach her. Knowing him and the information that goaded him, he probably had not stopped at all. She sighed and relaxed into her pillows, shut her eyes and was asleep.

She woke up to light coming in from the shimmering seal about the window. For a while she lay, with pleasant warmth at her back, her mind still fuzzy from sleep, trying to put a name to the oddness in the room. She faced the door. Which was splintered and gouged and merged most unnaturally to the abused frame about it. There were spidering cracks in the plaster on the wall around the doorframe. Plaster and wood littered the carpet before the door.

She made to sit up, but there was a heaviness across her waist keeping her down. An arm encircled her. Her head rested comfortably on another. She twisted her head and looked into Dante’s face. She drew a sharp breath, everything coming back. And in the light of morning she was not so certain how she felt about it. About him.

She could not stop staring at him. All tussled silver hair and black lashes fluttering on his cheeks. Oh, how she adored him when he was asleep. When he couldn’t hurt her with words or promises or deeds. He was only dangerous when he was awake and aware. She might have laid here forever with him in slumber and been happy.

He opened his eyes when she was looking at him and smiled at her. A charming, sleepy smile that made the corners of her mouth curve up in response.

“Good morning,” he murmured.

That remained to be seen. A great many things remained to be seen.

“Are you sorry yet? To have forgiven me?” he inquired.

“I don’t remember saying that I had,” she responded.

He did not reply to that. His eyes fixed on hers, searching for the key to her thoughts. She lowered her lashes to keep it from him. Not ready yet to give him all her secrets. But she would give him one. One that they shared. She reached for the hand at her waist and drew it down between them, pressing it against her tummy where the life they had made resided.

“Our baby lives here.”

He drew in breath. He looked a little spooked, a little unnerved. He drew his hand away after a moment and brought it up to her cheek. He touched his forehead to hers, a gesture of such affection that it made her forget his uneasiness at the mention of their child.

Her stomach growled, telling her that she had overslept her normal breakfast hour. The rest of the castle was probably already astir and no doubt salivating to know what had transpired behind her sealed bedroom door.

“If I don’t get something to eat soon, I’m going to start gnawing on furniture. Perhaps you might undo the door.” She said blandly and he arched a brow at her. He leaned over her and waved a finger at the door. The odd merging between shattered door and frame melted away and the door teetered, then toppled forwards into the room.

Which left little privacy for dressing, with her room open to the hall. So she merely pulled a sweater over her nightgown and a skirt over that. All of which Dante watched as if she were performing some erotic dance for his benefit. It made her feel oddly embarrassed and elated. She had to wonder if he would react the same when she was waddling about like a house on legs.

“Well,” she said when she was dressed. “Shall we go and face the multitudes?”

He shrugged. Being the center of all attention had never been an issue with him. She thought he rather thrived on it.

“You will be civil and you will be contrite. You promised.”

“Civil maybe,” he said. She turned and fixed him with a narrow glare. He pretended to look elsewhere.

“And you’d better hope Gerad’s all right.”

“He is.”

“Humph.” She marched out of the room and he followed. A chambermaid saw them, stopped in the middle of the hall, then turned and scampered off the way she had come. A guard came up the hall and Sera smiled cheerfully at him, taking Dante’s arm in hers to assure no one got the wrong idea.

“Good morning.” She nodded.

The guard nodded back warily, stood against the wall and let them pass, then fell in a few yards behind them. Dante cast an amused glance back.

“Oh, charming. An escort.”

Down stairs to the main hall. There were a few guardsmen at the tables. A few nightwalkers sitting around their master who occupied one of the high backed cushioned chairs near the hearth. Keitlan was fussing about Gerad. She stopped in mid-finger shake to stare at Sera and Dante, open mouthed. Sera disengaged herself from his arm and hurried forward to confront Gerad.

“Are you all right?”

The master nightwalker waved a hand at Keitlan. “Mistress Keitlan was just inquiring about that herself. I’m fine. He pulled the punch.” His eyes went past her to Dante, who inclined his head and shrugged.

Keitlan put her hands on her hips and looked disapprovingly at Dante. Every set of eyes in the hall was staring at him.

“So this is the father.” The housekeeper said, disdain dripping from her voice. Sera blushed, glancing back to him. He did not seem offended. He merely lifted a brow and pulled out a chair for Sera at Gerad’s table.

“That I am,” he agreed, sitting down himself next to Sera.

“Oooh, well fine of you to show up after all the pain you caused the poor girl.”

“Keitlan,” Sera pleaded softly, “Please, could I have some breakfast. I’m starved.”

“No doubt. Running about in the night. And in your condition.” She cast one more dark glare at Dante, who lifted his lips in a predatory smile, then she turned to snap at one of the gawking serving girls to run and fetch food.

“So here you are,” Gerad said, turning a mug in his big hands.

“Here I am. Cold and miserable a place though it be.”

“Its not so bad,” Gerad said. “Better since Sera got her hands on it.”

“Cold and miserable, no matter what face you put on it. What do you mean since Sera got her hands on it?”

“Oh, I just helped with a little redecorating,” she said shyly.

Gerad snorted. He looked as if he wanted to say something but held it back. Keitlan sat a mug of milk down before Sera and with considerably more force slammed a mug of amber ale before Dante. It sloshed over the sides and onto the table. She gave him a look, just to make sure he knew she hadn’t done it by accident, then moved aside so the maid could lay heaping plates of eggs fried with vegetables and meat, potatoes, fried apples and bread before them.

“So, where is Kheron?” Gerad finally asked, voice light, but eyes intense under his lashes. Dante shrugged between mouthfuls.

“Keladedra, probably.”

“Probably? You don’t know?”

Dante cast him an irritated look. "She does what she wishes. I'm not her keeper."

"Not anymore," Gerad muttered.

"Who is this Kheron?" Keitlan demanded, hovering behind the table. "The woman he left poor lady Sera for?"

"Does everyone know everything here?" Dante asked in exasperation.

"As if there's not a clear enough explanation for a grieving woman with child. You ought to be ashamed to show your face."

"Mistress Keitlan! That will be enough!"

Kastel strode into the hall, captain Kiro on his heels, impeccably dressed in stern blue and black. The housekeeper blushed, bit her lip in consternation and retreated to the hearth where her girls were seeing to the seasoning of the mid-day stew. He stopped at the end of the table, expressionless. Dante leaned back in his chair and stared at him.

"Am I to expect anymore destruction to my castle, or are you done with that?"

Dante smiled blindingly, which made Sera uneasy. She kicked his ankle under the table to remind him of his manners.

"I'm done. But you never know. The cold makes me cranky."

Sera kicked him harder. He moved his foot out of her range.

"Oh, by the way, I'm told I was unbearably rude last night and that I ought to be remorseful for it. I'm sure you understand the depths to which I regret it."

Kastel's lashes fluttered down. He was not immune to the irony in Dante's tone. Anyone who knew him wouldn't be.

"This is a dreadful, drafty monastery you have here, Kastel. I'll never understand why you picked such a

comfortless place to call home.” He got a number of dark looks from men at arms and servants for that comment.

“I’m sorry it does not meet with your approval.”

“Hummm.” He tore the crust off a piece of bread and popped it into his mouth, still watching Kastel. “Don’t just stand there like an idiot. Sit down.”

Kiro’s lips clenched in anger, most upset by the disrespect given his lord, but wise enough not to call Dante on it. Kastel himself did not evidence irritation. Not in the set of his face at any rate. His eyes were shuttered by the gold tipped fringe of his lashes. He moved around the table to pull out a chair opposite Dante.

“I hardly expected to see you here after --- our last conversation.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Indeed. If Sera is agreeable to this change in your mood, then I have no dissension with it.”

Dante lifted a brow caustically. “You can’t imagine how much relief I feel to hear that. I would hate to have - - dissension with you, Kastel. And after you were so very forthright with me.”

“Dante.” Sera smiled at him tightly. “Play nice, please.”

He blinked at her innocently. “I thought I was. Civil. Wasn’t that what you asked for?”

She looked across the table to Kastel, who was beginning to look a bit doleful at Dante’s acerbity. “He’s just snappy because he hasn’t had much sleep the last few weeks.”

“And I hate all this endless snow,” Dante added.

“How did you travel across the mountains?” Kastel asked. “The passes are all snowed in.”

“I noticed. I made a new one.”

“A new one?”

“A new pass.” Dante waved a hand airily in a southerly direction. “The old ones were intolerable. I was in a hurry.”

“You made a new pass?” Kiro repeated his lord. “How did you --?”

Dante just stared at him.

“Are you saying you blasted a new pass through the great northern range?” Kastel said, with slightly narrowed eyes.

“Are the lot of you deaf and dumb?”

“You made a large, easily traveled pass through the mountains at a time when there is a possible army out there with aggressive intentions towards anything connected with you?”

Dante shrugged. “Without Angelo, Teo isn’t stupid enough to strike against me. The only people stupid enough to do that it seems are sitting about this table.”

Gerad laughed. Kastel chewed on the inside of his cheek, not convinced.

“Perhaps, my lord, we should send out men to watch this new pass he has made,” Kiro suggested warily. Kastel nodded, waving a hand to indicate he do it now. The captain spun on his heels and marched towards the doors at the end of the hall.

“You worry too much,” Dante said.

“You don’t worry enough,” Gerad replied, since Kastel wouldn’t respond to the complaint.

\* \* \*

Dante had taken up residence in Kastel’s castle as if it were his own. Oh, he was not particularly imperious to anyone other than Kastel himself -- old habits died hard -- but he most definitely acted as if he were certain he were the center of this particular universe. His moods and sulks were by far more important than anyone else’s, with the possible exception of Sera. His entertainment more pressing than the entire functioning of a city. His complaints more dire than any one else’s.



It was all familiar. Kastel had spent a lifetime dealing with it and did not particularly mind the moods or the ego. He did not appreciate the wit being practiced upon his person, especially in the presence of others; that little penchant disturbed his sense of honor, but there was no more help for it now than there had been years past. Dante did what Dante pleased. And when Dante was bored, which he claimed constantly to be here, snowbound in Sta-Veron, Dante had to find things to entertain himself.

Sera might have helped the situation greatly, had she extended her forgiveness to the bedroom. She had not as of yet, invited him to join her in her recently repaired room. Keitlan, in her general disapproval of him, had seen him placed in rooms of his own all the way across the castle from Sera's. His abstinence from Sera also seemed to include every other woman in the city. It seemed a condition of her good will, which amazed Kastel to no ends, since Dante had never curbed his outrageous flirting for any other living creature.

He had wondered into Kastel's library a few times, while Kastel was at his books, and drifted about the tome lined shelves, trailing his fingers over the spines of books, pausing to read a title here and there. He did not exactly make Kastel nervous, but he did make him excruciatingly aware of his presence. There was no concentration while he was on the prowl.

"Come across any new spells of the ancients in all this?"

"A few." Cautiously. Wizards, even friendly ones, were not generous creatures when it came to the sharing of spells. "I've been more interested in the lore of the very old world, before man civilized it with his technology. I was intrigued by your stories of this *Mother* and the lady of the forest."

Dante glanced thoughtfully over his shoulder at him. "And what have you found?"

“There are so few books that have references to those old magics. A lot of myth that is often hard to separate from fact.”

“Par for the course.”

“There are many references to forest deities and spirits from ancient sea faring cultures. I thought I might go south during the spring and see if I could find any books dealing more with those civilizations.”

“Ancient Seafarers? Fairy circles, toadstools, banshees and the like. Waste of time more than likely. But make yourself happy. You found no reference to *Mother*?”

“Not even an obscure one. Perhaps you might give me more details of the entity.”

Dante looked out the window, frowning. “I think *entity* is too small a term for it. It may very conceivably be a collective of entities, rather than one single being.”

“And its orientation?”

“I don’t think it has one, other than the welfare of the planet. I think it would do -- whatever was necessary to further its own capacity to protect -- or maybe nurture the earth.”

“Is it a extension of the world, or a separate being?”

“I don’t know. The first, I think. And if not then its connection is so strong that whatever state it is in, the earth will reflect and vice versa. I wish it were otherwise.”

“Why?”

“Because then I could kill it.”

Kastel stared at him, wide eyed. “I don’t understand. It freed you.”

Dante did not answer. He stared out the window with such a look of rancor that the clouds themselves seemed to turn pale and hurry on across the sky. He refused to speak more on the subject and wondered away not long after.

The next morning, when Kastel had finished breakfast in his chambers and walked on his way to the library,

Dante whisked up beside him, draping an arm across his shoulders.

“We’re going out.”

Kastel looked up at him warily, finding himself steered past the door to his library against his will and down the hall towards the stairs. “I had wanted to finish a passage I was reading--” he tried to explain.

“You read too much. See what my being gone has done to you? Turned you into a book worm.”

He could not imagine what was so alluring outside that Dante had to drag him out to see it. But through the hall and out the main doors they went. The sky was clear of clouds and the air had a fresh, almost warm sparkle to it. Ice and snow glinted in the sunlight. One had to wonder if this suspiciously spring like day had been induced by means other than natures.

Kastel cast a skeptical glance to Dante. “You didn’t --”

“Not even a little. It did it all on its own.” He grinned broadly and whitely, irresistible when he was in high spirits, and tromped down the steps and onto the muddy ground of the yard. There were horses saddled and waiting and quite a few white garbed men who Kastel recognized as being Gerad’s nightwalkers. Gerad himself strode up from the direction of the stable, all in white, with the Great Sword on his back and a grin of anticipation on his broad face.

“Good god, you dragged him out. I would have placed money against it.”

“Against me? Are you a complete fool?”

“Never proven.” Gerad was in fine spirits as well. Dante was practically bursting with them. Kastel had no notion what had the two of them in such a jovial mood, save the dubious occurrence of a warm winter’s day.

“What exactly are the two of you about?” Kastel asked, looking askance at horses and nightwalkers.

“War games,” Dante said with glee. “We’re going to go and destroy things.”

“Which things, exactly?”

“Nothing of yours, I assure you. You and Gerad and his nightwalkers against me.”

“I’m not dressed for this.”

Dante rolled his eyes and a heavy fur lined white cloak appeared out a thin air. A Sartor spell. Dante’s favorite waste of energy.

“Look at it this way, you get to take out all your frustrations at me.”

“I don’t want to take out any frustrations on you.”

“Oh, you are such a bad liar, Kastel.” He got pushed towards a horse. Gerad was already up and reining his mount in a tight circle about the yard.

There was really no fighting it. Gerad had obviously been telling Dante about the wargames he and his nightwalkers had been holding in the snowy wilderness outside Sta-Veron.

He climbed up into the saddle. The stable master had been kind enough to saddle the chestnut he had favored of late. The horse snorted and paced about in excitement over the company of all the other horses.

Kastel knew to shield his eyes against the sudden flare of sun on boundless snow. But several of the nightwalkers cursed, snow blinded when they left the gates of Sta-Veron. They rode towards the woods to the north.

“So what is the object of this war game we are to play?” He asked when Gerad and Dante rode beside him.

“Simple,” Gerad said. “I’ve sent one of my men ahead with two flags. We’re red, he’s black. Find the enemy flag and keep it before he gets ours and we win. The rules are. No flight spells. No killing my men --” He gave Dante a pointed stare. “No calling elementals for help in finding the flags. We’ve got to do it on our own.”

“Oh, lovely. Sounds like a wonderful way to pass the time.”

\* \* \*

Sera sat on a stool in the kitchen, where it was warmest in all the castle, and where today, the back door was open to let in the sunshine and the fresh air. She was putting garland on a tray of pastries. The cook and Keitlan were kneading dough for the morning's baking. The castle was pleasantly quiet today, what with a good portion of the castle guard gone to inspect the new southern pass with captain Kiro and the resident wizards out with Gerad's nightwalkers to play war games in the woods.

“So,” Keitlan said, her hands rhythmically turning the dough. “Have you decided yet, whether to forgive him?”

Sera was well used to the woman's bluntness by now and only blushed at the most indelicate questions. “Who's to say I haven't? He's here, isn't he?”

“As if your mere wanting it would keep that one away if he chose not to be. If you'd forgiven him, you'd have let him into your bed by now.”

Sera did blush at that.

“I wouldn't keep him from mine,” the fat old cook remarked with a cackle.

“He'd run screaming from your bed, Marge,” Keitlan laughed. Sera half smiled at the vision.

“Can't I forgive him and not sleep with him?”

“Man like that?” Keitlan sniffed. “Not likely, girl. If it were that easy, you'd probably not be in this state now. I don't much like the way he treats my lord, and I'd take a stick to him if I could for what he did to you, but I've got to admit that he'd be a hard one to turn away when he sets those eyes on a body or blinds a woman with that smile.”

“And powerful,” Old Marge added. “There's something about a man who flaunts power and its no hollow boast.”

Sera knew all this without having to be told. She thought about it daily. She was not mad at him anymore. She had not the nature to hold a grudge. Her forgiveness did not have strings attached. But she did have a desire not to be burned again, after surviving the first searing pain of his betrayal. She wanted to be near him, but she hesitated abandoning herself to the euphoria sexual contact would bring. That left her too open to be hurt again.

“I don’t see why sex is so important anyway,” she grumbled. “Why does everything have to come down that that? It was wonderful, but I could live very well without it, if I had to.”

Both Keitlan and Marge laughed, as if they knew something she did not.

“Oh, Sera. You are naive, aren’t you,” Keitlan said, when she’d caught her breath. “Men and women are two different breeds of animal. Of course we could do just fine without ever a man in our beds again, save for the warmth on a cold night. But to hear them talk, they’d die if they didn’t get their regular portion. It’s more important to them than the food they eat. If you want to keep a man, you cater to his needs and keep him happy in the bedroom.”

“That’s ridiculous. I know plenty of men who don’t have to have sex all the time. Why father never had it. Well, at least he didn’t after mother died.” She amended, blushing at the mere mention of her father and sex.

“Girl, your father is a priest. They don’t count. Your wizard is no priest.”

“I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I didn’t say that I did.”

“Then why are you pushing me to let him into my bed?”

Keitlan put a flour covered hand to her chest. “Me? I was just explaining the nature of men to you.”

"If you don't want him, I'll take him," Marge cackled, slapping a loaf of dough into a pan.

Sera sighed. "I want him. I'm just afraid."

"And what about this other woman he went off with?"

"Kheron."

"Does he love her?"

"He took her in. He taught her to control her power. He does love her and I wouldn't ask that he stop -- even if I could - not simply to placate my fears. She loved him before I was even born. It just seems so unfair."

"You're not willing to step aside and let her have him are you?"

"Years ago, maybe I was. She was so intense in her feelings for him -- it intimidated me. If -- if he meant what he said to me, then no, I wouldn't just step aside. I don't know what I'd do. I wish she loved Gerad as much as he loved her. Then we wouldn't have this problem."

"Lord Gerad loved this woman too?" Keitlan's brows rose in interest. "Oh ho, this just grows more and more entertaining."

"It is *not* entertaining," Sera said vehemently.

"No, not for you, dear." Keitlan patted her hand, leaving a powdery smudge. "But for the rest of us -- the staff hasn't been so excited in years. We've never been so happy since lord Kastel brought you here."

"Oh, how wonderful," Sera huffed. But it felt good to know that she was wanted.

There was a commotion from the main hall. The voices of men raised in alarm. Keitlan dropped her dough and dusted her hands on her apron, hurrying for the kitchen door. Sera followed, curious, for it was early for the war games to have ended. There were city guard in the main hall, and castle men at arms.

"What is this ruckus?" Keitlan demanded wading into the midst of them fearlessly.

"Where is lord Kastel?" Demanded one of the city guard.

“Out, as if it’s any of your concern,” The housekeeper said smartly. “What business do you have?”

“Then captain Kiro.”

“He’s gone as well. Spit it out man.”

There was a whispered pause as the men looked amongst themselves, shifting uneasily, then one of the guardsmen dumped a burlap sack on the floor and from it rolled three severed heads. Sera drew breath, bringing a hand to her mouth. Keitlan gasped.

“Get those horrid things off my floor,” she screeched. “What do you think you’re doing, bringing those here?”

“They were left at the city gates,” the guard said tightly. “And six more bags like them. Bandits left them with this.”

He held out a blood stained parchment. Keitlan refused to take it. The man told her what it said. “These are the heads of the townsfolk of Thelda. They were killed in retaliation for the execution of the marauders captain Kiro caught in the God’s Tooth range last week. They say there will be more.”

Keitlan nodded, finally taking the missive gingerly in her fingers. “Get those out of here. Give them the treatment honest men deserve. Send someone out to find Lord Kastel and tell him what happened.” She glanced back to Sera. “You shouldn’t be here, lady. This is no sight for your eyes.”

Sera shook her head, sniffing back bile and tears. “I’ve seen worse. Much, much worse.”



### Three

Kastel hit the ground with enough force to drive the shield he had up around him six feet under snow and dirt. He splintered trees with the impact and the snow melted from the combustive energy of the attack.

He'd had the black flag in his sights. Up a tree that he had no intention of climbing and instead created enough ice formation on the high up limb to make it crack and fall to the ground, bringing the flag with it. Which had been, he'd thought, an end to the not completely unenjoyable game until the Spitfire spell hit him. Granted, it had not been at full strength, but the residue energy of the thing was damned uncomfortable.

He could hear Dante laughing, all too pleased with his timely save of his black flag. It was not hard to track him. All one had to do was follow the skid mark Kastel's shield had left and it pointed a straight line to the enemy flag and hence the enemy who had gone to retrieve it.

*Sasarix Codalla-Lorotus.* He spoke the incantation, filled with a sudden determination not to let Dante get the flag quite so easily. A great howling wind swept through the wood -- one could only hope none of the nightwalker were about -- and seemed to snatch up every bit of snow, rock and not unfirmly attached piece of wood and hurl it with hurricane force towards the annoying laughter.

That stopped it. He climbed to his feet, dripping melted snow and mud, thoroughly disgusted at the *great fun*, Gerad and Dante had insisted this *divertissement* would be.

He took a step forward. Every tree standing was coated with a thick layer of blown snow and debris. Fire burst out of a particularly large lump of it in the center of the path, fanning out in a spiracle globe that melted snow and singed wet bark and pine needles. Dante burst out, clutching the black flag triumphantly in his hand.

“Take it if you can,” he taunted. Kastel narrowed his eyes, waved a finger and the soaked flag froze solid in Dante’s fingers.

Dante yelped, the freeze stinging his hand where he held the flag. He dropped it and it hit the ground, shattering into a hundred tiny, frozen black pieces of cloth. He glared at Kastel. “The object was to take the flag, not destroy it. You really don’t play very well. But, hey, it means all I have to do is get yours and I win.”

He wagged his fingers and a sheet of wind, static with electricity swirled up between them. Kastel shielded his eyes with a hand, not bothering with a shield since the maelstrom was not directed at him. When it was gone, so was Dante. Fine. Let him plague Gerad for a while.

He went looking for his horse, which had fled to who knew where once the air was rent with magic. Horses in general had a distaste for things of arcane nature. Wise creatures. He used a little spell to banish the dirt and water from his clothing as he walked.

His horse had stopped its mad fight across the forested hill and stood watching him warily as he stomped through snow up to his knees to reach it. He patted its thick furred neck reassuringly and its ears twitched while it decided whether to forgive him for the fright or not. It decided on forgiveness after a little scratching under the forelock and pushed at his shoulder with its wet, dirty muzzle. It had been ferreting under the snow for edible bits of greenery.

He had ridden a little ways towards the edge of the forest when he felt the trimmer of magic in the air and heard the not too distant boom of explosive power. The ground trembled a little and the horse tossed its head uneasily. He calmed it with a pat and the pressure of his knees. Gerad, he thought, releasing the power of the Great Sword. Then a return volley and the sky through the foliage lit up briefly. He came out of the trees and into a whirlwind of snow and energy. He saw glimpses of nightwalkers springing for cover in the trees. If Gerad

had appropriated the red flag, Kastel couldn't see it on his person, but Dante was in the midst of overwhelming him all the same.

One couldn't very well sit there and watch one's side be routed and not do something about it. He whispered the first lines of an incantation, deciding how he would direct the spell when it came to fruition. It was much harder to play at battle than it was to engage in the real thing. One had to curb the deadliness of spells and still defeat an enemy and that was a frustrating dilemma.

He brought his hands together and wove a symbol in the air. Faint lines of luminescence trailed in the path his fingers made. The air coalesced between Dante and Gerad, rebuffing the last strike made by the Master of the Divhar with neat efficiency. It thickened and thickened, creating a wall that snaked around the spot on which Dante stood. He was obscured by the hardening layers. It was a conical barrier of ice and energy pulled from the air itself. One could almost feel the moisture being sucked out of the air. It was open at the top and if Dante chose to ignore the rules of the contest, he could have levitated out. Flames spilled over the rim, some twenty feet high, instead, eating away at the prison from within. It kept forming from the outside, growing in diameter as it did.

Kastel rode towards Gerad, still concentrating on the spell. "Do you have the damned flag?"

"Ours, yes. Did you find his?"

"Yes."

"Do you have it?"

"No."

"Does he have it?"

"No."

Gerad lifted both brows at him skeptically. "You're having a hard time grasping the concept of this game, aren't you?" He thrust the red flag at Kastel with a grin. "Here you hold it, you've got better defenses than I do."

Kastel really didn't want it.

His eye caught movement from the south. A rider was coming up the path from Sta-Veron at a fast pace. The wall of ice suddenly shattered outwards, overcome by tremendous force from within. Shards flew in all directions, pelting snow and trees and men. Gerad sliced a chunk with the Great Sword and staggered back a step as smaller pieces hit him. Kastel threw up a shield to protect them both, but was distracted enough by the rider to let it down after the initial spray of shrapnel ceased.

“My Lord,” The rider called out.

Force hit him from the side. Not magical, he might have sensed that, but pure physical impact that knocked him out of the saddle and into the snow with not inconsiderable weight pressing him down into the white. Dante leered down and Gerad got knocked back by a wave of concussive energy when he came to help. Kastel got an arm across the throat and the flag ripped out of his fingers.

“Mine,” Dante crowed triumphantly. He had the advantage of leverage and Kastel couldn’t quite manage to throw him off.

“Surrender?” Dante demanded, pressing down. It was always a question of dominancy with him. Always a matter of impressing upon all the world and most importantly those closest to him that he was Alpha male. Leader of the pack of his making. Even his grin was wolfish. Kastel did the only thing he could to get Dante off him quickly and painlessly. He admitted defeat.

“You win. Get off.”

Dante laughed, rolling off and holding up the red flag in childish glee. The rider had come to a startled halt not far from them, staring at the ravaged land and the snow covered wizards with a white, shocked face. Gerad came limping over, brushing snow from his hair.

“Lord Kastel,” The rider swallowed, then drew breath and blurted out. “Marauders have attacked a village in

the north in retaliation for the execution of their brethren. They left the heads of the villages at our gates.”

“They did what?” Gerad sputtered. Kastel shut his eyes for a moment in consternation, fighting back a cold anger that made his fists clench. He sent troops to the south to guard against danger from that direction and it came in the form of vengeful bandits from the north. Bandits had always been a thorn in the side of honest towns and villages, but they had never dared to cast so blatant a challenge at the doorstep of the Winter King.

“Which village?” he asked.

“Thelda, my lord.”

Thelda was a four day ride at best from Sta-Veron.

“When were these --gifts left for me?”

“Only this afternoon. The gate guards saw no one.”

Which only meant that the bandits were good at their profession. But they could not have ridden far. If they were northern bandits then they would have ridden back towards the north. They might even have passed the pointless game Gerad and Dante insisted he engage in.

“Go back and see that the guard is doubled along the walls of Sta-Veron. Send a troop of men to Thelda to see what help might be given, if there are any left alive to help.”

“Yes, my lord. And you. What shall I say you do, my lord? Mistress Keitlan and Lady Sera were disturbed greatly by the message.”

He glanced to Gerad and Dante. “Tell them we look for the marauder’s trail.”

“Better done from the air,” Dante said, when the rider had taken off again for Sta-Veron.

“Yes,” Kastel agreed grimly. “They would ride towards the mountains to the north. That is where they nest.”

“Okay.” Dante uttered the words to a flight spell and rose from the earth, cloak billowing about him. “This is

better than war games,” he remarked and was off over the forest and flying northward.

Kastel didn't think so. Kastel thought it was infinitely worse.

\* \* \*

“Why haven't they returned?” Sera stood on the crenellated roof of the highest tower of Kastel's castle, bundled for cold weather, staring northward through a faint speckling of snow. “Or at least sent word?”

Keitlan stood beside her, huddled in her own thick coat, looking highly uncomfortable at the sheer height of the tower. She stood well away from the edge and the sharp drop. The tower was at the back of the castle and itself helped form the northern wall of the city. Below -- far far below -- was a snow covered rocky crevice. Sera looked over the edge and Keitlan complained bitterly about the recklessness youth.

“Men out hunting bandits don't have the time to send comforting messages,” the house keeper said sagely. “They've other things on their minds.”

“It's been five days. You'd think -- considering how much wizardly power they have at their beck and call -- they'd have caught a band of mere bandits already.”

“Wizards or no, bandits are a sneaky lot. They'll know every hidey hole between here and the Northern Tundra. Will you come down from here now?”

With a sigh, she did. The stairs leading down were narrow and circled the wall of the tower. She could touch either wall with her hands as she climbed down. The stones were cold to the touch. Even in the stairwell her breath frosted in the air.

Keitlan said another storm was on its way. Sera was sorry to hear it, having enjoyed the short spurt of sunshine. She thought Dante would be miserable out in the weather with a winter storm raging about him. She

rather wanted him back where she could lay hands on him if she wished, chide him for his acid wit or his strutting ego, or just sit and watch him. No wonder she had been so miserable her first month here. It was one thing to miss him when she knew he would come back to her, and quite another when she thought she might never see him again. She was unsure if she were so great a fool to accept and forgive or if he were that magnetic, that a reasonable girl lost her sense. If she had not the affinity to sense spells cast upon her person, she might have suspected he'd laid a geas on her.

She shed her winter cloak in her room, and warmed her hands and feet at the fire. Then she went downstairs to the hall to sit with the women while they did their sewing and mending and gossiped among themselves. She knew that when she was not present a fair deal of their gossip centered around her. She did not mind. They weren't spiteful as a general rule, not like the ladies at court in Alsansir. They rather liked her, she thought. She liked them, plain, simple women, the wives of men-at-arms, the women who worked for a living in their lord's castle. They were by far more honest than the rich ladies of the court she had known.

She was sitting among them, stitching a patch over someone's tunic, when one of the stable boys came hesitantly into the hall, searching out Keitlan.

"What is it, boy. Get your muddy feet off the rug."

"Mistress Keitlan. One of the gate guards escorted a lady to the castle gates. She says she's looking for -- for the dark wizard. Master Kelben told her he wasn't here so she asked for Lord Gerad."

"And you told her he wasn't here as well, didn't you?" Keitlan said in exasperation.

"She said she'd wait."

Sera's hands had frozen in their work. She stared at the needlework in shock, mind whirling with the certain suspicion of who such a lady might be.

“Well, she’ll have a long wait if they don’t come back before this storm. They’re likely to be snowed in. See what she wants.”

“She wanted to see his lordship’s guests, lady,” the boy said, as if Keitlan hadn’t heard that the first time.

“Let her in,” Sera said softly. Keitlan looked at her questionably. Sera shook her head. “She’s more than likely come a long way. Let her in out of the cold.”

Keitlan shrugged and waved the boy off. He scampered out of the hall, and not long after, the doors were opened again and he returned leading a heavily cloaked, hooded form. Gloved hands rose to push the fur lined hood back, revealing black hair and inhumanly large, golden eyes. Some of the women murmured at the sign of nelai’re blood. Sera just closed her eyes and tried to control the fear that hammered at her heart.

“And who might you be? A friend of lord Dante and Gerad?”

The dark head turned slowly, taking in the hall, finally resting on the housekeeper who had stood and walked towards her.

“I am.” Soft voice, a flickering of shining eyes under thick lashes. Nervous to be here, then.

“Well, they’re out chasing bandits with my lord Kastel and the fates only know when they’ll get back.”

The eyes swung past Keitlan and fixed on Sera, who stared back with wide tremulous orbs of her own. “Kheron,” she said quietly and the women whispered, having heard that name in their discussions about Sera and her affairs.

She rose, because she could see no other path for her to take, and inclined her head respectfully to the other woman. Kheron merely stared, unmoving. Under the cloak that dragged the floor was the glint of polished armor.

“It’s bad weather for traveling,” Sera said, for lack of more constructive conversation. What did one say to



lover of one's - - whatever Dante was to her? Kheron said nothing, never one for trivialities.

Why are you here? Sera wanted to cry, but she knew. She knew all too well.

"Well, Lady Kheron," Keitlan said, her lips pressed tight in disapproval. "I'll be certain to let them know you were looking for them when they return, which might be many days from now. Good day to you."

"All right," Kheron said, and turned to leave. There was such a look of uncertainty on her face, of disappointment and pain that Sera's sense of pity was pricked and badly so.

"Wait. Kheron, wait. Come in and sit by the fire. It's getting bitterly cold out and I've heard the inns are full of soldiers and trappers weathering the winter in the city." She could not picture Kheron sleeping in a stable and that was likely the only space left what with the storm approaching.

"There's -- there's room here for you -- if you want to wait for their return."

The Nelai're lowered her eyes, she shifted and one could hear the sounds of buckles and armor protesting. "I would not wish to impose on Kastel's hospitality."

Keitlan sniffed. Sera cast the woman a warning glance. This was a sorceress of no small power standing in their hall and not a stable one from the look of her.

"You wouldn't be. You know you wouldn't be. Keitlan, would it be too much trouble to make a room up for her?"

"Oh, hardly none at all," the woman said tightly.

Sera's head was spinning. Her stomach rebelled. If she stopped to think what she was doing, she would start screaming at herself for being a fool. For inviting the woman Dante had loved before he ever knew her, under this roof. But, for those very same reasons, how could she not? If that love was destined to take precedence over

her own, then she could not stop it. Could not drive it away.

So there she stood, nervously babbling, while the women by the fire whispered behind their hands and the Stormbringer stared at her as if she were some insect that she would as soon squash as express gratitude to, for the charity. She didn't know of a sudden, whether she wanted Dante to hurry back or stay indefinitely out in the wilderness.

\* \* \*

"This is damned annoying." Dante glared up at the sheets of driving white snow that obscured what should have been a daylight sky. Now there was nothing but gray and white and biting cold. He was tired of warming himself arcanelly. He had been doing it a week straight now and it was starting to wear like a migraine pressure behind his eyes. When he let the spell slip away he was cold and miserable and quickly became cranky because of it. He didn't know how Gerad and his nightwalker's tolerated it, not being creatures of the cold north.

Kastel, he understood. Kastel had an affinity for cold and ice, just as Dante had an affinity for fire-based things. The cold did not particularly bother Kastel. Dante hated it with a growing passion. He hated these northern mountains which made the southerly ones he had crossed getting to Sta-Veron look inviting and gentle in comparison. The God's Tooth range was a gaping, sharp toothed maw waiting to swallow any fool enough to tempt its heights. They weren't attempting the heights, they were barely in its foothills, but it was enough to sour Dante on any desire to venture further up those slopes.

He was at the point where he could have cared less about the bandits they had been tracking over this desolate land. It had stopped being fun some days ago when the storm had hit. They almost had them. Kastel

promised they did, claiming that no mundane man could ascend into the range during such a storm. Which meant the marauders had to be holding up somewhere waiting for it to pass, which was what they should have been doing.

But, no, with the Winter King driving them, they had to delve into the storm to find the hidey hole before the bandits could leave it and disappear up the mountain. So they were out in the storm, looking for sheltered spots where a group of men might hide. If he found those unfortunate men, they were going to be so very sorry for inconveniencing him.

There was a broad ice filmed lake almost indistinguishable from the color of the air that sat at the foot of a tree studded rise. The upper half of the slope was camouflaged in snow and storm, making it unclear how high it rose. Across the lake there was a tiny flare of fire magic. He might not have felt it at all, had not he been thinking about recasting the warmth spell himself. It was weak and untrained, the efforts of someone with small talent and even less ability to use it correctly. But it was very obviously the efforts of a man. And none of the men who accompanied him had a talent for creating fire.

He rose from the saddle of his horse with a whispered spell and soared through the snow high enough above the lake to scan the expanse of shoreline. The spell had come from the shore, he was certain of it. A protected cave hidden among the rocks, or even a campsite nestled among the trees. No matter, he would find it.

There, he sensed the crackling life a flame amidst all the endless snow and was drawn to it. There was the dark opening of a cave overlooking the frozen surface of the lake. He sat down before it, dropping the shields that had been protecting him from the onslaught of snow. Flakes gathered in his hair, almost invisible against the silvery white strands. He stepped into the cave, having to bend just a little to clear the ceiling. There was a faint

flickering light coming from within it. The smell of smoke and fresh blood; the low voices of men.

He strode down the narrow mouth of the cave, avoiding obstacles in the near dark. A group of men, maybe six, sat around a fire. There was the newly gutted corpse of a young boar on the ground before the it. They were working on skinning the thing, eager to get the meat over the flames. Dante crossed his arms and stood at the edge of the light, wondering how long it would take them to realize they were not alone. He got bored with the game finally and added a little extra energy to the fire. It flared up like a jug of hard liquor had been dumped into it, spreading out to lick at feet and hands of those closest. There were yelps of surprise as men scrambled back. One of them backed almost into Dante's legs. The man looked up. Dante looked down and smiled.

"If you're going to make a fire. Make a fire." He parted with that bit of wisdom a moment before the small cave was filled with the sound of weapons being drawn and men uttering curses and threats. They were most certainly a surly, mean looking lot. Grizzled and heavily bearded, smelling of rancid foods and improperly cured skins. They were prickly with weapons, swords, axes, knives, clubs with curved hooks attached to their ends, gloves with metal claws banded about the knuckles. A veritable sea of sharp, hurtful weapons aimed at him.

The first three to reach him simply exploded as if someone had planted bombs in their stomachs. Body parts spattered everything but Dante who had deflected the mess from himself with a shield. The others were stupid enough to follow in the footsteps of their comrades and two of them passed out of this life in the same grisly manner as the others. The last merely lost the hand holding the spiked club. His cries of attack were suddenly reduced to screams of purest agony as he held a profusely bleeding stump to his chest.

Six of them. Six was certainly not the extent of a group that had taken out a village that Kastel said had been home to more than forty folk. So the six were only the emissaries of a larger group that had probably never left the mountains. Not good. He did not wish to traipse further into the wilderness after bandits that were probably more elusive than these had been. What needed to be done, was impress upon the bandits to mend their ways. And one needed a spokesman to carry the suggestion to his fellows. This fellow with the blood pumping from his stump would have to do.

“Let’s cauterize that, shall we?”

Flesh began to sizzle, the screams grew more frantic. The man crumpled to his knees, on the verge of passing out. Dante caught him by the back of the collar and dragged him out of the cave and down to the shore of the lake. Kastel would probably have fits over this, but he didn’t care in the face of all this miserable weather and the prospect of returning to the warmth of the castle.

He lifted the man off his feet and snarled into his face. “Do you know the trouble you’ve put me through? I’m sure you don’t. I’m sure you have no notion of how perturbed I am to have to trek through this storm after you misbegotten, putrid, petty thieves. It was not a good thing you did, throwing heads at the gates of the Winter King’s city. He is very upset about it. He has a strong sense of responsibility for the people who pledge him fealty, so he’ll go to great efforts to keep it from happening again. I don’t wish him to have to go to those lengths. I very much wish him and myself back under a decent roof with a decent fire burning and that will not happen unless I get your vow to hurry back to your fellows where ever they might be and let them know what will happen if I have to come back out here.”

He dropped the bandit. The man hit the ground and landed on his rump, staring up with dark, slanted eyes filled with pain and fear.

“Don’t you want to know what will happen?” Dante asked when the bandit didn’t. The man slowly shook his head, cradling his arm.

Dante shrugged. “Well you’re going to find out.”

He formed a triangle with thumbs and forefingers and chanted the ancient words of an incantation. The bandit was too terrified to back away. It was no minor spell. He needed an impressive enough display for the man to witness that might terrify him into vehemently spreading the word to his fellows that a great and angry power would descend upon them should they attempt another strike of retaliation against Kastel’s people.

The surface of the lake began to crackle. A sheet of black energy began to swirl about the surface, gathering in an ever expanding sphere at the lake’s center. He spoke the last word of the spell and light flared. A vortex of energy exploded outwards from the black sphere, thrashing the shore with enough backlash to bend and break trees.

Dante shielded himself and the hapless bandit. The man screamed and threw his arms over his face regardless as the lake evaporated and the clouds overhead were blown away by the force, leaving the sky a clear gray pallet in a large area over the lake. Or what had been the lake. There was nothing there now but a deep, muddy pit of earth where water had once been. Now, steam hissed through the buckled, rent earth at the bottom, as the cold air come into contact with its superheated surface. The clouds rushed to fill the void they had been forced from. Dante dusted his hands off and turned an expectant look upon the petrified bandit.

“Well? Do we understand each other? Speak up, I don’t have all day and neither do you. Lord Kastel will probably be here soon and he’ll not be so inclined to let you go about your business as I.”

“I -- I understand, my lord. There will be no further strikes. We won’t bother you again, I swear it.”

“Excellent. Go on then.”

The bandit scampered off. Dante forgot about him as soon as he disappeared and turned to survey his handiwork.

\* \* \*

“What is this?” Kastel stared aghast at the great gaping crater that had once housed a lake. He stared at Dante, who leaned against his horse, his cloak pulled tightly about him not far from the edge of the former lake.

“It’s a big hole in the earth, Kastel. What do you think it is?”

Kastel clearly did not know what to think. There were nightwalkers melting out of the forest, drawn out of their habitual hiding by curiosity.

“Was there a reason -- or was it merely an impulse?” Gerad kicked a rock down the now frozen mud at the side of the great cavity.

Dante arched a brow at him. “The bandits are gone. At least the ones who dropped the heads on your doorstep, Kastel.”

“You found them?” Kastel turned on him sharply. “You killed them?”

“Mostly.”

“I needed them alive. At least long enough to tell me where their winter camp is.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kastel. I took care of it.”

“How did you take care of it?” Gerad wanted to know. Kastel was frustrated enough to snap his mouth shut and glare silently.

“I let one of them live and explained in detail what would happen if they bothered anything of yours again.” He gave Kastel a look that clearly said he expected gratitude not glares.

“Hence the lake?” Gerad deduced. “Your little way of getting the point across.”

“It seemed to make an impression.”

“I’m sure it did.”

“They won’t honor it,” Kastel said. “They don’t think that way.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised what a well placed fear can do. How do you think I molded the darklings into an army all those years ago? Give me a little credit for being able to put the fear of Me into the minds of a handful of bandits. So, now we can go back. You want to go back, don’t you Gerad?”

“I’m dying to get back.”

“See, you are outnumbered. I’ve solved your problem and now we’re going to all go back to your nice warm castle and hibernate until the snow stops. The snow does stop, doesn’t it?”



## Four

Timidly, Sera crept down the hall outside Kheron's door. Keitlan had given her a room two doors down from Gerad's. It did not escape Sera's recollection the look on the housekeeper's face when she had mentioned Gerad's feelings for the Stormbringer. Keitlan was nothing if not indiscreet in her efforts of maneuvering the people under her master's roof.

What exactly she was doing outside that ominous door, Sera was not quite certain. Kheron had certainly not seen fit to say a word to her since her arrival some days past. She had hardly come from her room, save once, two days ago when she had burst out without explanation, and rushed to the courtyard to stare northward as if she had heard something the rest of them were unaware of.

For a while, when all of them had thought Dante dead, they'd had a sort of truce. Not quite friendship, but not rivalry either. That only came with Dante being alive. She did not want to hate Kheron. Even after what had happened after the battle with Teo's army. Sera was not designed to carry hatreds. It ate at her soul to harbor malfeasances and to know they were harbored against her. It bothered her to know there was someone in pain because of her.

She could slap Dante for haphazardly instigating the whole tangled situation. Could he be satisfied with one woman? No. He had to go and court droves of them. She called him a foul name under her breath, then muttered a few more choice curses under her breath as she paced outside Kheron's room.

It was a trait of hers and a bad one, not to be able to keep her hands strictly on her own business. She felt the need to set all the world to rights, even if the world had little need of her efforts.

She rapped on the door. A quiet little knock that she almost hoped the Stormbringer might not hear.

But of course nelai're hearing was sharp as any cats. The door opened without Sera ever hearing steps taken towards it and Kheron looked down on her with wary question. She wore the under garments one might with armor. Padded pants and a thick tunic that was unbelted over her torso. Sera wondered if she had bothered to pack anything else in her journey here.

Kheron stood there, one hand on the door, waiting for Sera to state her business. Sera's mouth went dry and her mind blank.

"I -- I just wanted to make certain you were comfortable. That you didn't need anything?"

"I was not aware that you had taken the position as hostess to Kastel's guests."

"I haven't," Sera replied quietly. "I just wondered."

"Did you? Was that the extent of your wondering?" Kheron's eyes traveled down her body, lingering on her waist line which was beginning to noticeably thicken. The dark brows drew. Golden eyes flickered away, disturbed.

"No," Sera admitted. "I just wanted you to know I'm not angry. I don't wish us to be enemies."

"Is there anything else we can be?"

"There must be." Sera felt the nausea rising. The bottomless pit in her stomach that opened to spew out dread for an animosity she dearly did not wish. Kheron turned her eyes back to Sera. She was calm and precise in her stare, a warlord who had never hesitated in the slaughter of any who opposed her. What was one reticent girl, who desperately wished peace, to her?

"I made a mistake," Kheron said. "I should not have told him. You chose not to. He would not have come back to you if it were not for the child you carry. Does that make you happy? To know it wasn't you, but your child that drew him? I'll never carry a child of his -- fates

know I would have by now if it were possible -- but he'll always love me for who I am."

*Who he made you to be.* Sera thought, chin trembling. But she wouldn't say it. "He hurt you so much, you say hurtful things," she said quietly. "I understand. He hurt me too. But you're wrong. I'm sorry I came here."

"Why did you?"

"I wanted to make things better."

"Then go away and leave him to me."

As if she could. As if he would let her if she tried. She shook her head, miserably. Hopeless in this endeavor she had taken upon herself. She walked away from the door, clutching her hands to stop the shaking.

"I do not understand you," Kheron said to her back. "I do not understand the things you do."

*Neither do I.* She kept on down the hall.

\* \* \*

A clatter of hooves and the sound of many voices in the courtyard announced another arrival. This one greater by far than the last and accompanied by much excitement from men at arms and yard hands. Maids were scurrying about when Sera came down the stairs, rushing about with purpose in their step.

"What is it? Are they back?" she asked, catching the eye of one girl.

"Yes lady. Just so."

Joy and dread fought for dominance in her heart. She ran back up stairs to her room to grab a cloak, then pelted back down and through the main hall towards the courtyard. Men filled the yard, both returned travelers and home guards. She perched on the steps, looking for that unmistakable form amongst all the white clad nightwalkers. There, beyond Kastel, who was talking with Captain Kiro, Gerad and Dante were laughing about something. She started down the steps, weaving through

the shifting bodies towards them. She was almost upon them, when something made her turn her eyes back towards the castle. Kheron had come out upon the steps and stood without benefit of cloak upon the top level, staring down into the courtyard as he she were a queen surveying her court, eyes fixed upon the path Sera was taking.

As Sera stared, those golden eyes narrowed, then arms encircled her from behind, lifting her neatly off her feet, swinging her around into an embrace that took her breath away. He hardly gave her a chance to catch it before he kissed her. And no chaste kiss that, but one that stole the rest of her breath and made her thoughts muddled and hazy. She wrapped her arms about his neck, because it was the natural thing to do when one was cradled in another's arms and being soundly kissed to boot.

He broke it and smiled down at her, silver eyes fairly dancing with passion. "I've missed you, Sera."

She blinked dazedly up at him, trying to organize thoroughly disorganized thoughts.

"I missed you too." Was all that she could manage at the moment and his smile turned sultry.

"Shall we go upstairs and let you chase this miserable cold from my bones? It's fleeing fast just at the thought."

She blushed. She recalled who else was staying on that selfsame level of rooms and yanked at a lock of his hair urgently. "Dante. Kheron is here."

At which he blinked at her, smile fading. His eyes scanned the courtyard and fixed on the figure of the Stormbringer. She had not moved from the top of the steps. Her gaze had not wavered. He let Sera down gently and she thought he cursed under his breath. The nelair're turned then, and disappeared back inside the castle.

"How long?" He looked down to her gauging her temper on the matter.

She sighed, wrapping her arms about herself under the cloak. “Almost a week. She came looking for you.” She added the last unnecessary bit of information with a tremor in her voice. She bit her lip to cover it.

He put a hand on her shoulder, distracted. “Later -- I promise I’ll talk with you later. Let me deal with her.”

She didn’t say anything. She couldn’t. He strode away from her and she stood in his wake, lips still bruised from his kiss. Gerad came up at her shoulder, his face pale and tense.

“Kheron,” he said. Sera nodded. He shut his eyes briefly, then shook his head as if something crawled in his ear.

“She should have stayed away,” Kastel said, stepping to Sera’s other side, frowning.

Gerad cast him a look over Sera’s head. “What’s left of her men are here. We’re here. Where else could she go?”

“She’ll bring trouble.”

“No. She won’t,” Gerad said, with determination in his tone. “Don’t do her an injustice. She’s not malicious. She’s never been. She only follows his lead.”

“And you would defend her regardless.”

“Mayhap.”

\* \* \*

He didn’t have to ask anyone where the Stormbringer had gone. He could follow the scent of her unique presence blind and deaf. He had sensed that difference in her over a hundred years ago, when she had stared up at him, abandoned and frightened, a big eyed, half-human child who would have taken any hand offered to help her. And he had offered his, because at the time, it had amused him to do so. She had intrigued him to a certain degree, with her inbred magic that she was so ignorant of possessing. A blank slate on which he could write. Upon Which he might form a being of his own design. And she

had emerged a wonderful, spectacular butterfly from the bruised cocoon of childhood. *His* doing. He had made her what she was. And he loved his creation. He could not help but love the fruition of his labors. Could not help but love that which worshipped him. Narcissism was ever an integral part of Dante's personality.

But at this moment, he was uncertain if he wanted her presence. He would never abandon her, but he was treading delicate ground with Sera and of all the things he had ever wanted, her goodwill ranked absurdly high among them. He was still angry that she had known about the baby and not told him. Or perhaps it was only that she had thrown it in his face as a weapon to use against him.

She had gone to a room on the second floor. The door was half ajar and she stood with her back to it, looking out the window.

"So she forgives you. How convenient for the both of you."

"Kheron." Warningly. "Why did you come here?"

She shuddered, and turned her head to cut a glance at him from the side of her eye. "Why do you think? Should I have just sat there staring at the ocean while you run to soothe that girl's feelings, when you have no care for mine?"

"It might have been more opportune," he muttered. "Damn it, I'm trying to right a wrong here."

"What about the wrong done me?" She whispered.

If she raged at him, he could deal with it better. But her whispered tones of hurt made him guilty. He took a breath and tried to formulate in his own mind how he might explain it to her. There had been a time when he wouldn't have bothered.

"Kheron, this is important to me. Sera is important to me ---"

"Why? Why is she so different than all the others?"

"Because she is. Because I love her."

“You said you loved me.” A stifled sob of heartfelt misery.

“I do. It doesn’t change how I feel for you.” He was down to pleading now. He heard it in his own voice and felt mild disgust that he had been reduced to plea bargaining with two women in the last month. He might as well start giving donations at temple. He threw out his hands and stalked across the room to her, catching her by the shoulder and forcing her to turn and look fully at him.

“Look, Kheron, deal with it. Think what ever you want -- you will regardless -- but deal with it.”

“Do you want me to go?” Tiny voice. Small, hurt voice and large bruised eyes that reminded him of the child he’d found in the forest so long ago. No. He did not want her to go. He did not want her hurt and alone. He just wanted her to give him a little room to placate Sera, who might be gentler in nature but was damned sure not as likely to overlook a second offense so quick on the heels of the first.

“Stay. Just be nice.”

\* \* \*

Sera wasn’t as easy to find. She was not in her room. He threw off his cloak and gloves on the end of her bed, then went downstairs to look for her there. Housemaids bobbed curtsies at him as he passed and he ignored them, not even giving them the usual lecherous leer that had them giggling behind their hands in embarrassed delight at his passing.

Sta-Veron had been a welcome gray beacon in the endless white, but now the welcome was not so warm. He’d almost rather still be out in the snowy wilderness. Almost. Even the dubious moods of two women could not reduce him to that. Down into the main hall, where the conversation was a buzz of confused chatter. Everyone had crowded in and the kitchen maids were

running about with mugs of warmed ale and bowls of stew to warm men too long in the freezing weather. He did not see Kastel, but Gerad was down by the fire, with his back against the flame and a cup of ale in his hand. Dante stalked over to him and the master nightwalker's frown followed him the distance.

"Where's Sera?"

"How is Kheron?"

Came out simultaneously. Dante lifted a brow. Gerad looked down into his ale.

"I think she's in the kitchen," Gerad muttered.

Hiding, he thought, from confrontation with him. He walked through the kitchen door, into domain he had not stepped before and half a dozen female eyes snapped up to him. Sera leaned against a counter next to Kastel's housekeeper, an apple frozen in her hands.

"Ooooh, hello," the crone of a cook leered at him. She had at least four teeth left in her mouth, which probably attested for the tenderness of her cooking. It would have to be for her to chew.

"Sera, I want to talk to you."

Her eyes went round and wary. "I'm helping Keitlan peel apples. Maybe later."

"No. Now," he said, patience already a thin stretched line.

"I'd really rather not." She lifted her pert little nose with an edge of stubbornness flashing into her eyes.

"Damn it, I didn't plan this. This is not my fault."

"Who's fault is it?" The housekeeper sniffed without looking up from her rapidly moving paring knife.

"Stay out of this," he snapped.

"Don't talk to my friends like that. And she's right. It is your fault. It's not my fault. It's not Kheron's fault."

"You're mad at me because she came here?"

"I'm not mad at you," she came close to yelling at him. The kitchen girls were all madly performing their tasks, but their ears were practically twitching they



listened so hard. "If I was mad at you, I wouldn't be talking to you at all. I just want you to go away so I can think for just a little while."

"Think about what? If you'd just let me explain you wouldn't have to think."

"That's the problem, you moron. I don't want you telling me what to think. I can do it on my own." She let out a frustrated little half breath, half cry. He stared at her, hurt and feeling unjustly accused. He had not been prepared to come back and face this. He hated being caught off guard.

The old cook offered him a tart fresh from the oven. He took a step back from her, then whirled and stormed out the door. Through the nightwalker and men at arms who were exchanging tales of the chase through the mountains and up the stairs. Kastel was in his chambers, a servant collecting armor to be cleaned and polished and beaten free of dents. They both looked up at Dante's unannounced intrusion.

"I do believe I detest women," he hissed in greeting. Kastel blinked at him. The servant gathered up an armful of armor and hurried from the room.

"I -- ah -- don't recall I've ever heard that from you before." Kastel was trying to be delicate. Kastel had his boots off and was down to the undertunic worn under the armor padding. There was not a piece of discarded clothing on the floor. Kastel was generally meticulous in his tidiness. He could be damned annoying, when Dante wanted a little rousing disorder. Kastel went to a tall armoire and found a robe. Dante flopped down on the bed and glared at the ceiling.

"I can't understand them. Are they trying to make my life miserable?"

"I rather doubt it."

"Why would she blame me for Kheron showing up? Why would Kheron follow me out here when she knew I was trying to get Sera to forgive me?"

“Why were you cruel to Sera in the first place, if it means so much?”

Dante turned a dark glare on the younger wizard. “Didn’t you and I go over this?”

Kastel looked away, exasperated. “Tell Kheron to go away then.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Ah -- well then there’s a problem.”

“You know what would be perfect?”

Kastel slanted a look at him. “If you say a threesome, I shall be very disappointed in you.”

Dante opened his mouth, then shut it before saying. “No. But, that’s not a bad idea, by the way. What would be perfect is if the two of them could see things logically.”

“There’s logic to this situation? Did I miss something?”

“Don’t be smart. If they stopped to think about it, they’d see that neither one is a threat to the other. I’m perfectly capable of satisfying them both.”

Kastel was staring at him with a sort of amazed expression. “You’re not seriously thinking about suggesting this to them, are you?”

“What, you don’t think they’d buy it?”

“If you do, please do it outside of my city. I’d prefer it undamaged.”

“All right. Fine. Be that way. You’re no help at all.”

\* \* \*

The door was not quite latched. Gerad knocked at it hesitantly and it inched inwards. There was a sniffle from within, but no answer to his summons. He pushed it open and stood in the doorway, not knowing if he should enter or slip away. Kheron sat in the center of the bed, her knees up to her chest, arms wrapped about those, as miserable as he had ever seen her.

“Go away,” she said quietly.

“Are you all right?” He felt a sick tightness in his chest at the pain in her face.

“I’m fine. Please close the door.”

“You don’t look fine.” Stubbornly he refused to retreat.

“I look like a fool,” she said, wiping the back of one hand across a moist cheek. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

She looked away laying her cheek on her knees. Gerad stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him, pressing his back to it. He felt like a thief, intruding upon her sadness. He wished he could steal it away.

“Why did you?”

“I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know where else to go. Gerad, he hurt me when he was dead and he hurts me when he’s alive. And I can’t stop loving him.” She sobbed, hugging herself tighter. “I’m such a fool. I’m such a fool.”

He went over, reached out to lay his hand hesitantly on the top of her dark head. “You’re no fool, Kheron. Never a fool.”

“How can you say that?”

“Loyalty and devotion do not make a fool, woman.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide and full of tears. “Tell me what to do, Gerad. Tell me what I should do.”

He stared at her and couldn’t tell her what a marvelous, incredible creature she was. He could not tell her how she inspired him.

“I can’t tell you what to do. Dante can’t tell you. You have to make that decision on your own and none of us make a difference when it comes right down to it. It’s your life, Kheron. Not his or mine or any else’s but your own.”

“I was so happy to see him. He welcomed me with open arms. But the whole time he was thinking about *her*. He’s never used me before to get to someone else, but this time he did. I feel so ashamed.”

She threw herself against him, looking for comfort. Awkwardly he held her, rigid and unprepared for her outpouring of emotion. She never showed this much passion. And all for the disregard Dante had shown her. It made his blood boil, to see her so reduced. If anger over Sera's pain had been a question of honor, then this went beyond that. This was personal. And even if she never realized it, when Kheron hurt, Gerad did as well.

## Five

Gerad shut the door behind him and stood for a moment with the solid wood at his back. The Great Sword pressed against his spine, its hilt rising over his shoulder like a living thing that always watched and waited. Her room was next to his. Gods knew what fate had put its twisted hand to that arrangement. He wanted to take the sword off and the weight of the armor and the clothing he had worn for two weeks or more tromping through the snow.

A door down the hall opened, Kastel's chambers, he thought, and Dante walked out. He stood in the hall a moment, as if undecided, then started for the stairs leading down to the main hall. Gerad ground his teeth and pushed off from the door, sliding down the hall with all the grace and silence of a lifetime of training. He caught up with Dante ten steps down.

"What did you say to her?"

The sorcerer jerked his head about, startled at Gerad's silent presence at his back. He paused, his perfect face miming bafflement.

"What business is it of yours?" He asked airily and something inside Gerad snapped.

He made no noise of protest, merely drew his lips back in a silent snarl and whipped an elbow out. It caught Dante across the jaw. His head snapped back, he faltered a step and Gerad slammed him backwards into the stairwell wall.

"Godsdamn you. It's my business that I looked after her while you were in hell. It's my business that she's my friend and I respect her and her feelings, which you goddamned well have no sense of burden for." He leaned close, glaring down, his hands on either side of Dante's head. A trickle of blood seeped from the side of Dante's lip. He lifted a hand between them to gingerly touch the split. His eyes were hidden by lashes.

“Back off, Gerad.” A quiet warning.

“I will not.”

“Have you lost your sanity?” Again low voiced. The lashes flickered up. There was still something of perplexity in those silver eyes and irritation that did not quite verge on the anger that Gerad felt.

“Damn you, stop hurting her.”

“Kheron?”

“Yes, Kheron! You use her then you discard her, then you use her again when it suits your purposes.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Gerad.” A little bit of anger seeped into the tone. Good, Gerad wanted anger. He wanted something he could sink his teeth into. Dante tried to shove one of the Gerad’s arms out of his way and Gerad, taller and heavier used his weight to slam against him, pressing him back against the wall with a thud.

“Goddamnit, Gerad -- do you want a fight? Is that what you want? You’re about to get one.”

“You are not the god of the world, Dante. You can’t treat people like that and get away with it. You used her to hurt Sera and then when you changed your mind, she got hurt. Don’t you ever think of anyone else besides yourself?”

“Shut up. Get your fucking hands away from me or loose them.”

“Make me.”

“Damnit -- Gerad,” Dante hissed between his teeth, glancing away in frustration. Gerad realized, in the part of his brain that was not on a rampage to defend Kheron’s honor, that Dante did not want to fight him. That Dante was going to great lengths not to return the violence that Gerad was teetering on the edge of. It was sobering that Gerad was the irrational one here and not the other way around. He prided himself on his calm and here he was squandering it. He was the one asking for a fight -- a fight that he could never hope to win.

He cursed and stepped back. Didn't say a word, just called on every shadow skill he had and melted down the stairs like a wraith. Dante probably saw through it, Gerad didn't care. He just wanted away, out of the castle and into the cold where the heat that pulsed inside him might cool.

\* \* \*

Gerad was down the steps, not making a sound and doing a damn good job of blending into the shadows. He'd had such a stricken look on his face, when the anger had passed, that Dante just stood with his back against the wall staring at the curve in the stair where he'd disappeared. He ran his tongue along the split inside his lip and healed it with an absent thought.

This had started out such a nice day, the prospective warmth of Kastel's city finally reached after too long in the snowy wilderness. It had been just lovely up until the point he had broken the kiss with Sera and heard the news of Kheron's presence. From there it had gotten rather dismal. He didn't like feeling guilty and Kheron's damned lost little girl eyes had managed to make him feel it. And Sera, who had been sweet and shy for the last several weeks -- albeit chastely sweet and shy -- had turned back into a fearless, condemning termagant over a period of mere minutes. And to top it all off, Gerad experienced a loss of sanity and assaulted him. Miserable, miserable day.

"What are you doing? Are you all right?"

Speaking of termagants -- here she came up the stairs, eyeing him with wary suspicion in her brown eyes. He slid down the wall to sit on a step and her frown deepened.

"Gerad just up and attacked me. Can you believe it?"

“Gerad wouldn’t do that,” she said with the vaguely scoffing tones of an adult who had just heard an outrageous tale from an overly imaginative youngster.

He narrowed his eyes balefully and did not dignify her rebuttal with an argument. “I am not in the mood to be bitched at right now.”

“Who said I was going to bitch at you?” Her little nose lifted into the air.

“Well, it would be just par for the course.”

“Well, I don’t bitch,” she said. He laughed, at which she narrowed her eyes and stomped up a step to glare down at him.

“Not that you don’t deserve it for plenty of things. Oodles of things. So many things I can’t even think of them all.”

“I get the picture,” He smiled up at her tightly.

“No, you don’t. I sometimes wonder if you even realize that some of the things you do are just – wrong. Do you? Do you have the moral capacity separate good from bad.”

“Sera, just go away now. You’re the one who wanted time alone to think. Take it.”

“Oh, right, avoid the really serious issues.”

“I’m not a simpleton. Yes, I feel bad about you not being able to handle Kheron and Kheron not being able to handle you. Okay? Satisfied?”

She jabbed a finger under his nose, apparently not satisfied. “You feel bad about that because it directly effects you. Where’s the responsibility of doing something about it?”

“What the hell do you want of me?” He came to his feet and she stepped down at the sudden readjustment of eye levels. “You are driving me mad, woman. I never used to have this many problems. I never used to give a goddamned what anybody thought. What the hell changed?”



She stared up at him, wide eyed at the fervor in his face. She put one hand reflexively to her stomach, reassuring herself of the life she carried within it. "Maybe you did," she whispered. "But you just don't know it."

She looked down and tried to slip up the stairs past him. He put an arm out to stop her.

"And maybe I haven't."

She stood there, blocked by his arm. Then she lifted her eyes to his and met him glare for glare. There was quiet determination in her eyes fed from deep resources of will.

"Let me pass. This conversation is over. Later when you've regathered your composure I will speak with you again."

He took a breath, full of indignation over her tone and her implications that he was the one who was irrational. He opened his mouth, ready to spew forth the first biting thing that came to mind and she cut him off.

"When I was growing up and you were - - with me in spirit - - the essence of your soul always there - - I loved you. The core of you." She balled a fist and touched it gently to his chest. "When you became flesh and blood, you were different. Dark and decadent and completely lacking in regard and yet, that other part was still there, under the rest. How else could I have loved you? How else could you have tried to change from that dark warlord mage that sought to conquer a world? You say I make you a better man, but I think you tried to change because some part of you knew it was the right thing. So yes, I believe in change and your capacity for it."

She ducked under his arm and was up the stairs, a slight figure that didn't blend as well as Gerad, but was gone just as quickly nonetheless.

The master of Nightwalkers could not have so efficiently have knocked the breath from him.

There was a fine celebratory dinner in the great hall. The cook outdid herself. Kastel's commanders and their ladies, Gerad's nightwalker lieutenants, Kheron's knight captain all seemed in great, fine moods. The wine flowed, the minstrel's played, conversation buzzed about the hall like spring pollen. Of the principle players in attendance, Dante, Gerad, Kheron who looked to have come down under duress only, Sera and Kastel himself, only the Winter King was not glaring at the world as if it had done him a grave injustice.

Sera adjusted the placement of food on her plate despondently, never actually looking up to meet anyone's eyes, hardly speaking a word and then not above a whisper. Gerad sat as far down the main table as he could get from the rest of them and was equally uncommunicative, an unusual trait for the nightwalker master. Kheron sat among her men, stone faced and stiff backed, glaring at anyone who dared make a comment to her. And Dante sat slouched in a chair next to Kastel, drinking a great deal of wine, fingers drumming the table top with an agitated, discordant beat. The conversations went on around them.

Kastel felt vaguely displaced, being on the outside of some dark drama that the rest of them shared. The only player in a game of hearts that was not critically engaged in the battle.

He was not usually one for gossip, but something had definitively changed since Dante had come complaining at his door that afternoon. Words had been exchanged between unknown -- but guessed at -- parties. Gerad had gotten into the fray, that was clear from the big man's morose expression. He leaned over to Dante, swirling the wine in his goblet idly.

"Should I hazard a guess and say that things have deteriorated since we last spoke?"

Dante slanted an ominous glance his way. His eyes were shadowed pools of darkness beneath the fall of moonlight pale hair. He didn't answer. One of the serving girls slipped between them to refill both their goblets. Dante leered up at her -- his old familiar leer -- and ran a hand down her posterior as she bent. The girl gasped, turning red, but not with outrage, more with embarrassed pleasure. The female staff -- the ones that were not sympathetically and firmly planted in Sera's camp, were aflutter over him. He had, as far as Kastel knew, been miraculously abstemious in his treatment of them.

The serving girl giggled a little under her breath and leaned over in her filling of Dante's cup to press her bosom against his arm. A cup slammed onto the tabletop and wine sloshed over Kheron's untouched dinner plate. Her gaze was fixed on the fire. Sera's chair scraped up and she made a whispered apology, claiming nausea, and practically ran from the hall.

There was a moment's lull in conversation. People did not quite know where to look. Dante retrieved his hand from the maid and crossed his arms, glaring at Sera's empty chair. The girl, sensing the change in mood, hurried back to the kitchen.

"To hell with this," he finally hissed and pushed back from the table so hard his chair toppled backwards when he stood. That most certainly stopped conversation and every eye in the hall followed him as he stalked from it.

Kastel sat for a moment, caught in that silence. Then carefully he put his goblet down and rose in a much more mannerly fashion and followed in Dante's footsteps.

Up the stairs. Past the second level where the living quarters were, past the third where his study and library rested, the fourth housed the staff and then there were the steps to the tower. The door was left open and a cold draft whistled down.

Dante stood on the battlements, looking down over the heights, out over the snowy landscape beyond. The sky was dark and smeared with clouds. Some small bit of powdery snow drifted down from the heavens.

"You'll have to fix this, sooner or later." Kastel circled the battlements, running a hand along the rough grain of stone. Hair fluttered about his ears. Snow caught in his lashes. He blinked it out.

"Go the hell away, Kastel. No lectures on morality. I've had mine today, thank you."

"Oh. I wasn't aware you took that sort of thing to heart." That was a blatant invitation for strife, but he plunged on anyway. "But, strangely enough, I can see that you have. What will you do?"

Dante glanced over his shoulder, eyes narrow, hair snaking about his face. "I had an idea, but you didn't seem to like it."

"I do not believe it was -- well thought out." Kastel said diplomatically. "I had almost thought -- from the looks on all of your faces that you had suggested it to them."

Dante laughed, turned his back on the battlements and leaned there, hands on the crenellated stone. "No. Never got the chance. Gerad seems to have a strong opinion on the matter as well."

"Gerad -- is protective over those he considers friends."

"I guess I don't qualify."

"You seldom need protection."

Again, a slightly mad laugh. "I wonder how high you'd have to go before the air turned so thin you couldn't breath?"

"I have no idea."

"I've a notion to find out." He shot skywards, cutting through snow and wind like a black-sheathed scythe. Kastel stared up in dismay at the rapidly diminishing figure. The clouds blotted Dante's form. The sky

rumbled with unease, violent energies swirling high over Sta-Veron. Lightning pierced the dark clouds like the finger of god. He felt the uncontrolled release of mystic energies and cursed. Not over his city. If Dante were going to throw a fit, let him do it elsewhere.

With a summoning of energy, his feet left the rooftop and he cut through the night sky, heading into the boiling storm. Winds tore at him, but they were nothing to a wizard who had mastered the elements of ice and winter malice. He broke through the clouds, going for the center of power that was still high above him.

Was Dante truly trying to breach the shell of oxygen that surrounded the world? A bolt of errant lightning struck at him, attracted to his solid presence in the midst of clouds and frozen water. He shielded against it, effortlessly. Tried to find the center of the storm Dante had provoked and make it null, but it was a wild thing of thunder and lightning and those elements were not so easily controllable for him.

Another bolt struck at him hungrily, its fingers of energy skittering across his shield. The resulting boom of thunder almost deafened him. He put his hands over his ears and called out Dante's name.

"Stop it, Damnit."

Something slammed his shield with enough insidious force to shatter it and solid force hit him from behind. Arms wrapped around him, pinning his arms, holding him fast against a body that radiated heat against his cold. Fire wizard against Ice. Dante pressed close and whispered in his ear.

"She said I'd changed. What does that mean? To change would mean something -- some outside force molded me and I won't be manipulated or molded to anyone else's will. Not even hers."

"Stop the storm. You don't know how volatile the weather patterns are here. You'll do the city harm."

"Make me, Kastel."

Kastel threw his head back in frustration, hitting Dante on the side of the cheek. "It's not a game. You don't have to prove anything to me. It's yourself that's uncertain. You don't have to go to lengths just to prove you're the same or not. What does it matter?"

"You always try to reason with me, Kastel. Why do you bother?"

A finger of lightning formed out of thin air behind them. It struck Dante in the back and laced through him and into Kastel. His vision went white. Every nerve ending in his body screamed in agony. His heart froze up in shock.

And started back up erratically, spurred by Dante who recovered faster from the strike than he did, if he'd been effected by it at all. He was laughing. "Why do you bother at all, Kastel?"

Kastel felt sick from the strike; he forced it away. He'd lost hold of the flight spell and let Dante support the both of them while he gathered his wits.

"Because you bothered with me. No one else would."

There it was. The truth of the matter. The debt he could never repay. His life, his self-esteem, everything he was and would never have been if Dante had not, in his own indubitable way, convinced him he was not the abhorrent, worthless creature every other person in his life had managed to convince him he was.

Silence after that. The clouds boiled around them. Lighting flared and was diverted away by will alone. Dante rested his forehead on Kastel's shoulder.

"All right," he murmured and the storm seemed to collapse in upon itself. Even the clouds seemed to dissipate. Their feet touched down on the tower roof and he let Kastel go. He looked tired of a sudden and world weary, as though the infinite energy that had always infused him had inexplicable dried up. Kastel stared, shaken to the core himself.

“Go on, Kastel. I won’t destroy anything of yours, Go back to dinner or your books or whatever it is you do to entertain yourself.”

Kastel couldn’t find any words to reply. There was nothing to do but comply and hope for the best.

\* \* \*

The master taught Lily the words to certain hymns that he found pleasurable. She had never sung religious songs before, her former owners having bawdier tastes. But she knew the words of the common songs sang at temple or for religious events. These hymns were different. Unfamiliar to her. He said they were of the ancient world. He said it was all right if she knew those old lyrics for she would never sing them to any other living soul but him. She would serve no other master but him for the rest of her life. In this forbidding, windowless place, where hope died, squashed under the iron-shod heel of His religion, she thought he might be right.

She sat on the floor at his feet and strummed her instrument, singing the words he had taught her. Sometimes he did nothing but stare into space, and she was not certain he even heard her. At others he mouthed the words with her, stroking her hair while she played, his eyes lit with the fervor of a passion she did not understand. He never touched her in any other way. Not to beat her -- she was far too accommodating for that -- or relieve his physical needs. If he slacked those needs at all, she never saw. The only times he ever seemed excited in that manner -- really excited was when he was punishing some violation of his code -- whether real or imagined. Taking out his wraith on some hapless, broken hostage of this monastery they all inhabited.

She never watched long enough to see what he did after he’d slacked his thirst for blood and pain. She didn’t want to know if he did more. She thought he might have -

- when the madness was upon him. She thought sometimes, when he purified himself with prayer and self-inflicted pain, that it was to cleanse himself of the sin of giving in to those baser desires.

Sometimes while she played, he would orate to himself. Talking about the will of the God and his place as the chosen servant. Of his divine right as the Prophet. He spoke of darker things too. Of hatreds and revenge that made her shiver and sometimes miss a chord.

She sat against the wall of his own private room, while he knelt before the stone symbol of divinity where he delivered his prayers to the god. Candles burned on either side of the icon, casting the room in a flickering shadow. She played a particular hymn. One of divine retribution and the reward of the faithful. Her voice was low pitched and the strumming of the lyre was almost a whisper, a mere background noise to the Master's communion with his god. She only half listened to his words, she had learned to tune out what did not directly apply to herself. But some of the things he said caught her attention. He spoke of the future and his own departure. Of that, she had great interest.

"It is almost time," he said. "The day fast approaches when my retribution shall be at hand and I shall leave to do Your work. He was stronger than I ever imagined. I miscalculated the strength of will that a minion of hell could possess. I failed You in that. I could not break the spirit to take the vessel. Not physically. Perhaps there are other ways. I know his weaknesses. I know what he treasures, as if such a creature could hold anything sacred. Take those things away and we shall see -- and if that path fails, then there is always the other. Your will shall be served."

He bowed his head and chanted prayers and Lily shivered. Someone was going to be hurt. Someone was going to suffer the divine retribution of her master and she wished that fate on no living thing. But she missed not a



word or a note in her song. He would have noticed that and in the mood he entertained now, she would have sorely regretted it.

## Six

Dante wasn't talking to her. Sera supposed fair was fair. She had not given him much of a chance to express himself after he'd come back. She'd done fine with Kheron being in Sta-Veron up until the moment that he'd come back, then suddenly the hurt and the uncertainty became a little more than she could easily deal with and she'd forced him away. Natural reflex, to distance one's self from the things that were most likely to cause great pain.

Of course he hadn't taken it well, he never did to censure, and simple avoidance drove him mad. Simple truth made him dark and dangerous and very much looking to rebel against all the invisible things he thought were changing him. Changing him!

What a completely and monumentally foolish man. Life changed people. Even immortal people like him. Experience changed a body, an outlook, a soul. Even a simple mortal girl who'd only seen twenty summers knew that. *He* treated the notion like an anathema. Like it had never occurred to him that he was anything different than what he'd been.

He was afraid, she thought. He was scared of growing a conscience. And he was being distant and obnoxious because of it. It did not particularly bother her. She had other things on her mind. She thought of the baby. More and more now that it was obviously apparent that she was pregnant. It was amazing how differently people treated pregnant women. Men became such bumbling, considerate creatures and here she was months away from birthing.

Even Dante, who tried not to make it obvious kept a close tab on her. He watched her when she wasn't looking and she knew he was generally about when she

went into the city with Keitlan or Gerad or some of the wives of Kastel's commanders.

He was scared of the baby too, she thought. She could see it in his eyes when they lingered on her middle. She'd spent a great deal of time pondering why and could only come up with his fear of responsibility and the undeniable truth that a child of his would be a obligation he could not shake. Even if he wanted to. He never had been able to give up anything that he considered his.

She wasn't angry at him. Even for the present sulk. He'd done worse things and this one was more self-defense than anything else. He would get over it. She was actually, to some degree rather pleased at the brooding. A battle of conscience with Dante Epherian was a fine thing. He was being really rather good, if one considered how his tantrums usually played out. Other than the occasional bout of minor destruction, mostly non-magical, he was curbing his tendencies for violence. And he was not sleeping with the staff, at least according to Keitlan. And as far as she knew -- and she figured it was a sure bet since Kheron was still giving every one the silent treatment and casting mournful looks at Dante -- he wasn't sleeping with her either. Which meant he was either going into town and entertaining himself with the women there, or he was abstaining. She rather thought it was the latter. Rumors tended to travel in relatively small cities like Sta-Veron, and Dante stood out.

It had been a quiet couple of weeks. Sera was starting to sew baby clothing. Keitlan was enthusiastically helping her. A rider came in from the north, claiming that a creature had come down from the heights and was wrecking havoc in the villages. Apparently other such anomalies had plagued the mountains for Kastel's men eagerly spoke of the last one they had hunted down and killed. There was a great cry for a hunt. Gerad was all for it. And to everyone's surprise Kheron quietly announced that she too would join the hunting party.

Which was all fine and good until Dante lazily included himself, which was obviously his attempt to piss off Gerad, who had been at cold silences with him for weeks now. Kastel looked frustrated and distressed over the glares and bickering that resulted.

“Why don’t the three of you go and I’ll stay here where it’s peaceful and quiet?” he finally suggested with icy regard for the lot of them. Sera applauded him for the splash of maturity in an otherwise puerile situation. And they, to avoid looking the fools in the face of the gathered men and servants had no choice but to lift their chins and stoically agree to join together in camaraderie during this one hunt.

“Why don’t you just do that.” Dante gave him an arch look and Kastel waved a hand to indicate that it really mattered little to him. He would just as well enjoy the solitude of being left alone in his library, Sera well knew.

So they set out in the company of Kiro and his best trackers to hunt down a hideous monster from the cold heights. Kastel retreated to his books and Sera went back to contemplating the future life of her baby.

It was early evening when a messenger came to the gates with a note for her. The maid that brought it to her looked as bemused by the sealed letter as Sera herself was. Everyone she knew in Sta-Veron, save a few casual acquaintances in town, lived within the walls of the castle. She turned the parchment over in her hands curiously. It was sealed with wax and bound with a blue ribbon. She broke both seals and unfolded the paper. The note was short and written in a neat script.

*Sera’Rab-Ker*

*I have come a great distance to find you. It is urgent that I speak with you. It concerns your honorable father, the great priest Rab-Ker. I am staying at the Red Wolf Inn. Please come this afternoon and please use*

*discretion. There are those who do not hold your esteemed father in good will.*

*Your friend  
Maya*

Maya? Maya was a Sword Maiden. She had trained with Maya when she had thought to enter that fellowship. Maya was devoted to Rab-Ker and the Goddess. She had even on occasion protected Sera's own life. And she was here. How had she managed the cruel journey through the winter bound north? Perhaps, Dante's new pass? One could hardly forget that, considering how much Kiro and his men groused about the vulnerability in which the magic made pass placed the Winter King's provinces.

A dozen dread scenarios passed her mind over what might have brought the Sword Maiden here regarding her father. Had something happened to the great priest? Oh, please let it not be so. Please let him be all right. She dearly wanted him to see his grandchild. She put her sewing down, hands shaking, and went up stairs to fetch her cloak. With Gerad and Dante out on the hunt it would be easy to sneak into the city with no one insisting on escorting her and none the wiser. She put her hood up and hustled through the courtyard and all the daily activity that went on about the castle. The guards let her through the gate with nothing more than a nod of greeting and a wish for her to have a good afternoon. She returned the courtesy and asked where the Red Wolf Inn was located.

A nice inn, not far from the gates of the city. It was a long, cold walk, but the exercise felt good. Her cheeks and nose were red by the time she stepped into the front door of the inn. A fire crackled in the main hearth. A collection of tables sat about the room and the smells of baking bread drifted through the air. There was a couple at one table, taking lunch and a lone, cloaked figure

sitting by the window. A woman looked up at her. Close cropped hair and a nose disfigured by one too many fights, but not unpretty. Sera remembered her before the nose had been broken and the hair shorn.

"Maya." They clasped hands and hugged. Maya gestured Sera to sit and she did.

"Are you here by yourself?" Sera began to assault the Sword Maiden with questions. "Is father all right? How did you manage to come all this way in the winter? Did the army go back home?"

"Sera." The young woman placed her hands over Sera's, smiling gently. "I'm just glad to find you alive and unharmed."

"Why would I be harmed? These are my friends."

"I know, but they are not the friends of your father."

"Father. Is he okay?"

"No. He came to find you. But the journey was harsh. He's injured and we feared to bring him here. It is well known that Dante holds a grudge against him and after -- all that happened we thought it doubly risky."

"Oh, goddess, Maya. Where is he?"

"In the mountains to the south. We're in hiding from the Winter King's men. They guard the pass. He wants to see you."

"Maya, you've got to bring him here. It will be all right. I'll get Lord Kastel to send out a party --"

"No. You don't see it. You're too close to them. Do you remember what the Dark Brethren are capable of? Do you doubt that Dante would hesitate to destroy an enemy of his?"

Sera stared, aghast. At this moment in time, when he was so angry and chaotic in his moods, she was not quite certain she could deny such a thing.

"But, I can't just ride out without telling anyone. Not that far. They'll be worried." Goddess, Maya couldn't imagine how worried, considering Sera's present state.

“Leave a note with the innkeeper here. Have it delivered tonight after we’ve gotten half a days ride and relieve any fears. He came all this way to see you, Sera. Don’t make it in vain.”

“What does he want? Does he want to bring me back? Teo said I was banished from Alsansir. Did he change his mind?”

Sadly, Maya shook her head. “No. It’s why he came all this way. I don’t think he can live not knowing you’re all right. He places the blame upon himself.”

“He doesn’t! That’s ridiculous. It was my decision and no one else’s.”

“Sera, please, we don’t have much time. Just talk to him.”

What could she do, really? Turn away from her father? Again? After she had left him without a word of good bye. She had condemned herself for that for a long while now. He lay injured in the mountains waiting for her.

“I don’t have the gear to make such a trip,” she said quietly. Maya smiled, relieved.

“I do. Come with me to my room and we’ll get you travel clothing.”

Through the gates they rode, two bundled, faceless riders. The gate guards had no reason not to let them pass. Their horses plowed through soft snow and Sera thought over and over how angry they all were going to be at her for running off like this. She could imagine Keitlan’s disparaging words. Kastel’s icy stare and goddess -- goddess, Dante’s rage that would have nothing to do with ice or cold.

Well, they would have to understand the need. Father was more important than a short while of worry on their part. She would talk him into coming back to Sta-Veron. It would be stupid for him not to. She would talk reason into everyone. Whether they wanted to hear it or not.

They rode deep into the night, until Sera finally begged exhaustion and they made camp. A miserable little pit

dug out of the snow where they bundled together in sleeping bags to conserve heat. They continued on early the next morning and Sera murmured the words to a healing spell to take away her exhaustion, to make certain the baby was all right inside her with all the cold and the exertion.

No riders came after them. But, as Maya said, they had a good head start. She hoped Kastel had received her message. The innkeeper's boy had promised to deliver it at the falling of dusk. That afternoon the white caps of the southern mountains came into view. Sera had never seen them from this side of the range before. The last time, she had been so self-absorbed in misery that she had hardly noticed how beautiful they were. The stark snowy plains turned into woodland and the gradual sloping of hills.

"How much further?" she asked, when the mountains loomed so close they seemed to fill the sky.

"A day perhaps," Maya said. "Not too deep into the mountains."

That was a relief. Sera did not relish having to ride those steep trails. They had been treacherous enough during the fall.

\* \* \*

Mistress Keitlan had come timidly knocking at the library door. Kastel assumed it was a request that he take some dinner, whether here or in the hall. She probably had it with her. He absently called permission to enter and the woman stepped into the room, hands unencumbered, and clutching at each other nervously. Mistress Keitlan did not normally show great nervousness in his presence, unlike most of her staff. He quirked a brow at her in question.

"My lord. It's the lady Sera. She's -- she's disappeared from the castle."



“What do you mean-- disappeared?”

“She’s nowhere to be found, my lord. I had my girls search high and low when she didn’t take lunch. I thought, perhaps she might have gone into town, but she’d not stay this long. It’s getting past dark.”

He stared at her, the book and all he’d been reading banished from his mind. All he could feel was that numb sensation of shock that came with unexpected grave news. “Did the guards see her leave the castle?”

“Yes, lord. Early this afternoon. She asked after the Red Wolf Inn.”

“Have you sent anyone there looking for her?”

“No, my lord. I came to you first.”

He shut the book and rose, not bothering to put it in its place. “She said nothing to you at all about an errand or something she wanted from town?”

“Not a word. But -- but one of the girls brought her a note this morning.”

“A note? From whom?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say. I think that’s why she went into town. At least I can’t think of any other reason.”

He took a breath to prevent himself from cursing the woman for not thinking it odd for Sera to be receiving notes in the first place and doubly so for not mentioning it right away. “Call down to the stable and have my horse readied.”

She bobbed her head and hurried to do his bidding. He disregarded the offer of escort, wanting to settle this quietly and on his own before alerting the whole town that one of his guests had gone missing. He rode through the streets with none of the nighttime travelers aware that their lord moved among them. He knew the inn. It was by the main gates of the city. He left the chestnut in the street outside and stalked into the front door.

A dozen mildly curious faces looked up from dinners and drinks to access him, the intruder in their midst. A

murmur went up. He was not inconspicuous. Quiet descended rather suddenly after that.

“Who owns this inn?” he asked into the silence. The man behind the bar blanched and hesitantly lifted a hand.

“I do, yer lordship.”

Kastel walked towards him, weeding through tables to get there. People got up hastily, making a path for him. “Is there a place we can talk?”

The man gestured to a door behind the bar. The entrance to the kitchen and the rooms the innkeeper’s family shared. The wife froze in the slicing of a chunk of meat. A boy stared wide-eyed from a suds filled basin, a dirty dish in hand.

“My lord, is there something I can get you? What service do you wish?”

“Did a young woman come here this afternoon. Very pretty, long reddish hair. Brown eyes. So tall.” He held his hand up at about chin level. “She might have received a message to meet someone here.”

The boy dropped his dish, dark eyes widening in something very like terror.

“I remember a girl like that. Yes, I do, my lord. Came this afternoon.” The innkeeper nodded, eager to help. Overjoyed to help. “She did meet someone. Another woman. Checked in just yesterday and left today. Paid in southern gold and a lot of it, so I gave her a room. Had two horses in the stables. Your girl, she might have left with her, now that I recall.”

Left with the woman? Left with some strange woman who summoned her with a mysterious note? Was Sera insane? Dante was not going to take this news well.

He took a moment to compose a calm question. “Did they say where they were going?”

The innkeeper shook his head. The wife hadn’t moved an inch, the knife still held gripped in her fingers, her face shocked at the presence of the Winter King himself in her

kitchen. The boy's face was a picture of fear. Of guilt. Kastel fixed his eyes upon the teenager.

"Did you see them leave or hear what they might have said?"

"N--no. No, not I." It came out a strangled gasp. The boy wiped soapy hands on his tunic, eyes flickering nervously towards the back door.

"For some reason," Kastel said softly. "I don't believe you."

The boy's face turned ashen. He bolted suddenly for the door, practically slammed it off its hinges as he rushed through it. Kastel ground his teeth and brushed past the startled innkeeper after the boy. There was a narrow alley outside and the boy ran down it. Kastel made a sign in the air, and of the darkness that swallowed the ground a beast rose up, made of ice and water and arcane power. It roared, a brittle, shrieking roar and bounded down the alley, overtaking the boy in three leaps, and slamming him to the ground. It crouched over him, its cold maw at his neck.

Kastel walked down the ally and crouched where the boy could see him.

"So. What is it that are you afraid to tell me?"

"Nothing. I swear it. I didn't do nothing."

Kastel sighed, beleaguered. "Do you really want to lie to me? Think about it."

The boy thought. His eyes leaked tears and his finger clutched at the hard earth. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know she had nothing to do with you," he finally cried out. "All I did was throw the note into the fire. The other girl, she gave me a silver piece not to take it to the castle after the other lady handed it to me."

"This note. What did it say?"

"I don't know. I can't read, yer lordship."

He believed him. He rubbed a hand over his eyes, chasing away the beginnings of a throbbing headache.

Dante was going to kill him. Was absolutely and completely going to kill him.

“What fire?” He waved a finger and the ice beast dissipated into a shower of fine snow that heaped upon the boy’s sprawled body. The boy gaped at him.

“The main one. The main hearth. But it’s long gone to cinders now.”

“Have you cleaned the ash since you burned it?”

“No.” The boy’s brows drew in befuddlement.

Kastel was not of a mind to explain it. He rose and went back into the inn. Past the innkeeper and his crying wife and into the main room, where the patrons had formed into groups of curious spectators. He ignored them. Went to the fire and stood before it. Reconstruction was tedious work and mix that with the active flame, which was never his specialty, and it promised to bring back the headache. He recollected the words of the spell, got them straight in his mind before speaking them out loud. Felt the fire rebel against his influences, thought about just smothering it, but that might scatter the ashes and this would be so much easier if they were all in one place.

Something flickered besides flame in the hearth. Ash and cinder coalesced, fluttering up out of the pile at the bottom of the pit.

He focused on what he wanted, on the hand of the person who had written it, on the thing that had her aura about it that had been consumed by the fire.

A piece of black edged, charred paper floated out of the fire and settled on the hearthstones. Kastel picked it up and read Sera’s graceful, sweeping script.

*Kastel*

*Please forgive me for not telling you, but my father has traveled into the mountains and waits to see me. A Sword*

*Maiden has come to take me to him. He is injured and I hope to convince him to return to Sta-Veron with me.*

*If Dante gets back before I do, please, please don't let him get angry and come after me. I want to convince father there is no harm for him here.*

*Love*

*Sera*

He read it again and once more, looking for something to explain her duplicity. Her father's uncertainty of his well being in Sta-Veron was not inconceivable. That he would ask her to travel days through winter storm and snow to reach him was less than credible. Rab-Ker was neither stupid nor likely to disregard the safety of his daughter. That Sera would consent to it, pregnant and alone, was pure insanity. How could she be so gullible?

He folded the note carefully and placed it in his belt. The silence in the room behind him was tomb-like. All their eyes held some measure of fear at his presence. And these were his people, who averted their gazes from him when he chanced to pass them by. An old man made a little averted sign against evil. Kastel stopped looking. Just focused his gaze elsewhere until he was out of the inn and back to the unbiased company of his horse.

He had to let Dante know. There was no help for it. She was out there in the company of someone who had paid to divert her note from him. No proper company that. Headed towards something that very well might not be her father. They had too many enemies to take chances.

He had no choice, but to call Dante back from his monster hunt.

\* \* \*

Trees closed around them like leering giants, their limbs heavy with snow. It fell sometimes in clumps, hitting the ground with muffled impact that was eerie and echoless in the insulated forest slope. Sera pulled her cloak tighter, huddling under its insubstantial warmth. Maya rode before her, looking for a path in the camouflaging snow. A trail that would lead to Rab-Ker.

There was a fork in the trail up ahead. One way leading west down the sloping side of the mountain and the other winding higher up. Maya looked back and grinned, pointing to the higher path.

"This is it," she called.

Sera sighed, relief filling her like warmth. She urged her horse up the trail and it obliged with an indignant equine sigh. Up the trail and past an outcropping of granite she picked up the scent of smoke in the air. There was a campsite beyond the bend in the trail, with horses picketed in the lee of a group of trees and a fire pit dug in the snow. Men sat around it, cloaked and bundled against the cold. She could not see the cut of their armor under the winter gear. She looked for the familiar form of her father. For the outer robes of a priest and saw them huddled next to the fire for warmth.

Sera let out a little cry of joy and spurred her horse past Maya, and towards the camp site.

"Father," she cried. "Father, it's me."

She pulled the animal to a stop, untangling her cloak to dismount. He straightened his shoulders and rose, turning to face her. His eyes gleamed up at her, sparkling with the fervor of victory. Not the face of her father at all. But the narrow, long features that belonged to the Prophet.

"My sweet little Sera. How nice of you to join me." He smiled up at her and she recoiled, so profoundly shocked that she could not even summon the breath to scream. The men around him rose, and beneath the cloaks she saw the signal of his holy guard, she saw the green eyed face of his captain Sinakha.

She whispered a terrified prayer to the goddess before he reached out for her.

## Seven

They dragged her down from the saddle into their midst, laying hands to her shoulders and around her neck when she struggled. Angelo in his crisp white robes, fur trimmed and elegant, put his fingers on her chin and forced her to look at him. She spat in his face and his smile faltered. Slowly he wiped it off with the back of one sleeve.

“Foolish, foolish girl to have sided against me. You could have had so much and now you will have nothing.”

The Sword Maiden, Maya, hesitantly approached the ring of men around Sera and Angelo. Sera saw her and cried out.

“How could you have led me here? We were friends.” The woman’s face fell, but she shored it up. “It is for your own good. They’ve twisted your thinking. They’ve made you forsake all that you held dear. We’ll save you. The Prophet has promised to bring you back into the fold.”

“He’s not going to save me,” Sera sobbed. “He’s going to destroy me. Can’t you see that?”

Maya shook her head. Angelo smiled, looking over his shoulder at the Sword Maiden. “You do your faith justice, Maya. But, she’s quite right, you know. There’s no salvation for her now that she’s been tainted.”

The woman opened her mouth, not certain how to take that. Angelo didn’t say a word, but force ripped out him and into Maya. Fingers of black power that tore through her body like hail through the thinnest sheet of tissue. The snow was darkened with blood and barely recognizable pieces of what had been a human body. She’d hardly had the time to scream it happened so fast.

Sera did. Sera screamed until Angelo backhanded her into silence and then she hung in the grip of those who held her with her vision spinning and fear eating at her



like a cancer. He put his hands in her hair and lifted her head. She felt the blood trickling down from the corner of her mouth and stared back at him dazedly. His eyes bore into her, his hand slid down her throat to lay splay-fingered across her chest.

“Oh and he has tainted you, hasn’t he?” The Prophet whispered. “What is this that grows in your womb? A spawn of his? Oh, how very perfect. How very convenient.”

“No,” she whimpered, the fear exploding into palatable panic -- sudden realization of the other life that was threatened here. “Oh, goddess, please no.”

“Yes,” he said.

Power blossomed in her that she hardly knew she held. Energy and magic that she had no name for save desperation. Explosive force propelled outwards, blasting the men around her backwards, clearing a space around her, save Angelo who merely lifted a hand to shield his eyes and stood firm against her summoning. He simply stared at her, while his men were trying to shake the shock off and climb to their feet.

She ran. Darted past the dazed men in the snow and into the fringe of forest behind the campsite. Through low branched furs that tore at her when she passed, into the muffled recesses of a forest asleep in deepest winter.

Up a slope she pelted, grabbing at limbs and trees to help her when the passage grew too steep. Her feet slipped in the snow and upon the rocks and roots that were hidden under it. She fell so many times she lost count. She heard them after her; the sounds of heavy bodies crashing through the forest in her wake. The breath came so hard in her chest that it hurt. Tears streamed down her face, filling her mouth when she gasped after air.

She ran blindly in her panic, no thought in her head but saving herself and the child she carried. A small part of her mind tried to reason the best course of action. What

would Dante do? Destroy them all effortlessly. No good help for her there. Gerad? Blend into the forest and hide before he struck. She tried to recall the incantation she had used so long ago to sneak past the temple guards and get into Dante's cell, but her mind was too fractured, her attention too divided between the sounds of the men behind her and dwelling upon what Angelo might do to her if he caught her. Why hadn't she gone to Kastel before setting out, so blindly faithful? He would have reasoned with her, or at the very least not let her go alone.

She topped the rise and on the other side was a steep and treacherous slope, so rocky that only a few persistent trees sprouted up from its surface. There was no choice but to attempt it. She ran along the ridge until she found a place that offered somewhat stable footing and slid down, falling to her backside and sliding a few feet until she caught hold of a scraggly tree to stop her descent. She looked back and saw the dark forms of her pursuers on the ridge. She let go and scooted further down. There was a gully at the bottom, far below, that seemed to run between the slopes of two rises into another section of wood.

"There's no escaping me, Sera." Angelo's voice echoed above her. He stood on the ridge, robes fluttering in the wind, while his men climbed down after her.

Panicked, she scrambled further down the slope. Her boot slipped on snow-covered rock and destroyed her balance. Her feet went out from under her and she hit the ground, shoulder and hip and lost all control of her descent. Like a broken doll she tumbled down the rocky slope, a nightmare voyage of pain and fear laced adrenaline. She couldn't breath, she couldn't think, couldn't even grab for handhold her momentum built so fast. She crashed against a rock and rebounded off it and ended up at the bottom in a pain that she could not associate with any state of being she had ever experienced. Her arm was twisted under her unnaturally,

her hip throbbing and pounding with bone deep hurt. Her head spun and liquid that was warm seeped down from her hairline into her eyes. But the agony in her stomach was the worst. Like white hot pokers were piercing the lining of her belly.

She could not even curl in the reflexive effort to protect herself when they came down to stand over her, blocking out the light. Blocking out her consciousness. She came to a moment later, brought back by another stab of intense pain. Angelo crouched over her, looking at her oddly, as if she were a butterfly he had caught and pinned living to a board. He reached out and captured a bit of blood from her forehead, looked at it critically, then wiped it off upon her cloak.

“If he hadn’t touched you, I might have still attempted to save your soul. You might have been granted redemption. But I’ll have nothing to do with a whore tainted by that hell spawn.”

She spasmed and wetness flowed down her thighs. Her whole body convulsed. Angelo lifted a brow curiously.

“It’s trying to get out. I should help it.”

Blood ran down her throat, strangling her when she tried to scream out. His hands hovered above her belly and a glow spread between them. It cast his face in a demonic, orange light. She did scream then and spewed blood in the expulsion of air. It splattered Angelo’s face. But then his hands were already red. His hands held something small and covered with gore of her own making. It was silent and still and no life pulsed within it.

The tears mixed with the blood. She was weakening so fast that all she could do was whimper when he placed it next to her in the blood stained snow. Then he rose and looked down at her one more time.

“He will regret with his last breath ever challenging me.”

Then he was gone. They were all gone and all Sera saw was the red film of pain and madness that bled over her vision and dragged her into darkness.

\* \* \*

She came to with a start and a jarring of pain in her arm. The ache in her belly was numb and hollow. Her thoughts were liquid things that spilled through her mind like water from a shattered urn. Nothing made sense. Reality was a foreign, distant thing that held little meaning for her. She tried to turn to free her arm and the whole of her body protested. She could barely move. The numbness spread from her belly outwards to all her limbs. Something small and frozen lay beside her. She tilted her head to look down and saw an indistinguishable lump. Small, curled body, with limbs pressed close against the torso. All covered in cold blood.

She couldn't understand its presence. She moved her good arm and touched it. Cold, cold, cold in death. Her vision grayed. She came back with the growing realization of what this was. She screamed. A hoarse, pitiful cry of devastation. She mouthed the words of supplication to the goddess that would grant her healing magics. She poured everything she had, everything she was into that frozen little body until there was nothing left for her.

Then she drifted deep into a place where she was not certain she might ever come back. But there was no pain there. And no remorse or tragedy. She fled there eagerly and left the world behind.

\* \* \*

Dante overtook Kastel at the foot of the mountains. He had come overland without the benefit of a horse. That meant non-stop flying for two days straight, which was no

minor feat, but one that covered distance quickly and efficiently. He had come twice the distance they had and they had traveled at a grueling pace, hardly stopping to rest during the night. Kastel's tracker was having an easy time of it, no snow having fallen to obscure the path.

Dante touched down before Kastel's horse and stared levelly up at him.

"Have you found her?"

He took a breath. There was cold accusation under the layer of calm Dante exhibited.

"We're close. The trail is fresh."

Dante looked at the ground, drew his brows and waved an impatient hand at Kastel's party in general. "Well get on with it."

Up the mountain trail, with Dante in the air above them. It began to snow. Kastel cursed the weather, contemplating a spell to drive the snow away when his scout pointed down the trail ahead of them to the remains of a campsite. They galloped down the path towards it. Kastel dismounted even as Dante touched earth to stare balefully at the pit where the fire had been. It was cold, but only by a few hours.

"They were here. We just missed them." His scout said. The man pointed down the trail to the south. "Horses went that way. Maybe fifteen mounted men."

"What's this?" One of his men stood over a section of muddied snow. He walked over and Dante did and the two of them looked down on what became recognizable as bits of armor and chunks of flesh. The scavengers had been at it. There were the tracks of small feet in the snow around the stain. Kastel drew an aborted, horrified breath thinking that it might have been her.

"Its not Sera," Dante said grimly, then his eyes turned towards the wood, drawn there by a tiny tendril of power. Kastel scented it, as well, but Dante was already in the air and rocketing over the tree-lined ridge. He followed suit, leaving his men staring up at them.

Over the ridge and there was nothing but a rocky gully below. He faltered in mid-air when his eyes were drawn to a splash of color at the bottom. A sprawled, twisted figure lying in red stained snow. Dante was already beside it -- beside her. It was Sera. Still and broken.

Kastel landed a few yards away, stunned. Dante was bent over her, black cloak all but obscuring her body, crooning to her or himself, Kastel wasn't sure which. He cried out and pulled her up into his arms and something small and ghastly rolled away from her limp body.

Power radiated from Dante, focused on Sera. Kastel wasn't sure if she was alive. The snow melted in a radius of fifty yards around where Dante kneeled, holding her. Kastel felt the warmth of healing; of transferred energies so great he had to take a step backwards.

"Kastel - -" Dante didn't look up at him, head still bent over the girl in his arms, he sounded unsteady and weak. Hesitantly Kastel approached, knelt beside them, one gloved hand resting in the snow. The little red thing lay not far from his knee. He stared down at it in dismay. He knew what it was. It was clear what it was from the blood staining Sera's tunic and pants. There was so much blood.

The energies still flowed from Dante. Like the flow of her blood.

"Get us out of here," Dante whispered, face buried in her hair. "I don't -- think I can do it."

\* \* \*

He couldn't find her. There was life, he felt the weak spark of it burning within her, but it seemed as if her spirit were not attached to it. All there was, was that pitiful little core of life and magic that had surged one last time before her strength gave out. Drained her of strength and spirit that she had directed not inwards, for her own salvation but towards another. Towards the lifeless little

body that lay curled in the snow beside her. All for nothing for that soul was long gone. Long beyond any hope of help. And she had wasted her strength uselessly.

Silly, silly girl, to throw away her life like that. He squeezed her tight against him, feeling the slow seepage of blood soak through his tunic. He fed strength into her, trying to fix the ills of her body, to mend the rips in flesh and the breaks in bone, to renew the bounty of her spirit and succeeded in all but one.

The well of her soul just drank up the energy and spilled it who knew where, for it certainly did not retain it. And he kept giving it to her because he could not fathom the spark of boundless spirit and life that was Sera extinguishing. It was not conceivable or acceptable that she not exist in the same world he did. So he went after her. He went to that dark place, following the thin trail she had left, the only string connecting her still to the mortal world.

He had been there before. The void. A realm where sensation meant nothing, where will was an abstract term. Where nothing mattered but endless, featureless existence. It pulled at awareness, sinking its tendrils into a mind and numbing it, wanting all purpose and thought to cease. He repelled the urge to just drift, repelled the urge to give up the frantic search and the trials of life, repelled the numbness that seeped into his soul.

He hated this place. This in-between. Hated it more than what waited on the other side, because at least there emotion existed. Here there was nothing. But here at least there was a chance of getting her back.

There were a thousand aimless, drifting souls here. The line became blurred and he poured his heart into finding her among the multitudes. Her unique scent, her unique spirit that was precious and irreplaceable. It was there, threatening to break the fragile thread that connected it still to Sera's physical form. She struggled to break the thread and he engulfed her, stilling the struggle,

surrounding her with his own energy, infusing her with his strength to reinforce the line. He felt the panic, the dismay the single driving thought that separated her from all the other souls in attendance. She wanted to pass on into the other realm because the small, sleeping spirit that she had been connected to for so many months had already passed that way.

She fought against him. It was almost overpowering, the desire to follow the infant soul. She almost dragged him with her, almost drained him of the immense well of power at his command, to bring them both back. She shocked him with her reserves of power. He had to delve deep into his own to subdue her, to pull them back along the thread to the faint glowing light that was life and world and reality.

She shuddered faintly in his arms and he felt dizzy and rubbery with weakness. Relief flooded him. She was there. Deeply unconscious, but her soul rested where it ought, in the precious shell of her body.

“Kastel - -” he murmured, shutting his eyes against an all-consuming light-headedness. He heard the snow shift nearby; felt Kastel’s presence, but could not quite gather the strength to lift his eyes and look at him.

“Get us out of here. I don’t -- think I can do it.”

A hesitant silence, then. “The baby?”

The baby. The payment to Mother that she could take now if she so wished. Did this count? He felt sick contemplating it. He didn’t know. If she wanted it, then he would put it where it might be closest to her.

“Bury it,” he said.

“All right.” Soft reply from Kastel. Miserable reply.

He fed her still, because he was afraid she might drift away again, she had been that adamant about it. He wanted her back within the walls of Sta-Veron. He wanted himself clear headed enough to understand what had happened and who had been responsible.



“Can you stand?” Kastel asked, putting a hand under his arm. “Let me take her.”

“No.” Jealous of what he had almost lost, he held her closer and attempted to gain his feet on his own. Then everything became disoriented and his vision grayed. He toppled backwards and Kastel caught him and held him there, supporting the both of them.

“I’ve got you.” There was fear in Kastel’s voice. Grief there, when Kastel so infrequently showed emotion at all. Strange. He was shaking more than Dante was. But his power was sure and strong. He lifted the three of them into the air, arms around Dante who in turn cradled Sera.

The change in orientation, the loss of the solid ground under him did it. The world grayed out and when he opened his eyes again, he felt like he was falling. Only he never hit.

And then the snow was gone and there was warmth and softness and a ceiling over his head. He blinked up at it, trying to gather his wits. Taking account of himself and the state of his being.

“Welcome back,” Kheron said. He turned his head to find her sitting in a chair at the side of the bed. Her knees were drawn up to her chest, her expression wan. Clear memory slipped through his grasp. He beetled his brows, puzzled at the state of disorder within his head. There was a great deal of noise from the hallway beyond the door. The sound of voices and hurrying feet and general clatter. Curious.

“How are you?” she asked. He looked back at her, narrowing his eyes, recalling the sensation of falling. Recalling -- other things.

It came to him, clear and painful and he bolted upright, wild eyed, and she rose, crossing the space between chair and bed to place hands on his chest.

“She’s all right. She’s safe. It’s you I worry about, giving so much of yourself. Don’t you have the sense to know when to stop?”

“How long? How long have I been out?” He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He was naked under the sheets. Kheron surveyed him clinically.

“Two days. Kastel made good time getting you back.”

There were no handy clothes, so he snatched up the sheet and wrapped it about himself as he stalked for the door. She did not try and stop him. She knew him too well for that. She followed him into the hall. Sera’s room seemed the general goal for most of the commotion. The staff was in an uproar. He saw the concern and the fear in the faces of every maid he passed, when they weren’t frozen in shock at seeing him march down the hall half naked. There were a great cluster of them outside her door, talking in hushed little groups. Gerad stood in the doorway, caressing the scarred hilt of his Great sword. He glanced over his shoulder at Dante’s approach and stepped aside. His face was grim and deadly.

The bedchamber was less crowded. Only the housekeeper and one of the maids who was delivering a basin of warm water. Sera was asleep under a mountain of white sheets and blankets. The fire roared warmly, the curtains were pulled, letting in only a slant of sunlight.

One step into the room and he hesitated, afraid to go closer. Afraid to see how fragile and wounded she was. He had healed her injuries, he knew that much, but the mind did not always recover as quickly as the body. And he could not heal the mind, only pull the soul back from the precipice of death.

His hands were shaking, in front of witnesses, so he crossed his arms and held onto his elbows to hide it. Still weak, he told himself. Just the strain showing. Sera should be up and bouncing off the walls what with all the energy he had given her. He wasn’t up to it. Keitlan

pursed her lips at his hesitancy and beckoned him over with an impatient gesture of her hand.

“You’ve clothes in the wardrobe,” she reminded him archly, then patted his arm consolingly. “You’re pale as a ghost. You should be back in bed and leaving her to her rest.”

“Has she woken?”

“Oh, several times. Took breakfast, which is more than I can say for you. I had to force it on her though, poor child. Hasn’t said a word. Not a single word. Just stares into space, then goes back to sleep. Lord Kastel said she was badly injured. That she almost died.”

“She might have,” he said, distracted by the fluttering of Sera’s lids, the trembling of her lips.

“Who did it to her? What monster would do such a thing?” Keitlan’s eyes teared up and water spilled down her ruddy cheeks.

Dante opened his mouth, he’d been too distracted with Sera to give that question serious thought. It was a very good one. He thought he knew the answer. It made his blood boil. The air around him crackled with a flashflood of anger. Keitlan let out a little squeal and jumped back.

“I’m going out there to look for them,” Gerad said from the doorway, low, deadly voice. Kheron stood at his shoulder, her eyes now less grim.

“Kastel’s men are still out there, looking for the trail, but if it is the Prophet, then they’ll be damned little good against him.”

“It was him,” Dante growled.

He wanted to vent the anger so badly it hurt. There was the sound of armored men moving the hallway. Kastel and his captain of the guard, Kiro. Kiro stood in the hall, Kastel stepped into the room.

“You’re awake.” He looked particularly relieved at that state. There was still worry in his eyes. There ought to be. He’d let an agent of Angelo’s spirit Sera away.

“You let this happen,” Dante hissed, moving around the bed. “You let her ride out of here into that bastard’s hands.”

“Now wait a minute --” Gerad started in defense. Kastel’s chin rose over so slightly, a defensive motion.

He shook his head, not in denial. “I’m sorry --”

“She almost died!!” He lashed out, caught Kastel a backhanded blow that withheld nothing of his strength. Kastel spun, hit the doorframe and leaned there, fingers clutching at it for support, face pressed into the wood. Exuding guilt. Dante could almost feel it wafting off him.

Kiro almost drew his sword, but Kheron put her hand on his to stop the action. Every servant in the hall was ashen faced and shocked.

“What the fuck good are you if you can’t even keep track of where she is? Did you see what he did to her?”

“It’s not his fault,” Gerad shouted at him. “How in hell could he have known? She snuck out. She’s damned wily enough to get her way when she wants it. She got you out of Alsansir past a whole damn city looking for you, didn’t she?”

He didn’t want to hear it. He wanted to rage and rant. He wanted to hurt somebody as much as he hurt. As much as Sera had been hurt.

“Get out!!” he screamed at them all. “Get the hell out!!”

And they went. Gerad put his hands on Kastel, who shook them off, pushing himself off the doorframe and turning without a look at Dante and stalking off. Gerad cast one not quite scathing glare into the room.

“We’re going to find the bastard,” he promised. Kheron nodded her agreement and followed in his wake. The housekeeper was the last to scurry past him. But she paused at the door, as brave or braver than Gerad, and said with a disapproving frown.

“It’s because you love her that you’re so angry. But his lordship doesn’t deserve your ire.” Then she was out the door and shutting it behind her.

He didn’t know what to do then, plummeted into silence and solitude. He went to the bedside and stared down at Sera. Sank down to sit on the edge of it and touched her smooth cheek.

Months of hearing nothing from the Prophet and he was back. And he dared to attack something of Dante’s. He dared to destroy a life that she and he had created, regardless of the desperate pact with Mother.

He had held the notion that he could find a way out of that bargain. He could find a way around anything if he tried hard enough. He recalled a vague memory of the pitiful little corpse in the dirtied snow. He had been too distracted with Sera to pay it much heed. No bigger than his hand, but perfectly formed. A child of his. His flesh.

A tear trailed down his cheek and he wiped at it furiously. Another followed in its wake. He didn’t know whether it was anger or remorse that made him cry. He preferred to think it was anger, but the other tore at his heart with razored claws. He put a hand to his forehead, grasping hair in his fist, incapable of doing more than sitting there and shaking.

It was a new experience. An anger and a hurt that incapacitated him to the point that he could not fly off immediately in a quest for vengeance. He could not in all of his long life, remember anything that hurt as much as this. No wonder Sera wanted to sleep. It dulled the pain.

## Eight

He sat in the window seat in her room and stared out into the emptiness of black. All the day long and Sera hadn't stirred. Keitlan had come in once or twice to check on her. Had brought him a tray which he had left untouched. She took it away, muttering about the both of them being foolish. He wouldn't leave until he saw her awake and well. As well as she could be considering.

He was snared by that notion, to see her healthy and sound, and until he did, no other thought or action seemed worthy of his attention.

And finally, she did wake. Stretched under her blankets and made a little sound of impending consciousness. He padded over to the bedside, dropped to his knees on the thick carpet and waited while she slowly blinked sleep away from her eyes. She focused on him, languidly, dreamily and half smiled. He took a breath of relief -- so much relief flooded through him it was almost a shock. Reached out to push back a strand of her hair that had fallen over her nose.

Dante could not for the life of him form words to say to her. So he simply stared, with his hand on her cheek until she drew her brows in puzzlement and whispered.

"What's wrong? You look so melancholy."

What did one say to that innocent question? Stymied again. He let out a little breath of cynical laughter and dropped his head onto his arm. She trailed her fingers down his wrist and arm, and laid them on his head, stroking his hair, still that bemusement on her face.

"Are you talking to me again?" she asked in a little voice. "I don't think I like it much when you don't."

"Yes," he said and rose up a little to pull her closer to the edge of the bed where he could wrap her in his arms and bury his face in her hair. She ran her hands down his

shoulders, a gentle, reassuring stroke and murmured against his ear.

“I love you, but we have to be careful of the baby.”

He froze, while her fingers lingered on the skin of his back, trying to digest what she had said. What she might have meant. Didn’t she know? Hadn’t they told her? He wasn’t sure he could.

He pulled away a little, staring down at her face. There was a dreamy pleasure in her eyes, in her smile as if everything in the world were perfect. He caught her hands in his, squeezing gently.

“Sera -- you lost the baby. Remember?”

Her smile faltered a little. Her pupils seemed to expand. Her gaze went right through him, as if he were not even there. She pulled her hands out of his grasp, shifting to sit up, to swing her legs over the side of the bed. She rose, white nightshift flowing about her slender body and stood for an unsteady moment next to where he knelt, then she walked towards the fire and the chair there. There was a basket of sewing on the floor beside it. She sat down and picked up a folded piece of material. She held it up and smiled back at him.

“See? This will be a summer smock. I’ve got the material for winter ones, but I haven’t gotten the chance to start on them yet. It’ll be spring before she’s born anyway.”

“Sera --” His voice cracked a little. “Sera, don’t you remember what happened? The mountains?”

“I’ve been thinking for weeks about names. I was thinking of naming her after my mother, if that’s all right with you. Thelsa. It would make father happy.”

“How do you know,” he asked leadenly, in the face of her refusal to acknowledge the truth. “That it will be a girl?”

“I had a dream,” she laughed. “I know its silly, but I think it heralded the truth.”

The truth. How far had she gone, in her desperation to join that infant soul? Had he not brought everything that was essential back? Had he failed that miserably?

The door opened and Keitlan came in with a covered pot of tea. She stopped in the threshold, taking in the sight of Sera sitting by the fire, of him by the bed with a look that must have been horror on his face. She walked into the room, a practical, reasonable woman and sat the tea service down on the table next to Sera's chair. Sera didn't acknowledge her presence. Dante couldn't take his eyes from Sera.

"She should be in bed," Keitlan said, concern in her face. She patted the girl's shoulder, took her elbow gently in her hand and urged her up.

"Put that down now," the housekeeper suggested when Sera seemed to want to take the unfinished baby smock with her. Dante rose, keeping the sheet, which he'd sat in all day, about him, letting the woman guide Sera past him and back into bed. Keitlan cast him a worried look and frowned.

When she had Sera settled, she caught his arm and said in a voice that brooked no argument. "You come with me."

Numbly, he did, until she shut the door and scolded. "You'll do her no good looking like you do. Go eat. Get yourself together, man."

"She doesn't know," he said. "I tried to tell her, but she ignored me. She talks as if she still carries the baby."

Keitlan drew her brows, glancing back at the closed door. She took a breath, a long, uncertain one. "It's – it's not uncommon for a woman who's lost a babe to deny it happened. I've seen it before. She's had a terrible shock. Gods know she's had a terrible shock. Give her a little time. That's all she needs."

\* \* \*



Dante felt as if the fates were conspiring against him. The disorientation clung stubbornly, his mind reeled with the image of her dreamy smile and her delusion. *I love you, but we have to be careful of the baby.* And he had thought for so fleeting a moment that she was all right. That everything would be fine. As if anything, since he had come back to the world had been fine.

He went to the only other place he knew to find solace, when he felt so lost. He went to Kheron. He found her polishing armor in her room, her newly oiled sword out of its scabbard on the bed. Her war armor. She hadn't worn it since she'd come here.

"We're leaving in the morning," she said, to break the silence when he only stood leaning against her doorframe.

"Where?" he asked. She frowned at him.

"To search the mountains. Kastel left this afternoon with a party. Gerad and I leave in the morning. We'll find whoever did this."

"Oh. Why didn't you tell me?"

"We did," she said slowly, warily. "You were -- upset."

"Angelo did it." He was so very certain of that.

"Probably," she agreed. She carefully laid the piece of armor she'd been working on down. "How is Sera?"

"I don't know." Complete honesty there. "She seems to be in denial."

"Dante, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For her. For you." And there was honesty there as well. She held out a hand to him. He went to her, sat on the edge of her bed amidst her armor and weaponry while she scooted over to wrap her arms about him, hugging him. He sat there with her weight and warmth against his back and thought about all the deaths he would bring down upon Angelo's head. He wondered if in his rage he would be able to prolong the Prophet's life long enough to inflict the pain he wanted to inflict.

"It will be all right," she said. "We'll make it better. We'll find him and make him pay for what he did to her."

"It was because of me. He hurt her, but it was aimed at me."

"And he'll suffer for it." There was righteous indignation in her voice. She would, no matter what offense he gave her, defend him to the death.

"I love you, Kheron."

He felt her sigh against him and whisper. "I know."

\* \* \*

Kheron and Gerad left with a contingent of Sta-Veron troops who were well versed in the ways of the mountains. For two days Dante watched Sera drift aimlessly about the castle, for the most part hearing only what she wanted to hear, seeing only what she wanted to see. People spoke to her and she stared through them as if they were ghosts. To her they might have been.

She stared at Dante half the time, as if he weren't there. Only occasionally did she deign to see him and then she might only smile dreamily at him, almost in welcome, as if she hadn't seen him in weeks or months, and remark about some trivial matter. Or comment on the baby. He wished he hadn't had Kastel bury it. Maybe if that pitiful little corpse were here -- if she could see it with her own eyes -- she might be forced back to the reality she belonged. Keitlan had said give her time. Keitlan was beginning to frown and wring her hands in dismay now when Sera roamed the castle.

When he asked her what she recalled of her journey to the mountains. Of who had hurt her, she went all the more vague. It was like he had missed a piece of her soul, when he'd brought her back. She was not complete.

The wrath began to build. He had told himself he would see her well before he abandoned her to seek his vengeance, but he was not so certain she would get well.

A black, seething frustration built inside him. A regret that ached with all the persistence of slow death. He had a need to see Angelo writhe. He had a need to destroy his foe that ate at him and became an all-consuming passion.

Two days and he had stayed by her side as long as he was able. Before his need for vengeance overwhelmed him. His former warlords were out hunting his enemy and he could no longer endure not having his own hand involved.

He found Sera before he set out, hoping she might look up at him with clear recognition in her eyes. With reason and grief that she had not so far shown. She leaned against the sill of the window in her room, arms wrapped about her, face wan from the pale morning light that shone through the panes of glass. He put a gloved hand on her shoulder, brushing back hair and she hardly flinched. Only stared outside at nothing. There was nothing to see.

“Sera. I’ll find him. I swear it,” he promised. She began humming. A child’s song. A lullaby mother’s sang to put their babies to sleep. He withdrew his hand, shutting his eyes for a moment, at a loss with her. Helpless to repair something so fragile as a mortal mind.

Then he clenched his fists, and whirled away from her, letting the anger flow back to wash away the moment of weakness. Weakness and pain were no longer an option. There was only relentless revenge.

\* \* \*

The mountains were treacherous. Snow coated peaks and valleys. Trails that were indistinguishable to the untrained eye as anything other than one more patch of white covered earth, perilous and deadly if one took the wrong step. The air was that was gray and frost laden, producing flurries of snow at a moment’s notice. Trees bent like old crones from the weight of powder and ice on

their limbs. Wind blew through the mountains like a banshee, obscuring their own trail moments after they'd passed, much less tracks days old.

All this they had against them and yet the mountaineers and trackers in the Winter King's service seemed undaunted.

Gerad began to develop a healthy respect for those men who made the cold mountains their home. He had lost track of how many days they'd been out here, looking for trace of an enemy on their doorstep.

Perhaps a week. Maybe less. How many miles of mountainous landscape they had searched, he could not begin to fathom. They had begun at the campsite Kastel and Dante had found and worked their way outwards from that point. The trackers found traces here and there of the passage of men, but no solid trail. It was easy to hide in the mountains in the midst of winter, Captain Kiro had said, when they had all convened in the base camp, coincidence bringing them back at the same night. There were a dozen search parties combing the peaks and gullies and all the rocky ground in-between that could be traveled by man.

Kastel had made it clear to his men that if the enemy was discovered, none of them were to engage, but to follow discreetly and send word back to either Gerad and Kheron or himself.

The men understood. Well aware of the limits of mortal men when sorcerous powers were in play. Tomorrow they would move the base camp further into the mountains and expand the search.

They sat in a tent, Gerad, Kheron, Kastel, his captain and the leaders of the various search parties, studying a meticulously drawn map of the mountains. Witchlight illuminated the interior of the tent casting them all in a cold, bluish light. Kiro and Kastel discussed the area's they had already covered and contemplated the likeliest places to send parties on the morn. Kastel traced a route

with his finger to the west and Kiro agreed that it would be a probable course to follow. They mapped other routes to follow, assigning them to the weather bitten men under Kiro.

Kheron bent over the map, her armored shoulder brushing Gerad. One slim finger tapped an area to the south west of where they sat.

“What’s this?”

“Impassable,” Kiro said. “No reason to bother, horses nor men could travel it.”

She drew her brows, frowning in thought.

“What?” Gerad asked, recognizing the look of contemplation.

“I don’t know. A feeling,” she said. “I want to look there.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Kastel looked up at her.

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “I’ll go anyway.”

“I’ll go with you,” Gerad said. Kheron stared at him a moment, gold eyes unreadable, then inclined her head. Kastel gave them both impatient looks, before expelling a breath of air and continuing to arrange the search patterns of his men.

In the morning, not long after the sun had begun peeking over the tips of the mountains, casting its bright rays over a landscape of stark white, men started to leave camp.

Gerad and Kheron set out on their own. It was slow traveling. The horses seemed instinctually to know the places that offered the best footing, even through deep snow. They trusted in the wisdom of their mountain-bred mounts and let them wind their way up and down the trails at their own pace and their own discretion. A great vista of white slopes spread before them. Steep, snow covered mountain that plummeted down to a valley thick with dense forest.

It was a crater shaped vale, with jagged ridges along all its sides. No easy route down. No route at all for the

horses. They were at the low side and it was still thousands of yards down to the forest. To the west, a great field of uninterrupted white ran up to a cloud obscured peak overhead. The wind whistled down from those heights, bringing with it the occasional swirl of blown snow. Other than that the vale was stilted in silence. The jangle of tack and armor as they shifted in the saddle to observe the valley was a foreign intrusion upon the quiet.

“No safe path down,” Gerad observed softly.

Kheron withheld comment. She swung down from her horse, tossing the reins up to Gerad. Her cloak fluttered around her, her hair obscured her face. She readjusted her sword on her back, so it wouldn’t get in her way and stepped over the ridge. Her foot slid down into deep snow and she whispered a word and the wind seemed to gather around her and buoy her up. When she moved thereafter down the slope, her feet barely broke the crust of snow. Gerad cursed under his breath.

He followed her, albeit by more natural means. His descent was more destructive to the pristine covering of snow. He left long, ragged tracks, but it was a controlled decent. Almost graceful; he utilizing all the balance and deftness of foot a lifetime of training had ingrained within him. She was quite a distance ahead of him. Halfway between the ridge and the tree line below.

High above there was a distant crack. A boom that echoed down over and over into the cone shaped vale. Gerad stopped, knee deep in the snow, eyes drawn upward at the sound. An explosion of snow billowed out, spitting chunks of rock and ice in an arch over the vale. Not magic. He would have sensed that. Just sudden destructive power that seemed to come from nowhere. The pelting of debris didn’t come near them. Just pelted the slope a thousand of feet above.

Silence. A breath’s worth of intense silence and then the mountain side seemed to crumble. High up where the

explosion had originated the snow started to slide downward. A gradual, lazy degeneration at first, that quickly culminated into a roaring, frothing avalanche of snow and rock and dirt. He cried out Kheron's name, but was too far behind her to do anything but scramble desperately along the slope away from the avalanche.

He ran, sliding and slipping and the monster was behind him, flooding the valley with a roar so loud it was deafening. It didn't matter how fast he ran, it would catch him. Bits and chunks of snow hit his back. He cried out and drew the Great Sword as he stumbled up the slope. Lost his footing and went down to his knees, twisted onto his back and stabbed the blade out before him, calling forth its power in desperation.

A gust of wind swept past him. A lacing of force trembled under his hands and the blade expelled a seismically jarring wave of power that cut into the wall of tumbling white crashing down on him. The onslaught of snow didn't slow, but it veered around him, cut in two by the power of the Great Sword.

But only the brunt of it. The edges came pouring down, smothering him with snow and ice and weight. The insulating whiteness buried him and cut off the rumbling sound of the avalanche's fury. Cut off the gray of daylight. Gerad ceased for a while to know anything.

Then came back to awareness with a panic and a growing sense of claustrophobia. His body was immobile, trapped beneath snow the depth of which he could only imagine. He couldn't breath. His fingers still clutched the hilt of the sword. It felt hot all the way through his glove. The forces within it trembled and he willed them to release.

Snow exploded outwards, clearing a space where sky glowered balefully down. Gerad had never been so happy to see dour, snow threatening clouds. He clawed his way up out of the pit the blade had created and knelt on the new, uneven landscape of white. White littered with the

gray of stone and the brown of dirt. There was a bald spot on the mountain where the explosion had stripped it of snow. The resulting avalanche had filled the vale with what had rested on the slopes of the mountain. It had covered half the forest at the bottom. The trees bent at awkward angles or uprooted entirely, snow half way up their trunks.

Gerad scanned the lower slopes desperately for some sign of life. He was too short of breath to bellow out her name, so he began to slide down slope to search for her. Something blazed bright in the sky. An arc of energy that sizzled through the air like a comet and hit the earth some two hundred yards from the edge of the wood. It flared so brightly, Gerad had to shield his eyes. When he could see again there was a faintly glowing sphere of power where the blast had hit. A crackling growing haze of energy that indicated a power there that did not take kindly to being attacked by both nature and magic.

Kheron was alive and defending herself then. But where was the attacker? He scanned the heights and the sky itself for sign, but saw no one. Then from the woods behind Kheron movement drifted across the snow. Gerad started running as quickly as he could, calling out for her to beware behind her.

She might have heard him. The shield pulsed, and then a slash of power arched out and hit it from the woods. Gerad was close enough to see her clearly now, protected by her shield. She lifted her hands and wordlessly cried out the locution of a spell. A ball of sizzling energy formed before her and crashed into the abused wood. Trees splintered. Snow melted. A trench of snow and earth was created.

Silence. He was almost to her. She let her shield drop, and he saw her clearly, covered with snow and dirt and as bedraggled as he was. There was a bit of blood running down from her lip. Don't let your guard down, he thought. The first blast didn't come from the woods.



Then he did see movement from above. A moments glimpse of a dark form before light obscured it and between one breath and the next a wave of energy so strong it knocked Gerad from his feet and threw him back a dozen feet.

It had hit the spot Kheron had been standing. Gerad cried out in rage, horror, regret. Half buried in snow he struggled up, saw a pale flash of face against dark flowing robes and hood. And knew that face. Knew those damned fanatical eyes and that holier than thou expression. He screamed out in fury and the gaze flickered to him. A hand reached out, as if contemplating the casting of a spell. Then withdrew and the airborne form began to sped away, over the ridge to the west and gone in the haze of cloud and mist stirred up by the avalanche.

He couldn't care about that now. He couldn't care about anything but sliding down the slope to the blast area where he'd last see Kheron. The snow was gone from a circular space some fifty yards wide. The earth had been gouged and ripped.

At first he didn't see her, she was so covered in mud and dirt. She was whole, at least mostly, as far as he could see. There was charred armor and tattered cloak and tunic, but the flesh was intact. She started to move before he reached the edge of the spell blast, but she seemed disoriented.

A man stepped from the edge of the wood. Big man, made even larger by the bulk of winter gear and armor. Spiky brown hair and odd green eyes. Gerad knew him. The captain of the Prophet's guard. He lifted sword and hand and something elemental gathered in the air before him, then raced towards the recovering sorceress.

Gerad cried out and leapt, bringing the great sword down in an arc that sliced through the speeding elemental force and ripped it asunder. He felt the impact all the way to his bones and hit the ground with less grace than he

might have liked. He crouched between Kheron and Sinakha, one hand on the ground, the other holding his enchanted blade as a shield between them.

“Here to finish the work your master did such a half-assed job at?”

Sinakha’s face didn’t move. No emotion crossed his eyes. He stepped out from the trees and the sword came up into a fighting position. So he wanted a little hand to hand, did he? Gerad was up to that.

Sinakha made the first move. Came at him so quick that he was hard to follow and sliced low, aiming at Gerad’s legs. Gerad forced his aching body into action, sprang up and into the air, landing in the mud in one movement and launching back up and towards his opponent in the next, slicing from above. Sinakha blocked it. Gerad came down and they circled, testing each other’s strength and swiftness. They traded blows, steel glancing off of steel and Gerad thought that the blade Sinakha wielded was no common sword. The man was quick and he broadcast nothing of his intentions. Damned good swordsman. Damned good. Sixty seconds into it and Gerad thought he had never faced better.

Slash. Clang. Reflect the blow. Feint to the left and score a thin slice across Sinakha’s arm. No blood drawn. Just a slice through the layers of clothing. Crossing of blades and Sinakha pressed close, using his shoulder to shove Gerad back a step. His boot slipped on snow and he lost balance. Sinakha sliced towards his belly and he just fell backwards to avoid it, and found himself at a disadvantage on his back.

He called up a burst of power from the great sword and Sinakha leapt aside to avoid it. It gave Gerad the space to gain his feet. But, since he had called magic into the fray, Sinakha seemed content to take the battle to new limits. His blade glowed. Power gathered at the tip, a dozen little spots of energy. They arched towards Gerad and he twisted this way and that to avoid them. He couldn’t

avoid them all. White hot pain lanced through his thigh and along his ribs. His leg gave out and he went down.

Sinakha did smile then. A cold, emotionless twist of his lips. He summoned the energies again and this time pointed the blade towards Kheron, who was barely beginning to shake off the effects of the blast that had taken her down. Gerad surged up, raced towards her even as the power was released, slammed into her and bowled her over, protecting her with his own body. Felt hot little fingers of pain lance into him and wasn't even sure if his meager flesh could protect her; if the little orbs of power wouldn't eat right through him and into her. It felt as if they were. It felt as if his flesh were burning up.

She twisted under him, hissing and cursing with disorientation, with sudden awakening to imminent destruction. She pushed Gerad off and he rolled onto his back, hurting so bad he saw red mixed in with the dancing spots of light. Or maybe that was blood in his eyes. Hard to tell.

"Are you insane?" Kheron was screaming and it occurred to him that she was yelling at him. Sinakha stood at the edge of the clearing, sword at ready. Kheron cried out the words to a spell. The air crackled with it. Sinakha was too close to avoid it this time. He must have been aware of this. He leapt backwards into the cover of trees, disappearing into the shadows with the skill of a nightwalker trained.

Gerad lost track of him. Kheron had to have, but she released the spell anyway and it tore through the already ravaged forest. Whether she got him or not, Gerad didn't know. His vision was wavering. He rolled onto his side and felt the places his flesh had been pierced protest with the movement. Where was the damned sword? He'd lost it sometime between the time he'd jumped to protect Kheron and when Sinakha's spell bursts had hit him.

He heard Kheron gain her feet. Heard her cursing soundly.

"Gods damn it! How did this happen?" she cried.

"It was a set up," he muttered and tasted blood. Not a cut lip, but coming up from his throat. Punctured lung maybe.

She whirled and hit the ground next to him, her knees pressing into his arm.

"How?" she demanded. "How could he have known we'd be here?"

"He called you."

It seemed simple enough. Dante said Angelo was a mind witch among his other talents. He had gotten to Kheron somehow and given her the urge to come here. She'd certainly had no explanation as to why she thought it important to search a place more experienced mountaineers declared a waste of time.

He shuddered, feeling his body beginning to go shocky.

"Gerad?" She leaned over him, blocking out the light. "Are you alright?"

He couldn't answer just then, too busy coughing up blood. She cried out at the sight of the red froth dribbling down his chin.

"How bad?" she demanded, pulling him into her lap, running her hands down his front to find the wounds. He couldn't feel her fingers and thought that was a terrible sign.

"Bad enough." He coughed more blood. His head was spinning now, interfering with his thinking.

"You stupid, stupid man. Why did you do it? Why sacrifice yourself for me?" She cried. "I never asked it of you."

Wasn't it obvious to her? It had always been so obvious to him.

"Because I love you." He wouldn't have said it if he hadn't been so lightheaded. She stared down at him in horror.

"I'm getting to old for this," he muttered, to negate the earlier statement. To say anything to wash it from her

memory. Fool. Fool. He would die a fool with her looking at him as if he were the greatest idiot in the world.

She bent over him and he thought silent tears ran down her cheeks.

"How could you?" she sobbed. "What have I ever done to warrant it? I've devoted my whole life to Dante -- everything I am only to please him. How could anyone ever love me?"

"You -- don't give yourself enough -- credit. You think -- you're nothing without -- him. You're wrong. I don't matter. He doesn't. Nobody does. Do me a favor and learn to love yourself as much as I do and I'll die content."

"You will NOT!" She screamed at him. "How dare you say this to me and presume to avoid the consequences by dying?"

She held his face between her hands and glared down at him. She sniffed back tears. He could see her gathering strength. She was staring down at him as if he were a curiosity in a traveling sideshow.

"You have gray hairs," she whispered in awe. He almost laughed at that observation. Sure enough, over the last year or two he had begun to get a peppering of gray. In the crowd he hung with it was an anomaly. But then he was only human.

"You've been my best friend, Gerad. I never had a friend before you. Somebody who never asked anything of me. . . . Damnit, why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I rather like to avoid - - self inflicted pain - - present situation excluded. Your heart belongs to another."

"And his is as fickle as the day is long. Oh, Gerad --"

His strength was failing fast. She had never been that good at healing. "Kheron, find the Sword."

## Nine

Dante came up the mountain in the midst of a slow moving party of men and horses who treated the landscape as if it were some fragile, easily annoyed giant who might retaliate against them at any moment for their trespass. They spoke of respect for the winter and the highlands and Dante fumed darkly, holding nothing but contempt for the mountains that hid his enemy. They did not daunt him. What blocked his path, he removed. He might have flown here and searched from a loftier angle, but he didn't know how long it might take and he did not wish his strength depleted when he did find Angelo.

They found tracks in the lower ranges leading north towards the plains land and wasted time following only to discover it was a band of trappers down from the heights taking their furs to Sta-Veron for trade. They had seen no sign of anyone other than themselves in the mountains. Damned annoying. Dante urged his men onwards, eager to discover what those who had been scouring the range for days had found out.

The base camp was in the process of moving when they rode in. Most of the supplies were packed and already on the way deeper into the mountains. The only men remaining were a few scouts left behind to advise any stragglers coming into camp of its new location. They had no good news for Dante.

He stomped about, kicking snow, undecided what course to take. Something prickled the hairs at the back of his neck. Some sense of magic being used. He could not place the flavor of the spell, but it was powerful in nature. He jabbed a finger in the general direction he felt the magic emanating from.

"That way? What's that way?"

"That's the route lord Gerad and Lady Kheron took,"  
One of the scouts said.

Something more familiar tickled at his awareness. A spellcasting of intimately familiar nature. Kheron.

He cursed under his breath and rose from the earth, leaving startled men beneath. Damn. Damn. He had waited too long to come out here. Waited futilely for Sera to come to her senses and now the Prophet had found something else of his.

It was over before he was in the air ten minutes. The magic just stopped and there was nothing to guide him. He tried to find Kheron's mental presence but that unique plain was crowded with static and confusion. If she were agitated or concentrating on something else she would not be receptive.

If he had more time, he could track her. He kept to the direction he had first sensed the magic and soon realized how mammoth a job searching these mountains really was. Even from the air it was nearly impossible to see past the trees. And where there were no trees the slopes were laden with crevices and shadows. Only the broad slopes of snow gladly gave up their secrets and there was little chance of men who did not wish to be seen traversing those.

He was lost and aimlessly searching, anger turning into dread of what he might discover when he did find her. Then he saw the dark shapes of two horses picking their way down a trail. Two riders. One horse being lead by a guide rope attached to the first. He swooped down, not caring it was friend or foe and the lead horse tossed its head in fright, sensing his presence before the riders did.

Kheron almost reached for her sword. She came that close then aborted the movement as her eyes focused on him. Her mouth opened soundlessly. Her face was dirty and blood smeared.

"What happened?" he demanded, stalking to her side, laying a hand on her stirrup.

“Dante, help Gerad!” she cried, flinging a leg over the saddle and practically knocking him back a step in her efforts to get down and rush back to the second horse.

He hadn’t spared a glance for Gerad. Now he did. The nightwalker master sat slumped in the saddle, his hands clutching the length of that great, spirit-possessed weapon of his, head bowed. He was covered in blood. He reeked of it. He could feel the living presence of the great sword struggling to anchor its master’s life-force -- to shore up his failing body.

“Goddamnit,” Dante hissed and pulled Gerad down. The big man toppled unresisting and Dante half stumbled under the dead weight before Kheron added her support and together they got him to the ground.

Gerad’s face was a pale imitation of his normal skin tone, if one discounted the blood. There were half a dozen mortal wounds piercing his body. He should have been dead. It was probably only thanks to his link with the arcane blade that he still breathed.

“What the hell happened, Kheron?” He ground out, summoning healing forces, lending some of his own strength for the second time in a week.

Gerad was stubborn. He might have been near death but he held tenaciously to life. He wasn’t nearly the battle Sera had been. But, Sera hadn’t had the Sword refusing to let her soul break from her body. The damn thing was so insistent on protecting its master that it almost rebuffed Dante’s efforts to heal him.

Kheron was crying. Silent tears, moistening her cheeks. She looked as shaken as he’d ever seen her. She was weak and injured, but not to the extent Gerad was. He could see it in her eyes, in the way she held herself.

“He was waiting for us,” she said quietly. “He -- he got into my head I think and guided me to the valley. And the mountain came down upon us. He hit me with a spell I wasn’t familiar with. Gerad saved me. Don’t let him die.”



“He’s too stubborn to die. Was it Angelo?” He had to ask, even though he knew the answer.

She nodded, miserable, clutching her hands at her chest. “And his captain, Sinakha. He’s the one who hurt Gerad. I’ll kill him.”

“Fine. Fine. Where did Angelo go?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see.”

“He went west,” Gerad whispered, eyes still shut.

“Ah, gods,” Kheron took a shaky breath, gloved fists clenching. “You’re okay.”

“I feel like shit. He’s using something other than magic. Old stuff, maybe. It had the feel of something of the ancients when the side of the mountain blew.”

“Technology of the ancients.” Kheron whispered as if she were bringing up something sacred and horrifying.

“Explosives,” Dante scowled, thinking of the wards he had worn on his wrists that had been as much technology as magic. A twisted, impossible blending of the two. Technology was anathema to magic. Yet Angelo used both. Technology and things of its ilk could cripple a creature of magic, yet Angelo’s magic was stolen.

“What did he want?” Kheron asked. “Why draw us out there?”

“To get at me,” Dante deduced, clenching his fists. He recalled what the Prophet had said to him once when he’d been at the man’s mercy in the cell under the temple. That he would destroy what Dante loved if he could not destroy Dante himself. And what else had he promised? If he couldn’t have Dante body and Dante’s magic as his own, then he’d have the next best thing.

“Where is Kastel?”

Kheron blinked at him, wide eyed. Gerad cracked open weary eyes.

“West. He’s searching west.”

\* \* \*

It was slow work, combing the mountains. Meticulous work. Dangerous. Kastel had lost a man the day before to a misstep on a narrow mountain trail. He cursed the carelessness. The responsibility ate at him. Just as the responsibility of what had happened to Sera did.

Dante was right. It was his fault. It was his city and his province and he had blindly let something as foul as the Prophet slip into it. He had let his guard down and an innocent had paid. Paid in blood and paid in the life of an unborn child. He could not erase the vision of that baby from his mind. He tried and it came back all the stronger.

*Dante was right.* It was his fault and he would die before he let the Prophet escape these mountains. They were following what might have been a trail now. Through a narrow valley and up a non-existent path where his trackers had found freshly broken limbs. It might be nothing more than the passage of a large animal. But it was the best they had found in days.

One of his trackers came excitedly down the trail from above. The remains of a camp had been found. A trail under the shelter of the trees on the far side of the ridge. He was listening to these details when the sense of powerful magic being used scratched at his awareness. He lost track of what his man was saying, staring eastward, trying to concentrate on the nature of the magic. Then it was gone, swallowed up by the eather and he stood blinking while his men stared at him.

“My Lord?” His lead tracker prompted.

“How old a camp?” he asked, distracted.

“Not more than a day. We can follow the trail easily.”

A choice. The fading aroma of a magic that might or might not signify the presence of their enemy or the concrete trail of a camp and tracks. If he went after that magic, the trail might be obscured by wind and snow. His men might come upon something they were not equipped to handle.

“Show me the camp.” He decided, and his men eagerly started up the trail.

A fire pit, only powdered with blown snow. The charred remains of a fire blackening its bottom. The trampled snow and frozen manure from many horses. A clear trail ahead. They took it at a fast pace. Through the forest and along a gully clear of trees and walled by rocky slopes on one side and the slow rise of a mountain on the other.

The trail led up the gradual slope. An easy climb for mountain horses. Something glinted in the light from the top of the ridge. One of his men pointed upwards and Kastel shielded his eyes to make it out. But it was gone. He waved a hand at his men to halt. He wanted to see what awaited them at the top of the rise.

To the discontent of his mount, he rose out of the saddle and into the air. A hundred feet up with the wind whipping at hair and cloak. Senses stretched taught for the slightest hint of magic being summoned. And there was nothing. Just the wind and the overpowering sense of the mountain’s age; of the deep-rooted power that lay beneath this rocky earth.

There was a crack in the air. Something hit his shoulder, like a stone being hurled at him. But of course there was no one on the ground that could hurl a stone so hard and so fast. The echoes of the crack sounded while he was trying to figure out what had happened. Before they faded it occurred to him that the shoulder was numb and he looked down and saw a clean hole through the armor plating. He stared at it in shock, lifting a gloved hand to touch the perimeter of it.

Crack. Impact hit him again and this time it spun him in mid-air, burning through his side like a fire-heated poker and stealing his wit. Blood stained his tunic and he could not quite grasp how. Something leaden and impenetrable lodged within his flesh.

Crack. The third hit and he lost control of the flight spell and plummeted like a rock to the earth. Hit snow and rolled, incoherent with the source of the pain that had invaded him. Not magic, he would have sensed it. Not mundane. He couldn't summon magic that would combat the things lodged in his body. It wouldn't respond, as if it was repelled by whatever had struck him.

His men were running towards him. He could see them from his sprawled angle, half buried in the snow. Crack. One of them stumbled and fell. Crack. Another went down. Crack. The skull of a man was shattered. Crack. Crack. He couldn't see what happened. His vision was graying. He couldn't think. He dropped his head into the snow, sick and hovering at the edge of true darkness.

Crunch, crunch of boots in the snow. He forced his eyes open and struggled to prop himself up. His right arm wouldn't work at all. His left was strengthless and rubbery. Robes in the snow so close he couldn't see more than an expanse of gray cloth. The figure moved, turning as another man trudged down the slope carrying a long, metal object. Metal cylinder, wooden base. He'd seen pictures. A gun. A gun, when there hadn't been guns for hundreds of years. He half recognized the man who carried it.

The man in the robes crouched. Hands reached out to roll him over. He could not at the moment resist them. He tried to organize his thoughts enough to cast a spell. It was hard with the dizziness and pain.

"No. No." The Prophet smiled down at him, placing his hand over Kastel's eyes, cutting out the sight of him. "Not just yet. We'll play at sorcery later. Go to sleep."

He couldn't fight it. The fingers of something that was not quite magic and not quite *not* magic were inside his head, weaving in and out of channels made by disorientation and shock and they just flicked a switch and shut him down. At the very least, the pain was gone.

For two days they searched without a trace until several of the horses wondered back down the trail in search of food and warmth and Dante invaded the animal mind to make them backtrack the way they had come. Then all they found were frozen corpses littering the side of a mountain slope. Kiro was so distraught his hands shook as he went from body to body, looking for sign of his lord. Dante knew he wasn't there. Dante remembered Angelo's promise.

He stood in the midst of a field of corpses killed by a means that should not have existed in this day and age and seethed. Events were beginning to spin out of his control. A series of tragedies that he was continually too late to avert. Sera hurt and so distressed her mind was not all there. Kheron and Gerad almost killed. Kastel just gone. His allies bruised and reduced and the bastard wouldn't come straight at him. He hit from behind out of shadows and raced back into their depths like a thief in the night.

There was a bloody spot in the snow where no corpse lay. A single glove rested half buried in the snow. Tracks led to the spot, but none led away. Dante stared down silently.

"Search the other side of the ridge," Kiro commanded and men started to climb its heights. Dante didn't bother to tell them it was a waste of time. He couldn't at the moment, form coherent speech. He was so incensed that his heart hammered painfully against his ribs. Angelo had hit everything that mattered to him in this world. There was nothing left, save those wounded ones that had already been hurt.

Gerad and Kheron were safe at base camp. Sera back at Sta-Veron. God knew where Kastel was. The devil would have a luckier guess. He wanted the others where he could protect them. Having them scattered only

increased the chances of Angelo striking at them again. If they were all safe, then he could think about how to track Kastel down. He'd had no success finding Angelo after the Prophet had disappeared at the eastern range. Not the slightest trace. But Kastel he might be able to track, whether Angelo wished it or not. And if he found Kastel, he would find the Prophet.

\* \* \*

The place without windows was astir. More than Lily had ever seen it. More than when the master had returned weeks and weeks ago after his long absence. Nothing so much to cause rampant gossip from the somber denizens of this place, but something to set them aflutter nonetheless. Even if she asked, no one would tell her, so she followed a group of acolytes down the stairs and through the corridors only to catch a glimpse of the master himself striding into a room. The acolytes all deferred to him, casting their gazes down. Lily could barely see past shoulders and torsos, but the master's shadow, the silent green-eyed man who always skulked at his heels, this time did so with a burden.

All she caught was an image of blue cloak, a quick gleam of armor. A limp hand that trailed blood and then the master's shadow was into the room and the door closed on all the curious. Lily shuddered. In all the time she had been here, no one else had been brought. No one that didn't worship the master's every word. No one that was not one of the silent acolytes that drifted like ghosts in these cold halls.

She moved away, like the others, not wanting to be caught prying into the master's business. But she was curious. Deeply curious at the anomaly that had been brought into the tedious pattern the place without windows had always followed.

The master sent for her eventually, and she came to his rooms warily with her instrument in hand. He smiled serenely at her, face aglow with pleasure. Play a song for me, he asked. A joyful song. And she did.

## Ten

He became aware by degrees. First of discomfort. Of a dull ache that seemed to bore through his side and into his back, of the throbbing of blood behind his eyes. The steady thump thump of his heartbeat that seemed to drive right into his brain with its deafening resonance, then of smaller pains that demanded less attention than the first. Rough sheets under his back, moist, cool air that touched his skin and a cavernous, silent weight that lurked over and around him; that his senses, on the verge of waking could not pierce.

He opened his eyes to darkness. It took a moment to realize he did not know where he was. No familiar place most certainly. He started, bewildered and pain lanced through his side. His shoulder ached dully. He drew an unsteady breath, clenched his fists and his teeth in efforts to drive the pain away and clear his head enough to heal it.

The magic came erratically, as though it were hesitant to respond to his will. He pushed the pain away. Healed the wounds in his flesh with greater effort than he could recall ever having exerted in similar tasks. His head still throbbed. He called a witchlight and it came at his bidding, showing a small stone room devoid of windows, boasting only the cot he lay upon and a rough stone alter with the symbol of the one god carved into its face.

He pushed off from the side of the cot, wincing. Mind recalling the pain he had washed away from his body even if it was physically gone. He was bereft of armor. Bereft of everything save trousers and linen under tunic and those were crusted with blood. He recalled the mountain. He recalled the echoing cracks of gunfire. *Gunfire!* He'd had pieces of lead from a technology of old lodged within him. Someone had taken them out. He



had certainly not done it in his healing. Those dead little pieces of ancient weaponry had stymied his attempts.

He took a breath and tried the door. He expected it locked. He expected to have to magic his way past it. But it opened easily, creaking on rusty hinges. He stood in the doorway, staring out at a dark stone passage. The ceiling was low, the walls close and thick. There was something about the stone of the place -- floor, ceiling, walls - - that was odd. Something that was muffling and ancient and foreboding. There was power in those stones. Dormant, subliminal power that was layered so thickly as to be impenetrable.

Wards, he thought. Wards on the walls for some purpose. Wards in the stone of this place. Wards so strong that it must have taken centuries to layer them. To build upon their effectiveness. He put fingers to the wall to try and determine their purpose, but they were silent and featureless in their rest. Only whatever they were meant to protect would trigger their energies.

He did not know which way to go. This place lent him no clues. Try as he might, he could sense nothing but stillness from within and without. Either that or the wards muffled his inquiry. There were steps leading up. Up was a good direction. He felt as if the weight of the world were resting above him. There was a hall at the end of the steps. A gathering place perhaps with tall ceiling and thick columns running along the sides of the wall. It was still oppressive and dark, despite the size. There were torches burning at the far end. What looked to be the nave of a chapel resided in the flickering shadow. A figure knelt before the altar, head bowed, hands clasped before him.

Kastel stared, needing the way out. Needing confirmation that this was not some fever dream. He took a step down the aisle and the kneeling figure shifted, turning his head to look over his shoulder.

“Oh, hello Kastel.” The Prophet smiled at him.

He didn't hesitate in mouthing the words of a spell. Summoned a force of energy that made the air waver and cast it towards the nave. It rebounded off a shield and crashed against the walls. And a strange thing happened. Instead of crumbling from the impact they seemed to absorb it. They shimmered and pulsed while the energies of Kastel's spell raced along the lines of mortar and stone, desperately looking for a path out and not finding it. The wards had come into play. They protected these walls against magic.

"Wicked, foul thing to desecrate a chapel dedicated to the one god." The Prophet clicked his tongue reproachfully, rising to his feet with an audible creaking of the knees.

"Mortal bodies just don't last as long as they ought." He remarked and Kastel blinked, caught off guard at the casual observation.

The Prophet opened his mouth and a blinding ball of white energy burst forth from between his lips, growing as it sped down the aisle towards Kastel. He threw up a hasty shield, which would have deflected it save for the fact that where shield touched floor, the ward ate at its fabric, dispersing the lower section of it. Energy got through, stabbing its fingers upwards and enveloping him, finding all the weak spots where the wounds had been and gouging newly healed flesh. He cried out and fought it off, breathless and staggering.

He tried to summon an elemental and felt it stirring at his request, but it hesitated, repelled by the wards that guarded this place. It wanted to come to his bidding, but could not convince itself to pass the wards. He cursed it for a sniveling coward and called forth an ice spell to crystallize the air surrounding the Prophet. The air wasn't warded and it was humid enough to give him all the fuel he needed to create a weapon.

Ice formed at the Prophet's feet. The man looked down with mild surprise as it raced up his body, encasing him in

a sheath of white ice. It thickened, layer upon layer until it was no longer recognizable as a man. Then the cracks began. A spider web network of them that started at its heart and worked their way out. Like the shattering of glass it began to chip away, littering the floor with shards. It exploded outwards in a final thrust of rebellion and Kastel had to put up a shield again to avoid being impaled by ice of his own making.

Angelo stood there, smiling benevolently. “Do you understand how irreverent this is? Can you grasp that concept, being what you are, an aberration spawned of an unholy coupling?”

“Shut up,” Kastel cried out the words of a spell and released it in a single breath. It consumed the Prophet, swirled around him, its excess energies absorbed by the wards on the walls. This time when it cleared, the Prophet had his back to the altar, his shoulders hunched. A little trickle of blood ran down the corner of his mouth. The bloodied lips turned up to regain the smile. Kastel wanted to scream. He wanted out of here.

“Don’t speak to me of irreverence, you murderer,” Kastel spat at him.

“Oh, you can’t begin to imagine.”

The Prophet summoned a spell. Kastel braced for a powerful strike and got the opposite. A corpse lay at his feet. He looked down in shock and took a hasty step backwards. Bloody and ravaged, as if it had been blown apart by some terrible spell. A woman’s body. Long, blood soaked hair tangled about a face that was no longer recognizable. But there was something about her that struck a chord. Something that made him catch his breath and choke on the bile that rose up his throat. He had seen this before. He had seen this ravaged body before. So long ago it was shrouded in the cobwebs of his memory, pushed away into a place where he might always treasure the guilt and yet not have to relive it day after day. He knew that body, because he had wrought the damage

himself. A hundred years ago, locked in a shrine where they had sent his own mother to kill him.

He put a hand to his mouth, stifling a cry. It wasn't real. He told himself that. He knew better than to even believe it for a second, but he couldn't look away all the same.

A high impact energy spell hit him full center. He didn't even notice it coming. It blew him back into the wall with enough force to shatter bone. He slid down, mostly conscious, more interested in searching the floor for that terrifying corpse than pinpointing Angelo's location. It was gone. Melted away like the illusion it had been.

Angelo knelt at his side and the tall, ominous figure of Sinakha loomed behind him. The Prophet held something in his hand. A thin, glass tube with a needle on the end. He plunged it into Kastel's shoulder. He hardly felt it through the shock of the spell.

"A little something to make this easier on all of us. Wizardbane, they call it now. It used to have another name. I find it rather useful. You realize now, who's the master of this place, don't you? I had to let you find out for yourself, otherwise you'd have tested my limits."

The prophet ran the back of his hand down Kastel's cheek. "You understand now, don't you?"

The world was beginning to go soft around the edges. He was finding it increasingly difficult to focus on what Angelo was saying. His concentration began to scatter. He wanted to summon the magic and blast Angelo away from him, but he couldn't remember the words and the magic swirled aimlessly about, unchecked and ungovernable with his wits so shredded.

"Its all right," the Prophet promised. "You soon will."

\* \* \*

It took three tries for Kheron's voice to get through the self-induced trance. Dante blinked, pulling back from a

mental search of the eather so intense it had his head swimming. It took a moment for his eyes to focus on her face. Her eyes were worried, brows drawn in her agitation.

“Anything?”

Slowly he shook his head, running fingers through his hair in weariness. Not a thing. He’d been searching the ethereal plane for what seemed hours on end for some tiny trace of a presence that should have been clear as day to him and come up stumped and empty handed. Nothing. No single trace to hint that Kastel was even alive. But he knew he was. He was too valuable a commodity to a man who stole magic and form to keep himself alive and in power.

It was a frightening thought -- Angelino with Kastel’s power combined with his own. Separately either one was a force to reckon with --- one did not wish to dwell on what might happen if Angelo did succeed. One did not wish to contemplate what would happen to Kastel’s soul if he did. The logistics of the Prophet’s pastime of body snatching were not perfectly clear to Dante. One assumed the original owners of those stolen bodies were not allowed due consideration from the thief. One assumed there was a great deal of discomfort, mental or physical or both, involved. He did not wish that on Kastel. He arduously wanted to circumvent it.

“We’re getting ready to move out,” Kheron said.

She looked tired. Her face was drawn. She held concern over Gerad who was still weak, but gaining ground swiftly. She held concern over Kastel, though she might be loath to admit it, the rivalry between them a thing that had always curbed any show of affection. But, though one might quarrel with a brother, one would not wish great harm upon him.

Kiro still had men out in the mountains. Kiro would keep men out until the storms blew them back to the safety of the lowlands. There might be men of Angelo’s

out there still, Dante did not contest that, but he was convinced that the Prophet himself was long gone. Let Kiro search if he liked. It soothed the man's feelings of helplessness to be doing something. Dante knew better than to waste his time freezing up in the mountains. He could conduct his own hunt better from the comforts of Sta-Veron. Where all that was his was under one roof and he could better protect them.

\* \* \*

They were chanting mantras against evil. He knew the words like they were written inside of his eyelids. He knew all the religious songs designed to protect man against the darkness. He never listened to them anymore -- ignored their presence in the world, but could not block out the monotonous singing of the dull-eyed acolytes who shifted like shadows through the halls of this monstrous place. A place warded from the inside and not the out. Warded to keep things in, but not to repel.

"You're contaminated," the Prophet had said, so close that he felt the man's hot breath on his face. "We can cleanse the body of the filth of evil, but the soul is another matter. Purify him so that he does not offend the eyes of the One God."

Sinakha had wrapped thick fingers about his arm and jerked him up. The wizardbane had him reeling so badly he couldn't stand without the hurtful grip. Concentrate. Try and gather scattered thoughts so he might cast a spell. But every time he thought he had a grip on his wits, they would spin out of control and he would find himself dully responding to the impetus of Sinakha's grip on his arm. Turn right. Turn left. Climb steps. Stop.

Time slipped away from him. He did not recall entering the room with the incense and the chanting acolytes and the walls adorned with symbols of diocese protection. Sinakha thrust him into their midst, hovering

a hands breadth behind as they circled him, shaking tiny bells to drive away demons and waving sticks of incense in the air. The smell made him nauseous. The room wavered around him. Without the support of Sinakha's hand, his knees threatened to give way.

He didn't want to kneel among them, while they chanted protections against evil aimed at him. But there was little help for it. One knee buckled and he went down, a hand on the floor, staring at the circling feet around him. Even with the wizardbane debilitating his wits, his pride still screamed protest at the situation.

They laid hands on him. Gentle enough not to alarm him. Just pulled him to his feet and drew him towards the back of the room where the air grew moist and warm. There was a baptismal pool there, under the symbol of the One God. It smelled of lavender and incense. He balked, realizing what they intended. Fingers pulled at his bloody tunic and he panicked, not caring what magic he summoned or whether he could control it in his present state of mind. He willed the power desperately and felt it stirring erratically and wildly in the eather around him. It howled with abandon, almost as if it were a living thing that sensed that the hand that had always controlled it was beyond that mastery now. He released it, no actual spell, the words of one wouldn't gather in his head, intending to blast the priests away from him. But it went astray, whirling like a dervish about the room, putting out torches and shattering scones of incense, rebounding off the warded walls. A priest not even near him got hit by the residue fringe of it and screamed as half his shoulder and arm were torn from his body. The others cringed, loath to hold on to him, afraid to let go.

Then Sinakha was upon him. Spinning him around and backhanding him with enough force to send him to the floor at the edge of the pool. Again and his senses threatened to depart entirely. There was no resistance in his limbs when Sinakha dragged him into the water and

plunged his head under the surface. Held him there until he was half drowned, sucking water into his lungs, then drew him up, coughing and choking on the water he'd swallowed.

Sinakha didn't say a word. Just drew him up and stared meaningfully into his eyes. A very clear warning. Then he was thrust back into the arms of the acolytes as the big man sloshed out of the pool. Everything turned gray about the edges. The world went away.

\* \* \*

And came back in the same room he'd woken up in the first time. His senses were no clearer than they had been when he'd passed out. So he lay there miserably trying to organize thoughts that willfully refused to be subjugated.

He was in clean, white linen clothing. Loose, draw-string trousers and beltless tunic. His hair was dry, which meant some time had passed. He slipped out of bed and lost balance, going to one knee at the edge of the cot. He leaned there a moment, head in his hands trying to gather his equilibrium. It was like he was perpetually at the edge of sleep, hazy and sluggish of mind and body. He made a little sound of frustration and pushed himself up. One, two, three deep breaths to gather focus.

He went towards the door and found it unlocked again. Unsettling that they didn't try and lock him in. It worried him more than such a trivial thing should have. Same hall outside. He knew what lay in the one direction, so he took the other. Somewhere there had to be a way out. A door, a window where the wards were not so dense. Long hall way with doors -- some locked and some opening into empty rooms, as bare as his own -- none with windows. There was an intersection. He chose to go forward, half leaning against the wall because it was easier to walk that way with that solidity to help his balance.



A slender figure shifted out of the shadows of one fork of the intersection. He caught the movement with the corner of his eye. Glanced back and it retreated back into the darkness. He could not be certain he'd even seen it, his own mind was so untrustworthy at the moment. It did not come back out, so it either never existed or had fled. He began to continue on.

"Wait," a timid voice echoed along the stone passage. He turned, pressing his shoulders against the wall, staring into the shadows. A girl half stepped out from them, using them to hide her face. "You don't want to go down there. It is not allowed."

He blinked at her slowly. Her face was hardly visible past a straight fall of dark hair. She kept her head lowered, as if in deference. He tried to shake the clutter from his mind, thinking that if it was not allowed, then perhaps it meant down this passage was a way out. He started to move forward.

"You'll get into trouble," she warned, sounding almost disappointed.

As if he were not already so deeply in it, it threatened to drown him.

"Is there a door?" he asked and his voice sounded strange in his own ears. He had to stop and listen to it to ascertain it was his own. "A way out?"

"There are no doors. No windows. Just walls," she replied. Lost, disconsolate voice. "But that way -- that way leads to below and the Master forbids any to go there."

There was the sound of footsteps, the tap tap of a cane on the stone. The girl gasped and shied back into the shadows. Kastel stood his ground. The Prophet strolled down the dark corridor, a carved staff with the symbol of the One God in his hand. He never faltered in his step, as if he were not at all surprised to see Kastel there.

"Awake again, I see. And treading where you should not."

Kastel glared, trying to gain enough composure not to make a fool of himself.

“You are insane if you think to keep me here.”

“You killed a man of mine last night. You don’t yet grasp your position here.”

“What do you hope to gain by this?” he hissed. Angelo merely smiled at him.

And something tried to crawl inside his head. Kastel’s eyes widened and reflexively he repelled it. It didn’t require concentration or reason, it was mere natural habit to expel intrusion into the recesses of his mind. He saw the Prophet’s frown of dissatisfaction, then a sharp stab of agony burned in his chest. He gasped, short of breath, clutching at the wall as the molten pain followed the pathways of his arteries. Fire burning through his veins. Incinerating him from the inside out. The end of the staff hit him between the shoulders, a solid thump that drove him to the floor.

“Don’t fight me,” Angelo said, standing over him, the foot of the staff by his head. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to drive off the hurt, but it was insistent and insidious in its crafting and he in no shape to latch onto it and drag it away from him. “You killed a righteous man. Don’t you think you deserve punishment? Don’t you think you should beg forgiveness of the God?”

If he’d had the breath, he would have cursed the Prophet. The staff smacked into him again, like a hammer striking his flesh. A rib cracked. He heard it snap. That mundane pain was nothing to the lava that cursed through his veins.

Crack. It glanced off his skull, tearing the skin behind his ear. Blood trickled down his cheek, running into his mouth. Behind the darkness of his lids he saw lightening quick flashes of another face twisted with rage, demanding penitence. An old man with a raised cane cursing him for being born.

“No,” he cried, and raised an arm to block another blow. The oaken staff bounced off his arm, making the limb numb with shock. Angelo laughed, catching his wrist and pulling him half way up by it, pushing him against the wall and whispering. “You know how to beg for absolution, don’t you? You have to try so much harder to gain *His* heed, being the spawn of a demon, than a righteous man would -- and sometimes he still won’t listen, will he?”

The pain wouldn’t stop. He didn’t know if it was blood or tears running down his face. He would have preferred to have just passed out and escaped it that way.

“You can stop it,” Angelo whispered, a fey, taunting voice that got past the thrumming white noise of pain in his head. “Just a few simple words.”

A few simple words? What had placated that other fanatic so long ago? What had he said over and over, time after time to make the old man stop railing and accusing him of things he never had been certain he’d been responsible for? Nothing for long, but if he sounded like he truly meant it he might stave off the brunt of the anger. Just a few words to stop the pain. Nothing so monumental as a surrender. He was not stupid enough to suffer needlessly out of misplaced pride.

“I’m sorry.”

A whisper. He barely heard it himself.

“Forgive me.”

“Oh, yes.” Angelo brushed his hair back, a caress almost. And the pain faded away, a tangible memory that left Kastel shaking. “You are so much more reasonable than *he* was.”

## Eleven

It was a dream he didn't want to be in. From the moment he looked down and saw his sandaled feet on the dusty dirt road outside the little village he wanted desperately out of it because dreams of the place he had been born always turned into nightmares. He couldn't stop his legs from carrying him forward down that road that ran alongside the river. The docks were behind him, the smell of fish strong in the air. The grass was green and tall along the shore and the trees on the other side dense and full of spring growth. The little fishing village was ahead. He could see the first of houses now and the outlying gardens tended by the women in the village.

He did not want to go into that village, but the dream seemed determined to push him there. A woman was on her knees weeding one of the gardens. She glanced up at his passing and narrowed her eyes, making a small sign against evil with her dirt-smeared hand. He looked at the ground beneath his sandals and passed her by. His feet were small and filthy. He could not recall where he'd been playing. Had he been playing? The edges of the dream fuzzed with reality.

There were people in the streets about their daily business. Faces that blurred before his eyes, half remembered. They all seemed so much taller than he. Some of them looked down at him in distaste. They scorned him. They whispered about him behind their hands and sometimes with not even that veil to hide their words. All the buildings were indistinct save two. The small house where he and his mother lived with grandfather and the larger church that sat at the end of the street.

His house lay not far from the church, Grandfather being a priest and living close to his calling. The cemetery lay between them. He could see all the

gravestones from his window. At nighttime he could sometimes imagine things moving among them. Shades of the dead. He had mentioned that fear once to Grandfather and the old man's eyes had bulged and he'd raved about second sight passed on by the hellspawn that had raped his mother.

At the time Kastel hadn't known exactly what he'd meant. At the time all he could do was cower under the old man's wraith. He'd had to say penance for a week after that, in efforts to wash away the evil. Grandfather never had been satisfied.

He was almost home. There was a covered basket in his hands that he hadn't realized was there. Fish from the docks. A rock hit him in the leg. He yelped and whirled about. One of the older town boys who always bullied him stood jeering at him, hands on hips.

"Bringing fish heads to the town whore?" the ruffian sneered. They always called mother names. She always pretended not to hear. It made Kastel so mad he almost dropped the basket. He wanted to pick up the rock and hurl it back, but the boy was bigger than he and had bested him before in a fight. Besides, grandfather would only blame him and he'd have to do penances.

"Don't call her that," he said tightly.

The bully laughed. "Make me stop. Bastard. Fatherless cur."

Kastel ground his teeth. They called him names all the time too, the children only echoing what they overheard their parents saying. He stiffened his back in helpless anger and turned to go down the path to his house -- and another of the bully boys stood blocking that path, grinning, a stick in his hand. On this long spring day they had nothing better to do than torment him. He didn't want to get into a fight. He didn't want to lose the fish.

He darted down the road past the cemetery and towards the church. The bullies ran after him, calling him names. He ran up the steps to the plain wooden doors. There

were two stained glass windows next to the doors, the pride and joy of Grandfather's congregation. They had come all the way from Ludas. The bullyboys pitched rocks at him and one of them crashed through the right hand panel. The boys froze in sudden horror at what they'd done, then scattered like rabbits.

Kastel stared at the widening crack in stupefaction. The doors were yanked open behind him. Grandfather stormed out, waving his cane like a weapon, thready beard waving in the breeze of his passage, small, black eyes alight with fury.

"What? You did this?!!"

"No!" Kastel protested in shock even as the old man snatched him by the ear and yanked him inside the shadow of the vestibule, throwing him down to his knees to better see the pieces of shattered glass that lay on the wooden floor. The basket of fish went tumbling.

"What demon spirit made you do this?" The old man cried, grabbing him up again by the collar, shaking him so hard his head snapped back and forth on his neck.

"But I didn't --"

"And you lie in a house of the gods to compound the crime?" Grandfather's hand snapped out and slapped him. "Hell spawn. Evil, evil hell spawn. Gods save us from your mischief."

"But it wasn't me." He was sobbing, lost and half convinced that Grandfather was right. That somehow it had been his fault. That he'd made those boys throw the stones.

Grandfather shoved him against the wall in a fury and the cane lashed his back. Retribution for something he hadn't even done. It hurt. It hurt so bad he shredded his lip and then he did something in reflexive urge to protect himself. He summoned an ice spirit. Spoke the words through the blood in his mouth and set it on the old man. It formed out of the air, a snarling ice beast that leapt onto the frail old priest and bowled him over, ripping his throat

out in a single tear, then it turned its glassy, white eyes back to him, stared for a moment and bounded away. Kastel pressed against the wall, biting his knuckle staring at the bloodied corpse. Another priest came out of the Abby, bent by Grandfather to see what wounds he had taken, then looked up at Kastel with hard, incriminating eyes.

“Look what you’ve done, boy.”

He didn’t know this priest and yet he did.

“I sorry,” Kastel sobbed. “I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

Grandfather opened his eyes and lifted his head to look at him, throat bloodied and raw. “I should have drowned you at birth. You don’t deserve to live. You’ll be the death of us all.”

“It’s time to take your penance,” the other priest said.

*No. No.* He came awake with a start, scrambled up and back against the wall while his mind tried to sort reality from dream. Dark room. Dank, moist air with the smell of age and mildew. He knew the room. Not an escape from the nightmare, merely a plunge into another all too real one.

A shadow moved against the wall by the door. The door was half open. At first he thought it might have been Angelo, but the furtive movements relayed that it wasn’t. The Prophet would never be so circumspect in his presence. He was too shaken from the dream to speak, so he just stared. The figure paused in its escape -- crouched for a moment by the door, then straightened and turned. It was the girl with the hair that hid her face. She stood with her hand on the door, then seemed to make a decision and took a step back into the cell.

“You can’t fight the master. It’s lunacy. Resist and you make it harder on yourself.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he whispered. His back hurt from the caning -- no, that had been the dream -- from Angelo’s staff, then.

“Don’t I?” she whispered back and was gone. He didn’t have the will to call her back. Didn’t have the excess mental energy to wonder who she was. He pulled his knees up, folding his arms around them and stretching his back to work out the kinks. His side ached terribly. He remembered the rib and tried a healing. But healing required concentration at the best of times and his was gone thanks to the wizardbane. How long it lasted he didn’t know. Angelo most certainly did, down to the minute. Angelo was a devil.

\* \* \*

They reached the snowy city after four days of travel. The castle was abuzz with the return until word got around -- spread by the weary guards who accompanied them -- of the losses they had taken, their lord among them. Then silence reigned. All the maids walked about ashen faced and quiet, the castle guard fumed in the barracks.

Sera was the only one who didn’t seem phased. Sera was firmly planted in her own little world of blind happiness. She smiled at them all when they came in out of the cold, refusing to acknowledge the dour news they carried. Refusing to see anything that contradicted her desperate illusion.

It hit Dante hard, seeing her thus, and he stared morosely into the fire while the rest of them discussed what had happened and what they might do about it. Gerad was still weak and shaky, but he wouldn’t go up to his bed, despite Kheron’s urging.

He didn’t know how to take that sudden concern. He couldn’t quite bring himself to meet her eyes after a confession he thought he was making on his dying breath.

Damned twice cursed blade and its predilection for keeping him alive when by all rights he should be dead. Kheron was having trouble meeting his glance which



made matters worse by far. Gerad had never been a man easily embarrassed but he wished at that moment to sink into the floor and escape. He should have gone up to bed, but there was danger and action that might not be wise brewing in Dante's eyes.

Dante had never been one to sit idly by when things needed doing. There was some hint of madness over the insults done him by the assaults on his friends. No one had ever dared to offend him so in the past. At least not and lived. No one had ever managed to hit him so hard and in such a personal nature. It was worse than any attack on his person. He could have overcome that sort of strike. He couldn't fight this because Angelo struck where he wasn't. Angelo did his damage and ran, leaving bloody taunts behind him. It was driving Dante madder than he already was.

When finally Dante's fulminating gaze regained some of its focus, he tore his eyes away from the fire and Sera's quiet humming and stalked towards the doors. Gerad sighed, figuring nothing good was afoot. Figuring that he owed Dante at least a moment's worth of level headed good sense. It would serve them all in the long run. He pushed his aching body out of the chair, pretending ignorance of Kheron's worried look, and followed Dante out the doors and into the moonlit courtyard. Not the quiet courtyard of weeks ago, but one even in night filled with supplies and accrements of war.

"Where are you going?"

Dante tossed a dark glare over his shoulder. "Don't start with me, Gerad. I'm in no mood."

"That I can see. You also have the look a man soon to fly the coop. Planning on taking off on your own to search Angelo down?"

"I can do it better than the lot of Kastel's men."

"Maybe. Probably won't do any good. Angelo's not sloppy. He hasn't gotten this far leaving loose ends or clues. He's also pulling your strings like a master

puppeteer. When did he figure out how to work you so good? When you were his prisoner in Alsansir?"

The pale eyes narrowed. "He has no power over me."

"Maybe. Maybe not. What if you go off in a fit looking for him and he attacks here? I don't think Kheron and I can take him. Think about it. He hurts Sera to draw us out. Separates us. Attacks us and draws you there and while we're all occupied he takes Kastel. Bam. Bam. Bam." Gerad hit his open palm with his fist. "He's got it all orchestrated. He's been controlling this game and we've all been playing to his tune. He wants you angry and not thinking rationally because that's the only way he can get to you."

Dante looked away, expelling a breath of frustration. The look of a man who knew a thing to be true, but still did not want to accept it on his face.

Gerad rubbed at his neck, wearily. "He's had a long time to figure out the best way to play people. He's been around as long as you, right? Only you never were good at the mind game. He seems to excel at it."

"Do you know how he's survived all these years?" Dante hissed. "He's a mortal man. He should have died centuries ago. He's a body thief, Gerad. He gains his magic by stealing it from others. What do you think he wanted me for? What do you think he took Kastel for? He told me he was going to do this. He *told* me! And I shrugged it off. Do you understand? Think about what happens if he breaks Kastel and gains his power?" He glared at Gerad.

Gerad thought about it and did not like the conclusions he drew.

"And you want me to just sit around here waiting for the spring thaw?"

"No." Quietly, calmly. "I want you to stop and reason. I want you to use your damned sorcery to track Kastel from here -- which is as good a place as any. It's a big damned continent, he could be anywhere. I want us all to

go into this thing on our terms, not his. I want you to wait till we've got a lead to go on. Kiro's combing the mountains. I'm sending my men south. Don't go running around like a chicken with its head cut off."

Dante glared, offended and in a state of mind to take offense badly.

Gerad held up his hands, begging silent pardon.

Dante swore under his breath, looked away, not happy, not wanting to listen to reason.

Likely as not to ignore words of wisdom and rush of anyway. Gerad swayed a little, weak from the hard travel, a little dizzy from the intensity of this talk, from the foreboding predictions Dante made. The wizard waved a hand at him, cursing under his breath.

"Go to bed, Gerad, before you fall down. I'm not picking you up again."

"I didn't ask you to. Thanks for doing it the first time, anyway."

"It wasn't the first."

"Probably won't be the last," Gerad muttered darkly.

"Go on. And stop looking like that. I'm not going. Satisfied?" Dante's eyes glittered beneath black lashes. He crossed his arms, looking torn and frustrated. Gerad thought it was only partly revenge that had him itching to find Angelo so bad. There existed a fear for Kastel that had nothing to do with Angelo pilfering his magic and using it against them.

\* \* \*

It took Kastel a good while to step foot outside his cell again. Hunger and thirst were persistent draws. The refusal to accept this warped and malignant imprisonment were more insistent lures. Even then he lost time -- just blanked out in the middle of a train of thought and came back to himself with the incoherent suspicion that he had

sat a long time just staring at the dark stones that made up the walls of the cell.

At least he didn't dream during those times. And if he did, he didn't recall the details. He couldn't shake the memory of the last one. It clung like smoke to his skin and try as he might, he couldn't rub it off. Just like the bruises that he couldn't heal, even though he sat with his eyes closed and tried his hardest to direct the currents of a healing magic. He just couldn't formulate the thought patterns it took to control it. Which made him think about Sera, who'd always been so good at healing. She had the touch of an angel. Which made him think about what the Prophet had done to her, reminding him of his own fault in the matter. Dante was angry at him. The Prophet had surely taken him to get at Dante, as if he mattered enough to make a difference. As if Dante wasn't angry enough not to give a damn.

Guilt. Guilt. Guilt. It always came down to guilt. He could not wash the guilt from his dreams. And Angelo was using it. *He knew* Angelo was using it and it didn't matter in the least, that knowledge, because he could not escape the persecution that he had always inflicted upon himself. Could not escape the fact that the only person who had ever really loved him had in the end died because of him, cursing his birth on her last breath.

If he sat there in the darkness thinking a moment longer, with the wizardbane creating endless loops in his memory, he would go crazy.

He left the cell again. This time more wary, standing against the wall outside for a long time trying to figure which way to go. Where had the girl gone? She was an enigma in this place. Not an acolyte. Not a guard, most certainly. She had warned him twice. He had ignored her twice. The advice of a mere girl meant nothing to the Winter King. But then he was far from that at the moment, and she seemed to know this foul place better than he.

He chose the path leading away from the temple. Turned at the intersection this time, deciding to take the advice on not venturing down the path that led to Below. Whatever that was. It sounded ominous enough to make him wish to avoid it. The halls were like a maze. There were stairs leading up and down. The place was monstrous. And not once did he see a single ray of light shining in from outside. In truth there seemed to be no windows. It chilled him -- to whom cold meant nothing -- to the bone, that cessation of natural light. It brought to mind the underground, cavernous place where Galgaga had rested, dormant in form, but insidiously active of mind.

He pulled his thoughts away from that humiliation. Yet one more thing to feel guilt about -- his weakness in that whole abominable affair.

He passed a pair of acolytes in the hall -- the first living souls he'd seen on this latest foray of exploration. They walked past him without doing more than surreptitiously casting glances his way. If they spoke to themselves once past, his hearing could not pick it up. He stared at their backs as they retreated. There was death in their eyes. Living, breathing death. Life without hope. Without meaning. There was nothing left for them to speak of. He leaned against the wall, a wave of despondency creeping over him. It was the place that drained the life from a body. The place and the whim of its twisted master. If there was a window it would have been better. But perhaps it had been designed that way apurpose.

\* \* \*

Lily watched him because he didn't belong here. Because no one else had ever been brought here after she came and she was curious. Because he was beautiful and his eyes were bruised and lost. But mostly she watched him because he spoke to her and no one else in this place

without windows had ever done that, save the master and the sound of *his* voice made her cringe inside.

It was easy to go unseen in this place, unless the master were expressly looking for you. Then he always knew where a body was. There were so many nooks and shadowed crannies, so many unused rooms to hide in so large a place that she could have avoided all the other living souls here for eternity in an endless game of hide and seek. But, what was the point? Why hide if she were already a slave?

But she did hide from him. For the same reason she watched him. Because he had spoken to her and she did not know how to deal with that after so long a time without it. She was desperate to know what manner of man the master held so much interest in. She was desperate to know whether he was merely another initiate of the place without windows, or if he were something more.

More she thought. Because the Master had never shown such a fervent interest in anything before, save his musings of vengeance. She wondered if this were an enemy. She hoped not, for she had seen what the Master did to his own people at small infractions. She would hate to see her beautiful, sad eyed angel destroyed by the Master. But she feared it would happen anyway. He rebelled. He had not yet learned that capitulation was the way to less pain and in the end, less humiliation. She had tried to tell him. Free men never understood. It took a lifetime of slavery to learn those harsh lessons.

She hid in an open doorway while two acolytes passed, waited for a moment then peeked out. He leaned against the wall, looking miserable. He looked down the hall in her direction, at the backs of the acolytes. They and all their ilk would be heading towards the dining hall for the second and last meal of the day. She ought to be heading there herself, her stomach rumbled insistently. Stragglers got nothing. She wondered of a sudden if he had eaten

anything since he was brought here. Two days. She had not seen him in the dining hall and food was not allowed outside it.

While she was debating, gathering her courage to perhaps step out into the dim light and speak to him -- steps echoed down the hall. Not the quiet, hesitant tread of the acolytes, but the confident step of a man who knew power. Not the Master's rhythm -- she knew that too well. It was the step of his Shadow. She slipped further into the darkness of the doorway, crouching down to make a smaller shape in the darkness. Sinakha passed her by without pause, intent on other prey.

\* \* \*

He came out of the shadows like a wolf on the hunt. The odd green of his eyes glowed within the flat-planed specter of his face. For a moment, he was a ghostly, militant apparition and Kastel stared with the drunken fascination of a dreamer only recently arrived in reality. It was not until Sinakha put hands on him that his mind cleared enough to realize it was nothing more than Angelo's captain and indignation fought its way past the wizardbane at the treatment.

"Take your hands from me," he hissed, trying to dislodge the fingers that bit into his arm, drawing him down the hall as if he were a truant child. And Sinakha merely ignored him, as if he were no more consequential than a child.

Humiliation upon humiliation upon humiliation. For so long he had lived with all respect afforded a warlord, a lord, a wizard of the highest echelon that the lack of it continually dumfounded him.

To struggle against the man's dogged determination was useless and only added to the shame, so he walked along, grinding his teeth until the sound of many voices raised in prayer alerted him that they were approaching

some gathering place. The smell of food drifted down the passage. It made him recall how long it had been since he'd eaten. Not since the morning Angelo had ambushed him. How long ago was that? He found he had no clear notion.

A chamber lit by torches along the walls. Long, low ceilinged, lined with two plain wooden tables, and at the end the ever present alter and symbol of Angelo's one god. Kettles of soup or stew sat at the end of each table, along with baskets of bread and urns of water. Row upon row of robed acolytes knelt on the stone floor before the alter, perhaps thirty or forty of them in total, reciting prayers of thanksgiving. Altered prayers. Not quite the words he remembered from childhood. But the prayers then had been to the brethren of gods the village worshipped, not merely to the one god.

The sonorous rhythm of the chant was monotonous and echoed in the chamber. The bowed heads, the clasped hands, the fervent, desperate tremor in dozens of voices to be heard by the deaf ears of their god. As if they thought it were from his hand indeed that the bread came from.

The Prophet sat at the end of one of the tables in the only high backed chair that graced the room. In his hands he turned the symbol he wore about his neck. He did not turn his head to look when Sinakha led Kastel into the room, though he was certain to have seen them from his vantage. He waited until his captain had marched Kastel over and they stood beside his chair before he deigned to look up. He smiled. Kastel hated his smile. Detested it with a passion that made his fingers curl.

"Will you break bread with us, Kastel?" Angelo asked, as if Kastel were a guest in this place. As if he had other choices available to him. He looked away, not answering, trying to ignore the hunger that the smells of food awakened. Sinakha's fingers tightened on his arm and he got a short, rough jerk to remind him of his manners.



“Ah, no need to be unreasonable,” Angelo purred. “No need to deny yourself out of mere pride.”

Pride. He had already assessed that pride was not worth a good many things. His first lesson in this horrid place.

“All right.” A whisper of agreement.

“Kneel then before the alter of the high god and give prayers of thanksgiving for His generosity.”

Kastel half laughed, then decided the suggestion was too wretched for even satiric humor and hissed instead. “Go to hell.”

The Prophet didn’t even move and something lashed across Kastel’s face. It felt like tail end of a cat of nine tails. He stifled a cry and lifted his free hand to touch his face. It felt as if half the flesh had been torn off, but when he fingered it, he was whole. The acolytes never stopped their prayers. The Prophet turned the symbol around and around in his fingers.

“If you will not give thanks to the god you will not eat. It is the way of the righteous.”

“But I’m not righteous, am I?” Kastel said softly.

“Oh, but I strive to correct that. I may fail. You may be beyond redemption. But one must try.” Angelo’s eyes gleamed. He waved a hand and Sinakha pushed Kastel towards the bench next to Angelo’s chair. Forced him down upon it when he stared at it stupidly. He sat there, staring at the rough tabletop, listening to the chanting, trying to block it out. It invaded his mind like a persistent tune. Over and over, deep voiced and repetitious.

*Forgive us our sins, oh divine holy father.*

*Sustain our unworthy bodies with the food from your vine.*

*Hear our pledge for eternal faithfulness and protect our souls from the reach of the dark pit.*

*Humbleness is our virtue.*

And on and on it went. All forty lines of the prayer of thanksgiving. Repeated and repeated. A higher voice

joined the chorus of male tones. Kastel glanced up under his lashes to see that the girl had slid into the hall and knelt at the back of the row of acolytes, to add her voice to the supplication.

They ceased after a while, but the echoes still rebounded within his head. Stew was served and they all silently took their places at the benches, bent over their meals as if it were the most interesting point of their existence. It probably was. Sinakha stood behind Kastel as though waiting for some infraction he might discipline. Someone brought the Prophet a glass of wine for him to sip while his flock ate their meals. One imagined he dined on better fare than what was served here. Not stew, bread or water was offered Kastel.

Trivial, trivial punishment. He refused to let anger rise, but he could not keep down the resentment. The frustration that he was reduced to this.

“Do you wonder why they haven’t come looking for you?” Angelo’s voice wormed its way into his mind. He blinked, not quite certain he heard it with his ears. “It’s been days. I must admit myself surprised not to have Dante tearing down my doorstep. I had prepared, you know -- but he’s not come. He’s usually more protective of those he considers his own. Did you have a falling out?”

Kastel tightened his lips, concentrating on the grains of the wood. Block out the voice even though it wormed its way into his thoughts. Ignore him, even though he spoke more truth than he could possibly know.

“I visited the Stormbringer before I came to you.” The Prophet informed him and he did look up at that, remembering the bursts of magic he had felt and chosen not to investigate. “She and the Nightwalker put up a good fight. I don’t honestly know if they managed to survive it. I do know that he went to her though. He was desperate to get to her. But wasn’t that always how it was between you? Didn’t he always forsake you for her?”

Kastel clenched his fists, trying to do anything to block out the insidious voice in his head. Recite the prayer in his mind. He knew the lines by heart. Grandfather had drilled them into him, one more obstacle against the darkness that tainted his soul. The first in a line of priests to defame him for evil, before he ever truly knew what evil was.

He couldn't get the insinuations out of his mind though. Not fully. Angelo spoke a portion of the truth. And if a portion were true -- how did he know what other parts were fabrications?

## Twelve

Dante rode the winds above Sta-Veron, frigid fingers of air tearing at his cloak and hair. The city was a maze of narrow streets and tiny, blocky buildings, the castle a larger block of gray far, far below. There were no clouds out today to obstruct his view of it, even from so high a vantage. The sun glinted down, an insubstantial heat against the winds of high.

He ignored it all. His mind was far flung, his senses stretched like spider's silk in a far sensing that over the past days had stretched the width and breadth of a continent. He had begun with a broad sweep and turned up nothing. No hint. No tiny scrape of awareness either of Kastel, who he should have been able to discern, or the biting familiar tang of the Prophet's power. Which meant there were wards. Wards were harder to get past when one's prey had the entirety of a continent to hide in.

It was grueling, exhausting work, searching mile by mile of physical world, while underneath he scrutinized the ethereal one as well. He found a hundred essences he knew, a hundred familiar spirits that had touched him at one point or another in time -- and all of them useless to him now.

*Damnit, Kastel, help me.* He roared into that plane that was below consciousness and above the realm of sleep. Eight days and nothing. This was not Sera, who was an infant in the ways of magic, or Gerad who's presence was weak in the planes where magic dwelt, or even Kheron, who was vastly powerful but sometimes left herself open in her passions. Kastel was damned well better than that. Kastel shouldn't have let this happen.

It was driving him mad. Eight days and he was so irritable and tired from the searching that the servants scurried from his path when they saw him coming. Gerad

and Kheron avoided him. The only person that was unfazed by his mood was Sera, who paid him not the slightest heed most of the time and babbled incoherent delusions when she did.

She hardly spoke anymore. She sat in her room for the most part, looking out the window or sewing by the fire. Keitlan would sit with her for hours on end. He was grateful for that loyalty. Someone needed to be with her, but he could not bring himself to watch her in her dementia for more than a short while. He missed her wit. He missed her scolding and her forthright opinions. He missed the optimism that she had always upheld, even in the worst situation. Though he might be loath to admit it, he wanted her opinion on what he should do. He wanted her advice because he was at his wits end himself. But mostly he just wanted the calming comfort of her smile and her laughter.

He touched down on the tower roof and stood there, eyes closed, trying to subdue the pounding behind his temples. It was not enough of a physical pain for a healing to banish. It was a strain on his magic that he had kept up almost non-stop for the last week. Not easy work, the delicate operation of finding a needle in a haystack.

Down the narrow tower stair. Past the servant's floor and down to the residential one. He hesitated in the hallway, bereft of objective. He was despondent and disillusioned and torn between the need to seek support and the desire to sulk in solitude. Kheron's room was down the hall, but she might not be there. She had taken to wondering the city in the company of her few remaining men. Gerad might be all right to talk strategy with, but he was damned useless when Dante was looking for a little comfort.

He drifted by Sera's door. Leaned against the frame and watched her sitting in the window seat, her knees pulled up to her chest, her eyes far away. She hummed to herself, so far away from him and the rest of the world

that she might as well not be here at all. The light graced her profile and the stray strands of reddish hair; her skin so porcelain pale it was doll-like. Her beauty made him ache. He dropped his gaze, rubbing a hand across his eyes.

“Dante, are you all right?” Soft voice. Limpid eyes watched him when he snapped his gaze up to look at her. There was concern there and confusion.

“No,” he admitted. “Are you?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” she went a little fuzzy eyed thinking about that. Everyone who dared council him told him not to confront her boldly with the truth. To let her reach it on her own. They warned that it might do more damage than good forcing the issue. He could not conceive how.

“What’s happened?” she asked. It was more concern than she’d had for anyone outside of her illusional baby for more than a week. He stepped into the room, encouraged by the question.

“Angelo’s got Kastel and I can’t find him. Don’t you remember hearing that?”

Angelo’s name made her expression go blank and she turned to stare out the window, blocking him out. Blocking everything out again. Dante drew a ragged breath, overwrought with the search, with the failure that ate at him like a cancer and the frustration of having all the things he loved bruised and destroyed.

“Look at me!” he roared at her.

She didn’t flinch. He stalked across the room, grasped her sleight shoulders and turned her roughly to face him. Her knees slid off the window seat and she sat there, balanced on the edge, eyes boring into his chest. He grabbed her chin, forcing her face up.

“It’s dead, Sera. The baby is dead. Accept it.” He slid his hand down to grasp her wrist and forced it between them, lying her hand upon her flat stomach. “Feel that? There’s nothing living there now.”

She turned her face away, her eyes growing just a little disturbed. She began humming again. A baby's lullaby. He thrust her away, trembling. What would it take to make her understand? Did he have to show her the grave and the frozen corpse?

Did he? He caught his breath, snared by the inspiration. Then grasping hold of it like a holy tenant. Cruel it might be, but gentle tolerance had gotten nowhere.

He caught her arm, pulling her along in his wake, snatching her cloak from the peg behind the door as he forced her from the room. Like a reluctant child she balked, but was nothing against his strength and determination. Down to the main hall and people stopped in their tasks to stare. Sera was whimpering, her eyes threatening tears. He didn't care. He kicked open the doors, got tired of fighting her outside on the steps, spun her around and in a deft motion wrapped her cloak about her, then swept her up, formed the words of a flight spell in his head and ascended into the sky. He heard the cries of people from below and ignored them. Focused on a southerly destination, one irrevocably etched into his memory. She stopped struggling. Just went limp in his arms, her face buried against his shoulder to shield it from the wind. He put up a buffer between them and the cold.

How many times had he traveled this route? With each trip only to find disaster. This time it would be different. He convinced himself of that. This time something good would come of it. She would be awakened to reality. She would mourn as was proper and return to being Sera.

Hours and she never stirred. It was almost dark when he reached the terrible little gully where he had found her. He sat her on the ground and she stood, wrapped in her cloak, shifting from foot to foot, either from cold or from disorientation. He cast the whole of the area in a blaring witchlight, looking for the marker Kastel's men had left on the little grave. He had not seen it himself, had not

returned to this spot since he had first left it, but he had been told him what Kastel's men had done.

There. A pile of stones over a small mound of earth. He grabbed Sera by the arm and pulled her over to it.

"Its here, Sera. Buried in the cold earth. Look."

He hissed a word and the stones and earth erupted, blown away. The dirt spewed aside, creating a hole. Past the frost line and the earth turned rich and dark and the pit grew. Nothing was revealed inside it. His breath came harder. He felt a little disorientation himself. A little bewilderment at this riddle that had presented itself. He called upon a strike of lightning and it struck the earth with enough force to make the ground tremble and send Sera off her feet. A pit yawned before him. A pit full of broken chunks of rock, of ice and snow, of shattered roots and veins of metal lying below the surface. But no bit of frozen flesh was there.

This was the spot. There was no other. He stalked around the gully desperately looking to see if there might be some other pile of carefully placed rocks that he had overlooked. Some other mound of freshly dug earth. He called lightning to blast a half dozen holes in the earth and none of them revealed what he wanted. Sera huddled in the midst of his destruction, silent observer. He collapsed on an overturned rock, stunned and only barely beginning to accept the notion that the infant corpse he'd had buried here was gone. That something had taken it. Not animals. The rocks would have been disturbed. What then? He pulled at his hair in frustration. He had come here to restore Sera to her senses and he was close to loosing his own.

A light touch on his shoulder. "It will be okay, Dante," she assured him. "When the baby's born, everything will be better. You'll see."

\* \* \*



Time passed. Day and night were interchangeable in the Place Without Windows. The light never changed. Always flickering and taunting, turning into shadow and hiding the true details of the place. Sleep was a torture more excruciating than the waking humiliation of captivity. The nightmare's more vivid within the recesses of his mind where they fed off all his subconscious dread. He only half remembered most of them, and they were more devastating for it. Lingered scrapes of horror/pain/guilt that he could not quite grasp the source of. But it stayed with him during the waking hours nonetheless and he sat in the shadows of his cell trying to dredge up the recollection so he might chase it away once and for all. But it never came.

The Prophet did. The Prophet hammered at him ruthlessly with ever-changing tactics. A mental assault that left him reeling and senseless; a fanatical sermon denouncing him for unclean and tainted, demanding retribution, demanding things Kastel refused to give until the sermon turned into punishing pain that he could not block out and then he gave in a little. And bit by bit -- as his mental defenses weakened from depravation and torment, and the self-destructive force of his own dreams -- he crumbled.

He tried to deflect the mental intrusion, but it was so hard with his brain clouded by wizardbane. Angelo was hideously good at mind games. It was as violent and intrusive as any physical rape and left Kastel as traumatized. It worsened as the Prophet discovered his weaknesses. And the nightmares began to bleed over into consciousness.

He began to think the Prophet was right. They hadn't come to get him, because they weren't looking. Dante was angry because he'd killed Sera's baby -- no, no, he hadn't -- Angelo had -- but he'd let her fall into the Prophet's hands. So Dante left him here to have his mind ripped to shreds -- just like he'd abandoned him to that

*other* darkness that had claimed him. But this was worse because the Prophet did not want to elevate him to power, he wanted to destroy him utterly. And he did it in the name of God. And though Kastel had always avoided priests and holy houses with a vengeance, the belief drilled into him as a child by Grandfather still lingered. There were gods -- they just turned their faces from the unworthy. They turned their faces from him because of what he was -- what he had been born of.

*Do you think you're worthy to grace the halls of heaven?* Grandfather said in the dream -- in reality so long ago.

*No.* Kastel replied, tremulous answer. He thought it was the one Grandfather expected. He knelt on the hard wood floor of the church, small and dirty because he'd been fighting with one of the boys. He couldn't recall what had started it. Blood ran from his nose. He'd gotten the worse of the fight, being smaller. Grandfather blamed him. Called him an instigator. Rapped him across the back of the legs with his cane until there were red welts and sat him down to beg the gods for forgiveness.

Tears ran down his face to mix with the blood, but he prayed, clasping his hands together so hard his nails bit into the backs of his hands.

*Your mother is to blame for this.* Grandfather said acidly. *She brought this upon us. Your sins are hers to bear.*

He prayed all the more fervently, begging the gods that no blame of his be placed upon Mother. Mother loved him. She was the only one who cared what became of him. She was the only one who protected him against the worst of Grandfather's prosecutions. He wished she'd come now, gracing the church with her gentle presence. Bringing calm and forgiveness in the warm depths of her eyes. Smoothing things over with Grandfather as only she could. She would wipe the blood off his lip. She would hug him and make it better. She would tell him he

did not endanger her immortal soul with his mere existence. But what if he did? What if every sin he committed condemned her to a deeper hell?

*Please, please God. Forgive me my trespass. Forgive the sins of my flesh. Forgive the sins of my mind.*

*The god will never turn his face towards the spawn of a demon.* The other priest had come to join Grandfather on the podium behind the naive, the both of them looking down at Kastel disapprovingly. *The only thing that will save her soul, is his death.*

He shuddered, curled up against the wall and mouthed the words of the prayer over and over. The taste of salt was on his lips. Tears? Blood? From the fight? He could only barely recall the fight. He huddled in darkness, wondering where the light had gone. Where grandfather was. The church had been replaced by dank darkness and a tiny square cell with a rough stone alter against the far wall. He could not recall how he had gotten there. The words of the priest echoed in his mind. He did not wish to jeopardize Mother's soul. He fervently did not wish to endanger her in any way. But he didn't want to die. But, Grandfather said everything he did was a sin because of what he was. Because of what had spawned him. He didn't know how to stop being what he was.

He sobbed miserably and crawled over to the alter, knelt before it and prayed for forgiveness.

"Why can't you do that for the Master? Then he'll let you eat." The voice came out of the darkness at him. He gasped, choked back a cry and cringed back against the wall. A figure shifted in the shadows by the door. A girl's soft voice. She had been sitting there, watching him. He didn't know her.

He did know her.

He blinked, confused. His vision blurred and his balance did. He clutched at the alter and rested his head against its cold stone surface.

Reality smashed into him like a fist. On his knees before the altar, the words of a prayer on his lips, the fear of a child a clinging mist in his mind. He cried out in dismay at what he was doing -- of what his mind had thrust upon him. He glared at the shadow of the girl for witnessing it. He could not form words to chase her away.

"What will it hurt?" she asked. "Capitulate. Bend knee and give thanks before his god and he'll relent. You'll starve otherwise."

"I'll die first," he murmured, not so certain that was true anymore. From the small huff of air she released, he didn't think she thought so either.

"You'll suffer," she whispered. "Why are a few meaningless words so important? If you don't bend, you'll break."

"Why do you care? Who are you?"

She shook her head. Her hand moved slightly and caught at the faint light. There was a black tattoo there. A slave mark. He stared at it. He hadn't known what she was. He hadn't thought a slave. He couldn't imagine why the Prophet would need to buy a person, when he could take whatever he wanted. She self-consciously moved the hand back into shadow, and shifted as if to rise and flee.

"Who are you?" he repeated, the need to know suddenly overpowering the humiliation and the terror of the dream/reality.

"No one." She whispered and slipped out the door and down the hall. He couldn't find the strength to move or call after her.

\* \* \*

"You're avoiding me."

Gerad held up a hand and the nightwalker he was sparring with stepped back, unsheathed sword lowered.

They stood in the practice yard, stripped down to nothing more than shirts and trousers and soft boots in the heat of exertion. One didn't notice the cold until one stopped. And even then, with Kheron standing outside the fence, the warmth of embarrassment flooded up to chase away the chill of sweat drenched skin.

Gerad wiped a hand across his brow. Nodded once to the nightwalker that the practice was over and sheathed his practice sword. The nightwalker walked away and Gerad stood in the middle of the muddy field trying to think up a suitable excuse.

"We've all been busy. I've been trying to get back into shape. Almost dying takes a lot out of a man."

She pondered that, tilting her head, resting her hand on the top rail of the fence.

"No," she finally said. "You've been avoiding me. Ever since we came back from the mountains."

He looked away and stubbornly insisted. "I've been practicing."

"You're as good as you're going to get, Gerad."

He looked up at her sharply at that. "Not good enough."

"Ah. But only because you were thinking more of me than of yourself. Foolish."

"I suppose so." He started walking towards the gate.

"Do you want to spar with me?"

The question stopped him in his tracks. He looked over his shoulder at her. There was nothing but serious inquiry in her eyes.

"All right." Slowly. Carefully.

She walked around the fence to the shed where the practice weapons were kept. Chose a blade and entered the ring. They stood facing each other and she raised her weapon first. He drew his. Not the Great Sword. He only fought for real with that.

She struck at him, a quick calculated feint to test the waters. She was adept at the blade -- she ought to be,

having studied it for over twice his lifetime. But she was a sorceress before a swordswoman and he was the nightwalker master. He met the thrust and deflected it, warily, letting her circle him, letting her exert her effort moving around him, while he waited for her next move. Feint to the left. He blocked it. Bam, bam, bam. A series of blows trying to get him off balance. His balance was unshakable.

“How long have you loved me?”

He faltered and she came under his guard, nicked the underside of his arm with the business end of the blade. He transferred the sword the other hand, shaking the sting out of his arm.

“Does it matter?” He felt gawky of a sudden. And lumbering and uncouth. A plain, scar-faced man compared to what she had spent her whole life devoted to. He didn’t know why she was tormenting him with it. Curiosity. Some perversity she had picked up from Dante. She had picked up enough other bad habits from him.

“Yes,” she answered him simply, earnestly, dropping the tip of her blade. “I think it does.”

They stood in the mud of the practice field, with drawn weapons held at ready, as if it were still a sparring match. He stared at her. Her fine brows drawn, her skin showing the slight sheen of sweat.

“Since the first day I saw you don armor and ride out to meet battle.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Why then?”

“Because at first I thought you were one of his toys. A concubine. A plaything with no will of your own and you surprised me. You turned out to be a woman of courage and power -- and compassion.”

She laughed outright. “Compassion. You saw that in me back then? I thought it was well hid myself.”

He didn't know if she were mocking him or herself. He walked past her towards the gate, finished with the match. She followed.

"Why would you love me, Gerad?" she demanded, a desperate note in her voice.

"You already asked me that?"

"I don't understand," she cried. "You say you love me, yet you ask nothing of me. You've never asked anything of me."

"I don't want anything of you," he said putting the blade in its slot, not turning to look at her. She stood behind him silently and when he did turn to look, there was hurt in her eyes. She had taken it the wrong way.

"I didn't mean it like that. I do --" he faltered. That wasn't right either. He took a breath and said rationally, calmly. "I need your friendship, Kheron. I need that more than anything else. The rest -- anything not given freely is no gift at all."

Philosophy. He hated himself for attempting it. But she stared for a moment, then nodded, handed him her blade and walked away from him.

It started to rain. Not snow, it was not quite cold enough for that, but a steady, gray drizzle that pitted the snow covering the yard and made the icicles start to drip puddles. A sign, perhaps, that spring thaw was on its way.

## Thirteen

Gerad put Kheron's practice sword beside his own on the rack, swearing to himself at his own blundering ineloquence. He grabbed the Great Sword leaning against the interior wall of the shed and strapped it to his back, never far from it when he did not know what the future might bring. He stalked out into the courtyard to see where she had gone. She was half way to the castle doors. There were too many people loitering about for him to call for her to wait. Even if he'd had the courage to do so.

A cry came from the gates. The watch guard at the tower was gesturing down excitedly for the gates men to open the gates. Kheron paused on the steps. Gerad took a step that way, wary of what was causing such furor. The gates swung open and riders thundered in. A great cluster of horses and men. He caught of glimpse of Kiro and a moment of hope flared up. Had they found something? There were riders among them that were not uniformed Sta-Veron militia. There were the robes of priests among them. Gods, had they ferreted out Angelo's men?

He pushed forward through the press of bodies trying to get close to the incoming party. Trying to see who the prisoners were. There was an old woman huddled on the saddle before one of the guards, her wrinkled face twisted in fear. A Sword Maiden in tunic and symbol of the Goddess. Two priests. A young one and -- *Gods*. Gerad swore soundly, shoving forward to grab hold of the bridle of the high priest, Rab-Ker's horse.

He glared up at the priest, who's hands were bound to the saddle as were those of his escort. He had a cut -- not a new one by the crusted blood -- on his temple. A bruise under one eye. He stared down at Gerad with decisive



brown eyes, not flinching a bit when one of the guards cried out that they'd captured men of the enemy.

"What the hell are you doing here, old man?" Gerad demanded, and slapped a man away that tried to pull Rab-Ker from the saddle as his men were being dragged from theirs. Gerad slipped a blade from his belt and cut the ropes binding the priest and the man climbed stiffly down on his own and stood before Gerad rubbing his wrists.

"I've come to find my daughter."

"Your daughter?" Gerad had to laugh at that. "You're a little late, don't you think? Should have entertained concern a long while back."

"I am not asking for your approval, Master of the Divhar."

"Whose then?" Kheron came up behind Gerad, a deadlier presence by far.

"I've come to find my daughter and to speak with Dante Epherian."

Gerad laughed. Kiro had come up, warily looking between them. "You know this man?" he asked. "Are his claims true?"

"That he's Sera's father? Yes," Gerad admitted. "As to what else he claims -- that remains to be seen. Don't trust them just yet."

Kiro nodded. He signaled to his men and the younger priest and the sword maiden were hustled towards the castle. The old woman escorted at a more sedate pace by a guardsman who seemed as ready to steady her step as prevent her escape. Gerad lifted a brow at Kiro and the captain shrugged.

"A woman that old, to have survived the journey over the mountains -- such endurance is respected in the north."

"Who is she?"

"She was with them."

Gerad swept a hand towards the castle, indicating Rab-Ker should proceed him. The priest lifted his head

resolutely and started walking. Then hesitated in his stride.

Dante stood in the door way, a look of cold outrage on his face.

“Shit,” Gerad muttered, stepping forward and wrapping his fingers about the priest’s arm.

“Just keep walking,” he suggested. “And pray to your gods that he’s in a better mood than he has been the last few days.”

“I doubt it,” Kheron said softly from behind him. And on that, they were in complete agreement.

\* \* \*

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing coming here?” Dante had Rab-Ker by the front of his robes, half dragging the priest off his feet. The other priest made little sounds of protest in the hands of two guards. The sword maiden stood rigid with a blade at her throat. Dante wanted to blast Rab-Ker so badly the heat simmered in the air around them.

How dare the old bastard come here? How dare he bring his holier than thou self anywhere near Dante after what he had participated in. He had stood with the rest of those self-righteous pricks in Alsansir and condemned him at the word of the Prophet and then piled sin upon sin and promised Sera to the monster.

“What the fuck made you think I wouldn’t erase you from the face of the earth?”

“I came to see Sera.” Rab-Ker did not struggle against the grip. “I came to find my daughter.”

“Well you can’t see her,” Dante snarled. “She doesn’t want to see you. You gave up any claim to her when you promised her to *Him!*”

“I didn’t know.” Rab-Ker’s voice broke just a little. “I didn’t know then, what I do now.”

“You can die with the knowledge then.”

The whole of the hall was hushed in fearful silence. They were all blurred faces to Dante in his fury. All he could see was Rab-Ker, who had stymied him time after time. Manipulated him. Betrayed him. Betrayed Sera.

"This is her father? This is the lady's father?" A voice from the outside reached him. The housekeeper had started forward and been caught by Kheron's hand. The woman's eyes were round with concern. "Maybe he can help her, my lord."

He did not want to think that Rab-Ker might be able to, while he himself had not.

"Help her?" The Priest repeated the words. "By the goddess, what is wrong with Sera?"

Dante glared at Keitlan. At the desperately hopeful look in the woman's eyes. At the frozen faces scattered about the great hall.

"Damn you," he hissed and thrust the priest away from him so hard the man stumbled and went down, catching his fall on a hand and a hip. Not a weak man, Rab-Ker. Or an easily intimidated one. He rose, straightening his robes and matched Dante's glare.

"Where is Sera? What's happened to her?"

Dante drew a breath in disgust and whirled, stabbing a finger at Keitlan, who backed up just a little at his damning stare. "You seem to think he'll help. You tell him."

He stalked past her, brushing by Gerad and Kheron, who parted to make room for him to go. To flee. To retreat. He seethed at what he had been reduced to. Afraid to hear the words recited -- afraid to see the horror on the face of someone else who loved her. Afraid most of all that it wouldn't make a bit of difference when it came right down to it.

But he slunk back anyway, out of desperate curiosity, when Keitlan and Gerad had taken the priest to Sera's room. Stood in the doorway while Gerad sat by the fire with his daughter, talking softly, hold her hands. She

seemed to know him. She smiled at him and spoke about the baby and trivial things like the warming weather and the tapestries she had purchased for the walls and how nice everyone was to her here. She wouldn't acknowledge that her home had ever been anywhere else. There were certain names her eyes went blank at the mention of.

The Great Priest left after a long while, meeting Dante's eyes warily as he passed. Keitlan was in the hallway. Gerad leaned against the wall further down, his head down as if he were dozing.

"I had begun to suspect --" Rab-Ker said in a low, trembling voice. "- - That he was not all that he claimed -- but never that he could do *this*. May the goddess forgive me, but if I could kill him with my own hands, I would."

"That pleasure will be mine," Dante growled.

The priest sighed, cast one look over his shoulder at Sera, then said. "Is there somewhere we might talk -- peacefully?"

"It depends on what you have to say. And at whose behest you came."

"I came of my own accord -- but unofficially I carry other news."

Dante waved a hand carelessly. "Down in the hall then. But be warned, my patience is worn thin and I'm not in the mood for your holier than thou assumptions. I'd just as soon see you burn as listen to your worthless opinions."

"You won't receive any. Not today."

Gerad pushed off from the wall and proceeded them down the hall. The tables before the hearth accommodated them, and Rab-Ker's priest and guard, Kiro and a few of his men, Kheron and the curious old woman who had come with the priest's party. Dante had hardly looked at her, but as he diffidently took a seat at the head of the table she caught his attention. Her small, sunken black eyes were fixed on him intently. The

distinctive wrinkles of her face and the sunken cant of her cheeks were familiar. He leaned forward, amazed to discover the old hedge witch from Thrax's compound at the edge of the Great forest.

"You? What are you doing here?"

"You remember me do you?" she cackled softly. "I would have thought one such as I to be below your notice, my lord."

He lifted a brow.

"The charm wore off. Thrax figured out what had been done and who had made it. He was less than pleased. I had resigned myself to being burned at the stake when this generous priest and his people happened by and saved me from that fate. It seemed we had an acquaintance or two in common."

"Oh well, it was a good charm while it lasted. What's your name, old woman?"

"Ayntha"

He nodded, accepting it and her. "You did me a favor, I'll return it and welcome you in this hall."

She inclined her head, grateful, then infringed on his generosity by commenting,

"If I might be so bold, great lord, this priest is a good man and not here as your enemy."

Dante's lips tightened. He waved her to silence and she humbly bowed her head in regard of the command.

"So what do you have to say for yourself, Rab-Ker? Any excuses for what you did?"

"Nothing I did was conceived with anything but the good of Sera and my people at heart. Like everyone else I believed the Prophet was the man he claimed to be. I believed the god spoke through him."

"Gullible fool. *You* at least should have known better. You were ready to give Sera to him against her will. You knew she didn't want it."

"She was beyond rational at the time. I believed she needed guidance that I could not give her. The Prophet offered his suit. It seemed reasonable."

"He's a mind witch, old man. He can make you think slitting your own throat is reasonable if that's what he wants."

"I -- recognize that now. A priest of his -- a man who used to worship the goddess, confessed a guilt to me. He confessed that a messenger of my daughter's sent to find nightwalker master Gerad -- was intercepted by the Prophet's men. That the Prophet himself -- killed him. I took this information to the king, but the rally and cry for the Prophet's safe return is so strong that all of Alsansir -- indeed all of the southern cities are in tumult. If we denounce him now the infrastructure of the whole church of the One God will crumble. The south may very well be reduced to civil war."

"So Teo is going to sit there and do nothing?" Dante snapped, disgusted. "Miserably little coward."

"What can he do? There are only hints that the Prophet is darker of nature than he led us to believe. Nothing blatant. Nothing to make the people understand that they've been led astray. Anything he's done could conceivably be explained away as strident means of opposing *you* -- who have evidenced repeatedly that you are a threat to the peace of the people of the south. Politically he is at an impasse until more evidence against the prophet can be found."

"Politics! My politics on the matter are find Angelo and blow him off the face of the earth. I could care less what the sniveling multitude of the south think."

"Which is why you never wanted to be king -- just conqueror. You couldn't have handled the responsibility of ruling a people. Too boring," Gerad noted quietly. "But, he's got a point. Somebody's got to think about keeping the south together."

Dante glared at the nightwalker master.

“Teo did not send me here,” Rab-Ker said. “But unofficially I bring with me his inquiry as to the standing of the Southern Alliance’s relationship with the North.”

“How the hell should I know?” Dante snarled. “I don’t rule the North. Kastel does -- but oh, the Prophet who you’re all pussyfooting around denouncing has him holed away somewhere. So I guess the south’s standing with the North is up in the air. Now, the South’s standing with *me* is damned unstable -- just for your information. Next time I see Teo I’m going to do something violent and probably lethal. Any more questions about political relationships?”

Rab-Ker’s countenance zeroed out blankly. A weary priest’s expression of extreme patience in the face of illogical and highly flammable adversity.

Carefully, slowly he said. “We have taken a demon into our midst. A worse evil than you ever were, because we accepted him with all of our hearts and gave him our souls for the keeping. That is not an easy mistake to accept. Not for kings or common men -- or priests. There are those who will not accept it at all. What we face may be a holy war. Goddess help me, but I would gladly give my life to avoid such an atrocity. But if it cannot be avoided, then support from the north -- from the lands who are not embroiled in the religion of the One God -- may well be what keeps the south from toppling into chaos.”

“Let it topple,” Dante hissed. “I’m done with it.”

“No,” Kheron’s soft voice trailed his last word like an echo. “If it comes to that -- to avoid such bloodshed again -- I will lend my support to stop it. There are too many orphans already.”

“I too,” Gerad said.

Dante stared at the both of them sullenly. Outnumbered by those closest to him. All he needed was Sera to come downstairs and declare him a stubborn fool.

“I don’t care. I don’t care what you do, as long as no one stands between me and Angelo. They can make a martyr out of him for all I care. Call him Saint Angelo the tragically misunderstood. But I will take out you, Rab-Ker and Teo and every religious zealot in the south that stands between me and the Prophet if I have to.”

\* \* \*

They walked down the dirt road to the church on holy day, he and mother, she holding his hand in hers. She had on her best dress, the one she wore to church or village festivities. She looked so beautiful. The village women were jealous of her. Kastel understood that, even with a child’s naive perception. They envied her beauty and her grace and the fact that she was the daughter of the village’s religious leader. So they talked about her behind her back. They ostracized her from their social circles and never let her forget her sin. All because of him. Grandfather and that other priest had told him that. Made him understand that damning fact. To have shared her body with a demon was one thing but to have carried its seed and birthed it’s child was another. She was forever blackened.

They pointed at her -- at them, when they entered the church and walked down the aisle to take a seat on the first pew. Grandfather always insisted they sit in front on holy day, where he could see them, where the congregation could see that his sinner daughter and her unholy get were actively attempting at redemption.

He didn’t want to come today. He was terrified to come today, though there was no avoiding it. He didn’t know why. It was no different than any other holy day. Grandfather would sermonize and preach and condemn all the sins of the physical flesh and the people would nod and chant the appropriate prayers to cleanse their souls of the week’s transgressions and that would be that. Except



that the prayers never seemed to be enough for Kastel. Grandfather said they would never be enough. And the new priest, the one with the terrifying eyes seconded this opinion. It was because of the new priest he was afraid to come to holy day. He was afraid Grandfather would let him preach and that the man would single Kastel out of the crowd and denounce him personally.

*The only way to save her soul is his death.* Those words would not leave his head. Those words beat a tempo in the back of his mind. He didn't want to die. But he didn't want to hurt mother either. He needed someone to tell him what to do, but there was no one other than mother than did not despise him.

"I love you Kastel," Mother bent over to whisper against his ear. He looked up at her in surprise that she should speak during the sermon to mention it. "I'm the only one who'll ever love you. All the rest of them just want to use you, sweetling. But they don't love you like I do."

He stared, wide eyed. Grandfather's words blared in the background. The voice of the congregation was a chorus of well worn prayers.

"But you need to be good. You need to be very good." The congregation echoed her words. Grandfather did. He blinked, disoriented. "You've got to strive towards forgiveness to help lesson the stain on my soul. To wash away the sin. I don't want to die and burn in hell because of you, my love."

Tears welled up in her eyes. She reached out her arms and pulled him close and all he could do was hang limply in her grasp, traumatized by her words. Someone pulled him out of her arms and thrust him to his knees at the foot of the alter. The other priest stood over him, demanding he beg the god for absolution. He could hear mother crying behind him. His throat closed up and he couldn't utter the words. The priest hit him. A back handed slap

that knocked him over onto the wood floor. His head cracked against it.

Stone floor. Not wood. His vision wavered. The dream clouded with reality. The priest was still there, hovering over him. There was a great altar, but the church was wrong. There were no faithful congregation. No grandfather. No mother. The pews behind him were empty. Tears gathered on his lashes and he blinked them away, furious and devastated at once. He could not remember coming here, to this dark and oppressing temple in the Place Without Windows. He could not remember falling asleep to dream or when he had not been asleep or awake for that matter. It blurred together so seamlessly he thought he might have lost his mind entirely. Only the anger, despair, hurt that the Prophet had dragged his mother into his dreams -- that she denounced him in them for the destruction of her soul made him come out of the daze.

He swung around, glaring. "You beast! Leave her out of it."

Angelo stood impassively. "Beast? Am I only half a human?"

"You're not even that," he cried. He could not stop shaking. He could not stop the images in his head.

"Submit to the mercy of the High God. Beg for his forgiveness so that your wretched soul might be salvaged."

"No." Kastel shook his head desperately. "The gods have no mercy. They have no interest. Its only men like you who use their name to control the naive."

Angelo kicked him hard enough to knock his hands out from under him and he curled to protect himself from the further blows. Despite his spinning head he tried to call up power. Any power. He didn't care what responded or what it did as long as it interceded in this humiliation. Something did come. But it was like throwing darts blindfolded and drunk with no idea where the target was.

A crack of energy. The Prophet cried out, more in surprise than hurt and held up his arm as something snaked across the room, recoiled off a warded wall and hit the great symbol of the High God that rested atop the altar. That was apparently not warded. It cracked down the middle, bits and chunks of it crumbling to fall on the podium below. Angelo cried out in rage and the next blow that hit him was arcane. A giant hand might have picked him up and tossed him like a rag doll across the room. He hit a column and rebounded, slumped to the floor bonelessly, only half aware of Angelo's shrieks of incrimination.

It hurt. His body cried out in protest of the treatment and his mind half drifted to that place where mother and grandfather stood in the church. Someone yanked him up. Not Angelo. Bigger, stronger hands. Sinakha registered in his vision. Harsh, impassive face, even in the presence of his master's wraith.

"How dare you!! How dare you!!" Angelo was screaming, all of his serenity and his superior contempt turned to frothing rage. "No forgiveness for this. None!!" he cried.

Sinakha slammed him face forward against a column. Grabbed one wrist then went around and caught the other one and held him pressed there from the other side with an unshakable grip.

Then Angelo lashed him with something from behind. It cut through shirt and skin with a stinging agony that traveled the length of his body. It hit again and he threw his head back, coming out of the stupor hitting the column had thrown him into. He couldn't see what it was the Prophet wielded. He wasn't certain he wanted to. It burned like fire and stung like ice and all the while Angelo was screeching words like *Demonspawn* and *devil* and *wretched malefactor*. *Sinner. Sinner. Sinner.*

He fought against Sinakha's strength frantically, writhing to escape the torment. He couldn't breathe from

it. It stole the air from his lungs and filled them with fire. He didn't know where he got the breath to scream. But he did. Incoherently, he begged for it to stop. And that seemed to do nothing but drive Angelo to further fits of violence. It wasn't until he was whimpering, almost mindless from it, that the lash -- the whip -- whatever it was, evaporated into thin air out of Angelo's hand and the Prophet came up behind him, caught a handful of hair and pulled his head back so far he thought his neck would snap. He had no strength to fight against it. Angelo could break his neck right now if he wanted and it would be a welcome release.

The Prophet's breath was hot against his cheek, the man's body pressing into the fire the whipping had made of Kastel's back.

"You shouldn't have done that. You'll be punished for that."

Hadn't he been? The Prophet was trembling. The fanatical rage was still in his eyes, but there was something else. A thrill over the power, the pain, the supplication for mercy that had been ignored -- that bordered on lust. As if the smell of fear excited him.

Kastel made a sound of dismay and shut his eyes, wanting to find a hole somewhere and crawl into it. Even the nightmares seemed preferable to this.

Angelo let go of him. Sinakha released his wrists and he had no stamina to support his own weight. He slid down the column, slumping to his side on the floor. Darkness and light swam before his vision. He wanted desperately to go to the darkness. His back pulsed with agony. It felt as if every inch of skin had been stripped off. His shirt was wet, he could feel the blood seeping around his ribs.

"Shall we start again?" The Prophet said, in control of his emotions once more. His face back to placid serenity.

Kastel blinked up at him dazedly. Angelo strode back towards the alter. Sinakha bent down, grabbed his arm

and dragged him along in his wake. Blood smeared the floor behind him. He cried out in pain, grayed out from it only to find himself in a heap before the alter when he came back to his senses.

“Recite the invocation of forgiveness. You know the words. *He* may not heed you the first time, but you can appeal again and again and maybe, eventually, you might be heard.”

\* \* \*

He wouldn't come out of it. Lily stood uncertainly, her fingers on the edge of the thick door and wondered what she ought to do. She was risking everything coming here. Having anything to do with the Master's new obsession would be the death of her if he found out. But he had turned into almost an obsession with her as well. He spoke to her. He looked at her as if she were not an object, even though she knew he had seen the slave mark on her hand. He wanted to know who she was. No one had ever cared before. She wouldn't tell him, because she was ashamed to admit that she didn't know if Lily was her real name. It was the one her first master had called her, but she seemed to recall something else. Something plainer, more fitting for the daughter of starving peasants.

She knew his name. She had heard the master say it. She whispered it to herself in the shadows. Kastel. He was so, so much better than she was. She knew that. Even though he was as much a prisoner here as she was, he was something to reckon with in the world outside, because no ordinary man would hold the master's attention so fully. An ordinary man would not have fought against the master's wishes. Not for long at any rate.

But something was wrong now. Something was broken. There was the dark stain of blood over his clothing. He lay half on his side, his head tucked up

beneath one arm -- silent and unmoving. Barely breathing. He made no response when she called out. So she hesitantly approached and touched his shoulder. She felt as if she were overstepping her bounds with even that small contact. But nothing. She saw his back through the shreds of the shirt and made a little moaning sound of pity. She had seen men beaten before and this was as bad as the worst she had witnessed. He must have angered the master terribly. But not enough to kill him. She had seen men killed for little more than being in the wrong place when the master was in one of his moods. But not him. He held more value to the Master than all the others.

She crouched and tentatively touched his shoulder again, calling his name softly, biting her lip when he did not respond. His fingers clutched the bed covers, as if trying to anchor to something to keep from being swept away. Lily backed away, until her shoulders touched the wall, then slid down to kneel, staring at him.

She thought of a song she knew that had always pleased her last master. He had always said she had a touch of healing magic in her voice, but had never explained how or why. He ought to have known, being a wizard, but she never inquired, superstitious of such things herself. She had never healed a thing in her life, but she had soothed and calmed with her voice. So she sat against the wall and sang the song, her voice a sweet, drifting melody in the dank confines of the cell. She finished it and started another, voice pitched low so it would not carry into the hall. It became more a thing she did for herself than him. It had been so long since she had voiced anything but the hymns the master insisted she sing. It felt good to sing of springtime and true love and a sailor's bawdy adventure with a shepherd's daughter.

His fingers tightened on the sheets. His lashes fluttered slowly and she caught her breath, frozen on a high note. He shifted his arm slightly to look at her and his eyes turned almost violet with the pain the motion caused him.

He shuddered and she bit her lip. She did not know what to do now.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He said nothing. Merely shut his eyes and pulled his arm back down to cover his face. There was a difference to his eyes, that went beyond the pain. Something abjectly disconsolate. Had the master broken that part of him that rebelled? That dared let him break the terrible codes of this place? If he had, then she would be thrust back into endless silence. Endless isolation. And she would eventually lose her mind.

## Fourteen

She went away and Kastel couldn't get his bearings. He had drifted aimlessly between blackness and the nauseating, restless fever dreams. These dreams were more flashing images of nightmarish intensity than the realistic renderings the Prophet sent him. He couldn't find his way out of it, until the quiet, unintrusive sound of singing gradually made itself known. And then he drifted with that for the longest while, anchored by the soothing sound of a woman's voice.

Then she went away and the song went with her and he despaired. He didn't remember her going. Just swam against the current to awareness and there was silence again. Overpowering, monumental silence, as if all the living things had crawled away to abandon him to the dark, windowless stone coffin that this place had become. The thought of dying crossed his mind. A fleeting, abstract notion. A passage to escape. Who would care?

He drifted off again. Came back to the scuffling sounds of someone in his cell, vaguely saw shadowed figures moving about. He shut his eyes and they went away.

"Does it hurt?" Angelo purred, leaning over the cot, face a shadowed mask in the darkness. He recoiled in hate -- pain -- fear. And the Prophet laughed at all of it. Pulled him up by the front of his tunic, dragged him off the cot and he could hardly gather the strength not to sprawl bonelessly to the floor.

"Pray to the god for the souls of all those unfortunate ones you've destroyed," Angelo hissed in his hear. "Admit to the god that you are a damned soul. A wretched sinner who may never receive true absolution."

The small stone alter waited in silent attendance for those utterances.



“What do you want of me?” A heartfelt plea. He teetered on the last legs of his endurance to fight the madness.

“Your soul,” Angelo whispered. “I want you to hand me your soul.”

He blinked in confusion in that, not understanding.

“You will,” Angelo promised. He wrapped an arm about Kastel’s neck of a sudden, dragging him backwards, off his knees and onto his feet. Slammed him against the wall where the head of the cot rested, grabbed one wrist and drew it upwards. There was a ring in the stone that had not been there before. Newly set into the wall, with a set of manacles attached by short lengths of chain.

No.

“No,” he cried in panic. Fought against it, but his body betrayed him with its weakness. One wrist fastened with a snap of the lock and he was lost. Hardly a reason to fight against the other one being caught and locked into the cuff, other than the fear of what would happen once he was helpless.

“I told you there would be punishment to pay,” Angelo declared, in his fire and brimstone voice. As if he were preaching a sermon to a gaggle of avid parishioners. The bloody tatters of his shirt were ripped off his shoulders. That alone hurt. He caught his breath, trying not to shiver.

“If you will not learn one way, you will learn the other.”

Through hazed senses he felt some slight bit of arcane power stir. From the corner of his eye he caught a faint snakish outline glowing in Angelo’s hand. What use pride? What use self-respect at the beginning if he would loose it at the end?

“I’m sorry,” he said desperately, as if he were the child in his dreams again and this were Grandfather he was trying to convince. “I didn’t mean to do it. It won’t happen again, I swear.”

“You swear to what? To the demons in hell that spawned you?”

The lash kissed his lower back. He hissed in pain, clenched his fists and tried to think how to reason his way out of this while his mind was still coherent.

“No, no, to the One God. Let me beg forgiveness of him. That’s what you want, right?”

He hated the whining tone in his voice, but the hysteria in his mind was more abominable. The weakness that ate at him, the fear. Fear and weakness were things of his past, things of his childhood, before he had come into the full bloom of his power.

The lash licked his shoulders, the tip of it snaking about to burn into his throat. He spasmed against the manacles, pressed against the cold grit of the wall as if it might swallow him up and deliver him from the torment.

“The One God will not hear the prayers of those that don’t truly repent. You can beg for absolution for eternity and if your soul is black and your heart impure, then you will always be rebuffed.”

Slash. Slash. He cried out, yanking uselessly at the ring. Then why hammer at him so relentlessly to utter the damn prayers? To beg for absolution, if Angelo was so convinced that the one god would turn a deaf ear.

*Ah, but eventually he will. The words slithered inside his head. When you have no pride left. No will but what I allow you to possess. Then he may turn his eyes upon you. I need him to forgive you. A damned vessel is of no use to me.*

Incomprehension. He wasn’t even sure he heard it, as the agony of the lash spread over him, engulfed his senses until all he could understand was the pain. It hurt so bad, he could not even reach the bliss of oblivion. He was not certain when it stopped. The sound of sobbing echoed in his ears, but it seemed to come from a distant place. His wrists bled from where the cuffs had cut into them, holding his sagging weight. Angelo was still talking.

Angelo was pacing behind him like a caged animal. The words were nothing to Kastel but meaningless babble. He tasted blood in his mouth.

Angelo undid the manacles with a touch and a whisper of Unlocking magic. Kastel crumpled to the floor and lost his senses before he reached the stone.

Came to at a scratching at the door. The turning of the rusty handle. He blinked dazedly, still sprawled against the wall. The door would not open at someone's attempt. It had never been locked before. It was subtly terrifying that it was now. As if he'd had some freedom of choice before that had now been taken away from him.

He pushed himself up against the wall, moaning at the agony the movement caused him, wide eyed at the expectation of Angelo walking through that door. But no door in this place would be barred to the Prophet, so it was not him. No one else would have a care to try his door and fail at it, save the girl and why she did so was beyond him. The scratching stopped. She was going away. He tried to say something, but his throat was so raw that he couldn't utter more than a pained croak. Had he screamed so much? He couldn't remember.

He dozed. He had made it as far as the cot. Rested his head on his arms along its edge, having no strength to pull himself up onto it. He saw his mother talking with Grandfather at the doors of the church. He stood near the vestry door at the back of the nave, trying to overhear their words. Grandfather was yelling about something. About him? Mother stood there with her head bowed, her hands folded before her. She was crying. About him. He knew it was about him. Tears welled up in his own eyes. Guilt that somehow he hurt her without even knowing how. He turned to run away and the new priest caught him by the shoulders. Long, bony fingers biting into his flesh. He was so surprised his mouth opened in shock, a scream trembling to be released. The priest clamped a hand over his mouth and dragged him backwards, into the

vestry, shutting the door between them and the church outside.

The priest bent down close to his face and hissed. "Spying were you? Degenerate little half-breed."

He stared up at the terrifying priest, eyes round with fear and shock. He did not want to be alone with this man in the small robe lined walls of the vestry. He did not want to have the man's hands on him, preventing escape.

"I --I wasn't." He tried to protest, but his words came out shaky and tremulous, as if deep down he knew -- he just knew -- that denying anything this man said was wrong. The fingers tightened on his shoulders, and he started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Hysterically apologizing for a thing he had not done. Anything to get out from under those hands and those fervent, mad eyes that looked at him as if he were a thing to devour, while at the same time the thin lips called him unholy filth. He was so afraid his whole body shook. The priest had never looked at him like that before. Never before with anything but cold detachment and revulsion.

"Please let me go," he begged in a tiny, hiccuping voice.

"No. You need a lesson."

His wrists were grabbed, wrenched up over his head, his body dragged along with them. Fire burned along his back and his head spun in disorientation, not knowing where that all consuming pain come from. He didn't know where the stone wall had come from, or the harsh manacles that cut into his wrists. He thought if he kept screaming mother would hear and come to see what was wrong. He thought there had to be an end to this. The fire bit into his lower back, across his thighs, scorched the tender flesh beneath his arms. He screamed and cried and writhed. He would never ever do anything bad again. He promised it, over and over. He screamed for his mother,

until the priest told him she didn't care. Until the priest told him she ordained this. Told him she thought he needed to be purged of the evil that cursed in his blood.

He went still and silent at that, crushed beyond what the pain could bring. He believed it. He believed it because she had told him as much. Because she had to have heard his cries and she hadn't come.

"Do you understand that you are lost?" the priest whispered against his back. And he thought he was. He couldn't say it. The priest's hands turned him around, so that his back grated against the wall. He blacked out from the hurt. But the priest brought him back with a sly little tweak inside his head. The priest's fingers touched the relatively whole skin of his stomach, the fingers trembling.

"How badly do you want to die?" he asked.

The boy didn't know how to answer. The boy's mind blanked with bewilderment and fear. Somewhere the man curled tighter inside his protective shell, trying to distance himself, but failing because his tormentor knew the path beyond his defenses.

He hung there and shivered, half way between the dream and the reality, mind spinning with the question put to him. The priest -- the Prophet took a shaky breath, almost smiled at him, as if satisfied with the lack of answer, then he leaned close and whispered.

"Such a beautiful body to be conceived in sin. When its mine I shall atone for the sin of its making by washing the evil of all those that oppose the will of the One God from the face of the earth."

The Prophet's lips brushed against his, fluttered away, then pressed back against him in a guttural excitement, one more act of possession that he couldn't fight against, could only endure while the pain ate at his consciousness and threatened to drown him.

“Soon.” Was the last thing he heard before it pulled him down.

\* \* \*

The castle was abuzz with the arrival of Rab-Ker. The servants whispered among themselves in speculation. All of them worried over the lady Sera’s condition. All of them had their own notions what ought to be done, though no one of them dared voice those opinions anywhere near the dark wizard, who had the lot of them trembling in their shoes. His fits were lengthy and destructive. Half the wall surrounding the castle court yard was a crumbled mess, from the last one. Forty feet of wall reduced to bits and pieces of mortar and stone and all from one tantrum caused by an argument with the lady Sera’s priestly father while the two of them were yelling at each other in the courtyard. There was a clear view of the city from the kitchen doorway now. The merchants who brought wares didn’t even bother with the front gates, finding it easier to pick their way past the rubble. The guards were in a frenzy over the lack of proper security.

Though not all of them were certain exactly where their own lord was, they all knew he was in some grave danger from the anxious faces of captain Kiro’s men when they gathered together to speak of it and the quiet and sometimes tense conversations between the castle’s other wizardly occupants. Quite a few of the more superstitious servants left little offerings on doorsteps of milk or bread, hoping to appease the spirits who dwelled in earth and air, and have them bless their lord where ever he might be.

Gerad sat on a bench outside the kitchen, chewing on a sweetmeat stolen fresh from the cooling racks, and watched the men clear the rubble away from the ruined wall. He didn’t like the wall being down. Did not like at all the vulnerability it placed the castle under. He cursed

Dante for not having a shred of self-control. But he understood the pressure. He understood the frustration.

“Lord Gerad.” A boy ran across the yard towards him. He waited for the youngster to reach him, lifted a thick brow at the boy’s red face and his puffing breaths of exertion.

“What’s the rush about, boy?” he asked calmly.

“The lady sent me to fetch you.”

“The lady?”

The boy looked about as if he were spreading a dread secret and whispered. “The Nelai’re one, lord Gerad. She gave me a copper to run and find you.”

“Did she now? And what were you to tell me when you’d accomplished that task?”

“She’s at the Raven and the Otter Tavern. She wants you to join her.”

Both brows rose. Odd inspiration for Kheron to have that would spur her to send a boy to fetch him. But then, after the practice field, he didn’t know quite what she was thinking. But he rose anyway, after he’d sent the boy off, and walked through the rubble of the wall and down the thawing city street outside. Spring was most definitely in the air. The Sta-Veron natives claimed they could smell its sweet nectar in the air. It was early coming. A sign, some said good luck in the future. Gerad hoped so. They were due it.

The tavern was one preferred by the castle garrison. Not particularly genteel on the outside, but serving a fine selection of ale and wines, and a tasty fare. There were a few soldiers drinking at the bar. Kheron sat at a table by the fire, with her back to the door. She had a bottle of wine by her elbow and a half filled glass that she toyed with while she waited.

“Drinking by yourself in the middle of the day,” he observed. She looked up at him dryly.

“You state the obvious so deftly, Gerad.”

He hid a grin and sat down opposite her. The girl at the bar brought a second glass.

"What's the occasion?"

"I was thinking." She tapped her short, hard nails on the tabletop. "That if it comes to civil war in the south -- if there's a need to intervene - that we ought to join forces. We work well together." She stated this fact as if were an offhand strategic anomaly that she had only just noted. He sat back in his chair, face carefully neutral.

"I've always thought so."

"Dante is being selfish refusing to associate himself with the problem."

Dante --- selfish? That was a novel idea from Kheron.

"He's carrying a grudge. I thought you were ready to separate Teo's head from his body not so long ago, too."

"I was. I still would if he offered harm towards my friends, but I understand that he was deceived by this Prophet. I understand that even a man of Rab-Ker's strong character was misled. It says a great deal about this evil man we face. If Teo makes amends for his mistakes, then I will hold no grudge."

"That's good to hear, Kheron. There was a time when you would have."

"And you would not have?" She asked, then lifted a hand to stop him from answering. "No. You were ever more reasonable than the rest of us. Ever quicker to see what escaped our notice."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Gerad said quietly. "I'm finding myself dreading the thought of another war. I think, after this is over, I'd like to sit back and just relax for a summer or two."

"You're not getting *that* old, Gerad." And there was a hint of a smile on her face.

He wasn't quite so certain. But, if one were going to go campaigning again, what better companion than the Stormbringer?



Dante rubbed the bridge of his nose, cursing blackly under his breath. Sleep of late had been an elusive thing. The great priest was annoying him. The great priest cast what Dante perceived to be dark, accusing stares his way whenever their paths happened to cross, which was not a great deal, since the day the man had arrived.

Rab-Ker was not a fool, after all. He was not a man to blithely tempt fate by positioning himself frequently within the scope of Dante's bad temper. He and his little priestling, when they weren't blathering holy drivel about the goddess and her benediction around Sera in the deluded idea that bringing her closer to her faith might snap her out of her self-deception, were harassing the castle folk with their religious talk and even going out into the city. They weren't particularly preaching. Rab-Ker had never, Dante had to admit, been a fire and brimstone sort of priest, but they were most certainly in Dante's estimation, testing the religious waters of Sta-Veron. They were cool waters to be sure. Kastel had never encouraged the spread of religious organization through his domain, always being a touch shy of it himself. There was little chance of Rab-Ker starting a blazing rush to worship the goddess, but it irked Dante just the same. Priests irked Dante in general.

His head pounded with the last bout of far-sensing. It hurt as much from the throbbing pressure of frustration born of failure as from exertion. A fine sheen of sweat touched his skin. It was almost warm in the castle for a change. Amazing.

He walked into the main hall, hungry from the Seeking, bypassed the women sewing by the fire, all of whom watched him from beneath their lashes, and into the kitchen. He had come to rather like the old cook. She wasn't afraid of him. She made lurid suggestions which

amused him. She always gave him the choice delectables from her ovens.

It smelled of roasting pork today and baking bread. There were cooling apple tarts on racks by the ovens.

“Well hello handsome boy,” she cackled, her hands coated with flour. He never corrected her on the truth of their age differences. “Come for a tumble with old cook?”

He summoned a lecherous grin, despite the headache and the strain. “Is that the going price for a bit of your cooking, old crone?”

“Perhaps a juicy kiss will do. I expect tongues.”

He laughed outright and selected a tart. Stood against the counter and downed it in two bites, while Cook kneaded dough. Her helpers sat along the table against the wall, peeling sweet potatoes. The old witch, Ayntha sat among them, deftly slicing skin from a knotty potato. He stole another tart.

“You liken to make the air come alive with all the power you pour into it,” the old witch commented. “Even a dullard like me can feel the crackle of your efforts.”

His mood slipped back into shadow, reminded of his failures.

“Not that it does any good,” he muttered, downing the tart, the heat of the kitchen suddenly becoming unwelcome. He strode for the open door, pulling his hair off the back of his neck to feel the coolness. The old witch’s voice drifted after him.

“Enough power in the air to pull spring back weeks before its due.”

He wasn’t sure that was true, but hedge witches tended towards superstition, practicing a different sort of magic than sorcerers who held true power.

“Must be hidden well and truly if all that power can’t find what you seek.”

He stood in the doorway, ignoring her babbling. Half hearing the sound of her voice as she told the women

peeling roots with her of her own practice over the years. Of how she used to make a fancy bit of coin finding lost children and the like, using herb lore and witchcraft and nothing more than a lock of hair to create a divination that would lead to the lost soul. Witchcraft and herb lore and the complex creation of spells that relied on powers other than those generated by the caster herself. So far below a wizard such as himself as to be almost unnoticed and most certainly not deserving of his attention. The spells of hedge witches were almost a throwback to the witchcraft practiced in dark attics by the ostracized society of witches who practiced in the old world. Real power was a fantasy, all they'd had to rely on was the benevolence of the spirit world and that they got only rarely.

He leaned against the door, watching men cart cut stone into the courtyard to repair the wall. He and Rab-Ker had been talking about Sera. The Great Priest had mentioned something about Sera, being a good, religious girl, probably holding a fair amount of shame over the notion of having a child out of wedlock. How that might be eating at her as well as the loss of the child itself. Dante had not agreed and the conversation had degenerated from there.

He recalled seeing a thick old book in Kastel's library. Augury's, divination's and spells of the ancient world. It had been nestled within a section of texts concerning the concocting of spells using symbols and herbs. Trivial reading, he thought. But, Kastel had always had a taste for meaningless knowledge. Angelo was hidden with wards strong enough to keep out his most strenuous questing. He wondered if something that held nothing of his power, no hint of the magic he used, might find the scent of what he sought. A lock of hair?

He had been trying for weeks to find a mental trail. Would a physical one be easier to locate?

## Fifteen

Dante delved into Kastel's library with a fanatical passion. Pulling down a volume he thought he wanted and scouring its pages for some hint of the spell making he sought. Carelessly he tossed priceless books aside if they offered nothing he wanted. In others he found passages he thought might be useful and read and reread them, marking the places for future reference. He found bits and pieces of things that would be of use to him. Various positions of the stars which made some spell casting more potent. Various components without which a proper casting could not be achieved. He had never cared a whit about where the stars were. Had never bothered with the mundane mechanics of lowbrow witchery. He had always made his own moments and man and demon and angel be damned if they didn't like it.

He sat behind Kastel's desk with the collected volumes of several mortal lifetimes strewn around him, witchlight glowing eerily over his shoulder, scribbling notes occasionally on the fine parchment he'd found in the desk.

He summoned the old woman once, needing her lore in herbcraft to clarify a point for him. She looked at his scribblings, at the dark path his search for a casting seemed to take and her rheumy eyes paled in fright.

"Only the dark gods will respond from such a casting as this," she murmured. "No witch with a shred of reason would risk their notice."

"I'm not a witch," he said offhandedly. "Let them notice me. Who's to say I haven't already trafficked with them?"

She looked spooked then and scurried away. Kheron came later, when the night had been driven away by the

first dregs of morning. She stood in the mess he had made of the immaculate study and he hardly noticed her.

“What are you doing?” she finally asked. “Reduced to herb lore and spell crafting?”

He half glanced up at her, then back to the book he was studying.

“This is useless,” she admonished him. “A waste of time spent better elsewhere. What use have we ever had for this kind of magic?”

“Go away, Kheron.” He turned a page.

“What if he’s dead, Dante? It’s been nearly a month. He was probably dead within the day. That’s why we’ve not been able to sense him.”

“Then I’ll find his corpse. If you’ve nothing to offer, then leave me alone.”

She went silent for a moment, then said low voiced. “What if he’s in hell, Dante? Will you go there after him? Haven’t you had enough of that?”

He didn’t respond. She left eventually, but he tapped his fingers on the page of a book thoughtfully in the echo of her words. If the spell he concocted succeeded, it very well might take him to the depths of hell, if that was where the scent led. He did not particularly relish the notion of revisiting that realm. Not just a spell of locating then. Not just a reverse summoning, which was what he mapped out, bit by bit, but another layer of magic on top of that binding his physical form to this place. He had never under his own power crossed the threshold of space and distance. It was not a magic he possessed.

The Prophet possessed it somehow. He could not begin to imagine how he had come across it. Not without preparation and time and the damned annoying inconvenience of having the moon just so and the proper ingredients mixed to perfection and the burning incense of blood. Distorting the fabric of space and place was just not that important.

He wiped everything from the desktop and layered it in parchment. Dipped pen in ink and began to transfer the mechanics of the spell, of the chants of the ingredients into more coherent form. He had taken parts from several invocations, from several schools of thought and began to tedious task of twining them into one whole that would serve his purposes. It might do nothing at all, for all he knew. He might be wasting his time in truth, but once he latched onto an idea, he was like a dog with a scrap of bone with it. Refusing to let go until it was gnawed down to nothing.

He personally went and found old Ayntha when he'd finished the greater part of it and forced her to look at his speculation and the method of his madness, using her skill as a practitioner of herb magics to gauge how accurate his concoctions would be. She clicked her tongue, running a gnarled finger over the parchments.

"You weave a complex web here," she observed. "There are simple things that could be substituted -- and would be less demanding of the caster."

"Simplicity is not an issue. There are wards which no simple counter summoning will bypass. Do you think it will work?"

"I think it is as dangerous a crafting as ever I've seen. I think the scope of it is beyond a simple old woman like me."

"Do you think it will work?" He repeated the question, pinning her with his eyes.

"I think something will happen. How could it not?"

"Then help find what I need for the spell." He thrust a list of ingredients at her. No simple list, certainly. Her old eyes scanned it, then widened in dismay.

"Here -- in the cold north, some of these things may not be available."

"Then use your years of study in herb lore to come up with acceptable substitutes, but be quick about it. The

moon is full in two nights hence and I'll not wait another cycle to try this out."

He could not wait another moon cycle, because it would be too late by then. Because by then, the Prophet would have had more than enough time to accomplish what he wanted and it would mean the ruination of them all more than likely when he did.

\* \* \*

There was no escape from the morass that pulled him down. He gave up struggling against it, not because it was easier or the pain washed away his will to fight, but because to a certain degree he just didn't care.

Only not caring didn't make the dreams go away. The last one he had, the last one he could remember assaulting him in this place without windows and hope was a skewered, surrealistic version of the truth. He had traveled that path before, step by terrible step and yet there was nothing he could do to avert it. Nothing he could do to force his mind or body to stop the things from happening that happened. Again and again and again.

Miserable, horrible day. Pushed beyond his endurance by the lot of malicious, foul-mouthed boys that always plagued him. Hurt by words and fists, until he fought back the best he could, outnumbered and outwitted by older, more treacherous minds. When he drew blood against them, it drove them to a frenzy and in the dream, as in reality, he had thought they were going to kill him in their rage. And something that he had little control over had surged to the surface and struck them down. Horribly killed them, the sons of the village's upstanding citizens. And he had been taken, dazed and bewildered by what he had done to stand before the judgment of the town's elders. Of his grandfather. His mother had been a silent witness. She had looked upon it all with mournful eyes, but she hadn't shed a tear. He hadn't until they decreed

that they didn't quite know what to do with him. Until they decided to lock him away in the only sanctified place they knew that might contain the evil of his soul. The old church at the edge of the river, half flooded by the crumbling of the shore. Decreed that there he would stay until he died of starvation. He had cried then. But more because his mother could hardly stand to meet his eye when he screamed for her to comfort him. He hardly understood what the banishment meant, in his mind the only punishment they gave him was separation from Mother and she hardly seemed to notice when they took him away.

The priest did. That was the only thing different in the dream. The new priest watched them drag him off with simmering, accusing eyes and a small smile on his thin lips. There was a promise in that smile that Kastel did not know how to interpret. So he didn't think about it. All he could think about was the ruined, boarded up interior of the old church that he was thrust into. The slanted floor that dipped towards the encroaching river. The walls coated with mildew and algae. The pews mostly ripped up from the floor to use in the new church, but a few broken seats remaining. The naive was almost submerged. A few statues that had crashed down when the foundation finally gave lay shattered on floor. The one window that had not been boarded was the round, stained glass one above the naive. It let in a tainted, greenish light. A lapping pool of brown water took up the far end of the church. The smell of stagnation was strong in the air.

He whimpered when they slammed the doors behind him. When he heard the crash of the bar and the sound of them nailing it into place. Finality. Something rustled in the debris near the water. Snakes that had slithered in through the cracks to find a quiet, dark place to nest, he thought with a shiver of fear. He sat with his back against the door, desperately wishing that mother would come.



He needed her soothing voice and the comfort of her arms so badly.

But no, when she came, a detached part of him insisted, the nightmare would truly begin. That part of him dreaded her appearance. The other part of him, the part that walked consciously in the dream had no choice but to yearn her presence. He went to sleep eventually, curled by the door, and dreamt of snakes crawling out to see what had invaded their domain. Snakes and a dull, throbbing pain that ate through his back to the core of his being. Of hurtful pressure in his shoulders and arms and a seeping numbness in his hands and wrists that would not go away. He came half awake to confusion. His back to a wall, his weight supported by manacles that cut his wrists to the bone. He sobbed, trying to take his weight onto his legs, but the movement grated his back against the wall. It thrust him again into darkness.

And he awoke to the sound of not snakes but rats scurrying across the floor by his legs. He cried out and flailed at them and they scampered, intimidated by his size and the sudden waking furor.

He rubbed his wrists and climbed unsteadily to his feet. It was unclear to him how long he had been here. His legs were weak. With hunger? He could not recall eating in a very long time. He walked down the wrecked, tilted aisle towards the edge of the water, wondering if it were drinkable. The smell warned him away. It was fouled by stagnation. His throat ached from crying -- screaming? He backed against one of the fallen statues and leaned there, praying to the gods for salvation. For forgiveness. But they turned a deaf ear.

And then, when the oppressive silence of the drowning church weighed so heavily upon him that he slept again his prayers were answered and she came.

Part of him panicked. The buried, helpless part that could only watch this dream from a distance. That part of him sobbed, even while the child caught his breath in

boundless relief that she had come. That she had not abandoned him after all. The other part of him wanted to wake up so badly even the endless pain of that other existence would be welcome. Anything to avoid this scene from being played.

But he couldn't. He sat up, with tears of gratitude spilling down his face and watched her shadowed figure move up the aisle. Watched the gentle sway of her skirts, the movement of her long hair as she put a hand out on the back of one shattered pew to steady herself. The other hand she held behind her back. Her eyes were in shadow. She said nothing.

He said her name, tentatively. Held out a hand to her, confused by the silence and the unsteady gait. As if she were sick or unwilling to approach him. She had seen what he'd done. Was she disgusted? Did she hate him for it?

He wept that he was sorry. Pledged that he would never do it again. He hadn't meant to!! She stared down at him, face frozen and impassive.

"It is my fault," she said. "My sin. You never should have been born."

Part of him stared with incomprehension, another part of him wailed to hear those words because he knew them to be true.

"I'll burn in hell because of your existence," she said and swung her hand out from behind her, clutching the gleaming curved length of a blade. There was nothing he could or would do but stare as she brought it two handed down upon his head.

It didn't hurt, surprisingly enough. Just drove him to his knees, and blinded him with blood streaming into his eyes. She stumbled back, begging for the gods to forgive her. To save her soul from the taint of having let him live so long. And the power that dwelled within him coiled and ripped out of its bonds, lashing out into the solid world of reality, ripping into the living flesh that had

killed him. Tore her body to shreds as if she were nothing more than unconnected flesh and muscle without the benefit of a skin to keep it together.

The blade hit the floor. The power caught him in its grip and repaired the damage done without him ever being aware of the intricacy of the task. It was a living, malevolent thing that took control of its vessel when the vessel could not summon the will or rational to move on his own. All he could do was stare at the bloodied, ravaged corpse of his mother. He bent down numbly and picked up the blade she had used to destroy him. It was large in his small fingers. Blood made the hilt sticky in his grip. The doors were closed, locked behind Mother so she could do her duty. The powers gathered to blast them open, to blast all of their self-righteous faces into the same bloody pulp it had made of mother.

In reality it had happened. In the dream something was altered. The new priest stepped into the path of the greenish light from the stained glass window. There was in the priest's eyes a gleaming inferno of triumph. His lips stretched in satisfaction.

“Look what you’ve done, wretched creature.”

Kastel screamed and wanted this man dead so bad he felt it consume his reason, his memory, every physical sensation in his body. The power responded, it welled up in a wave of hate and guilt and devastation and crashed down upon the Priest. And the priest lifted a hand and batted it aside. Lifted the other and closed the fingers like a fist and clamped down upon the source of it, obliterating it as easily as he might squash an ant beneath his thumb.

He stared in dismay, the fury that the power had summoned within him dwindling away to nothing now that it was gone. All he could see now was the inescapable walls of the drowned church, the desecrated body of Mother and the man that hunted him. The man that would finish what his mother had not been able to accomplish.

He took a step backwards, trembling so hard he had to clutch his hands to hold them still. The priest smiled. A feral, animal smile that promised nothing but hurt and death.

“She was the last. The last of anyone who ever wanted to help you. And look what you did to her. What punishment a matricide?” The priest slithered towards him, a snake in godly vestments. He bent and picked up the blade. Ran his fingers down the length of the blade, then licked the blood from them.

“The taste of your blood is sweet, boy.”

The child scrambled to get away, mindless panic in his huge eyes. Over the pitted corpse of his mother and he sobbed hysterically. The priest circled him, pacing his awkward flight, holding that bloody blade in his hand. He pointed it at Kastel and said between breaths that were becoming labored in his agitation. “There’s no way out for you now. Different ending this time, my pretty, pretty little monster.”

“Nonononono,” he moaned and curled against the splintered remains of an old statue. No place to run in this drowned place. No place to hide from those mad, gleaming eyes and that grin that dripped saliva with its owner’s fervor. The priest raised the sword and slammed it down over Kastel’s head. He whimpered and covered his face with his hands. The blade sunk into the stone of the statue and quivered there. The priest reached down for him --

--Slash! The lash crossed his skin and took all his breath away. His eyes stared blindly at the gray wall before his face. He could see the drowned church so clearly in his mind that he almost believed he was there. Almost, save for the crack of the arcane lash that ripped his flesh to shreds.

She was dead. She was dead. She was dead. And he’d sent her to hell. The demons had devoured her soul. Taken her to eternal torment and all because of him.

From his birth to his living, to his evil, betraying magic that had taken her life, when his was the one that should have ended. Worthless, this life, if it had cost so much. He wanted to die. He wanted so badly to die and take the coward's way out --

-- and the priest crowed in victory, caught at his pale hair and the collar of his tunic and jerked his small body up from against the statue, glaring into his grief and fear etched face. "You will. You will, boy. But not yet."

He tried frantically to twist away and the tunic ripped. He slithered out of it and the priest pounced on him, slammed him down into the rubble littered floor and sought to restrain his twisting, writhing body. Caught his wrists and pinned them over his head and crouched over him, shaking with a maniacal light in his eyes while he ran his free hand down his narrow chest. "Pretty, pretty monster."

Madness in the priest's eyes -- and something more that the boy could not comprehend -- but froze him with terror nonetheless ---

--The lash stopped and the echoes of the nightmare, delusion, fever dream, blended with reality. Angelo's hands ran down the bloody mess of his back. The man's breathing was harsher than his own. Fingers caught in his hair, pulled his head back and the blood coated hand smeared a line of crimson down the side of his cheek to his neck. He couldn't think, couldn't reason. Couldn't do anything but pulse with the hurt and wish over and over that it would end forever. Death was the only escape from this.

"Sinner. Sinner. Sinner," Angelo hissed in his ear. "You even try to taint me with your wretchedness. But you're almost there, aren't you. Almost mine."

He sobbed, not even having a voice to beg for death. The Prophet's lips pressed against his jaw, his tongue flicked out to lick the blood away, his hands moved around his ribs to trail down the muscles of his stomach.

Horried trembling shook him, mind balking in revulsion and horror at what he had seen in Angelo's eyes and heard in his voice. One last overpowering shame to destroy him. Ridged, punishing flesh pressed against him and he couldn't even find the breath within his lungs to scream for it to stop --

-- The child screamed. And screamed. And the priest hit him repeatedly to quiet them, damning him to hell for his sins. Damning him for making the priest fall into sin himself. All the while he hurt him, he blamed it on the child for tempting him into it. Demanded that the child admit it was so. Hadn't his poor dead mother said as much when she'd tried to rectify her own sin and died by the hand of her son? The priest was a holy man, a good man and look how he had been tainted by the evil in Kastel's soul. And the child lay with his face pressed into the rubble and begged for forgiveness, because it was the only way he knew to make it stop. Because he knew, deep down that the priest was right. That he was the cause of all the bad and horrible things that had happened in his small world and he wanted to die for it --

--"Damn you to hell," Angelo screamed in his ear, spittle hitting his neck, cheek. "You make me do this, demonspawn. Say it! Say it!"

He couldn't get the blood and the tears out of his mouth. The child in the drowned church screamed in bewilderment and shame, desperate to say anything to make it stop.

"I made you. I made you do it."

"Repent, sinner." Tearing. Ripping, pain that ate at the core of him. That shredded the last vestiges of armor that had protected what was left of pride and honor and vitality.

"REPENT!" The Prophet screamed, hoarse himself, breathing ragged and labored.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry sorry sorry." He couldn't say it enough. It echoed in his mind until it was all he could

think and see and feel. Pain and guilt. Guilt and pain. And he hardly even felt the pain in the spinning, detached place he retreated to. The man curled into that place and closed himself from the world, mortally wounded. And the child took up residence, huddled in a corner of a church so long gone as to be forgotten, crying over the hurt done to his body and the ravaged corpse of his mother.

\* \* \*

The Master summoned her. She crept into his chambers hesitantly, lyre clutched in her hand while he paced, muttering incoherently to himself. There was such a look in his eyes, that she almost bolted. But to balk at his command would mean certain death, so she slipped into the room and knelt where he could see her if he wanted, waiting. There was blood on his hands. Her eyes caught it in one of her hesitant glances towards him and she caught her breath on a surge of dread of what he had done to draw it. What he had done to cause himself such apparent anguish.

He whirled to her, as if he had just spotted her after she had sat there for long minutes awaiting his pleasure.

“Sing the scripture I taught you. The one asking for atonement.”

She brought the instrument to her thighs, positioned her fingers to strum the simple chords and sang the hymn. More a reverberation of appeal to the holy gods, words of redemption clothed in the shards of humbleness to ease the guilt of the righteous. She sang it and he mouthed the words with her, calming himself. He went to the alter and symbol of his god and dropped to his knees, breaking with the hymn and offering up his own prayers of redemption. He shrugged his shoulders out of the loose neck of his robes, then pulled off the tunic underneath. Lily stared in shock, faltering in the hymn. She had never

seen the master without his robes. His body was stringy and rawboned, despite the breadth of his shoulders. White, dead looking skin.

He reached for a short handled, leather whip and she shuddered, a dozen fears going through her mind. But he seemed to have forgotten her entirely. With slow, savage intensity he brought the whip down across his own shoulder, leaving a red welt.

“Forgive me, God, my transgression,” he gritted out and hit himself again.

“Forgive me my weakness.” Again.

Lily clutched the lyre to her chest, inching back towards the wall. The slap of leather against flesh was mesmerizing. Blood leaked down from the welts in tiny rivulets, scarlet against his white skin. He never cried out or even grimaced. As if he longed for the pain, for the redemption his own flogging would bring. As if such a simple thing ever could redeem him of the things he had done.

“Forgive me to succumbing to his foul temptation. I am unworthy to serve You.” Slap, slap, slap.

“Cleanse the filth from my mind. Forgive me my trespass.”

She covered her face, shutting out the sight of him, but not the sound of the whip or the madness in his voice. What had he done? What had he done to drive him to such guilt? Fear pulled at her ruthlessly. A chilling, empty fear that made her chest pound and her head spin. On her rump, with one hand holding the lyre and the other on the floor to support her, she slipped to the door. Crawled backwards out of it and even out of his personal chamber could not find the strength to gain her feet. So she crawled to the outer door and only climbed to her feet outside it, her shoulder shored up by the wall, her teeth chattering so hard she bit her tongue and tasted blood.

She ran down the hall then, her bare feet a soft patter on the floor. To the door a floor down from this one where



she knew the Master had been. She expected it to be locked. It had been lately, but it stood half open, as if the Master had been in too much of a rush to shut it properly. She hesitated on the other side, her back pressed against the stone jamb, fearing to go in and see what the darkness and the silence hid.

She had no right here. She had no right meddling in her master's affairs. She was nothing but a slave and slaves had no business with anything not of their owner's choosing. There would be trouble for her, having left the Master's rooms without his permission. She slipped into the cell, regardless.

The door let in enough light for her to see him against the wall. She gasped and tears began in earnest down her cheeks. The blood was not an unfamiliar sight, nor the wounds of his flesh, but he hung from cruel manacles like he was dead. She didn't know that he wasn't. She hesitated to touch him. Even bloodied, she had not right to lay fingers upon him. But there seemed little difference of a sudden, between lord and slave, here in this place, when the Master ruled all. She swallowed and pressed her fingers against his neck to see if a pulse beat there.

It did. She tried to shore up his weight, reckless now that she had committed to him and this madness, and reach the cuffs that imprisoned his bleeding wrists. She could barely reach them with her fingertips when she stood on tip toe, much less support his man's weight. She murmured a curse under her breath, trying to think how she might get him down and came up stymied. She hadn't the key anyway. Stupid, stupid slave girl, she called herself and bit down on the side of her mouth to stifle a sound of despair.

The sound of boots in the hallway outside made her freeze. For one second she stood frozen beside him, trapped with no way out that would not be seen by whoever walked that hall. Then she darted for the cot and

shimmied under it, pressing against the wall in fear of discovery. She could just see the faint light made by the door. Beside, it lying in the dirty straw of the floor was her lyre. Her breath stopped in her throat. She was lost, surely. The door swung wide open and she saw black boots. No acolyte then, for they all went bare of foot with long robes covering their ungodly flesh. Not even the Master, for he too wore robes. Which meant it was the master's shadow. Sinakha.

He paused at the door and stood for a moment, unmoving. Had he seen her lyre? Was he even now searching the cell with his strange green eyes for her? He stepped forward, strode towards the wall and Kastel. There was the sound of metal grating against metal. A body slumped bonelessly to the floor. She could see him sprawled there, a glint of pale gold hair, pale skin amidst the blood and lash marks.

Sinakha crouched, pulled him up as if it were no effort at all and dumped him ungracefully on the cot. It groaned in protest of the sudden weight and Lily shut her eyes, fearing it would come crashing down upon her. Then Sinakha turned and walked out of the cell, not seeming to see her lyre at all. He was out the door and for a moment her head swam giddily with her narrow escape before he shut the door behind him and she heard the rusty grate of key in lock.

She wanted to moan. She kept it back. The cell was plunged into darkness. The only sounds were the faint rustle of his breathing. Hers was a silent, fearful trickle of breath. She stayed where she was for a long while, imagining Sinakha would realize something was amiss and come back. But nothing disturbed the endless dark, stillness. Eventually she scooted out from under the cot, feeling her way to the edge and his body that lay so quietly upon it. Her fingers found an arm. Ran up his shoulder to touch his face, to brush at his hair.

"Are you there?" she whispered. "Please wake up."

He made no response. No slightest tremor to suggest he lingered anywhere near consciousness. She rocked back and forth, trapped in this darkness with him. A few breaths to calm herself and she made her way to the door, tested its strength and found it resolute. Softly she hit her forehead against the wood. They would find her here, where she was not supposed to be and the master would be furious. She didn't know if her worth to him was enough to make the punishment survivable. He could find other minstrels surely. She slid down the door, searching in the darkness for her lute. Found it and hugged it to herself. It made a hollow thrumming sound, almost a complaint when she squeezed to her breast. She had sealed her own fate by having concern for a man she had no power to help.

## Sixteen

The darkness overwhelmed her and ate at her spirit, so she sang to comfort herself. She curled in the nook between the head of the cot and the cold stone wall and softly caressed the strings of the lyre, whispering the words of a song she remembered as a child.

Odd, how the simple songs she recalled her mother singing to her before her freedom had been stripped away from her were more soothing than all the elegant and courtly tunes she had been taught to play during her life as a slave. The song was about cherry trees and children stealing fruit and laughingly taunting the orchid grower as he pursued them for their theft. She had never seen a cherry tree. She had tasted them once, when she had belonged to the wealthy landowner. He had often been benevolent and given her scraps from the lord's table.

Scraps from his table and the full measure of his licentiousness when he had her alone after dinner, while his lady wife prayed in the chapel to wash away all her earthly sins. Only the wealthy had the ear of god. Lily had never imagined that such as her might receive such bounty.

The sound of Kastel's breathing never faltered. He was a shape in the darkness that held no spark of energy that she could sense. A life that pulsed near her, but that held no will or spirit. It was disconcerting. It made her feel so dreadfully alone, to sit so close by and yet sense no aura. She had to reach out and touch him every once and a while to reassure herself that she was not alone.

His skin was warm to the touch, fevered, she thought, but so smooth under her fingers. She felt like a thief in the orchard for prolonging the contact, but she had never felt skin as soft as his on a man grown. Like that of a child -- or an unattainable angel from the heavens. It

made her gut clench to think what the master had done to mar it.

The master said she had magic in her, in the melody of her song. She wished she did in truth, even though the notion scared her, for she would surely use it to soothe his wounds -- or at the very least out of this cell. Absently, she stroked the fingers of one limp hand curled by his head and wondered what he had been before this. Before the Master had decided he needed him shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. She had visions of wealth and power, because to the last he held himself with the grace of bearing that only men of power possessed. She wondered what it would have been like to be owned by him. Then shook her head, banishing where her thoughts led from there. Slaves were things to be used and discarded and she could not bear the thought of that, even in fantasy. One never, never grew attached to one's owner, for sooner or later, the one master would be exchanged for another.

She slept, with head pillowed on arm on the edge of the cot and woke to the muffled sound of footsteps echoing outside the door, coming down the hall. She stuffed the lyre under the cot and slipped into the scant shelter herself, pressing fists to chest and biting her bottom lip in fear.

The sound of key in lock. The squeak of hinges as the door was pushed open. The swish of robes and the hard tamp of a staff hitting the stone floor. She squinted out from beneath her lashes to see the hem of white robes and beside them polished black boots. The master and his shadow. The master stepped close. Shifted slightly to lay a hand perhaps on his sleeping victim. A long moment passed where no one moved. Lily dared not breath.

Then the master straightened and said with a tight inflection of anticipation in his voice. "He's ready. There will be no opposition when I take possession. But I will not wake within a marred host."

Another silence and this time she felt the stirring scent of power curling about the room. She felt it coil carefully and meticulously in the air above her and knew, without knowing how she knew, that a healing of sorts was taking place. The master was repairing the damage he had gone to such lengths to inflict. She could not for the life of her imagine why.

Then it was gone and the master turned without speaking another word and strode from the cell. His shadow stepped close to the cot, bent down and with a grunt of effort lifted Kastel from it. Dust settled down into her face from the shift in weight. She blinked her eyes furiously to dislodge it. They were gone by the time she'd cleared the grits from her eyes, leaving the cell door ajar and the room empty save for herself and whatever crawling insects had occupied it before she came. She lay under the cot, shaking from reaction, from the miracle that she had not been caught. That she could slip out now unnoticed with none the wiser. But the master's words rang ominously through her mind.

*I will not wake within a marred host. No opposition when I take possession?* They had broken him. Scarred his beautiful skin, then healed him at a whim. For what? She shivered to even imagine the master's dark thoughts. His reasons within reasons that no common slave girl could fathom. But it all revolved about him. About Kastel, who she thought was as ignorant of the master's machinations as she was.

She slipped from under the cot, hugging the lyre to her chest. She ought to run down the hall and cower as far from where the master was as possible. She ought to remember what she was and what place she held here, but her bare feet touched the stone and took her in the direction the master and his shadow had gone. Her ears could just make out the sound of boots slapping against the floor. If she didn't follow them to see what they were about, it would gnaw at her forever. Even if she held no

power here, she had a mind and a will to know, even if the knowledge would haunt her, what the master had planned for Kastel.

\* \* \*

The point of the anointed blade sliced cleanly into the flesh of Dante's wrist. He sank it deeply, wincing slightly at the sting, cutting through the large veins that pulsed under the translucent skin. The winds attacked him, high atop the tower of Sta-Veron Castle, whipping silver hair into his eyes and mouth, blinding him now and again as he watched the crimson well like a font from his wrist.

He was simply dressed for the preparation. Black sleeveless tunic and trousers, bare feet that had grown so numb from the cold stone that he barely felt them. A warming spell would be inappropriate at the moment, so he endured the discomfort. He saw the pattern in his mind. A glowing circle with a five pointed star within it. He held his wrist over the stone and let the blood drip down, softly chanting the lines of an incantation as he made the circuit full circle, creating the symbol from the most potent ingredient available. His own life's blood.

He made the first slash of the star, crossed its tip with the line of the circle and carefully walked the breadth of the circle to create the second line. A touch of dizziness assaulted him and he used a small bit of magic to shore up the strength the blood loss took from him. He couldn't replenish himself yet, because the symbol had to be made from his sacrifice. He hated -- hated with a passion, this sort of magic. But what choice was left, when all his other methods were exhausted?

He finished the symbol and sealed the rent in his wrist with a touch of finger tips to skin. Went and knelt in the center of the circle and finished chanting the invocation, feeling the stirring of sibilant and indistinct powers that were attracted to the sacrifice, drawn by the incantation.

Bound by the symbol. It would have been easier to bind them with his own will, but then they wouldn't be able to perform the tasks he wanted of them. The symbol glowed faintly in the night. The moon was almost at its zenith above him. He sighed and relaxed, reflexively rubbing the wrist he had cut.

One layer complete. Now for the second.

\* \* \*

Lily slid among the shadows, following the sound of footsteps in a vast emptiness. Up one level and the next, to halls that were dust shrouded and devoid of life. No one ever came up here. No one disturbed the solitude of these higher level halls. In all her wonderings she had never come up here, fearing perhaps the omens that kept all the other residents of the place without windows from these deserted pathways.

She had abandoned the lyre some ways back, afraid some slip of her hand might cause it to vibrate with sound. There was a door ahead which the master and his shadow had passed through. Hesitantly she peeked around the edge of the portal and looked into a room that dwarfed any she had seen in this place. The walls rose high enough that the ceiling was hidden in darkness. It was a cylindrical chamber, from the floor of which rose a circular pillar the width of several houses lumped together. A stair jutted out from the sides, winding round the pillar until they reached the top, which was some forty feet above the floor. There were columns surrounding the edge of the pilaster that might have rose to the ceiling. It was hard to see. Torches guttered on the inside face of each column, casting it in an orange glow, while the rest of the mammoth chamber resided in shadow.

They began climbing the steps. Disappeared around the back of the pylon and then appearing again as they reached the top. She could hardly hazard a guess what



waited on top. They were no longer visible to her. She shored up her courage and darted across the space separating the door and the foot of the stairs. They couldn't see her unless they came to the edge and looked down. She set her foot on the bottom step and climbed, too far into this to run now.

Hundreds of steps. Almost at the top and the beat of her heart was so palpable that her head hurt from it. At the top and she crouched, her head level with the top of the pilaster. Carefully she lifted her eyes above the surface and looked.

There was a great stone cross set above a broad altar in the center of the floor. The cross was engraved with runes and symbols, as if it were a religious icon instead of the familiar symbols of the gods she was used to seeing in temples and churches. She had never seen a cross so depicted. But the master knelt before it with clasped hands and prayed in a language she had never heard, while his shadow laid Kastel down upon the altar, which was also shaped somewhat like a cross. The Shadow arranged his limbs to conform with the shape of the cross. Arms spread out to either side, legs together down the center. The Shadow whispered a word and touched each wrist. Black fingers seemed to come out of the stone itself, encircling Kastel's arms, then his ankles, as if he were likely to jump up and fight them. The Shadow, finished with his duty, went to stand behind the Master, his back to Lily. She could see the end of his sword protruding from his long cloak.

The Master finished his prayers and stood. He walked to the end of the altar and lifted his hands and as if appealing to the silent stone cross he cried out.

"Forgive me, my lord God, but the flesh I am about to take is sullied by the hand of Your enemy. It is a willing sacrifice I make in your name so that I can better rid the lands of the pollution that fouls them."

In the air above his hands a blackness began to form . . .

\* \* \*

The servants trudged up the stairs in a procession, arms loaded with clothes. The spell called for something personal. A lock of hair or a nail clipping would have been ideal, but Kastel was so damned fastidious no such sloppy leavings were to be found. The old witch said clothing was the next best thing. So Dante had Kastel's closets emptied, bringing the entire lot of it up here just to be safe. The clothing was back up, he had his prize clutched in his hand, the bloody glove he'd found in the mountains when they had come upon Kastel's slaughtered party. Old blood, yes, but blood had great potency despite the fact that it was dried and flaking off of the leather.

A bonfire burned in the center of the pentagram. A ring of polished, round stones encircled it, miraculously keeping its flames from licking out beyond the borders of the ring. Ashes and cinder flew on the wind as material burned. He threw in other ingredients. Circling the flame, ever watchful of its dance, he spoke the words of his carefully constructed and researched spell.

The servants had fled, but others stood outside the boundaries of his blood circle, watching. Kheron and Gerad. The old witch and Rab-Ker, the only people in the castle who were not deathly afraid of what he was doing up here that required blood and the burning of all their master's wardrobe. He felt the potency of the spell. Felt things responding to his summons. He tossed the glove into the fire and watched sparks fly.

"I hate this," He heard Kheron whisper. "I don't trust it."

He did not respond to her fears, too busy listening to the winds that howled around the tower.

"What if this spell takes him someplace he can't return from."

“That’s what the blood circle is for,” the old witch said, voice soft and reverent. “His blood binds him to this circle. The counter-summons may pull him from this place temporarily, but the blood circle will snap him back.”

Kheron had no reply to that. He circled the fire again and saw her face, drawn and worried in the light from the flames. He felt a surge in power. A culmination of forces and drew his breath in expectation.

And Gerad stepped into the circle, an unexpected intrusion.

“No,” he said, and Kheron cried simultaneously.

“Going with him.”

“You will not!” Kheron reached after him and Rab-Ker caught her shoulder.

“Go back, Gerad. He’s almost killed you once,” Dante said softly, attention wavering between Gerad and the flame.

“No,” Gerad said simply, broad face set in stubborn lines.

“Then I’m coming,” Kheron declared, wrenching free of Rab-Ker’s hand.

“No, Kheron,” Dante snapped. “I need you here, guarding this place. I need you to protect her, Kheron. And protect yourself.”

Her eyes spoke volumes. She trembled at the edge of the circle, face taut with distress. Her eyes threatened moisture. She looked from him to Gerad, then back again.

“Bring him back,” she whispered, not taking that step, and Dante didn’t know who she meant, Kastel or Gerad or Angelo’s severed head.

Then the fire went out and with it went the wind and air and breath into the void where it had existed. Dante blinked and he was thrust into blackness.

He blinked again and he was falling through the night sky with nothing but indistinct blackness below and

Gerad's startled cry from above. He gasped out the words of a flight spell, caught Gerad up in its tendrils and slowed the descent.

Mountains below. He made out the sprawling line of ridges and the distant black void of what might have been the ocean. The western mountains then. And below -- below was nothing. Nothing until he sent a sphere of witchlight down to light the way and then he saw the sprawling roof of a blocky, flat surfaced building, built almost like a pyramid save for the tiers and the sprawling flat roof. It thrust out from the side of the mountain like some abnormal growth.

And it felt wrong. It felt as if he ought to be looking at nothing at all, as if his eyes were playing tricks on him and it wasn't there at all. Warded to the teeth then. He gathered power as they dropped, not even bothering with the words of the spell, just summoning the power he wanted and focusing it downward. Downward.

\* \* \*

Kastel screamed. The blackness the Master had created emitted a high-pitched wailing drone. Lily covered her ears, not sure Kastel were even conscious, but his body was arched on the alter, straining at the bonds, his mouth open in wordless shock. The Master stood before him, body ridged, hands turned into claws that reached out and hovered just over Kastel's face.

Tendrils of darkness laced out of the pulsing darkness that had settled just before the master's chest and just over Kastel's face, thrusting simultaneously into both bodies. A dozen grasping little spirals of evil that seemed to feed off the both of them. The master seemed almost to draw in upon himself. In the light of magic and torches his hair seemed to silver with age between one breath and the next as though the vitality were leaving his body and flowing into the black cloud. Lily cringed, tears streaming down

her face, helpless to do anything but cower on the steps and watch.

And the sky fell down upon her head. With a reverberating thunder clap of sheer, devastating sound the ceiling shattered. White, sizzling energy exploded downward, sheering off the far side of the pillar. Chunks of stone the size of wagons showered down. The column nearest her was hit. It toppled, ripped from its moorings and slammed into the column next to it. She screamed. She couldn't stop herself, but her voice was lost in the cascade of destruction. It was lost to the Master's screams of rage. To the sudden crashing sound of an explosive burst of his own making that he sent ceilingward into the darkness. She closed her eyes against the light. Opened them again to see him launching skyward as if some invisible hand had pulled him up by strings. Another burst of power that jarred her to her bones and the sky lit up. For one moment she could see the ragged outline of the hole made in the ceiling. She could see the night sky beyond and her eyes teared at the sight. Then a man was dropping out of the darkness with a naked sword in hand and the Master's Shadow dashed to meet him, drawing his blade as he ran.

She was afraid to move. Afraid to do anything but stare. The night sky flared as if some dire storm brewed in the clouds above. A chunk of stone fell, glanced off the cross and shattered one of its arms. The whole of the cross teetered and she thought it would fall forward and crush Kastel. She dashed forward even as it toppled. But it fell at an angle, hit one of the outlying arms of the alter and shattered. She shoved stone aside, away from his arm and clawed at the black bands circling his wrists.

Magic. Magic bindings, she thought frantically. They tingled at the touch. She yanked and pulled but they would not surrender. Sobbing furiously at her own helplessness she sank down next to the alter.

"Wake up," she cried. "Wake up and help me."

But he made no response. The sky shuddered as something vastly powerful burned through the cloud cover. The whole of the sky visible through the gaping hole in the ceiling glowed briefly. The sound of blades clashing resonated through the circular chamber. The fight drew closer to the altar.

\* \* \*

Gerad's boots touched ground and he rolled with the impact, came up with the Great Sword held at ready and his eyes scanning the area for enemies.

The enemy was not hard to find. The enemy was rushing him with drawn blade and damned expressionless eyes. He was prepared this time for the strength of Sinakha's blow. He blocked it and let it slide down the length of his own blade, then spun and kicked at the man's ankles. He didn't connect, but he didn't expect to. All he expected was Sinakha to jump to avoid it. He rammed a fist into the man's gut when he did. Sidestepped even as Sinakha shook off the blow and swung at his head with his blade.

A chunk of ceiling crashed down and the both of them leapt out of its path. It gave Gerad a split second to take in the battlefield on which he stood. A platform with edges beyond which lay depths that he could not see. Columns surrounding the circular surface, some of which had toppled when Dante had blasted through the ceiling. Nothing else but a cross in the center and an altar below it. Gerad's mouth twisted into a cold smile. He'd actually done it. Dante and his half-assed hedge witch spell had done it.

Sinakha sailed over the slab of ceiling, slashing down as he passed. Gerad lifted his blade to block it, called on the powers of the cursed blade and tore a path of destruction across the ground Sinakha would have to land on. The Prophet's captain touched ground and was tossed

to the side. He hit a column so hard it splintered. For a heartbeat he stood with his back against it, breathing hard, then his sword came up and he smiled. A cold little smile that made Gerad grip the hilt of his sword tighter and grind his teeth together. He had already ascertained that the man was good. Damned good. But the fact that Sinakha managed to unnerve him made him doubly dangerous.

Gathering power glowed in the air before Sinakha's sword. Then a dozen balls of pure energy hurtled towards Gerad. He cried out and slashed the Great Sword in an arch over his head. A whirlwind of power rose up before him, absorbing the energy, causing a hundred tiny little zig zags of lightning to flare before his eyes, all of them reaching out to touch the tip of the cursed blade. He felt the electric tingle in his fingers. Then it was gone, along with the magic and the two of them were left facing each other with plain steel again.

\* \* \*

Dante didn't get a chance to see what lay below the section of roof he had demolished. A bolt of high power energy lanced up out of the depths, almost as if had been a backlash of his own strike and seared the air in which he floated. He lost his hold on Gerad, he was taken so off guard. Then there was a screaming, force shield surrounded banshee rocketing up towards him and he forgot about the nightwalker altogether. He put up a shield in time to take the brunt of the impact but it still slammed him back a good hundred feet. By then he had recognized Angelo's face. He let out an inarticulate cry of his own, drew in power with a frenzy and released it in the biggest lightning blast he could summon on such short order.

It bounded across Angelo's shields. The skies rumbled in response to the energy released within them. Angelo

disappeared into the ominous clouds overhead and with a snarl Dante was after him.

The Prophet would not escape him again.



## Seventeen

He had him. Dante finally had Angelo within his sights and the damned murdering coward dove into the clouds to cover his escape. Vengeance marred the clarity of his thoughts. It made his vision tunnel and his head pound for the wanting of it. All he could think of was Angelo's death screams. Angelo's total destruction and even that wouldn't be enough to satisfy the churning need for retaliation eating at Dante's soul.

A sizzling wash of destructive power crashed down on him from above. His shields ate up the majority of it, but some of it got through. He felt the shock along the right side of his body, felt clothing char and skin burn. He did not waste the time in a healing, just fired back a damned powerful lightning spell he'd been building the entire flight up here. The clouds lit up with the scattered energy. For a brief moment he saw his foe, shields blazing with the power Angelo sought to deflect. Then it was dark again; the Prophet concealed by the clouds.

"You can't hide forever!" he screamed into the swirling mists. The clouds opened up above him. A humming aura of light came into being over his head. He recognized the scent of the spell. Angelo had used it on the battlefield at the foot of the western mountains months ago. He put effort into strengthening his shields, since there was no time to escape the thing and it slammed down like the avenging fist of Angelo's god. It hammered him down into the side of a mountain. Trees splintered and earth exploded outwards at the impact. Half the mountainside was razed from the backlash of power.

Fine. Fine, he thought, half buried in dirt and savaged trees. If this were too easy it would not hold as much satisfaction. He let his shields falter, using that energy to repair the damage the fall had done him. Something came out of the darkness of the shattered forest at him. A great,

lumbering beast that seemed to have been constructed of earth and trees and rock. It opened its maw and roared soundlessly at him. It reminded him vaguely of the giant in the great forest, with the height and the mindless expression on what passed for its face. But it was bigger and not hampered with the weakness of mortal flesh.

Still lying on his back in the crater his shield had made of the mountainside he lifted a hand, fingers splayed and hissed a word.

*Hellfire.*

The thing exploded backwards, shards of it flying in every direction. Rock pelted his body. He didn't bother with a shield, just held up an arm to protect his face from the shrapnel. Then with a grunt of effort he stood up, shaking dirt from his hair; staring up into the night sky.

"Is that the best you can do? After subsuming the powers of how many wizards? You're pitiful. It's a wonder your god can even stand to tolerate your existence."

A wisp of wind and Angelo hovered at the tree tops. A Hellfire spell with every bit as much power as the one Dante had just employed smashed into him. He was pummeled back into the earth he'd just risen from. Flesh and clothing was torn. His hair was singed. He felt a copious stream of blood running down from his scalp, and blinked it out of his eyes. That was two in a row. Angelo's luck was getting damned annoying.

"Don't you dare defile the name of my god with your serpent's lips."

"Which god is that, Angelino? The One God you're pushing down people's throats here; the old one you worshipped in the old world; or Galgaga? Do you even know anymore?"

"Shut up, Demon!!" A blast of fire-based energy scoured the earth where Dante had been. He leapt out of the path, taking to the air and firing back a blast of his own. In the Prophet's frenzy it caught him with shields

down and blew him backwards, ripping through robes and skin. The trees caught at his body. He righted himself, holding a hand to a gash in his stomach that leaked blood and the glistening roll of intestines. His eyes bled red, but his face still held that half mad, fanatical indignation. But it seemed older now than it had the last time Dante had seen him. As if all the power he used was eating up at the mortal flesh he wore, draining it of vitality.

It might very well be the case. If a mortal body, designed to contain only so much power were overfilled, then the vessel would eventually break. The power of umpteen wizards could not be contained in one mortal shell, which was why Angelo was so desperate to find a host that was not mortal. That could contain the powers he had stolen. But it was too late, because his current shell was already failing.

Dante threw back his head and laughed, hovering fifty feet from Angelo. “You’re falling to pieces, old man. You couldn’t get me and you didn’t get Kastel and now your mortal body is betraying you. This is so perfect. Payback is hell, isn’t it? I don’t even need to kill you. It’d almost be more fun to watch your own power eat you up. Almost.”

“Your depraved rantings do not effect me,” Angelo hissed. The flesh between his fingers sealed itself. He closed his eyes, then screamed an inarticulate string of words. The ground exploded upwards to engulf the both of them. Dante threw up a shield, but he was still blinded and buffeted by the use of earth magic. When it was over and the last bit of debris settled back to the ground, Angelo was gone.

\* \* \*

Gerad took a cut to the back of his arm. He launched into the air when Sinakha fired a spray of energy at him, connected with a column and rebounded off it, curling his

body into a tight ball to avoid the deadly blasts coming his way. Even as he landed he was calling upon the sword's power. He hit ground and let the blade release its destructive force. Unfortunately Sinakha leapt out of the way and the wave of power sailed uselessly past and hit the wall on the other side of the chamber. A strange thing happened. Instead of shattering stone with the impact, the magic seemed to spread out, skittering along the joints of mortar that held the stones in place before it harmlessly dispersed.

Odd. Very odd. He stared a half second too long and Sinakha was upon him. Blades met and danced off one another.

He took a slice along the upper thigh, grunted, the leg giving out and taking him down to one knee. Sinakha kicked at his sword hand. His boot connected with Gerad's wrist and the sword went flying.

He cried out in rage. Sinakha's lips turned up in a parody of a smile. He drove forward and the tip of his blade pierced flesh. It would have driven through Gerad's heart if he hadn't twisted. It went through his shoulder instead and he let it slide in, pushed himself forward to meet the thrust and trap the blade as he triggered the release of a dagger in his sleeve and rammed it up under Sinakha's ribcage. With a wrench of his hand he twisted the blade, driving it deeper. Hot blood spilled over his fingers. Sinakha's grin faltered, gave out entirely as blood filled his mouth. Those expressionless green eyes widened and suddenly filled with earnest surprise.

He staggered, stumbled forward onto Gerad. The fall forced the blade embedded in Gerad's shoulder to slice upwards, grating against bone. Gerad screamed, falling backwards, Sinakha's dead weight pinning him down. His vision turned gray and for a moment he couldn't see.

\* \* \*

“Wake up!” Lily’s scream was dwarfed by a shuddering burst of magic from across the pillion where the two men fought. She didn’t expect to see his lashes flutter. Didn’t expect to see those incredibly blue eyes hazily focus on her, but they did. She leaned across the alter, grateful and frightened all at once.

“I can’t get you free. How do I get you free of these?”

She tugged frantically at the band on his left wrist. His gaze lazily drifted down his arm to where her fingers grasped the magic band. She had seen his eyes only a few times, not nearly enough to know the range of his expression, but she knew -- she knew in her heart that something was missing from them now. There was deadness behind his gaze. An emptiness that she was not even certain her voice or her panic pierced. Whatever he had been -- he was not the same now.

She wailed in dismay, in frustration and tugged backwards with all her strength on the bond. Something gave. Something tingled through her arms and fingers and enveloped the thin black restraint. It dissolved as if it had been nothing but sand to begin with, scattering about his wrist on the alter top. She gasped in amazement. She was too fearful to question what she had done, if she did, she might not be able to do it again. But she did. Twice more. Then she dragged him off of the alter. He was mostly dead weight in her arms and she went down under him, the both of them sprawled in the rubble at the base of the alter. She struggled to get from under him. How was she to ever get him out of here and down those narrow stairs if he would not support himself?

“Please, please.” She pulled him up into her arms and pleaded against his ear. “You’ve got to help me with this. I can’t do it by myself.”

A cry of profound pain echoed from the other side of the alter. She shuddered, tightening her arms around Kastel. He shifted against her. A hand moved weakly to clutch at her shoulder. She did not hesitate and waste the

moment. A shoulder under his arm and all her strength to hoist him upright. He had no balance. His head drooped, brushing against hers.

I can't hold him. I'm going to fall, she thought.

Then something flashed down before her eyes, like a veil being lowered. A bloody, white veil, shredded beyond recognition that shrouded the figure of the Master. She caught one brief glance of his eyes. Bleeding and mad, before he swiped an arm at them and she was flung aside with no more thought than if he had flicked a mosquito off of his arm. She tumbled towards the edge of the pillion and went over the side.

In her frantic mind's eye she pictured herself falling to her death on the floor below. But her body hit much sooner than expected. Glanced off stairs and rolled a few painful yards down, before she managed to break the fall. Her nails bled from clutching at stone. Her head swam from too many impacts. She rolled to her back and felt ribs shift. As her vision swam out of focus, she thought she saw something flare in the gaping hole that had been made of the ceiling. She blinked back tears -- or blood to better see.

An angel, she thought dizzily. A silver-haired, glowing angel. But not one of the benevolent kinds she mused. This one had more the look of brimstone and fire. Then she passed out.

\* \* \*

The Prophet, even in his madness was a creature of cunning and machination. He had not been prepared for this. In no way had he expected this encounter so soon. He had known his mortal body was failing him. He had hoped to have a new immortal one before he faced his enemy. And he had been so close. So fatefully close to that end.

His enemy was infused with the power of the hell that spawned him. He wouldn't succumb to the spells that would have devastated any other sorcerer. As much stubbornness as hell-gifted power, but it spelled the same thing regardless. The Prophet could not best him taken unawares and unprepared. He needed time and he needed his chosen host.

Bloody and in more pain than he could easily recall enduring, he fled back to the place without windows. There were, hidden deep within its bowels places that magic would not dare. Places that even his own powers would not function. Not his magical ones at any rate. He needed to go to ground and lick his wounds, but not without his prize.

He saw an amazing thing. His little slave girl struggling to support a listing Kastel towards the stairs. He did not even waste the breath to condemn her for her sins. Just batted her aside and swept Kastel into his embrace when his knees started to buckle. He took a moment to delve into his mind, making certain the defenses were still down, all his carefully crafted fears still in place.

Anything could happen now. Angelo was no fool, having survived as long as he had, to assume fate would swing his way merely because he wished it so. He needed to know that even if he lost possession of the Winter King now, that he could reclaim him later.

Winds howled down through the hole in the roof. He looked up, eyes narrowing as his enemy descended, hair and clothing whipping about him in the tumult of his making. Angelo tightened his hold on Kastel, a living shield that he could not afford to lose now.

"Let him go." His enemy did not quite touch feet to ground, but hovered a foot or so off the floor, power radiating from him in heat waves that made the very air shimmer. Angelo did not bother to waste his power constructing a shield, because any blow Dante threw at him would hit what he so desperately needed.

“I don’t think so. I’ve gone to so much trouble to make him mine, to abandon him now would be sacrilegious.” He trailed a hand up Kastel’s chest, across his throat to tilt his head backwards. It rested against his shoulder with no resistance. Thick, dark lashes lay against pale cheeks. Angelo pressed his lips against his temple.

“He’s so very lovely. I don’t recall ever taking a body so beautiful. If his soul was not so tainted by evil, I might have felt sinful in the breaking of it.” His eyes glittered as he saw the rage build on his enemy’s face. He knew what would drive Dante to irrationality. And with irrationality he would make mistakes.

“Get your hands off him.” Power gathered in a pulsing, blinding orb before Dante. He formed it with his hands, threatening. But Angelo knew he wouldn’t hurl it. Not yet.

“Would you kill the both of us? I promise you he’ll go first. I can make certain of that. I can make certain no power of yours will ever resurrect him. You know I’m capable of that.”

“You’re going to die and when you do you’re going to find out just what place hell has for pretenders of faith.”

Angelo lifted a brow, felt blood dripping down into his eye and wiped it off against Kastel’s hair, bright red against palest gold. He reached sinuous mental fingers out to weave among the wards of this place. Wards he had meticulously built and layered and crafted over the centuries. Wards that he had constructed to rebuff any magic but his own, to prison any wizard other than himself. And being a creature that planned for every eventuality, he had made wards that would destroy this place and all within it, if the need ever arose. Only what rested below, the heart of his warren, would survive. That place had survived even the destruction of the old world, that place had been his haven while the rest of humanity suffered and died.



He sparked something within them, sent them out of their dormancy. Dante sensed it. His head tilted to the side, like a dog on the scent.

“He screams so very well.” Angelo ran a thumb down to the hollow of Kastel’s throat. “He pleaded for redemption at the last. The god might very well have heard.”

It distracted Dante enough to get his attention away from the wards.

“Get -- your -- hands -- off,” he ground out.

“He’s not yours anymore.” Angelo smiled his most benevolent smile. His leader of the flock smile that won the hearts and souls of thousands. It had blood in it now. He tasted it in his mouth. He felt the magic gathering. Dante was going to cast the spell regardless of the threat to Kastel. Wonderful.

“He damned well is,” Dante snarled even as he released the orb of energy.

Several things happened at once. The wards, active now and sensitive to the use of magic flared out to engulf the energy that had been released in the room as well as its caster. Angelo started to laugh, started to lift himself and his burden skyward while Dante was distracted. While the whole of the building began to shudder with the screaming of wards.

Then he was hit from the side. A glancing blow really, but unexpected in its pure lack of magic. Kastel’s weight was wrenched out of his arms, encircled by the broad, sword bearing back of what could only be the Master of the Divhar, who Angelo had not even been aware was here. He cursed, extended a hand to blast Gerad in the back, but the assassin dove for the edge of the pillion, taking himself and Kastel out of easy range.

Angelo screamed in rage. The chamber erupted in a backlash of power as Dante threw all his considerable power against the wards, against Angelo. And he actually made headway.

A wall blasted outwards, a section of warding destroyed. The web work of it had been damaged when the ceiling had fallen in. He never would have been able to overcome them otherwise, Angelo felt certain. He came up at Angelo even as the wards were grasping after him. Angelo felt fingers of pressure engulf his body. He screamed, focusing his power to fight them off. Bones crushed. He cast the quickest, easiest spell he could think of into Dante's face and felt the pressure ease up somewhat. Enough for him to shrug out of it and flee for the hole in the ceiling.

The Place Without Windows began to collapse behind him, magic and wards devouring themselves. If Dante stayed on his tail he'd lose what he came here to find in the destruction. The night air swallowed him, but he didn't know how long he could go, his body fading as it did. His power fluctuating and wailing, threatening to fail him. He wove spells of invisibility about himself, spells of silence to muffle the scent of his magic. And no blast came to shake his trembling shields.

Failure. Failure. It screamed in his mind. The ocean was a dark void before him. His magic faltered, his consciousness threatened to depart.

The Prophet fell towards the sea.

\* \* \*

Gerad hit the floor and took the brunt of the impact. There was no graceful way to direct a fall with a hundred and sixty some pounds of dead weight in one's arms, so he just fell and hit and figured if he survived it, Dante could repair the damage done. It hurt like hell. Shoulder dislocated, hip smashed, left leg broken in several places from the impact. He ground his teeth and felt his mouth filling with blood. Hoped it was from biting his tongue. It felt like it.

The walls flared alive with a greenish web work of energy that fluxed upwards towards the top of the pillion he had just sailed off of. The walls pulsed with enough static energy to make his hair stand on end. He tightened his good arm around Kastel as pieces of masonry began to fall, shattering on the floor around them. He couldn't do more than that. Couldn't even at the moment shift to shield him as more of the wall crumbled. He felt the trembling of the building in his bones.

*Goddamnit, Dante, he thought, finish up and get down here.*

A figure ran out of the smoke towards them. Gerad groaned, knowing he was in no shape to fight off an attack. But it was a girl, and she threw herself to her knees beside them, throwing her body over both their heads when a fall of debris showered down from above. He heard her grunt in pain as she was hit. But she pushed herself up and looked down at him -- or maybe she was looking at Kastel, it was hard to tell behind the curtain of her dark hair. All he could really see of her face was a slice of pale skin and trembling lips above a sharp little chin. Her hands where they rested on Kastel's shoulder and arm were small. One of them was marked with a slave tattoo. Not one of Angelo's minions then, but one of his servants.

"Have you come to take him away from here?" Her voice was soft, melodious even in its desperation.

"That was the plan." It hurt to talk.

"You must hurry." She cast her gaze at the walls around them. "This place wails its deathsong."

"No shit," he muttered.

The floor beneath them shuddered. About fifty feet away a section of it collapsed. Stone after stone was sucked down, widening the hole, bringing its edge closer and closer to them. The girl gasped and grabbed at Gerad's arm desperately.

"We must move."

"I don't think I can," he said, eyes on the growing pit, at the dust and the stray curls of greenish energy rising up from it. Then with a tremor the floor gave out beneath them. The girl didn't scream. Gerad thought he might have in shock as the sudden sensation of falling made his gut clench.

Then they weren't. They hovered in the gloom and pieces of masonry rebounded away from them off an invisible shield. Tendrils of energy also streaked towards that shield, feeding upon it, sucking at its energies.

Up. They began to sail upwards, and the walls of the place tried to fall in and crush them. The girl hugged herself to both him and Kastel. Past the gaping ceiling and into the night sky and then with a sickening lurch they began to drop, only this time they landed on the slope of a mountain and not so hard that bones were broken. The three of them sprawled, skidding a little ways down slope.

"Goddamnit. Dante," Gerad cursed, with as much breath as he had left him. "That hurt."

Dante hit the ground beside them. His knees buckled and he went down, out of breath himself and shaking, head bowed so that all one could see was a the moonlight pale fall of hair

"You're lucky --" he gasped after a moment. "--That I got you at all. That place sucks magic like a sponge."

Gerad twisted his head to look upslope at the dark silhouette of the fortress. Explosions illuminated the tiers. A great piece of it separated from the main mass of the building and began a lumbering roll down the mountainside.

"Uh, Dante --" Gerad would have nudged him if he'd been able. "Think you can levitate us out of here now."

"Give me a minute."

"We don't have one."

Dante's head snapped up. His eyes widened and he almost got the chance to curse before the darkness around

them changed and Gerad felt the same pull he had felt when the counter-summons had originally transported them here take effect. Then they weren't there at all.

## Eighteen

It was like a giant hand grabbed Dante by the scruff of the neck and yanked him sharply through a rent in space. It was unexpected and indignant and he was spitting with rage by the time he was dumped onto the cold, blood-crusted roof of Sta-Veron castle.

He spun about in a moment's confusion, grasping after a place that was no longer there. This night sky was not obscured by clouds. Torchlight turned the stone of the rooftop flickering orange. Voices cried out in simultaneous alarm. He was sitting in the ashes of his own witchly bonfire with Gerad sprawled over his legs, moaning in pain.

He snapped his head around to make sure the spell had caught everyone it ought. Kastel lay a few feet away with the strange girl huddled next to him. The Prophet was gone. Slipped through his fingers. It would be too much to wish that his last barrage of attack before he'd been forced to turn back and snatch Gerad and Kastel out of the self-destructing fortress, had finished the man off. It could have. Angelo's physical form had been failing, it might have been enough, but until Dante saw his cold corpse he would not be satisfied.

Kheron was pelting towards him. Rab-Ker was on her heels with an astonished look on his craggy face, as if he hadn't thought Dante would be successful.

"You're hurt!" Kheron sounded vaguely accusing. Dante realized she wasn't talking to him when he tried to pull his legs from under Gerad's bulk and the big man cried out in pain.

"Dante." Kheron looked up at him pleadingly. "Do something."

His mind was still a little too preoccupied with thoughts of the Prophet's escape to wonder when she had gotten so desperately concerned over Gerad's well being. He

ascertained the extent of the damage. Broken and crushed bones, shoulder, hip, leg -- a bevy of lesser hurts that Dante was too impatient to worry about. He cast a hasty healing, repairing the major damage and Gerad had hardly let out a sigh of relief when Dante was pushing him off his lower legs and turning to seek out the object of this whole expedition. Now that he thought about it he hadn't seen a flicker of awareness out of Kastel since he'd laid eyes on him.

The girl who'd been caught up in his spell and brought back with them was huddled in a frightened ball a few feet away. Rab-Ker crouched by Kastel, one hand hovering over his pale head. Dante slapped his hand away with a snarl, sending out his own magical probes to see what damage had been done.

"He's whole -- physically," Rab-Ker said, sounding a little offended.

"Shut up." Dante placed a hand over Kastel's forehead, one on his bare chest and sought after injury, but the priest was right. There was none. Just cool skin and even breathing and not a shred of consciousness that Dante could latch onto to drag Kastel back up into the land of the living.

Gerad limped over, half supported by Kheron. "How is he?"

There was a great deal of worry in the master nightwalker's voice. Dante scowled up at them, then drew his brows at the way Kheron was fussing over Gerad. "I don't know and why the hell did I bother to mend your bones if you're going to use her as a crutch?"

Gerad blanched. Kheron drew her brows, her lips tightening in what might have been the prelude to a stubborn glare. Dante's thoughts were too scattered to linger on the two of them.

"We should get him inside." Rab-Ker offered his opinion and Dante glared up at him, the very sound of his voice grating on his nerves. But since it was valid and

reasonable advice one could hardly sit here in the cold northern night just to be contrary. One had to show a spark of reason even when all one really wanted to do was throw a tantrum to vent frustration. But he was worried about Kastel's lack of response. His luck had not been running good enough of late to hope that it was merely the sleep of exhaustion.

He put an arm under Kastel's shoulders and Rab-Ker moved to lend a hand.

"Let me help."

"Don't touch him. I've got him."

The priest backed off at the dangerous look in Dante's eyes. Dante got Kastel up in his arms with a grunt. Dead weight. Lifeless limbs that were starting to scare him. The old witch opened the tower door for him and stepped aside to let him pass. He barely noticed her. Barely noticed the girl who hugged herself miserably, standing apart from the people who belonged here. He heard them following him down the narrow stairs. He had to be careful in his negotiation of them with his awkward burden. He reached the lower door and with no one to open it for him blasted it off its hinges with a thought. It shattered against the far wall and the startled screams of servants could be heard from the hall. A cluster of them gathered there, drawn he supposed, by the curiosity of what he had been doing on the tower. He brushed past them, ignoring their gasps and their excited chatter. A few of them ran before him down the hall, the others clustered behind joining the procession that trailed him.

Down to the residential level and the red-faced housekeeper was thundering down the hall with an excited serving girl on her heels. She almost fell down when she saw what he carried and began a fervent string of thanksgivings that he put a stop to with the impatient order to go and make certain her lord's chamber was in the order to receive him. She turned on her heels and ran down the hall before him, entering Kastel's rooms



moments before he did, snapping commands at her servants to get a fire started and hurrying to turn down the blankets herself.

Dante laid him down gently, leaned over him while the room bustled with servants and excited onlookers. He tried another exploration in case he'd missed something on the tower. The noise of the people behind him tore at his concentration.

"Out!!" he roared, looking over his shoulder to glare at the lot of them. The servants quaked. They stumbled over each other in their efforts to obey him. The guards retreated a little less enthusiastically, but go they did. That left Rab-Ker and Gerad and Kheron. The housekeeper stubbornly stood on the other side of the bed, wringing her hands. The room was somewhat decimated, the wardrobe standing open where he'd had the servants raid it for fuel for his fire. The hearth was cold, not having had a fire in it for weeks.

It was no worse off than its owner. Kastel was filthy. Smudged with dried blood and dirt. The torn trousers he wore were crusted with it. There were faint bruises under the dirt. Distant signs of abuse. Dante's fingers tightened on the sheets by Kastel's head. But there was no present injury. Nothing he could find to account for the depth of the unconsciousness, the lack of even subconscious awareness. He could not even find the pathway into Kastel's dreams. It was as if he were not even there.

"Damnit. Where the hell are you?"

"Dante." Kheron touched his back. "Heal yourself."

He leaned there a moment more, then forced himself to take stock of his own condition. He was bleeding from no few wounds. He had burns and a few fractured bones that he had managed to ignore for the last half hour or so. Or had it even been that long? He closed his eyes and mended the ills. Straightened up and fixed Keitlan with his stare. "Clean him up. Let me know if he wakes."

Then he whirled and brushed past Kheron, jerked his head at Gerad on his way out to indicate he wanted the man's company. Gerad walked down the hall at his side, one big hand rubbing at his arm. Kheron followed in their wake.

"Did you get him?" Gerad asked solemnly.

"I don't know. Probably not." He hissed in frustration at the last admission. "Did you recognize anything?"

"Mountains. I'd guess western from the trees. I'd never seen that fortress before."

"Me either. It was the western range. I could see the ocean. Of course there's a thousand miles of mountainous coast along the western ocean. It doesn't do me a damn bit of good in finding my way back there."

Gerad canted a wary look at him. "You sure he's not dead?"

"Yes. No. I need to be certain."

"Okay. We find that fortress -- or what's left of it and we've got a starting point. But you don't honestly think he'd stick around there, do you? For all we know he could be hightailing back south to reclaim his position as Prophet of the One God."

"That would make it easier if he did."

Gerad cast a look over his shoulder at Kheron. "Not exactly," he said slowly.

Dante stopped, glaring at the two of them. "Don't even start with that drivel about civil war in the south. I don't care if the whole of the south is up in flames as long as Angelo is dead. Hell, I'll start the fire myself if I have to and if the two of you have a problem with that -- well, I'll live with the guilt."

"A little bit of subtlety wouldn't hurt you once and a while, Dante." Kheron complained.

"Subtlety? I'm perfectly subtle."

Gerad laughed.

Dante's eyes narrowed threateningly, he lifted his chin imperiously and said. "I'm finished talking with you. The both of you. So leave me alone."

\* \* \*

He cleaned up. He didn't have the energy for a spelling up an outfit, so dressed in loose house clothes. Soft, embroidered linen that lay on his skin like a caress. Some of the things Sera had bought for him in her forays into the city -- before she'd lost the baby. He leaned against the door of his room in a sudden attack of weariness. He had thrown a fair deal of high power spells at Angelo -- had taken no few hits himself in the process -- and the son of a bitch squirmed away. Even taken off guard, he managed to escape -- managed to surprise them with the tricks he had hidden up his self-righteous sleeve.

That damned fortress had been a shock. Nothing to hint what it was on the outside, no warding at all -- but on the inside -- it had almost swallowed him, magic and all, before he'd summoned the strength to break free of it. If he had fought the majority of his battle with Angelo within its walls he would have been hard pressed to overcome the man. Not that he couldn't have, in the long run, ego made him rectify the estimation. He was what he was, after all and no body-snatching wizard could have bested him.

Little wonder he had not gotten a hint of Kastel during his month of searching. Little wonder that Kastel had not been able to get out of the place. A month smothered by those wards. A month in a place where the Prophet had nothing better to do than break him. Dante recalled his time under Angelo's care. The Prophet had at least had the call of his religious duty to distract him then. Even then, Dante was harder to crack than Kastel was. Kastel had a soft streak. Kastel, when he was in his right mind, had a weakness for morality that Dante had never

developed. Kastel felt guilty over things that he wasn't even responsible for. Kastel had a need to be accepted that was so deeply buried he refused to admit to himself, thanks to the damned crazy place in which he had been birthed, but Dante was aware of it. Dante had used it in the past to his advantage. The Prophet was a mind witch. If the Prophet had been able to get into *his* mind, he could damn well get into Kastel's.

His ground his teeth in simmering indignation. Angelo had broken things that belonged to him. Sera. Kastel. He only had Gerad to thank that Kheron hadn't ended up a casualty of the Prophet's twisted sense of retaliation.

He pushed himself off the door, restless to do something -- anything. Went out into the hall, where there were thankfully less mulling domestics to annoy him. Went back down the hall to Kastel's room. Keitlan had cleaned the dirt and blood off. Had him under the covers where he lay like the dead, pale and fragile looking. A fire was crackling in the hearth. The housekeeper had shut the open wardrobe doors and drawn the drapes, casting the room in shadow. The woman was adding fuel to the fire, elation turned to nervousness in her eyes. She watched Dante warily as he stood at the end of the bed, one hand on a carved oaken banister.

"I've never seen him taken sick, my lord," she whispered faintly. "I didn't think that -- sorcerers -- were prone to ailment."

"It's not physical. There are other things --"

Other things. It was either the power that got you -- the same power that healed you -- that when used in too much of an abundance, past that safe limit that most wizards instinctually knew, that threw the body into catatonia in efforts to protect itself. Or it was the mind -- because weren't they all creatures who practiced in the intricacies of mentality more than common men? All the pondering and all the lifetime's worth of dogma just built up until it all boiled around inside the mind like a disease and you

either blocked it out and let it fester or you convinced yourself that it didn't matter and threw it all out. He was of the latter breed. He thought Kastel was most certainly in the former category. All that fuel for Angelo to burn.

There was a shuffling by the door. A hesitant scratch of fingers trailing along the doorframe. He looked up and drew in his breath, carefully, slowly. Sera stood there, pressed against the frame, peeking into the room as if she feared it held bogeymen. Her hair was unkempt about her shoulders, her eyes wide and liquid.

"Sera?" he called to her softly. She didn't respond. Her eyes fixed on Kastel. Tears began to slip down her cheeks.

"He's lost," she whispered. "He can't find his way back. He doesn't want to." She pushed herself off of the doorframe and padded towards the bed. Sat down carefully on the edge and stared down, sniffing. Her fingers brushed Kastel's hair and the tears dripped down her chin. She looked up at Dante, and there was devastation in that gaze. Devastation and a hurt so deep that only the barest tip of it showed. But he saw it and felt it in the depth of her gaze and it seemed as if someone had hit him in the gut.

"He hurts people, Dante and he justifies it with God. I didn't deserve it. Kastel didn't. Don't let him get away with it."

*I won't.* But he couldn't make his lips form the words. All he could do was stare because she was crying and it was the first time he'd seen her cry since she'd lost the baby. She lay down, next to Kastel, wrapping her arms around him, as if he were a child she gave comfort to. She crooned soft, nonsense words low in her throat, and all the while the tears flowed.

He left them like that, almost in a daze, because she had asked something of him that he didn't know how to go about. He didn't know how to finish what he'd started if his prey stayed to ground. He could not vent his rage or

avenge her or Kastel, if Angelo refused to show himself. If he ran every time it got too hot for him, retreating to plot in secret and spring traps when they least expected it. If he had known the location of the Prophet's fortress, he would have left within the day, even if it proved nothing more than abandoned ruins.

It would have been a starting point. A place to look to see if perhaps he had not finished off the man after all. Perhaps the body lay shattered and broken within those mountains. He thought about the weather. It had not been particularly warm there. Rather cold actually, now that he thought about it -- not that he had recognized it in his wrath. So not too far south. It still left maybe six -- seven hundred miles of mountainous coast once one got past the northern range. A great deal of land to search. Hopeless unless he could get a fix on the fortress. Unless the wards that had protected it and that had been used to destroy it were damaged enough to leak the resonance of magic.

He needed to do something.

\* \* \*

Lily sat in a corner of the great hall, huddled away from the fire, from the groups of mulling, excited servants who belonged in this place, and she despaired. She was lost here. She didn't even know where here was. Or who these people were. It was cold outside. There was dirty, melting snow on the ground. She had gone into the courtyard to see if she recognized this place and found herself in the yard of a great castle. A great and active castle that was astir with activity and excitement. She heard the scraps of conversation. The hearsay and speculation that ran rampant. They offered thanksgivings to the spirits they worshipped that their lord had been returned to them. They spoke in hushed whispers over the miracle wrought by the *Silver Mage*.

She thought she knew which one *he* was. She had seen only glimpses of him in the Place Without Windows, and only marginally more once they had appeared in this place, but she recognized his face. His was not a countenance one would easily forget. Even if only seen briefly. He was the man her old master, the wizard, had met with before the church guards had come and taken them away. He was the man her new, crueller master had been so determined to find. He frightened her almost as much as the Master had. For he was powerful and angry. She'd had enough of powerful, angry men.

It was the other whispers that made her prick her ears. When they talked about *him*. About Kastel. About their lord. Another powerful man, then. She had guessed as much. She felt small and dirty here in this grand hall, with so many servants -- his servants -- coming and going, all of them ignoring her. Where would she go, a masterless slave? Sooner or later someone would see the slave tattoo and claim her. She could not hide the mark forever. Did she even wish to hide it at all. All she had ever known was the life of a slave. She wasn't sure she could take care of herself alone. She didn't even have an instrument to work as a minstrel. Lyres were not cheap to buy. She had nothing to her name to trade for one, save her body and she balked at being reduced to that profession. It was not an easy one to escape once entered.

She would have walked out of this castle and into the town beyond if it had not been dark still and she not a little afraid to venture into the streets of an unknown city alone and at night. There were some places that were hardly safe for a woman alone during the height of day.

A shadow fell over her as she sat contemplating her dour existence. She looked up in surprise to find a large, hard-eyed woman looking down at her. The woman's brows were narrowed in contemplation and perhaps a little distaste. Lily lowered her head slightly, letting her hair shroud the fright in her eyes.

"You're the girl that came back with Lord Dante. You belonged to the monster that took my lord and hurt lady Sera."

Lily didn't know what to say to that, other than to slowly nod her head in acquiescence. "He was my master. Yes," she whispered.

"Humph," the woman snorted in disgust. "Vilest creature on the face of the earth, if you ask me. I'll have nothing of his in this castle."

"I'll leave," Lily said, fighting back the tremor of dread in her voice. She started to push herself up.

"What's that on your hand. A slave mark?" The woman's hand shot out, quick as a cat and snatched Lily's wrist. "You're a slave?"

It was an obvious question. The answer so very obvious with the scarring of her skin.

"There is no slavery in Sta-Veron," the woman announced primly. "Lord Kastel doesn't permit it."

Lily flinched at his name. She wanted the woman to let her hand go, but dared not snatch it back.

"I don't imagine a slave would have much choice in the master who bought her. Did you?"

"No, mistress." Barely a whisper. "I was not -- content under his rule."

"Humph. No slave trade here, but slavers pass through. You'll find yourself back on the block if you wonder about in the city. All right then, there's nothing to do but have you stay here, but I warn you there are no slackabouts in my castle. There's chores a plenty for the servants. What do you do, girl?"

"Do? I --I am a minstrel."

"A minstrel? Not honest work. There's laundry to be washed and work in the kitchen that will do you just fine. Room and board and a silver piece a week for your troubles. A slave couldn't ask for more than that."

"No," she agreed softly. A slave could never ask for more than that.



The woman's face softened slightly at the humble tone. She patted Lily's hand.

"I don't envy the life of a slave. I'm Keitlan, housemistress of this castle. What's your name, girl?"

"Lily."

"You look bruised and battered enough to sleep a handful of nights and here there's only a slice of this one left. I'll have one of the girls show you to the maid's dormitory and find you a cot. Come down to the kitchen tomorrow with the other girls for breakfast and we'll see about getting you situated."

"Yes ma'am."

\* \* \*

"What are you doing up here?" Dante didn't turn as Kheron crept up behind him on the tower. Just stared at the lightening night sky to the south. The faint stain of his blood was still outlined on the tower floor, the pile of cinder that had been the bonfire mostly blown away by the fierce winds that played at this highest point of the castle. He said nothing. Simply stared, lost to his own dark musings.

She stood behind him for a while. Not moving, but he could feel her presence. He could always feel her presence. Then in a small, accusatory voice she asked.

"You're planning on leaving, aren't you? You're going to go looking for him and you don't even know where to start."

He had a notion. He didn't say that, too tired and full of turbulence to explain himself to her.

"Oh, that's just fine," she hissed. "Go off and leave everyone else to deal with the hard things. It's so easy to run and fight the battle. You never did give a damn about the casualties."

He slowly turned to fix her with a disapproving stare. "Don't presume to preach to me, Kheron. We both know you're not qualified."

"Damn it, Dante, as impossible as it may sound there are people here who need you. Need your presence! Sera does. Kastel does, though it's beyond me why, since you always did treat him like dirt. I do! You run away to feed your vengeances and leave chaos in your wake."

He stared at her, into her glittering eyes and remembered the look she had given Gerad. Another time and it would have sent him into a fury. Now he just felt cold and emotionless.

"You need me? And here I thought Gerad was the benefactor of your affection nowadays."

She glared at him. Her fists clenched at her sides, her lips twitched in agitation. So very upset, his Kheron.

"What do you care? You ignore me because you're afraid Sera will hate you for it. You don't need me, Dante. Does it offend you so greatly that someone else might? Goddamned you. Sometimes I hate you so much."

"But not forever, right," he mused. "Because eventually they all die and it's back to you and me."

She just looked at him, then she turned away and walked away from him, through the tower doors, her steps so soft she made no sound on the stairs. He turned back to look at the distant mountains, but his words played in his mind and he couldn't quite see them for the blur of tears.

\* \* \*

He might have taken off that night, so disturbed by the mere notion of his enemies continued existence had he been. But the conversation with Kheron haunted him in another way and he found himself downstairs, standing in the portal of Kastel's darkened room. Staring at Sera,

who had fallen asleep on top of the covers next to Kastel. At the both of them, his injured ones, his lost ones who he had not been able to protect and blamed himself.

All to get at him. One way or another Angelo had done it all to get at him. For old grievances, for his mere existence, because he'd been chosen by an old, old evil, to be the harbinger of its arrival, over a mortal priest, who'd ever been blinded by power. And innocents suffered for it.

He brushed Sera's hair, the soft curve of her tear streaked cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the room at large. And because he was weary of mind, body and magic, and more melancholy than he could easily recall being, he lay down next to her and wrapped his arms about the both of them. Sera murmured in her sleep. Kastel didn't move. Dante buried his face in her hair and tried to block out everything. If he didn't, at least for this while, it would drive him mad.

## Nineteen

Sera woke up for the first time in a very long while with more than a dreamy awareness of where and who she was. She lay with her eyes closed and savored the dull ache that lodged in her chest. The scratchy rawness at the back of her throat that signified tears to come or tears already shed. Which, she didn't know. Recent memory was hazy and incomplete. She opened her eyes on faint, spore-dusted sunlight. There was warmth and comfort. And confusion.

She drew her brows, wetting her lips, wondering why she was lying next to Kastel, one knee thrown over his thighs, one arm draped across his chest. Embarrassing situation to find oneself in. Granted he was under sheet and blanket and she on top of them, but still -- her sense of propriety was scandalized.

Then she realized that someone was pressed against her back and that an arm was encircling her and she felt a moment of dazed panic -- of bewildered claustrophobia, before she tilted her head to catch a slice of Dante's profile, mostly concealed by a fall of silver hair.

She slowed her breathing forcing back the shock. Trying to understand. She stared at the ceiling and tried to sort her thoughts. Tried to organize her memories. It was a hard task. Recollections meandered aimlessly about in her mind. Flashes of images here. Remembrances of pain there. Tears welled up in her eyes, running down her temples and into her hair. She could not quite recall where she had been for long while, but she knew where it had started. She knew how it had started and by who's hand.

She choked back a sob, bringing a hand to her mouth to bite -- anything to keep the cry back. A few moments where her body betrayed her, trembling uncontrollably, then she fought to bring back some semblance of control -

- of strength. Shifted gently so that she could bury her face in Dante's shoulder, feel the solid strength of him against her cheek and inhale the scent of him. She missed him. She thought he had been here all along and she had been as far away from him as a continent or the distance between earth and hell. Only this time she'd been the one in that fiery demesne. Her fingers clutched spasmodically at the soft material of his shirt, at the hard muscle underneath. He stirred, drawing breath in a sudden soft hiss, jerking his head back as if startled out of some bad dream.

"Shit." His breath tickled her hair. "Sera?"

She didn't say anything, just buried her face against him and felt him almost hesitantly tighten his arm around her, drawing her body closer. She wanted control over her emotions, but it kept slipping through her fingers, fickle and elusive.

The tears leaked anew and she whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry. I don't know where my head's been lately."

Where her head had been. As if she had forgotten to snuff out the candles before leaving the room. She tried to come up with something more eloquent to say and all she ended up crying was. "Oh, goddess. Oh, goddess. My baby. He took my baby."

He pressed her head against his shoulder, stroking her hair. "I know. I know. He'll burn for it, I swear."

She shuddered, trying to keep from wailing out her grief. She had the vague impression it was long overdue. That she had put it off for weeks and weeks. Flashes of pain long gone but only now remembered traced the line of her nerves; of her spine. She bit her lip and tasted blood.

"You brought me back," she murmured, amazed. "I was dead and you brought me back."

"It wasn't your time."

"I think I wanted to go."

He said nothing to that. She shifted to look up at him, moved a hand to brush his hair back because she needed to see his expression. He looked troubled -- at a loss perhaps to deal with that declaration. It was a weakness of his, that balking at the truly, deeply personal anguishes. He'd rather pretend they weren't there, or banish them with the sheer strength of his will -- anything but admit to suffering or acknowledge that something he loved could hurt so badly and there was nothing he could do about it. She didn't mind. It just made him a little more human.

"I don't anymore," she said softly and that admission brought to mind that thing which had dragged her from her half existence and back to reality. "Oh, Dante, what happened to Kastel?"

His lips tightened, lashes fluttered down to cover the glimmer of anger in his eyes. He didn't have to answer for her to know. The same thing that had happened to her.

How long? How long for her to get the sense that he preferred death over waking. She had drifted by the room and that sixth sense she had had latched onto misery -- onto fear -- onto overwhelming guilt. But they were aimless, drifting emotions with nothing to anchor them because Kastel wasn't there to put a name on them. The things that made up Kastel were buried so deep that he was lost and all that existed in the upper layers of subconscious was a traumatized, crying child.

She eased herself up, her own misery pushed aside as she realized someone else she loved was suffering. She laid a hand on his cheek, wishing him back with all her might. If she could come back, he could. But no response. Nothing but a fluttering movement of his lashes, a hitch in his breathing before it evened out.

"He's hurt. He doesn't want to come back."

Dante sat up behind her, wrapped an arm about her shoulders, looking over her head at Kastel. "I don't care what he wants."

“Yes you do,” she said softly. “But maybe it will make a difference anyway.”

\* \* \*

She was somewhat shocked to see her father. She thought she had dreamed his presence. To find him here, in Sta-Veron, was a surprise she was not certain was pleasant or foreboding. A certain guilt for leaving Alsansir without telling him goodbye -- or even leaving a note of explanation had weighed on her for months. He didn't seem to care. He was overjoyed to see her with awareness in her eyes, wrapping her in his smothering embrace until she couldn't breathe and whispering prayers of thanksgiving to the goddess for her recovery.

In fact everyone from the kitchen staff to Captain Kiro gathered around her when she descended downstairs to the main hall, practically suffocating her with their goodwill. She was saved by Dante's foreboding presence and dark warning glares. They backed off when he stepped up behind her and congratulated her on her health from a distance. He put his hands on her shoulders very proprietarily and dared Rab-Ker to make an issue of it.

Father was wise enough to do little more than frown at the familiarity. One had to assume he knew of the miscarriage and thus of their more than proper relationship. Her face flushed hot. She could not quite look him in the eye, afraid of the reprimand she might see there.

Cook went to extra trouble to make a suitable celebratory feast in her honor, which made Sera nervous and shy. She hated to be the center of attention, but even Dante seemed content to give her the honor this day. He lurked around her protectively, positively terrifying any of the maids she had made friendships with from coming up to her and talking. The only person who wasn't afraid of

him was Gerad who grabbed her up off her feet and hugged her, regardless of Dante's glower.

"What a day for luck," he laughed. "We get both Kastel and you back. The fates are smiling, humm?"

"Luck. Yes," she murmured and wished she could break away from all the smiling faces, because she did not feel particularly happy. Her head spun a little from dizziness. She needed a breath of fresh air.

"Where are you going?" Dante asked when she rose.

"Just outside for a bit. It's stifling in here."

"Company?"

"No. I'll be back in a minute."

He let her go and she slipped out the main doors and stood on the great front steps breathing in the cool afternoon air. Almost evening. A day had gone by and she had slept it away. Weeks had gone by with her walking in a waking sleep. The snow was nothing but patches in the courtyard. People tromped across it, grinding it further into the mud. Solders going or leaving duty. Stable boys carrying wheelbarrows full of muck to the compost heap outside of the castle walls. Servants coming and going from the city. People going about their afternoon's business.

A maid came from the direction of the barracks carrying a basket of laundry. A servant Sera hadn't seen before. So much seemed to have changed while she drifted in her own world. The girl never looked up at her, just walked through the mud past the main entrance heading for the service entry around the far corner, but Sera, who's powers of perception seemed unusually active, sensed a spark of light within her. A lyrical shimmer of something that did not quite coincide with the humble exterior she wore. She passed beyond the corner with the barrack's laundry.

Sera hesitated to go back inside, dismayed at the sound of so many voices, the laughter, the celebration that these people latched onto out of desperation -- anything to drive



off the long harshness of winter. To drive off the other tragedies they endured so stoically in the north. She was not up to it yet. So she chose another route. She stepped down into the mud and picked her way around the courtyard, followed in the wake of the servant girl to the large, low ceilinged laundry room, where the girl and another dour faced woman who never seemed to have anything to say to the other servants or anyone else for that matter scraped clothes over ridged wash boards. The later looked up with an indifferent expression when Sera loitered in the doorway. The other dumped her load into a tub of soapy water and began swishing the clothes about with single-minded efficiency.

“Hello,” Sera said. The older woman looked at her as if she were spouting gibberish. The younger one half looked up from under a fall of dark hair. Silence soaked the air. Sera begin to feel embarrassed for coming at all.

“Hello,” the dark haired girl finally murmured, as if uncomfortable with the expectant silence. Her hands worked at wringing out a heavy tunic.

“I saw you walk by. I didn’t recall seeing you here before and --” And what? She was nosy? She was trying to find anything to escape the furor in the main hall?

“I only came last night,” the girl said softly. Her voice was an evenly modulated whisper, just loud enough to hear, but one had to strain a little.

“Oh.”

Another length of silence. Then the older laundry woman snapped in exasperation. “Your wizard brought her back with him. She was one of his lordship’s enemy’s slaves.”

“Oh.”

The girl worked diligently at her wash. Sera leaned against the doorframe, staring, even though she knew it was impolite. There was something about the girl that struck a chord of familiarity.

“Do I know you?” She was never one for avoiding an issue that ate at her.

“No, milady,” the girl answered, refusing to meet her eyes.

“I think I’ve seen you somewhere -- I just can’t put my finger on it.”

The girl sighed, looked up from under the concealment of her hair. She had a pretty face -- what one could see of it. She had a slave tattoo on the hand she lifted to tuck one side of her hair behind her ear. The tattoo did it. Sera remembered this girl singing. Remembered the clarity and the almost magical lilt of her voice as if she had heard it only days ago, not months.

“You’re the minstrel that was singing at the tavern in Ludas. You were with the wizard I tried to hire.”

The girl very slowly inclined her head.

“How on earth did you get here?”

“Sera? What the hell are you doing in the laundry room?”

Dante stalked up behind her, obviously having gone long enough without her presence. She turned, grabbed his sleeve and pulled him a few unwilling steps into the cold, clammy room. His head almost brushed the ceiling.

“This is the singer that was with the wizard in the tavern in Ludas. The one I got to help with the wards, remember?”

He turned his nose up slightly, looking as if he’d really rather not be here. “That hedge witch? Don’t waste the term wizard on such a charlatan. He probably couldn’t have healed a wart much less understood those wards.”

“Don’t say that.” For the first time the dark haired girl’s voice rose above a whisper. She glared at him angrily, jutting out her small chin. “He was a decent man and he died because of you.”

“Oh, no,” Sera whispered.

Dante sniffed disdainfully. “No great loss, I’m sure. But you found a new master soon enough.”

“Dante!” Sera elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

“He killed Elijaro. He killed him for nothing more than talking with you. I had no choice.” Almost there were tears in the girl’s eyes. Almost, but not quite and not tears of sorrow, but of frustration.

“You must have made a cozy niche for yourself to have survived so long in the Prophet’s care. Did you warm his bed, little slave girl?”

Sera glared, hating that smug, predatory look in Dante’s eyes, the one that turned him from a man she loved to one she just wanted to hit. Repeatedly.

“You’re just like him,” the girl said, voice gone soft again. “Just like the Master. You don’t care about anything but your own satisfaction. You don’t care who you hurt to get it. I can see it in your eyes.”

Dante’s smug look turned to one of anger. Sera felt him tense, put herself in his path when he might have taken a step towards the girl. The older laundry woman was staring between them in open-mouthed shock.

“You little bitch. I should have left you there to rot.”

“You should have,” the girl agreed softly, hair falling back down to cover her face.

“You annoy me,” he hissed and from him, such a declaration was no small threat. Sera put her hands on his chest and shoved him backwards a step.

“Out! Just get out and go cool off!” She gave him another push and he glared at her. She narrowed her eyes and met it levelly. “Now, Dante!”

He said something under his breath, but retreated. She hoped no other innocent suffered from his ill temper. She had heard about the castle wall. She turned back to the girl, took a breath and extended a hand.

“I’m Sera and I would very much like to hear what happened?”

\* \* \*

Sera amazed her. Lily could not quite recall meeting anyone like her. Candid and bluntly honest and sincerely concerned for the plight of a mere, common slave, when Sera herself was obviously so much more. Lily found it difficult to share of herself, it was too painful, yet she found herself telling this girl she had known only a few hours about her earliest memory of being a slave. Of watching her family grow smaller and smaller on that distant dirt road while she was taken away by the man they had sold her to. She had never told anyone that, but Sera dragged it out and patted her hand and looked at her with those great brown eyes in compassion. Pity would have made Lily withdraw. Compassion was a foreign thing.

She told Sera about being taken by the church guard in Ludas and of her master's gruesome death at the hands of the man she now knew was the legendary Prophet. She spoke haltingly of her time in the Place Without Windows. Of the isolation, of the fear that any small thing she did wrong might result in her own grisly death. She spoke carefully about Kastel's coming to that place, of the Master's fixation on him. Of some of the terrible things he did to break him and Sera's compassion turned hard and brittle. It was an anger they had in common.

"I can't recall wishing death -- really wishing death on another human being -- but I wish it on him."

They sat beyond the stables, on the crude stone bench circling the stable well. Lily had her legs pulled up under the plain but thick woolen dress Keitlan had supplied her with. She had been given thick boots that laced up to her calves and kept her feet amazingly warm.

Sera told her what the Master had done to her. What he had taken from her and tears slipped down her cheeks in the telling. Lily had never had anyone admit a thing of so heart wrenching and personal a nature to her. No one confided so deeply in a slave. She stared, thinking that

this young woman, not so much older than herself, had strength of will that she herself might never know.

"And yet, I don't know if I want Dante going after him. I don't know whether it's selfishness or fear."

"I'm sorry I said that to him," Lily said, and she was, but for Sera's sake, not his.

"It's all right. You were right -- sort of. He gets a little megalomaniacal sometimes and he used to be really bad, but he's better now. He's trying."

Lily had heard the stories. The campfire tales of the Silver Mage and his reign of conquest. A little megalomaniacal seemed somewhat subdued when speaking of him. But he had come and destroyed the Place Without Windows, which in her mind was the worst hell she could imagine. He had done it to rescue Kastel, who was -- and she shivered helplessly at the thought -- another figure out of whispered legend. One of the Dark Brethren. The Winter King. Cold Death to his enemies all the stories said. And she had dared to touch him. To yearn for something that could never be, in the desperate desire to banish the solitude the Place Without Windows had cast over her. Fool. Fool. Fool.

"Still it was not my place to say," Lily admonished herself.

Sera grinned at her. "It was terribly brave. Do you know how many people in the world would have the nerve to say something like that to his face?" She held up the fingers on one hand. "Probably less than this."

"I'm not brave."

"Oh, I think you'd be surprised. You've survived this long, haven't you? That takes courage."

Sera's praise made her nervous. She stood up of a sudden. "Mistress Keitlan will be angry at my laziness. I must get back to work."

"Oh, she's not so bad." Sera smiled at her, a sunny smile that seemed to make the day brighter. Lily shook her head, amazed again.

“We’ll talk again, okay?” Sera insisted as she hurried away. She did not answer, but she thought she would like that very much.

## Twenty

Crying. Someone was crying in the distance. Pitiful, choked sobs that drifted in the air like summer pollen. He ignored it, as he ignored the screams of all the ghosts that haunted him, accusing him of their deaths. A thousand, hollow eyed faces that stabbed condemning, bone white fingers at him as he passed. A thousand victims he had sent to their graves. He had hardly cared when he did it; what cause for remorse now? What cause for anything but blind, unreasoning release. He sought after something that eluded him. He wanted -- he needed to find the utter darkness, the utter caliginous depths where nothing mattered. Where sensation ceased to be. Where emotion was swallowed by the void.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not completely overlook the guilt or the crying. It kept him from the place he sought. It pulled at him like thread thin chains, insubstantial, yet unbreakable. It made him feel and he did not want to feel. He wanted to die. But the only death here were the scattered corpses of his victims and his lethargy towards them was beginning to shatter. He was beginning to panic at their cloying reproachment, at the wealth of them scattered about the field of his making. The sky was inky black above the frost-covered earth. The dead could not move to follow him because their legs were frozen to the ground. He moved through them, skirting sideways to avoid a hand here, a touch there. Occasionally they would topple in their eagerness to reach for him and the frigid limbs would break off at the ankles, sending the body toppling forward. He cringed and wanted out. Out! Out!

There were pathways to choose from. A cross roads that did not offer oblivion, but other less savory choices. Down one way echoes of religious exhortations drifted,

and remembrances of agony and shame. He turned away sharply before the words could register in his mind, wanting nothing of that. Desperately wanting nothing of that path. Down another and something huge and all-powerful lurked, waiting to devour any sense of purpose, of free will that he had left.

It was hypnotic almost, the thrill of that call. Familiar and so easy to fall into. Almost an oblivion in itself. But, most of those corpses in the field he had flown from, had come from his association with that Omnipotence. No, better not to go that way.

Which left the path from which the crying emanated. Those plaintive sounds terrified him more than what the other two paths had offered. There was weakness there, and unmitigated acceptance of fear and pain. He did not want that awareness. Wished the opposite so badly he stood in the cross roads for what seemed an eternity, hoping some other choice would appear. But none did. So his choices were the guilt from behind him. The pain to the left. Subsumption to the center. Or awareness.

\* \* \*

Gradual awareness. Warmth. Softness under his skin. The faint smell of lavender in the linen under his head. Lashes fluttered, but did not open. He was frankly afraid to look upon the world and find the pleasant sensations all a trick designed to torment him. He listened for tell tale sounds that might betray the illusion. The clink of chain. The almost silent skittering of mice. The low, harsh breathing of his tormentor. Nothing but the quiet crackle of fire. The occasional shifting of charred embers.

So very appealing, those quiet, comforting sounds. He curled his fingers in the sheets. Wetness formed at the corners of his closed lashes. He had to blink to be rid of it, and held his breath in anticipation of what he might see



when he did. But it was just a room. A familiar, darkened room filled with familiar, shadowed things.

He stared at the things in his line of vision numbly, trying to fill the gap of events separating this place from the other. And couldn't. And found that he didn't care. The stink of the place still lingered in his nostrils. The feel of the chains still made his wrists itch. The words reverberated inside his head. But they kept their distance for the time being, only faint reminders in the background.

He pushed himself up, sheets falling off of clean, whole skin. He stared down at himself, at his unmarred wrists in dumbfoundment. He swung a leg over the side of the bed, discovered he was without clothing and took longer than he suspected was normal to conclude that fact needed to be remedied. He stood and dizziness assaulted him. His knees buckled and he caught himself on the side of the bed. Knelt there on the rug, with his face pressed into the mattress and tried to stop the spinning and the flashes of visions that pulsed behind his eyes. Angelo's face. Grandfather's face. Mother's dying eyes.

He gathered strength, pushed himself up and stood unsteadily. Put a hand to the bedpost to help him make the wardrobe. That stately piece of furniture proved an enigma. Its normally full insides bare to the cedar paneling. He leaned on one of the doors and stared at it in bewilderment, the vague notion crossing his mind that maybe he was dead and they had cleaned out his chambers. Perhaps he was only a ghost haunting these rooms. He'd rather hoped death would bring forgetting, not eternal remembrances.

He dragged a sheet off the bed and wrapped it about himself, opened the door and stepped out into the hall without a clear destination to guide him. He clutched the sheet together with one hand and used the other to steady himself against the wall. He stopped a dozen steps down and tried to focus his thoughts enough to figure where he

wanted to go. A maid came down the hall carrying an armful of linens. If he were a ghost in reality, then she would pass right by.

Apparently he was not, for when she saw him, she squealed, dropped her load and exclaimed, "My Lord!" Before bolting back down the hall the way she had come. He stood there, as startled at her reaction as she had apparently been at the sight of him. A door opened down the hall, the maid's cry rousing its occupant. Gerad ran out, his tunic unlaced and hastily thrown on, his hair ruffled as if he'd been woken from a sleep. He caught the hind end of the fleeing maid, muttered. "What the hell?" before he turned and caught sight of Kastel, leaning against the wall.

"Gods be damned." The Master of the Divhar breathed and started down the hall towards him. Kheron came out of the same room, adjusting her own tunic, her eyes wary. He hardly had the presence of mind to ponder his own existence, much less what the Stormbringer and the nightwalker might have been doing to exhibit such a state of dishevelment.

"You're awake," Gerad stated the obvious and put hands on him. He flinched, not quite able to help it. Gerad seemed not to notice. He had his big hands on Kastel's shoulders and was staring down critically. "What are you doing out here in the hallway wrapped in a sheet."

Kastel stared up at him, eloquent speech beyond him. "My clothes are gone."

He must have sounded shaky because even Kheron leaned in with concern on her face. "Get him back to his room, Gerad," she suggested.

He started to protest, but Gerad turned him around with an arm about his shoulders and walked him back to his room. He sat on the end of the bed, leaning against the bedpost, while Gerad studied him like he was an exhibit

at fair and Kheron stalked about the room as if she were on the prowl for something.

"I thought they fixed him," Gerad said, talking to her about him as if he weren't there. It felt as if he weren't.

"Something's you can't just fix," she said, sounding ominous. "Look at Sera."

Look at Sera? Look at Sera what? Was she dead? Dante had brought her back. Please don't let her be dead. Not one more guilt on his doorstep.

They both looked at the door as footsteps sounded in the hall. Then Dante was filling the doorway, his predator eyes fixing on Kastel and all he could think about was what if something had happened to Sera. Dante blamed him. The last words spoken between them had been an assignment of guilt. He pressed his forehead against the bedpost, trying to block it all out.

"He's a little disoriented," Gerad said.

"A little?" Kheron snorted.

A sleight weight settled on the mattress beside him. A hand touched his shoulder hesitantly. "Kastel. Are you all right?"

Sweet voice. A boundless feeling of relief swept over him at the sound of it. She wasn't dead.

"I don't know," he answered dully, the words drawn out of him because her hand was still on his shoulder and he didn't think she would remove it until he responded. And he could not quite convince himself that being touched was a good thing. "My clothes are gone."

"We'll get you new ones," she promised. He opened his eyes, swept them to look at her because he did not want to meet Dante's. Dante was hard to deal with at the best of times. But Dante snared him anyway.

He hadn't realized Dante had approached so close, practically standing over top him and was caught by the intensity of the stare. He blinked up, wide-eyed, at the scrutiny.

“What’s wrong, Kastel?” Low, pointed question. So very difficult to answer. A hundred things surged to the fore. He couldn’t utter one of them. Tried to force them back because his hands on the bedpost were starting to shake. There should have been a shell, a protective layer of impassivity that he had always relied on -- but he couldn’t find it. Shattered along with everything else.

He turned his face back to the wood of the bedpost because he was trapped by Sera on the one side and Dante standing before him. Dante caught his chin in his fingers, forced him to look at him. Not roughly, but with enough pressure to say he was not willing to brook refusal. And it brought to mind the Prophet’s fingers on him. He jerked backwards in sudden panic and Dante’s brows drew in displeasure.

“I’m sorry,” Kastel mumbled, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say and that supplication had seemed so often on his tongue of late.

Dante cursed under his breath, spun on his heel and stalked out of the room. Kastel felt sick.

\* \* \*

“What the hell was that?”

Gerad chased Dante out into the hall, catching up with him halfway to the stairs down. “You’re not angry at him?”

“No, I’m not fucking angry at him! God, give me a little credit, would you?”

“Then what?”

Dante stopped at the top of the stairs and waved a hand back down the hall. “What do you think, Gerad? The bastard did a job on him. A damned efficient one, I from the look of it. I should have made certain Angelo was dead.”

“Yeah, well if you had, Kastel and me both would be, too. You’ll get no complaints from me about being lax that once.”

He was angry and he was restless. He paced a few steps back down the hall and then back again. There was nothing downstairs but the supper he and Sera had left when the maid came bolting down with the news that her lord was awake and wondering the halls. He had no stomach to finish it. He hadn’t expected to see Kastel looking so damned -- abused. It was so clear in his eyes it was painful to look at. It was the look of the boy he had found on the road over a century ago, before he’d taught him that he was a step above the rest of humanity. Dazed and lost and guilty.

He glared sullenly at Gerad from under his lashes. “Whatever. And stop assuming I answer to you.”

“I never assumed any such thing.” Gerad managed a shocked look.

“You assume it all the time.” Dante brushed past him. Not downstairs, but down the hall and into Kastel’s library, assaulted by a sudden onslaught of guilt over the state he had left it in. Kastel was more fastidious about his precious books than anything else and Dante had left them strewn about the room in his fervid search for the right components for the spell. There were a few broken spines where, he’d tossed various volumes away from him in disgust when they proved fruitless. There was one particularly thick book he’d spent hours going over because it had hinted that it contained information he wanted only to find it useless to his cause -- it had been the victim of a sleep deprived tantrum and lay in a pile of charred ashes against the wall. Boring book, really, pertaining to druidic rites and passages. Kastel might not even notice it missing.

He opened the windows and summoned a tiny wind elemental to sweep the ashes outside. He poked about the

room, putting books up in an order that seemed rational to him, but honestly he couldn't recall what had been where.

"Housekeeping?" Sera wondered into the study. Three days since she'd come back to her senses and he still had to stare into her eyes for a moment to assure himself she was all there.

"Just putting things back. I don't see why the servants don't come in here and clean up."

"They're all afraid to come in here. Too many books of magic and the black arts. Kastel never lets them touch any of his collection. Oh my, was this scroll torn before?" She bent down to pick up a yellowed scroll that had rolled under the desk. Dante looked at it and shrugged. One suspected not.

"So -- what do you think?" he asked it idly, but the answer from her meant a great deal. Sera had a way of reading souls.

"I think it'll be okay. Eventually. I think he's hurt and he's hiding things and that we ought to keep an eye on him. And I think that you intimidate him and you need to stop."

"Intimidate? ME? I do not."

"Oh, you are so full of it. You intimidate everybody. Nature of the beast and all that."

"Beast?"

"Dante. Just be nice, all right?" She offered him the scroll. He took it sullenly and tossed it haphazardly on a shelf with like scrolls. He leaned on the sill of the window, while she continued what he'd started. She was more careful about it. Looking at titles and scanning the shelves for like subjects.

"He can rearrange it when he's got his head straight," she mused, sliding a book into place. "I suppose he can't complain about the disarray, since it got him home. You're very crafty, according to old Ayntha. But, of course I knew that."

“Did you?” he glanced away from the deepening night outside to watch her.

She grinned. “When you’re not being dense or blinded by your libido.”

“Libido? Me? I think you have me mistaken for someone else. Do you have any earthly idea how long it’s been since I’ve slept with a woman?”

“Well, I know you haven’t slept -- is that what we’re calling it now? -- with me for let me see, six -- seven months. So that would leave Kheron -- any of the prettier girls in town, where else have you been in that time --?”

He really shouldn’t have opened that line of discussion. He had truly been commendable -- so good he shocked himself. There had been a great deal of distractions and one of the surest ways to take his mind off of sex was anger and revenge. “I haven’t touched a woman since I’ve been in this frigid place.”

“Really?”

“Not even you.” He stared at her pointedly. She sniffed and bent down to pick up a book half hidden under the desk. It presented a nice view of her tunic-covered backside.

“It must be hard,” she commiserated, not sounding particularly sorry.

“It’s getting that way,” he muttered. She did have a perfect little ass.

If anger and revenge distracted him from thoughts of sex, then the opposite was most certainly true. A little niggling voice in his head recalled him of the hideous bargain Mother had forced out of him. He honestly couldn’t know whether she had collected or not. Whether she considered them even with the baby he’d had buried in the mountains that she might or might not have taken. It *was* his first born in a fashion. She had never clarified a live birth. He might be able to argue that if it ever came down to it. Deities and demons and the like tended to be sticklers for wordplay. Besides, and he’d had a lot of

time to mull it over once his head had cleared after the whole Mother incident and his idiotic solution to the problem, if he could pull a body back from the dead he could certainly assure that a child was not conceived. Sera didn't ever need to know. And he wanted very badly to devour her.

"Shall we break this streak of chastity?" He grinned at her lazily, but his eyes were glittering. She wrapped her arms around a leather bound volume and looked at him warily.

"You've gone this long."

"Wouldn't you like to see how it feels to make love on a bed instead of on the forest floor?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it, a blush spreading over her cheeks. He took a step towards her and she backed one up. He tilted his head at the roundness of her eyes and the way she bit her lower lip in nervousness. It made him want to swoop down and nibble on it himself. He did just that.

She went a little stiff against him, the book pressing against his ribs. Her teeth were clenched, but her lips were soft and pliant.

"I don't think I'm ready yet," she murmured against his mouth. But she did not exactly pull away, so he pretended not to hear it, cupping the back of her head and letting his lips travel over the smooth line of her jaw. She shuddered and let out a little sound of pleasure -- it was a sensitive spot.

Almost she melted into him, until his hands roamed down to knead the flesh of her bottom, then she pushed against him and broke contact.

"I'm not ready yet, Dante," she declared, louder and between labored breaths. She slammed the book against his chest with enough impact to force the breath out of his lungs. "And don't pretend you didn't hear me the first time."



She stabbed a finger against the book he had been forced to grab, then whirled and marched from the study. Leaving him with an aching monument to how badly he wanted her. For a compassionate woman she was cruel beyond measure.

\* \* \*

Mistress Keitlan brought Kastel something to eat and a finely stitched robe to wear that was just a touch oversized. Someone else's wardrobe had been raided, he assumed. She promised a selection of more appropriate clothing by morning. He belted the folds of the thing together and let the sleeves fall half way down his hands without bothering to push them back. The food he had vague awareness of. The smell made him queasy. He could not recall the last time he had eaten. He thought it had been a very long while, his body pulling at sorcerous reserves to nourish itself. But it wasn't the same. The selection she brought him was too rich to tolerate, so he quietly requested something simpler. She stared at him with frown lines between her brows, but he did not offer more than that request, so she went about his bidding, muttering under her breath things he had no interest in absorbing.

She came back with a porridge sweetened with honey. He picked at that listlessly, one side of him insisting that he needed it, another ambiguously wondering why he bothered. *You should never have been born. I'll burn in hell because of your existence.*

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the vision of her face as she raised the blade over her head. Focused, stubborn concentration as she strove to eradicate her sin. *You should have died. You deserve to die. I want to die.* Voices echoed in his head. Hers, Grandfathers, Angelo's -- his own.

He shoved the table away. It toppled and the bowl went flying. Porridge spattered the carpet. The fire cackled at him, mindless and cheerful. He hissed at it, threw a hand out and the whole thing, stonework and embers, iron grill and hearth stones grew heavy with ice. The weight of it sagged, splintering. The sound of creaking ice was as irksome in itself as the crackle of flame. He stared at it. He had not meant to do it. Had meant perhaps to put out the fire -- irrational action in itself. He had not intended to encase one wall of his chamber in a sheet of ice. Had his control slipped that much?

Chill seeped into the room. He didn't mind. Cold was not abhorrent to him. He retreated to the bed. Settled into soft goose feather pillows, tired and desperately wanting to fall back into the oblivion of sleep. He had overheard someone say he had slept three days straight, but it hardly seemed enough. Even when he'd slept in that other place, there had been no rest. No respite from the nightmares. He didn't remember any lately.

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Mistress Keitlan exclaimed over the melted ice that soaked his floor. Her shock stirred him out of slumber. Other voices joined hers in conjecture over the reason and he wondered why so many females dared to intrude upon his rest. He peered at them from beneath his lashes. Keitlan, two of her maids, and Sera who was complaining about the state of the rug. The two maids held armfuls of neatly folded clothing. Keitlan was looking at the ceiling as if she suspected a leak from above. Sera was not so easily deceived. She marched over and shook his shoulder. He glared miserably, beset and besieged in the privacy of his own rooms, wishing then all gone.

"Kastel, did you do this?" Sera demanded. She had no sense of decorum. He threw an arm over his eyes, hoping that if he couldn't see her, she'd go away and take the

others with her. Sera was not so accommodating. Her voice hammered at him.

“Kastel where did all the water come from? It's an inch thick over the whole floor. The carpet is ruined. And this was the best of the lot. Do you know how much this carpet cost?”

He ought to, having paid for it. But he could not quite care. However, he gathered she would go on until he answered, so he said quietly. “The fire annoyed me.”

“The fire -- ? Oh goddess, that sounds like something Dante would say. Well it's an hour past noon and you've slept too long as is. You need to get up.”

He truly did not wish to. If they would go away, draw the drapes, shut the door and leave him in darkness he would almost be happy.

“We need to get somebody in here to mop up the water. Oh, I do hope the carpet isn't ruined.”

He heard the other women moving about the room. The doors of the armoire opened. “Look, Keitlan has laid out something to wear for you. Keitlan has your tailor in town working on more.”

Even with the lassitude he had to ask. “What, prey tell, happened to all my clothes?”

A moment of silence. He moved his arm slightly to see if she were still there. She smiled a little guiltily and shrugged. “Dante sort of burned them all -- for a spell.”

“He burned -- my clothes?”

“It was for a good cause.”

The maids were looking at him with round eyes, shifting from foot to foot in cold, standing water.

“Get out,” he said softly and the two girls started and scattered like rabbits. Keitlan gave him a dour look before following after them. Sera eyed him a moment longer.

“Are you going to be okay? You were really unsteady last night. I can get somebody to help - - ?”

“No.”

"I can get Dante --"

"No!" More emphatically.

"Okay, but if you don't make some effort to get up I'm going to send him after you anyway."

With that threat, she left, shutting the door in her wake. He found himself glaring at the portal, thinking bad things of her. But the threat was enough to stir him into taking notice in what the maids had brought him. Plain, but fine material. No ornamentation, which suited his mood very well. He pulled on a pair of soft house boots -- Dante had apparently not seen fit to burn all his footwear -- and slopped through the water on his floor to the door. His head still felt a little hazy. His balance was better. His knees did not feel as if they might crumble under him.

The water had seeped out into the hallway. It stained the long narrow rug that graced the stone floor. There was a maid and a boy with a bucket and mop coming up the hall now. They bowed their heads respectfully at him as he stood undecided outside his doorway. They stood a few feet away, looking nervous, even a little frightened, blocked from their destination, which was obviously his room, by his presence.

He moved down the hall, spurred by their anxious stares. Found himself in his study, which was another haven. He shut the door behind him and tried to find the peace that had always come to him in this room, filled with so many years of avid collecting. It would not come. Disquietude came instead. His interest in the arcane, all the trappings of the dark magics, the superstitions, all the things that grandfather had preached against. All the things that he had taken up like a crusade once he realized that with power came the ability to banish all the people that condemned him. Even if it meant cutting a swath of death behind him as he went. How many people dead? He had no earthly idea.

*You should never have been born. Your death will absolve her sin.* His head spun with the notion. *Sinner.*

*Sinner. Sinner.* Flashes of pain and he pressed his palms into his eyes. Shame. A loss of dignity that could never be recovered. *Do you want to die? Yes.*

“My Lord?” Keitlan’s voice from outside the door. She babbled something about breakfast. He couldn’t listen to her. He jerked the door open and brushed past her startled face. Down the hall towards the tower stairs because the walls were a constraint that he could not tolerate. He needed to see sky above him. Limitless, uncondemning sky. She called after him. All he heard was the unintelligible sound of a voice raised in concern. The words made no sense. The ones in his head hammered at him ruthlessly.

Up the narrow stairs and he was winded by the time he’d reached the top. The sky loomed above, scattered clouds marring the blue depths of firmament. The wind made small whistling sounds. There was a dark stained pattern on the stones of the floor, worn away in places so that it was not recognizable. A faint smear of black in the center as if something had burned long and hard there. He went to the side away from the city, leaned on the bulwark and looked out upon fields where snow was slowly melting at the onslaught of spring.

When had spring come upon the north? He didn’t remember. The snow was mostly gone in the distant, rocky trench that rested below the tower. It only broke the brown of rocks and earth in patches.

He saw her body after he’d destroyed her. Broken and bloody. Not recognizable as Mother any more. He heard their voices and saw their stares and he believed them. He’d always believed them, deep down -- only now it hurt too much to deny. He was too tired to fight it. It would be easier just to wish it all away.

He found himself on the thick stone of the battlement. The wind whipped his shirt against his back, his hair into his eyes. He put a hand on the stone on either side of him, just a careful touch of fingertips to granite. The rocks

were tiny beads scattered among the vestiges of snow so very far below.

He simply stepped off the edge.

## Twenty-one

The world rushed past. A blurred, detached place that held no more allure. Falling. Falling. Falling. Avoid the instinctive urge to summon a wind to support his body and slow the descent. A hard, fast impact to bring eternal oblivion and one could only hope malicious magic would not defy his desire and force him back.

A breath and there was impact, but not of the expected sort. Something crashed into him from the side, bore him into the tower wall with enough force to knock the wind out of out him, holding him tightly enough to keep him from gaining it back.

“Nononono,” he wailed in dismay. The voices cried out in chagrin.

“Fucking imbecile!” Irate, oh so irate, voice yelling in his ear. He struggled against the hold mindlessly, like an animal trying to escape a snare by gnawing through its own leg. It didn’t occur to him to use magic, he had gone so long without having it as a resource to fight back with. An arm tightened around him, fingers tangled in his hair and jerked his head back so hard the bones in his neck protested. It brought to mind the Prophet’s habits and the frustrated desire to escape turned to panic.

But it wasn’t Angelo’s eyes glaring at him, it was Dante’s. There was just as much fury in the gaze though. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

Kastel felt tears gathering in his lashes and didn’t know if it was disappointment, fury or fear. “Damn you. Damn you. Let me alone!!”

Thirty feet above the earth. So close.

“Like hell!” Dante yelled at him. The winds buffered them upwards. It was unfair. So unfair. He struggled madly against the embrace, but his strength had abandoned him some undefined time ago and all he did was make Dante mad enough to shove him backwards

when he had brought the both of them back up to the tower roof. Kastel sprawled, embarrassed and miserable, desperate to follow the whispers in his head.

“Why can’t you ever just leave me alone?” he cried.

“Are you insane? Did he push you that far over the edge? What the fuck do you think you’re doing? You want to die?”

“Yes!” He cried back and Dante lunged down and grabbed him by the tunic, face dark in anger. Kastel thought he would hit him and he cringed. He couldn’t help it. He couldn’t even hate himself for the show of weakness. Dante’s lip curled in disgust and he let go of him.

“Too damn bad. It’s not going to happen.”

The desire to curl up and cry was replaced of a sudden by indignation and something halfway bordering on hate. “You arrogant bastard. What do you care? Since when has it mattered what happened to me as long as it didn’t interfere with your convenience? You stopped having a use for me a long time ago, so why bother?”

“You little shit.” Dante leaned so close Kastel could feel the whisper of his breath on his skin. His eyes were storm grey with anger. “That’s a good goddamned question. If you want to throw away your life, why the hell should I bother to stop you? Except that I spent too many years making you into what you are and I hate to think it was all a waste of time.”

“Maybe it was. I didn’t deserve it. I shouldn’t have ever been born. I killed her. She went to hell because of me. She was right. They were all right.”

“What, that spineless bitch who birthed you? God, you’re not tearing yourself up over that again? They were self-righteous, ignorant fools and your beloved mother was the biggest one of all.”

“Don’t say that!” Kastel cried. “She was the only person who ever *cared* about me. She didn’t drown me at birth because she loved me.”



“She didn’t drown you at birth because she was greedy and weak and she probably thrived on the attention of being the woman who slept with a demon -- or whatever the hell it really was. If she’d had really cared she would have gotten you the hell out of that place and gone somewhere to escape the ridicule.”

“Shut up. You don’t know anything. You don’t understand.”

“I understand Angelo fucked you up. I understand he knew exactly what buttons to push to crack you. You know what he needed of you, Kastel? Have you figured that out yet?”

He didn’t want to talk about Angelo. He did not want to think about those memories/ sensations / violations. They lurked too close to the surface already.

“He wanted your power. He wanted your body as a host. I told you how he’s survived all these years, but did I tell you how he does it? He can’t just move in and take up residence. He has to break you so badly you want to die. Just give up and welcome death so he can move in without a struggle. He did it didn’t he? Got you so badly that you want to finish the job he started.”

“You don’t understand.” He couldn’t think straight. He refused to accept that the turmoil in his head was a thing perpetrated upon him and not the result of his own guilt. He refused to believe he was that malleable. He shook his head and repeated it over and over. Covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the peaceful sky, Dante, everything.

“She said -- she said that as long as I lived, her sin could not be absolved.”

“How do you know she did? How do you know Angelo didn’t put it in your head?”

He didn’t know. He couldn’t separate reality from the dreams anymore. He bent over his knees and silently wept, hating himself. Dante cursed under his breath, caught him up roughly and pulled him against his chest.

Sat there in the center of the tower roof holding him, grounding him, while reaction racked his body.

"Goddamnit Kastel, you're better than this. Whatever demons you have swimming around in your head -- he put them there. Don't let him win."

Dante was always so sure in his assumptions. Always so damned self-assured and tenacious. It was so hard to argue with someone who never backed down and who never believed they could be wrong. Even when the things he was saying might be the means to a salvation that did not involve being broken before a cross dedicated to the one god.

"I'm not you. I can't wash away the sins and pretend they were never there."

"Do I do that?" There was an actual hint of curiosity in Dante's voice. Kastel couldn't answer.

"Well, maybe I do. Maybe I don't. Who's to say what sin is? Angelo? I don't think so. Rab-Ker and his self-righteous flock of clerics who pretend to know what the gods want? I can tell you that I've met some of their vaunted *angels* and they're not so steeped in purity. You want to know who I measure my sins by? Sera. The look in her eyes. You. Kheron, and even that clod Gerad. Nobody else matters. What do I care what the multitudes think? We're not on their level. No matter how low you want to sink to wallow in your precious guilt -- you'll never be on their level. Find something to venerate if you have to, but don't let it be Angelo's lies, or the church or any of the twisted things your misbegotten family told you."

The words dried up. It was probably the most philosophical thing he'd ever heard from Dante. Probably the most ideological. He was drained and confused. The desire to die was not so strong now as the one to just forget.

It began to rain. A light, early spring pattering of droplets on the stone. It would wash away more of the

already fading snow. Northern fields would already have been broken in anticipation of the brief planting and harvest season that graced the cold region. Tilled weeks ago while he was -- gone.

Dante was getting up, pulling him to his feet after him. He kept his fingers around Kastel's arm. "I'm not in the mood for a soaking. C'mon."

There was no room for argument with either the tone or the grip on his arm. It was a long, dark climb down. It had been easier going up. His knees hadn't been so shaky then. He put a hand to the wall and hesitated, light-headed. Dante hovered over his shoulder.

"Pull it together, Kastel. I'm not carrying you down these stairs a second time."

Kastel was somewhat surprised to hear he had done it a first time. He waved a hand and murmured. "I'm okay."

"Sure you are."

He took a breath and continued down. It occurred to him to ask, because he had not absorbed everything Sera had said when he'd brought up the subject to her.

"You burned all my clothes -- why again?"

\* \* \*

"He's going to go off the deep end when he finds out." Gerad met Kheron's onslaught of steel and repelled it, pushing her back a few feet on the hard earth of the practice ground. She bared her teeth and shifted her stance.

"Your left side is open," he remarked off handedly and she frowned, moving her blade a little to compensate. He made a pass for the weak spot anyway and she only barely managed to block it. "Told you."

"You didn't get through my defense, did you? And he already suspects. He said as much the night we got Kastel back."

"Suspicion and sure knowledge are totally different things, Kheron."

"He's been preoccupied lately."

"As if anyone hasn't. He's going to freak out."

She lowered her sword and stared at him. "Gerad. Are you afraid?"

"Well I'd be a fool if I said I wasn't a little worried. It's not like he's the blacksmith down the street who's a little jealous over the wench he's been rolling around in the hay with for the last century."

"You are not calling me a wench." Both her brows shot up. Gerad couldn't hold back a grin.

"You are the most magnificent wench alive -- and he's possessive and nasty tempered when other people play with his toys."

"I resent being called a wench and a toy in the same sentence. And I don't care what he thinks."

"You don't care if he blasts me into itty bitty pieces of charred nightwalker?"

"He and I would have some very terse words if that happened."

"Oh, well that makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Terse words, huh?"

There was a far off rumble of thunder. As if on cue it started to rain. Gerad sighed and rested his practice blade across his shoulder. So much for practice. Not that they had gotten a lot of it done, in-between the verbal sparring. She proceeded him to the practice shed and put up her blade. She turned to him while he was placing his in its place and put her hand on his face. Her fingers touched the scar running down from his eye and across his cheek.

"I think you were right when you said I deserved this. I think he will learn to deal with it or he and I will be at odds."

"And you don't want that." It was a statement, not a question.

"No."

“Because you love him.” Another statement.

“Of course. But my heart has been withered for such a long time, is it not possible for it to hold love for more than one man?”

She was so damned pragmatic when it suited her. “I’d be a fool if I said no, wouldn’t I?”

She smiled at him. Trilled her fingers down his face and across his chest, then turned and walked into the rain towards the castle. Gerad took a deep breath to still the blood flowing recklessly to sensitive parts of his anatomy. All it took was a smile and a touch both of which held promises of things he’d only dreamed about for years.

The cold rain cooled him off with chilling efficiency. He pounded up the steps and into the main hall. Kheron was already approaching the hearth where there was stew warming over the coals and mulled cider to chase away the still very chill weather. The hall was mostly empty, being afternoon and the servants busy with their day’s tasks.

Sera was there, hovering over the shoulder of a maid that was patching a pile of uniforms. The same girl, he thought, from the fall of straight dark hair that they had saved from the Prophet’s mountain fortress. He hadn’t seen her since that night on the tower. He’d forgotten about her quite honestly, though he really ought not have, considering she’d endangered her own life to try and help Kastel and himself when the fortress had been falling down around their ears. Kheron’s private welcome back had driven most everything else out of his head. It looked as if the girl had been taken care of though. If Sera had taken an interest, then she was sure to be treated fairly. Slave mark or no.

“Hello, little girl. You’re looking good today.”

Sera glanced up at him. The dark haired girl did, but looked quickly away. Shy or taught by her various owners never to look a free man in the eyes. Some men took great pleasure in dehumanizing their possessions.

He rather hoped it was the former, for the girl had too much courage to have been mistreated so badly.

“Well, hello Gerad.” Sera smiled at him. “You’re wet.”

“It’s raining.”

“Ah, that would do it.”

He wanted to ask the slave girl how she was getting along here, but the clamor of boot heels on the floor warned of a rapidly approaching disturbance. Dante stalked across the hall towards them, showing signs of dampness himself, looking mightily pissed off about something. Gerad felt his stomach tighten and missed the presence of the Great Sword. Dante stopped a few feet away and beckoned them over with a sharp wave of his hand.

“What’s wrong?” Sera asked, eyes wide with apprehension.

“Kastel is being self-destructive. I don’t trust him and I don’t want him left alone until he gets his sense back.”

Sera put a hand over her mouth in dismay.

Gerad narrowed his eyes, trying to read meaning into things that Dante wasn’t saying. “What did he do?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just keep an eye on him. It’s got to be us because nobody else here could stop him if he really wanted to do something stupid.”

The wizards and the lady Sera moved further away, conferring among themselves out of Lily’s hearing. But she had overheard enough to make her bite her lip in anxiety. Her fingers were frozen on the material she mended. Days had passed and she had strained to hear even a rumor of him and now this disheartening news. They wouldn’t understand, the powerful, the infallible lords who dominated this place. They could plan wars against the master -- the Prophet - - till the day grew long

and never truly know how overwhelming and how inevitable the power of his will was.

He had never lifted a hand to strike her, never hurt her in a physical fashion or gone to great lengths to destroy her will -- she had never given him cause -- but she still had nightmares about him. She still woke sweating in the darkness of this place where people laughed and lived without fear, afraid that he might catch her at this game of freedom she engaged in. She could only imagine what *he* endured, having been the center of the Master's obsession. They all seemed surprised, as if being a great lord or a powerful wizard could make one just shrug off the wounds.

But who was she to tell them? They had forgotten her, save for Sera, who seemed to think she was a cause to be taken up. She thought Sera took up a great many causes. Her charity was widespread and selfless, even when it made the recipient uncomfortable. Lily liked her very much, but she was not used to having people go out of their way to be kind to her, to look after her well-being. She kept expecting it to end suddenly and find herself thrust back into slavery.

She had coin in her pocket. She'd never had coin in her life of her own. She didn't know what she might do with it. Save it, she thought to buy an instrument, though the desire to go to market and spend it wildly and thoughtlessly on trinkets and sweetmeats was overpowering. Sera had offered to go with her that very morning, when Mistress Keitlan had handed her the few coins for her work. She had almost agreed, even though it was disconcerting to imagine herself guided through this northern city by a lady of some position. She hardly had the taste for it now, depressed by what she had overheard. The only consolation was the surety that they would protect him, even against himself. They had brought down the place without windows and beaten the Master to that end. Sera's wizard had, who glowered and glared

and stomped about threateningly, but was fiercely protective of his inner group of confidants. She had overheard some of the servants whispering that he had raised the lord Kastel and the nelai're Lady Kheron. Lily hardly saw how that was possible, him looking little older than the two of them. However, the appearance of wizardly things was not to be trusted.

But it was not her concern. None of it was her business. With a shuddery sigh she forced her fingers back to work. But her mind kept wondering.

\* \* \*

Kastel looked distracted, eyes filled with vague preoccupation. It was better than desolation. Much, much preferable to the look he'd had on the tower. Dante sat in a high backed chair, swirling the remnants of a red wine about the bottom of a crystal goblet while Kastel drifted about the walls of his library, running his fingers lightly across the spines of his books. He didn't speak. Just occasionally pulled a book out and placed it elsewhere. If he noticed various damages or missing volumes he did not mention it out loud.

Dante finished the wine and sat with his chin propped on his hand, staring out the window. Since Kastel was uncommunicative, his mind wandered to other things. Sera entertained his thoughts for a while, in various positions and states of undress. But it was a frustrating fantasy since he couldn't predict when it would come to fruition. Which brought to mind the reason for her present uncertainty. The baby and the man that had forced her to lose it. He ground his teeth, knowing he would only make himself crazy thinking about the Prophet possibly still alive and out there somewhere plotting against him. So he thought about that damned old fortress and its very powerful wards. He would very much like to discover its location. Very much like to scout those ruins.



“Did you ever have a hint where it was? Angelo’s fortress?”

Kastel slowly turned pale blue eyes his way. Expressionless, detached eyes that blinked once, then flickered back to the shelves. “No.”

“How’d you get there?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t turn this time, his back was very straight. Dante didn’t think he was actually seeing the books anymore. “I just -- woke up there. There were no windows.”

“Oh, but there were wards. Very strong wards.”

“I’m aware.”

Dante lifted a brow. “I imagine you are. What did he do to you?” He had a curiosity, whether as a fuel for his fire of vengeance or merely the need to know, he couldn’t say.

“Does it matter? We know the results, do we not?” Kastel’s voice had gone brittle and imperious, some fraction of the icy facade he always wore forming in reflexive protection.

Dante didn’t push it, even though he wanted to. “I just wish I’d seen his body. I want to find that fortress.”

“It was destroyed completely?” A glance over a shoulder. Some small bit of interest creeping past the attempt to distance himself from the ordeal.

“Pretty much. Last I saw the walls were falling down before the spell snapped us back.”

“What about the acolytes? Could they have escaped?”

Dante sniffed. “Nobody that was in that pile of stones got out alive.”

“Oh.” Kastel stared at him, then shifted his gaze back to the books. Dante was interested enough in his reactions to catch the brief flicker of pain that crossed his face.

“Why?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” A long pause. He found a misplaced book and took it down, stood staring at the

words on the spine for a long moment before murmuring softly. "There was a girl."

"A girl? One of his priestess's?"

"No. Just a slave. It doesn't matter."

Oh, interesting. Very interesting. "Humm. Maybe the slave girl we got out with us knows of her."

Kastel cast him a wary look, wary of Dante's tone. Dante spun the goblet between his fingers, waiting. Kastel broke the stare first and searched for the place the book belonged. It took him a while to find it.

"What was this slave girl's name?" Dante asked pleasantly.

"I don't know. She tried to help me. I told you it was of no import."

"Well the one we brought back is called Lily and she's foul tempered and disrespectful. Your housemistress gave her a job in the laundry."

Kastel didn't reply, apparently finished with the subject. After a while, when he'd pattered around the shelves for long enough, he asked. "Was it you that put my books in such disarray?"

"Don't complain. It got you back."

"How long do you plan on dogging my footsteps?" Quieter this time.

"Until Gerad comes up and takes my place." He smiled. Kastel looked at him unhappily and Dante reminded him. "I wasn't the one who tried to smash himself upon the rocks. So you *will* endure our company until I think there's no further need."

"There isn't."

"You lost the right to make that call when you stepped off the battlements. Earn it back."

Kastel's eyes flashed indignation. "I do not need your protection. I am not your disciple anymore."

"No? I think you do. Otherwise Angelo wouldn't have taken you so goddamned easy."

Kastel opened his mouth, snapped it shut. Stalked to the door and snatched it open intent on fleeing who the hell knew where. Gerad stood there with his hand raised to knock and an idiotic grin on his broad face.

“Well there you are. I was looking --”

“You’re late,” Dante remarked. Gerad had what looked like a bite on the side of his mouth and a sort of bemused expression in his eyes.

“What the hell happened to you?” In the back of his mind it occurred to him that Kheron had the tendency to bite when overexcited.

“Um -- just a little roughhousing in the practice yard.”

“Really? With anyone I’d know?”

Gerad blushed. It looked ridiculous on the Master of the Divhar. Dante wondered if he ought to kill him now or wait until later. If he killed him now it meant he’d have to spend the rest of the night baby-sitting Kastel.

Kastel glared at the both of them and brushed past Gerad. The nightwalker shrugged nervously, gestured after Kastel and disappeared after him.

Dante sat simmering, thinking about all the little things that had been going on between Gerad and Kheron lately. All the things he had been too busy to notice. The goblet shattered in his hand. He shook his fingers and carelessly let the shards fall to the floor. He stared at his palm and the blood welling from places where glass had rent flesh. Tiny slivers of glass worked themselves out, expelled by his magics, then the flesh mended itself.

Frustrating that the only blood he’d spilled these last days, when annoyances came at him one after the other, was his own.

## Twenty-two

Sera was melancholy, but she was determined to wear a cheerful face. She had gone long enough scaring everyone senseless with her dementia that she felt it her duty to make up for it. She recalled some of that time, but not all. It seemed such a surreal, drifting existence where faces came and went but nothing anyone did or said held enough impact to scar her memory. She sat in her room, brushing her hair, mindlessly letting the soothing rhythm of strokes bring her peace. The fire warmed the air. The smell of winter-dried flowers she had bought at market was a subtle perfume.

The handle of her door turned without the benefit of a polite knock to request entry. Dante stood there, looking sullen and brooding.

“Still awake?”

She arched a brow at the question and finished the stroke she had begun when he'd opened her door.

“Is there something you want in my room at this hour?” she asked tartly. She expected a leer or a lecherous suggestion. He frowned instead.

“What's wrong now?” she demanded warily.

“Nothing.” He almost spat the word, then stepped inside, shutting the door behind him and stalked over to stand before her fire, his hands on the thick mantel over it.

“Don't come to me with that look on your face and say nothing's wrong. Is Kastel okay?”

“Fine.”

She put the brush down and glared at his back. “If you're going to just stand there sulking and not tell me what's wrong, then you can leave right now.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her, eyes cold and angry beneath half lowered lashes. He pushed off from

the mantel and swept past her, apparently willing to follow her terms. He was blatantly insane if he thought he could prick her curiosity and just walk away.

“Oh no you don’t.” She jumped out of her chair and caught his arm.

He stopped, tense and rigid. He most certainly could have ripped out of her grasp without breaking stride. He was angry. *Angry* angry. Not worried angry like he’d been over Kastel for the last few days, but more the venomous, dearly wanted to kill something anger that took him from time to time. She thought if she’d had a brain in her head she would have been wary of him with that look on his face, but she generally was senseless when it came to him.

“Dante, tell me what’s happened? Something to do with Angelo?”

He hissed at that name. Tossed his head to shake the hair out of his eyes and snarled.

“It’s Gerad. That boundless, conniving whoreson. He’s fucking Kheron.”

She took a breath at the bluntness. “Oh. That. Well it’s been building for years now.”

His eyes widened with shock a moment before they narrowed into slits of soul searing accusation. “**What?** ”

“Oh everyone knew it. You can even ask Kastel. Gerad’s loved her for the longest time. She was just too busy mooning over you to realize how much healthier he was for her. She’s much better off with him, if you want my opinion.”

She smiled at him sweetly. One had to admit to being a tad bit prejudiced on the subject, even though she was terribly satisfied with how happy Gerad had been acting the last few days. She had noticed right off.

Dante glared like he wanted her dead. Jerked his arm out of her grasp and teetered between stalking out of the room and strangling her.

“That son of a bitch!” he settled for spitting. “He knew she was mine and he dares to lay a finger on her.”

“Yours?” Sera’s anger began to flare up. It began to burn rather nicely in the pit of her stomach. “What is it with you and thinking you own people? Does anybody here wear a slave mark?” She thrust her hand up before his eyes. Then balled it into a fist and shook it at him. “I don’t ever recall seeing one on Kheron. Or Kastel -- but you seem to think we’re all property.”

“Would you like one?” he hissed back at her.

She stomped her foot in frustration. “Ohhhh, you make me so mad sometimes. You are so arrogant. And remember that little speech you gave me when you chased me down here? Remember that, you possessive, annoying ass? What the hell does it matter if he’s sleeping with her? You won’t be doing it yourself, or was that just a convenient little lie to get me to forgive you. Or is it merely that since you had her no one else can?”

“He betrayed me.” Quiet simmering anger. But she could see in his face that he remembered very well what he had said.

“He did not. He never would have acted at all if you hadn’t been gone all that time. Even then all he wanted was that she be happy. He cares more about her well being than his own. Can you say the same? It has nothing to do with you, Dante. Not everything does. Can’t you see that? And if you even lay a finger on him, I swear I will make you regret it.”

“Don’t threaten me,” he said darkly.

“Or what?”

He glared at her silently. Turned on his heel to leave. Oh, not so easy to escape a discussion not to his liking -- not when she was so ready to take it on. She reached out and caught a handful of his hair. He hissed when it yanked against his scalp and brought a hand up to rub the spot, glaring daggers at her.

“Sera.” Warning tone. She ignored it and wound the thick lock around her hand twice to keep hold of it

“No. Not until you promise me no violence against Gerad.”

“No.”

“You will so. He’s your friend.”

He refused to respond to that. Foolish, foolish man. But there was some bit of hurt underneath the anger in his eyes. Some sense of the betrayal he felt that goaded this black mood. That was the heart of the matter after all, that someone he did consider a friend and an ally had transgressed against him. The anger made her mad. The jealousy made her want to hit him. That little spark of pain -- oh that made her want to do something altogether else.

She pulled on the hair, lifted herself up to her toes and kissed him. He was so surprised at the move he pulled back, but she had hold of his hair so he didn’t get far before she wrapped the other arm around his neck and molded herself against him. She felt reckless and daring, and her heart beat as rapidly with agitation as his did.

Brazenly she plunged her tongue into his mouth, felt him respond with quickly awakening fervor. Felt it in the hardness between his legs that pressed against her stomach. She had power, she realized of a sudden. A great deal of power that she had always chosen not to use. A power that had begun with that connection they shared, that soul bond from the days that his spirit and hers were linked, and afterwards when she had broken the spell that had kept his spirit from his slumbering flesh. Something about her always had drawn him like a moth to her flame. And for one reason or another, from fear, from anger, from some silly ideal of honor, she never used it.

“Promise me.” She broke the kiss, pulled back just far enough so that she could see his eyes. The anger had been replaced by a smoky haze of craving. His hands pressed against her back. She could feel the individual

indentation's of his fingers through the material of her night robe and gown. He leaned in towards her to reestablish the kiss, but she pulled back on his hair, not willing to continue until she got an answer. A vow that she felt confident he would not break if she could just get him to make it.

"No." With a stubbornness that refused to be leashed or reasoned with.

"Why?" She breathed it against his neck, teasing the skin below his jaw. His fingers tightened on her back, ran down the curve of her hip to press her closer against him.

"I thought you weren't ready?" he said against her ear.

"Maybe I'm still not. It depends on how much you inspire me with your altruism. Selflessness makes me tingly."

He half laughed, lifted her off her feet and backed her the few feet that separated them from the bed. Controlled fall, with him on top and his hands keeping his weight from hurting her. "Then why the hell are you with me?"

His leaned over her, plunging her into shadow, shutting out the rest of the world. Everything but his intense eyes. She trembled, felt her recklessness diminishing and fought to shore it back up. He could wrest control from her so very easily if she let him.

"Because every once and a while you surprise me. Benevolence is no big thing for a humble man, but when you do it -- it means more."

She trailed her fingers down his ribs and around his back, drawing him closer.

"Just let them be happy. It won't kill you. You have other things to worry about."

"So this is a bribe?"

"No."

He arched a brow at her dubiously. "A reward for my good behavior? What would your father think?"

"Oohhh." That was not the most political thing to bring up, what with Father sleeping not so far away. She



pushed at his chest and he rolled off to lie beside her. She propped herself up to glare down at him. "He'd think I was a brazen hussy, is what. I ought to kick you out right now."

"If you weren't a brazen hussy?"

"What are you going to do, Dante?"

"What do you want me to do, throw them a banquet?"

"That would be nice."

"Hah! In your dreams."

"Dante!"

"I'll think about it."

Oh, sweet victory. She could taste it. She bent over and kissed him. His fingers pulled at the ties at the neck of her nightgown. She gave in to the recklessness. Elation surged with the surrender, as she realized how very much she wanted this. Him. The bargain -- bribe -- reward was a convenient excuse to overcome inhibitions created of fear and betrayal. And she had an edge now. A knowledge and will to use it that had been lacking before Angelo had hurt her and taken her baby.

There was something inside her that was a little fiercer than it had been. Something willing to find an advantage and use it. Perhaps it made her better able to deal with him, because Goddess knew he was hard to handle under the best of circumstances. A little more on equal footing, emotionally. Not hard, but willing to make hard choices. This one she made because she wanted him -- loved him -- and thought it might sway him away from violence. And in the back of her mind a little voice cried, fool, fool, he'll only hurt you again. But the new, harder part of her calmly stated that if he betrayed her again -- there would be no further chance at redemption.

\* \* \*

Another handful of coins to join her small treasury and Lily felt wealthy beyond her dreams. She went into town

with one of the kitchen maids, to fetch a list of supplies the old woman who ran the kitchen needed. It was the first time she had stepped out of the castle grounds. The city of Sta-Veron was surprisingly well tended after a long winter. The girl, Setha, chattered incessantly, spreading gossip about the various outstanding citizens, pointing out landmarks, telling of the city's history. Conquered by its present lord many years past, it prospered more now than it ever had.

How many years?

She shivered when Setha told her. Longer than she'd been alive. Setha whispered things about wizards and immortality that Lily had no wish to hear. She tried to concentrate on other things.

Setha wanted to stop and buy a sweetmeat and she found that an alluring distraction. She gave over one of her coins and got a handful of copper and a sticky sweet pastry sprinkled with nuts in return.

They sat on a stone wall outside a tavern and consumed them, licking their fingers of sugar and honey. The sounds of music from inside drew Lily's attention. She peered in the door while Setha flirted with a passing merchant. Three musicians played by the fire. A rustic, overused tune, but the common folk here seemed to find it pleasing. She watched them, her fingers itching to touch the strings of her own lost instrument. She wanted to go and talk with them, to discover if they lived here in Sta-Veron or traveled with some troupe. Most minstrels roamed far and wide, hearing and seeing everything. Absorbing all the facets of history to make into song.

Oh, to have the freedom to do that. To wander where she might with no hand to sway her path. Freedom. She would go now, if she knew how to cross the mountains. If she had the money to buy a lyre. If she did not have the slave mark on her hand that would make her victim to any who chose to force the issue.

Setha pulled her away from the tavern door with the lighthearted comment that she had made a assignation for later with the merchant she'd been talking with and wanted to get back to the castle and finish her work so she might make it. They picked up Cook's supplies and walked back to the castle with the burdens.

Thyren, who was the laundry mistress, hailed her as soon as she stepped foot back within the kitchen courtyard, wanting help hanging out the linens. All the sheets and bedclothes that needed washing that week were wrung out in wet lumps waiting to be hung from the lines that stretched across the kitchen court. The lines were liken to sails, so full of billowing white sheets were they. It took the two of them to stretch the sheets out and clip them to the lines without the hems dragging in the mud that covered the cobblestone of the yard. Thyren worked silently. Her face was a perpetual frown. The quiet was a pleasant exchange for Setha's meaningless chatter.

Then Thyren looked up from the sheet she was clipping to a line and widened her eyes in surprise. She didn't say a thing, just looked past Lily's shoulder as if an angel had touched earth in the kitchen court. Lily turned. Her breath caught in her throat. He stood there, just outside the kitchen door, as out of place here in the mud covered kitchen yard as any angel would have been. He hesitated, eyes drifting about the yard, focusing finally, almost uncertainly upon the rows of laundry lines. Lily's heart hammered in her chest. Embarrassment, fear, shame churned in her stomach. She lowered her head so that her hair might fall into her face, an insubstantial shield that she had always used to protect herself. She could still see out, beyond the fall of dark strands. Could still see him, walking towards her, pale and fair in the sunlight. Goddess, she had wondered what it would be like to see him in the sun. He took her breath away and she was mortified for that too, that she should assess him as if he were on her own level. A few of the kitchen maids

looked out the door, intensely curious. The dark skinned, Nelai're lady loitered just outside the kitchen door, looking bored and restless.

He stopped a few feet from her, staring at her as if he were trying to ascertain whether she were familiar or not. There was a certain disassociation in his gaze, as if his mind were not fully connected to what his body did.

"M-my lord," she stammered it out. She heard Thyren murmur something of a similar nature from behind her.

Clarity returned to his eyes. She could almost see the change as the focus sharpened. Still wounded, she thought, but fighting it. Oh, she had wanted to see him so badly since she had been brought here, but now she realized that while she was the same slave girl who had dwelled in the place without windows, he was no longer the same man the Master had held captive. She wanted to flee. His standing in this muddy yard was so wrong. She couldn't stand it. She could not reckon what he wanted of her.

"He said -- I thought it might be you -- " He spoke, incompletely, as if he could only force some of his thoughts out. He looked away from her, disconcerted and finished with a simple. "Thank you. Just -- thank you."

She didn't know how to respond. So she simply stared at him when she should have bowed or given him his welcome or told him that he need not thank her at all, she had not done any of the things she had out of some need for gratitude.

He looked down under her hidden gaze and his eyes drifted to her hand. To the blaring black tattoo that would mark her for life. He reached down and took her fingers. She was trembling so hard he had to have felt it. He stared at the tattoo and she stared, fascinated at the fringe of lowered lashes that half hid his eyes. She felt something in the air, something invasive and electric that had nothing to do with the erratic beat of her heart. Her

skin tingled, hot and cold at the same time. Her hand in his seemed for a brief moment to be bathed in something liquid and cool. Reflexively she jerked it out of his grasp.

“You need never be enslaved again,” he said softly, then turned and strode away from her, not towards the kitchen but around the side of the castle. The nelai're pushed herself off the wall and stared at Lily with narrow, speculative eyes before sauntering after him.

Lily tried to calm her breathing. Tried to gather her wits about her. She looked at her hand and almost her knees faltered under her. The skin was clear of blemish. Smooth and clean and unscarred, as if no mark had ever been placed there.

Lily didn't cry. It was so useless a practice. But wetness streaked down her cheeks now. She held the hand to her breast and Thyren came around the line to look at it, and gasped in awe. The kitchen maids came out and even old cook and they all clustered about to look at what their lord and master had done. Lily half heard their words. Half heard that Lord Kastel never set foot in the servant's domain, much less trudged through the mud to the laundry lines to converse with serving girls. They speculated that he was still not quite right from his *ordeal*, as they called it. But they could never really know. No one could, that hadn't been there.

He had taken the slave mark away. She couldn't get past that miracle. He had taken her hand and given her the greatest gift anyone could ever had bestowed upon her. He had made her more than she was with a moment's concentration of magic and power that Lily could never comprehend. She couldn't make the tears stop, because he had sealed her fate. He had given her freedom and doomed her to misery in one stroke. How could even freedom compensate for the tragic fact that she loved him?

\* \* \*

Somewhere along the lush western coast of the continent an old man woke from a ravaged fever. He lay in a burrow nestled out from the sand at the edge of the forest. He had lain there for many days. Weeks almost, while the ocean surged against the sand, endlessly eroding at the shore. His clothes were stiff from salt, his body curled into a fetal position, cramped and stringy as if all the vigor of his muscles had left him. His flesh was sunken and lined, hair tangled and streaked liberally with gray. Not the man he had been scant weeks ago. A man weakened and drained by the toll of too much power passing a vessel that was never intended to possess it.

He crawled to his knees weakly and wailed out his consternation. The birds in the trees fluttered nervously at his keening. Stolen. All had been stolen from him at the last instant. Unfair. The god laughed at him for his failure. The god punished the weak. But it was so unjust. He had served so faithfully, for so many years.

Why? Why? He screamed out. But there was no answer from above. Only the sound of the ocean. To hell with god then, he seethed. That god had never lent him a physical hand anyway.

He stretched power that was weak and strained, feeling after the great solidity that was his asylum and found only the seeping wreck of the wards. The flavor of calamity and destruction. His doing that. A last, futile effort to obliterate the enemy. The work of centuries was nothing more than a crumbled wreck. But that archaic stone fortress was not truly the burrow that had served as his haven throughout the years of Galgaga's devastation. That place lay sheltered beneath the ruins. That place had withstood Galgaga itself, had withstood the nuclear and biological weapons frantic nations had launched in their misunderstood desperation.

He closed his eyes and called upon the homing ability of the sylph he had subsumed years past and pulled

himself to that place. A blur of position. A moment of disorientation and the natural beauty of the beach was replaced by something altogether more sterile. Metal hallway lit by only the few remaining running lights along its walls that were still able to pull power from fading nuclear generators. Four centuries of dust coated floor and walls, marred only by the occasional set of footprints that marked his own seldom comings and goings from these passages.

A fall out shelter of titanic proportions that had housed the elite of a dying world. The military, the politicians and the religious icons that held sway over the devotion of a people that would very soon mostly be dead. Almost it would have been a success, all that time ago, if the poison hadn't seeped in and taken out most of the people safeguarded within. The rest -- the rest had fallen victim to something else.

Stoop shouldered and limping, Angelo made his way down the seemingly endless array of corridors. He needed to rest. To regain what he could of his failing strength. His allies were gone. His faith in god shaken. His power diminished. All he had to rely upon now was his cunning and his resolve and the assurance of his enemy's arrogance.

## Twenty-three

“Where have you been?”

Kheron pulled the chair back opposite Gerad and settled into it. He already had a bottle of wine half consumed and his stomach rumbled eagerly for the meal he had been postponing till her arrival. They met at an inn in the east side of town. It was easier to get a private moment there without the sharp eyes and loose tongues of all the castle staff absorbing everything that went on within their domain. It was just a little safer to engage in an intimate moment without the danger of Dante happening by and blowing Gerad to bits. Even Kheron, despite her bravado, was just a little intimidated by thoughts of Dante’s reaction to the fact that she was sharing Gerad’s bed. So better safe than sorry.

Kheron pulled of her gloves a finger at a time -- Gerad was fascinated by the methodical way she accomplished it -- and lay the soft leather beside her on the table top afterwards. Her hands were long fingered and slim, strong despite the fragile bone structure. She could wield a sword better than most men with those hands. He had bruises to prove it.

“Kastel proved particularly restless. He decided to go riding. All the way to the northern forest line and him woolgathering the entire time. More than likely Dante was right in keeping an eye on him. I’ve known him to be lackadaisical on occasion -- mostly when we were younger -- but now -- I think he’s just lost his focus and that’s not like him.”

“I can understand it. That much hurt can change a man.”

She waved a hand, uncomfortable with the subject. “Well, here’s an interesting tidbit. Before I got dragged out into the wilderness, he made a stop to see that little



slave you brought back with you. He removed her slave tattoo."

Gerad lifted a thick brow in surprise. "Really? I think she tried to help him out when he was there. She damn sure went to lengths when the place was falling down about our heads. Did he say anything about her to you?"

Kheron snorted. "He didn't say a word to me the whole afternoon."

"Hummm. Well, if she did try and help him I think she deserves more than a job in the laundry."

"What? Some reward?"

"It wouldn't hurt."

"You are generous, Gerad." She smiled lazily at him. A smile that promised so many different things. He thought of the room upstairs he had bought and paid for. The smells from the kitchen divided his attention. His stomach was a harsh mistress.

"And famished," he said mournfully. "I was waiting for you to have supper."

She laughed. "Ah, a man not ruled by his head -- or his *other* head -- but by his stomach. How refreshing."

He gave her a dour stare. Not quite appreciating the off hand complement. Her laugh turned to a chuckle and she reached across the table to squeeze his fingers. "I'm so happy to have found you, Gerad. Supper is a wonderful notion."

Supper was quickly consumed and the hour's dalliance afterwards an ample dessert. Neither Gerad nor Kheron were much for lying about indulgently afterward and were on their way soon after, walking through the dusk shrouded evening of Sta-Veron. They were both too seasoned and wry to hold hands like young lovers on an evening stroll, but they savored the company and the brushing of shoulders and he occasionally wrapped an arm about her waist just to feel the curve of her body against him, still amazed and flabbergasted that she

allowed him to do it. That she allowed him to worship her in a way he heretofore had only dreamed of.

They found their way back to the castle, the gate guard letting them pass with a nod and a word of greeting to Gerad. Supper had already been served in the main hall and now only a few of the servants sat at the tables along the side of the hall taking a late meal. Gerad thought he saw the girl from Angelo's fortress among them. He could only tell because with her head lowered, concentrating on her stew, her dark hair fell almost completely over her face. All he could seem to remember of her was that shield of falling hair. He touched Kheron's arm and motioned towards the girl. She nodded at him, and stood against the wall while he walked along the hall towards the girl.

Silence was second nature to him and he was standing behind the girl, Lily, was her name, he believed, without a single servant being aware of him. When he spoke they all started and looked back at him in shock. One of them made a religious sign against ghosts and the like and Gerad smiled. Lily looked up at him warily and he could just see the large round orbs of dark eyes behind the hair. Pretty girl, he thought, if she'd only push the hair out of her face.

"A word, if you don't mind," he asked. The other girls at the table stared at her, curious and not a little envious. Twice in one day, he thought, that this girl, a slave -- or a former slave, since her hand was now free of blemish drew the attention of the powers that be. He felt a little sorry for her, figuring she would be the object of multitudes of speculation as an aftermath.

\* \* \*

Lily was thinking the same thing. She had already been questioned mercilessly about Kastel approaching her in the kitchen yard. Every servant in the castle was

whispering about it. What had she done to warrant such a gift from their lord? How had she known him? What was it like to have such a magic performed on her person? A hundred questions about the Place Without Windows and her time there that they had not cared a whit about before she had been placed at the fore of their attention. A few wary ones about their lord, but not many. They feared to gossip too much about him. They feared him as much as they respected him and other than the mere fact that he was a wizard, Lily had yet to see why. She thought the silver haired one deserved much more fear, but the girls all giggled and blushed when *he* was around, not afraid one bit.

Unless the lady Sera was with him, then they all turned their eyes away and went about their business, but Lily thought that had more to do with Sera than Dante.

They were all somewhat put out with her that she would not answer more than a soft yes, or no, or a simple refusal to speak of it at all. They thought her withdrawn and shy, which was probably better than thinking her contemptuous of their petty curiosity. In truth she was a little of both. Not comfortable talking with these outgoing women and most certainly uneasy with the thought of spreading things that were painful or dear to her heart for all to hear.

She bore their attention as she rose and meekly followed the Master of the Divhar along the wall, under the hanging tapestries and towards the quietly waiting figure of the *nelai're* lady. Kheron was her name. Lily had heard it said in the wake of Kastel's benediction of her.

Her hand still tingled from the feel of the magic. Or perhaps it was merely from the touch of his fingers. She recalled the latter more clearly than the former. She could not quite forget the brief moment when his eyes had focused upon her. Oh, gods help her, but he was so beautiful, her whole afternoon had been spent

daydreaming about him and all her practical self-advice had not been able to stop it.

“So, little girl -- Lily, isn’t it?” Lord Gerad looked down at her. Lily had to blink to regain composure and drive away thoughts of this hall’s lord. One had to realize how silly she was being. Every girl in this hall had probably looked at him and had a fantasy or three and none of it would ever come to fruition. Only, he’d never trekked through the mud and removed a slave mark from any of them.

Gerad was looking at her and she shook her head slightly in irritation at herself.

“Yes, my lord. Lily is my name.”

“How long have you been a slave, Lily?” The nelai’re lady asked.

Lily blinked at her. Close up the woman was exotically stunning. “As -- as long as I can remember, lady.”

“What will you do, now that you no longer are?” The lady was blunt.

“I -- I don’t know. My options are limited -- my lord. My lady.”

Gerad waved an impatient hand at the honorariums. “That’s what we’re here about. I know you helped out Kastel -- as much as you could at any rate -- while Angelo had him. It was a selfless thing to do. You deserve some repayment for your trouble.”

She stared at him, not comprehending. “My trouble?”

“Ask for something and if it is within my power, I will see you get it. Little enough payment for the life of a friend.”

The life of a friend. As if she had saved his life. As if she had done it expecting anything but punishment from the Master. Yet, they were asking and she could not quite stop from thinking of an answer. What sane person would not?

What did she want? Lord Kastel, she thought. But one doubted they would give gifts of that extravagance. So she said the only other thing that came to her mind.

“A lyre. So I can play again.”

“You’re a minstrel?” the lady lifted a brow in curiosity. Lily nodded.

Gerad shrugged. “All right. If that’s what you want. I’ll see that you get one.”

“Thank you,” she whispered it. Lady Kheron turned away, finished with the conversation. Gerad nodded his head once more, then patted her shoulder as if she were a favored hound who’d performed well. He even went so far as to say, before leaving her. “Good girl.”

Lilly almost laughed. She did not know what else to do.

\* \* \*

A wrapped package was waiting for her on her narrow cot in the room she shared with three other girls the next evening. She sat on the edge of the cot and held it over her knees for a long time before carefully unwrapping it. It was not a lyre, but a lute. Pear shaped body, graceful bent neck and fretted fingerboard.

Used, she thought from the wear along the neck, but of good craftsmanship. She supposed it was the best they’d been able to do, in such a place as Sta-Veron, so far from the beaten track of civilization. The sounds were not quite as lyrical as those of the harp-like lyre, but she supposed it was more practical for a traveling minstrel. Easier to swing over one’s knee to play. More versatile with some of the bawdy songs the common folk preferred to hear. Alone in the room, she dared to run her fingers over the strings. A cascade of notes ensued. Almost perfectly tuned. She adjusted it until it was to her liking and realized as she finished that she was grinning broadly. Her face hurt from it, it had been so long since she’d had anything to smile about.

It was not so late, she thought, that she might not venture out into the city and find a willing audience to practice on. There was always a tavern full of patrons that might part with a coin or two for a song. She had plied enough of them with her various owners. She knew the profession well. She pulled her apron off, and hefted the instrument. She was almost down the stairs to the second level when Setha came tromping up.

“Ohh, what have you there?” the girl asked, eyeing the lute.

It was so plainly obvious that Lily did not offer an answer.

“Where’d you get that?”

That one was not so obvious and Lily thought it best to answer to avoid rampart speculation. “Lord Gerad and Lady Kheron.”

“Really?” The girl looked surprised. “Well, where are you off with it?”

“I -- I thought to go into town and perhaps find a tavern keep willing to let me play a song or two.”

“Ooohhh, are you good? I know a place. A beau of mine works there.”

One could hardly find a better offer. She sighed and nodded. Setha grinned and scrambled up the stairs, calling over her shoulder. “Just be a minute. Have to make sure I look me best for a night on the town.”

\* \* \*

Sera had decided that, yes, she preferred the act of lovemaking on a bed rather than on a pine needle covered ground. Sharp little sticks and burrs were such a distraction when one could be concentrating on so much more interesting things. The bed was very nice, she also found -- and this appalled her stridently devout sense of propriety to no ends -- that there were a variety of other places and positions that were equally thrilling.

Dante was so diligent a teacher and plainly ecstatic by her wholehearted foray into the education. She had a particular fondness, she had discovered, for being on top. She rather thought it was because it gave her some small portion of control and that was so hard to find with him. He hardly complained.

They had barely left her rooms for the last few days, save when he reluctantly drifted off to take his turn watching Kastel. When she went down to find a bite to eat, Keitlan gave her a worried look and asked if she were feeling sick.

Why no. Why do you ask?

And of course the woman remarked that she had been closeted in her room, not even coming down for dinner or lunch and what was the matter. Sera blushed and couldn't quite come up with a thing to say until the old cook blurted out who else had been conspicuously absent during said meals. Keitlan's brows shot up, and she got a bit of a rosy blush herself, before hastily murmuring that a girl needed to eat if she were to keep her health.

The cook said something a little more crass -- the old woman had an absolutely blatant obsession with Dante. Sera hurriedly took her bread and bowl of stew out into the hall to consume. While she was trying to fight the blush down -- her mind kept recalling what she had been doing before he had left her -- her father and his attendant priest came in from the main courtyard.

Goddess, one just did not need to dwell on certain things when one's priestly father was approaching with a smile of greeting on his face.

"Sera, you look well this morning."

She lifted her cheek for a kiss of greeting.

"What have you been about so early?" she asked, knowing she sounded guilty. He did not seem to notice.

"There's a small temple at the edge of the city. The only one dedicated to the Goddess in Sta-Veron. It sees little patronage, and its priest is an elderly man who can

barely keep the maintenance up by himself. We've been helping him out."

"Trying to drum up business?" she asked wryly, then almost gasped at the sacrilegious flavor of the question. Dante was getting to her in more ways than one. Rab-Ker lifted a brow, not offended and she smiled weakly.

"There are not a great deal of pious men this far north. To most of them the gods are little more than names to utter in a curse. But there are a few. So, I missed you at dinner last night. Were you well?"

Oh, he had to ask that. Learning a new trick, oh honored father. You'd be proud of me, goddess knows Dante was impressed. She took a sip of cider and said. "I had a headache, so I stayed in."

Rab-Ker waved a hand and released his aide from duty to him. Then sat down beside her, folding his big hands on the table. She felt a certain amount of wariness at the serious look on his face.

"What is it?" she asked, never one to hold her tongue when curiosity beckoned.

"I feel I should return to Alsansir soon. Trading convoys will be traveling south soon. I need to see the state of affairs. I've been derelict from my duty for too long."

"You haven't been here that long," she said. "Hardly more than a month."

"Too long, considering the situation. You should come with me."

She blinked at him in surprise. "Me? But Teo banned me from the city."

"Before he knew fully of the Prophet's deceptions. When I return I shall shed more light on the man's activities and we will convince him that your actions were just."

She bit her lip, torn. Thinking of all the warm memories of Alsansir. All the childhood reminiscences that held a place in her heart. She had grown up in the



cathedral dormitory. Had lived most of her life in the delicate gardens and ornate passages of the palace grounds and yet it seemed so distant now. So empty of the things that made a home feel like a home.

This less refined, cold place was more of a home to her than she could convince herself that Alsansir could ever be again. All the politics, all the posturing and the courtly intrigue -- none of it held the simple allure of being welcome in amongst the servants, sharing in all their gossip and simple ways -- of not having to bow and practice courtly manners, of not having to be wary not to offend the godly men who shared the dormitory with her less than godly ways.

And of course Dante wouldn't be there. Dante would never be there because too much had passed. And Kastel wouldn't and probably not Gerad or Kheron, though the last two might not be as adamant about it. And without all the people she loved around her, she couldn't abide the thought of returning.

"I can't," she said softly. "Even if Teo welcomed me with open arms, I couldn't go back. Not to live there."

"Because of him?" Father said dourly, almost accusingly. "You have already come to harm because of him and I fear you will come to more."

"I can't hide all the time. I love you, Father. You know I do, but I've got other obligations now. Alsansir does not hold my allegiance anymore. I would never wish it harm, but I've other priorities."

He sighed. His shoulders slumped slightly -- in disappointment? -- Acceptance? She reached out and covered his large hand with her small one. Leaned against his shoulder.

"Papa. Please understand."

"I do, daughter. But, I had to ask."

\* \* \*

Dante was daydreaming in the windowsill, one knee bent and resting against the glass the other leg dangling, boot almost brushing the floor. Kastel was flipping the pages of a book disinterestedly. He had a stack of them sprawled across his desk and not one of them seemed to hold his attention.

Dante ignored him. Dante was immersed in the rather lurid recollection of Sera's lips and mouth performing the most erotic acts upon his person. For a novice she was mind numbingly talented. Or perhaps it was merely because it was *Sera*. She had the rather amazing ability to drive him to distraction. Just thinking about it was enough to make his blood pound and he brought the dangling leg up to obscure the physical evidence.

Kastel was looking at him with crystalline and very serious blue eyes. Dante scowled, wondering if he were that obvious.

"What?" he snapped, not particularly liking being dragged out of his reverie. It had been a very nice two days. The best two days he could easily recall.

"You don't have to be here." Very soft, very level statement. "I wish that you would cease this."

Dante lifted a brow, meeting Kastel's eyes with shrewd assessment. Nothing wild there. Nothing dangerous brewing under the surface. Sanity, even though it was touched with a certain lack of concentration. A certain tendency to drift away in the midst of a line of thought, which was most patently not a trait Kastel had ever evidenced before this. But it was not a self-destructive one.

Kastel broke the stare first, looking away to hide whatever emotion flickered across his eyes. But that was nothing new. Dante had always been able to stare him down and Kastel had always tried to hide the disquiet that he could so regularly do it. But he wasn't sure. He had just gotten things under his control again, everything that mattered was safe and mostly sane and he was skittish

enough -- rightfully, considering the past month or so -- not to take chances.

"I don't know. Tell me why I should."

Kastel sighed, shut his book and rested both palms on its leather bound cover. "What would you like to hear? I don't feel the need to sacrifice myself in hopes of alleviating my sins. I don't hear the voices in my head anymore -- at least when I'm awake. I don't know what to tell you. But if I cannot enjoy a moment's solitude without someone hovering over me I shall go mad."

"Humm, I thought that's why we were hovering to begin with."

Kastel cast a baleful stare his way.

"Listen, I have better things to do than waste my time sitting here too. You can not imagine how much better --

"Then go and do them," Kastel snapped in exasperation. "The lot of you are pestering me."

Dante laughed at the rebuke. He was not usually on the receiving end of Kastel's tempers. At the moment he found it amusing. It was heartening to see the flash of temper after too many days of glazed distance from the world.

"Tell you what, I'll go and talk to Kheron and see what she thinks."

"Oh, by all means go and confer about me."

Kastel waved a hand at him and Dante tossed him a warning look. One would only tolerate so much imperiousness directed at one's person. Of course it would be nice not to have this draw upon his time. He got up. Sauntered past, not wanting it to seem as if Kastel had chased him out.

Down the hall to Kheron's room, thinking seriously about granting Kastel's wish for purely selfish reasons. He opened the door without benefit of knocking and Kheron and Gerad separated like children caught groping in the chapel. He stared, his hand on the door, the breath

he'd drawn to blurt out a question to Kheron caught in his throat. Her eyes were wide, her pink mouth parted in an 'o' of surprise. Gerad looked pale, but he straightened his tunic and said in a strained voice.

"Well, good practice this morning -- in the sparring yard."

Dante's eyes narrowed. Gerad moved past him with a mumbled.

"Dante."

Dante let him go. Glared once at his back before turning his gaze upon Kheron.

"What was that?" he hissed.

"What did it look like?" she hissed back. "What do you want? Don't you ever knock?"

He didn't answer. He was too busy trying to fight down the jealous rage that gathered power like a sieve, wanting very badly to expel it back out in some vastly destructive manner. She must have felt it. Her head came up as if she were scenting the trace of magic in the air. Her eyes narrowed. She took a step forward and cried at him.

"What do you want? Should I go and join a convent while you content yourself with her? You've made it painfully clear her wants are more important than anyone else's. Why should I deny myself? What right do you have to ask?"

His fingers dug into the doorknob. He kept trying to focus on the promise he had made to Sera. It was a chore to tame the coiling power. If he stayed there, poised in her doorway he didn't know what he'd do. He turned away from her, said over his shoulder in a low, seething voice.

"Kastel wants out from under our watch. Leave him be, if you think it wise."

## Twenty-four

Gerad was leaning against the rough stone balustrade on the outside of the main doors, studying the fine leatherwork of the Great Sword's scabbard. There was nothing of tenseness in the way he held his body, or the muscles in his face. Nothing to indicate the unease he had evidenced before he had wisely fled Kheron's room.

Dante stalked down the steps, fixing Gerad with a gaze that would have done a hydra justice. He had known very well the Master of the Divhar wouldn't run far. Only far enough to take it away from Kheron. Dante knew the way his sense of honor worked. His own was an uneasy and unpredictable thing.

Gerad put the end of the scabbard down in the dirt and rested his hands on the pommel like it was an especially lethal cane.

"So what do we do about this?" he asked, voice neutral.

Dante circled like a wolf, lashes half-mast, eyes glittering underneath.

"I don't know." A sibilant hiss. "I made a promise not to kill you."

Gerad nodded at that, face carefully impassive. "You think I'm that easy to kill?"

A laugh that held no trace of humor. He did not bother to justify that question with an answer. Gerad took a breath. No fear. He always had been stupid enough to die for a cause. Always had been willing to fight against insurmountable odds in the name of his beliefs. Goddamned stupid, honorable fool who didn't know how close he was to death and probably didn't care.

"I've never fought over a woman," Gerad admitted. "Never cared enough myself. But it seems stupid for you to do it over one you don't want to begin with."

"Shut up. It's not yours to say what I want and what I don't."

"Right. You want everything. Spoiled, fucking brat."

Dante hissed and lashed out with a snaking coil of energy. Gerad launched himself into the air, somersaulted and came down behind Dante. The stone wall where he had stood had a blackened rent some ten feet wide.

“What? Tantrums?” Gerad taunted and darted in with more speed than the eye could easily follow and clipped Dante in the jaw with the hilt of the cursed blade. Hard. It hurt. He staggered back a step, tasted blood and was so furious that he didn’t even think about healing it. He was fast forgetting he had ever promised Sera anything.

He was contemplating a nice little Tonare spell. Gerad looked as if he were thinking about drawing the Great Sword. The package-laden figure of Rab-Ker’s little priestly assistant trundled through the courtyard and between them, oblivious to the power that radiated through the air he passed. He smiled hesitantly at Dante who ignored him in favor of glaring at Gerad, commenting as he passed.

“Good morning. Great Priest Geo has found a merchant party to travel south with. Is not that wonderful news? It will be so nice to have him and lady Sera home in Alsansir again.”

“What?!!”

The little priest was blown backwards off his feet, packages scattering. Dante pounced on him, grabbing robes in his fists and pulling the man up savagely. “Sera’s not going to Alsansir.”

The priest’s eyes were saucers staring up at him. The man’s mouth worked spasmodically. Dante shook him in efforts to prompt actual words to spill forth.

“The great priest -- priest had hoped -- they spoke this morning.”

Dante swore. Released his hold and let the priest fall in the mud. Gerad was a forgotten presence behind him. “And where is the Great Priest now?” he demanded.

The little priest cringed, gesturing weakly out the courtyard gates and towards the city. “Helping Father Cittaro

in the temple of the Goddess. I -- I think he took lady Sera to show her the -- the shrine."

"Oh, did he? Where the hell is this temple?"

The priest looked as if he were about to pass out. Gerad supplied from behind him.

"East wall of the city. Under a guard tower."

"How would you know? Since when did you start attending to the gods?" He cast a dark glare over his shoulder. Gerad shrugged, not looking particularly put out, or upset, considering what had been interrupted.

"Just like to know my way around is all."

Dante hissed at him, frustration and anger shifting to make room for just a little bit of apprehension. Sera wouldn't. He knew she wouldn't agree to such a pilgrimage without telling him. But still, the pull of her father -- of that melting pot of religion and commerce and misplaced honor that was Alsansir -- he knew she mourned the loss of its welcome.

He cursed and took to the air.

\* \* \*

Sera looked up at the worn wooden statue of the goddess that adorned the small temple's nave. There were chips here and there out of the wood, though it had been lovingly waxed and oiled to keep the wood strong. It was nothing like the idols in the great cities of the south. This little church could barely seat a congregation of fifty souls and from what father Cittaro said, he received not nearly so many as that on a regular basis.

Not surprising considering Kastel's views on religion. Views she could understand him holding, but no priest of the Goddess had ever preached brimstone and fire to keep his flock in line. The goddess was the gentlest of all the gods and the most forgiving. She felt remiss for never thinking to come here herself during all the time she had lived in Sta-Veron. She made a promise to herself to lend

the tired seeming old priest her aide from now on. This temple could use a few luxuries and a few helping hands and she was certain she might talk Keitlan and a few of the maids into donating a little time to help a struggling faith.

Rab-Ker was speaking with the old priest by the open front doors. Sera wondered about the nave, inspecting the few artifacts that graced the reliquaries lining it.

Father Cittaro made a startled noise from the front. She looked up and saw the last person she would have expected to set foot in a shoddy little temple to the Goddess fill the doorway. She opened her mouth in shock a moment before Dante swept in, grabbed her father by the front of his robes and slammed him into the wall of the atrium.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

She didn’t have any trouble hearing what he said, since he was yelling it rather uninhibitedly in Rab-Ker’s shocked face.

“Remove your hands from me.” That was father, somewhat lower, evidencing offended indignity.

“How dare you think you can take Sera back to Alsansir.”

So that was it. She could not for the life of her imagine how that bit of conversation had gotten back to him. She made a little frustrated sound in her throat and hurried up the aisle towards them.

“What are you *doing*??” She brushed past the very startled old priest, who was clearly debating whether he ought to attempt to pull the rude assailant off his fellow priest. His lady goddess must have been looking after him to grant him so much hesitation. She had no indecision at all about laying her hands on Dante’s arm. She yanked back with all her strength and he wouldn’t budge, too intent on pressing her father into the stone of the wall.

“Stop it!”



He shook her off so hard she staggered a few steps backwards and stabbed an accusing finger at her. "What are *you* doing?"

He still had an arm across Rab-Ker's throat, which greatly hindered the great priest from attempting an answer to his first enraged question.

Sera, who knew exactly what the problem was and could have solved it with a few simple words, got her back up at the accusatory and very proprietary look in his eyes.

Irritating, irrational man. If there had been anything readily at hand to throw at him, she would have snatched it up and hurled it. As it was, she threw both hands out in agitation and screamed.

"Who are *you*, to think I answer to you? I thought we had this conversation?"

"Not this one," he snarled back at her, then thrust Rab-Ker roughly to the side, his attention focused solely on her. She was never the recipient of his ire -- not real ire, but she found it in his eyes now. And did not particularly like it. She lifted her chin and forced herself to speak in a coolly rational tone of voice.

"If you would ever lower yourself to engage in conversation before you flew off into your asinine rages, maybe people would talk to you. And no, I am not going back to Alsansir with father, even though now that I think about it, it doesn't sound like such a bad notion."

She stalked between him and the moon eyed old priest and out onto the lightly traveled street outside. Father called after her, but it wasn't a desperate plea for help, so she figured he wasn't being killed and ignored it.

Dante didn't try to stop her or attempt to follow her. She almost wished he had. She hated for resentments to simmer. Better to get them out in the open, if it meant harsh words exchanged and anger flared. She ground her teeth and simmered. He was usually quick to take

offense, but that reaction had been extreme. Something had set him off this morning.

She slowed her deliberate march somewhat as her anger cooled and veered her course towards Market street. The venders were beginning to get a trickle of foreign goods to sell as the weather improved. She browsed through stall after stall of merchandise, trying to divert her stewing indignation. There was a nice display of cutlery on the bench of a metal smith that she was in the mood to inspect. She picked up a stiletto and had dark thoughts about what use such a thing might be put to. She put it down regretfully and drifted to another stall.

There was a figure she recognized standing before a stall boasting used clothing.

"Lily," she called, surprised to find the girl here. Lily looked back, a quick dark of dark eyes behind her hair. A moment's alarm before she recognized Sera.

"Oh, hello, Lady Sera. I finished my chores so mistress Keitlan let me come into town early," she explained, as if Sera would fault her for avoiding her duties.

Sera smiled brightly, determined to chase away the foul mood and crowded close to see what Lily was looking at. A bright red skirt, voluminous and many layered, like the gypsy wanderers wore when they passed through towns to entertain the land bound folk.

"Oh, that's pretty. Not for working around the castle, I take it?" she grinned as she fingered the material. A blush could almost be seen on Lily's face past the hair.

"No. No. A tavern keep has consented to let me play at night for whatever gratuity his patron's deem fit to grant me with. This --" and she hesitantly touched the plain, brown material of her skirt. "-- did not seem appropriate."

"You're playing at a tavern? How wonderful. I'm so happy for you. Which one? I must come and listen to you."

Lily told her of the lute Gerad had gifted her with and her approach of Seta's friend who worked at the tavern in question. She had played a few songs and the late night patrons as well as the tavern keep had been well impressed. Sera was delighted for her and when the merchant named a price for the skirt that seemed beyond Lily's capacity to pay, offered to help pay for it herself.

"No," Lily said softly. "Thank you, but no. I have been fettered so long, that I long to survive by my own resources and none other. Please understand."

Sera blinked, quite taken back by the fierce adherence to honor. This girl was only now being allowed to develop her own sense of worth and pride after so long denied it. "I understand. But the skirt would look lovely on you."

Lily sighed and dug in her little purse for another two coins. "I was saving them. But there will be more now that there is no one to take them from me."

"Saving for what?" Sera asked as they left the vender with Lily's wrapped package.

"Freedom. A means to travel without wondering quite so desperately where my next meal will come from. I know well how it feels to starve and have no wish to experience it again."

"A good minstrel will always find welcome," Sera encouraged. "Oh, look, pine nut cakes. Have you tasted one? You must."

She bought two regardless of Lily's claim to be dependent on no one. They sat down on a low stone wall beyond the market street to consume the cakes. The sticky sweetness clung to fingers making eating the cakes a messy task. But a thoroughly delightful one. Lily even smiled, which Sera thought an amazing thing. The girl had to push her hair back to eat the cake to keep honey from lodging in it. Her features were delicate, almost exotic in the cast of her eyes and the tone of her olive skin.

“Why do you hide your face all the time? What are you afraid of?” Sera voiced the question as soon as it surfaced in her mind. Lily blinked at her and reflexively looked down, but the hair tucked behind her ears would not fall to cover her face.

“See? You’re trying to do it now.”

Lily sighed, seeming uneasy with Sera’s bluntness. “It is easier to hide, I suppose. It always has been. If they don’t notice you, then they tend to leave you alone.”

“Oh. That’s terrible. What a terrible way to live.” Sera finished off her cake and licked her fingers one by one. “But you don’t have to anymore. You’re not a slave. And by the way you have to tell me all about *that*. I’ve only heard the barest rumors.”

“I don’t see how,” Lily grumbled. “I can hardly get away from the gossip.”

Sera lifted both brows, chuckling. “Well, I’ve been -- preoccupied -- the last few days and haven’t had the time to catch up on all the rampart tittle-tattle. But I can well imagine how surprised the staff was. I mean such a thing is so out of character for him. I mean unless you use threats and force and all sorts of other dire things as impetus, Kastel just never gets involved in the workings of the common world. He’s the master of distancing himself from everything that doesn’t directly interest him. You must have really made an impression for him to make such a gesture.”

“I didn’t,” Lily said softly, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. “I offered support and he was merely repaying the debt.”

“If you say so.”

Lily drew her brows and cast a hesitant look at Sera. “I do -- but why else would Lord Kastel have done such a thing?”

“I haven’t the foggiest. But, he’s been -- off a little bit since he came back. I think the shell he always uses to

protect himself is cracked and he can't figure out how to put it back together."

"You know him well?"

"Pretty well. He sort of got forced to accept me because of Dante -- otherwise, he'd barely know I was alive. But that's how most powerful sorcerers are, to be honest. Most of them are so wrapped up in wizardly stuff, that they don't have time for the world."

"It scares me, the casual talk of great magics."

"Well, you are definitely in the wrong place then, 'cause we've got the best collection of magic in the world right here in Sta-Veron. I'm not bad at it myself, you know?"

"You?"

"Well, it's mostly holy magic that father taught me. I was going to be a Sword Maiden once upon a time before the world went insane. I've got a good sense for people and you know, you've got an awful bright aura for a just a normal girl. Are you sure you don't have a touch of magic yourself?"

"No," Lily said sharply. "And I wouldn't want it if I did."

"Well, it's not so bad. It sort of comes in handy sometimes. And sorcerers aren't all that scary -- as long as they're not cranky -- if you keep them on a leash and don't let them think they can walk all over you."

Lily did not look quite convinced about that. A shadow fell over them and both girls looked up. Sera scowled.

"You're blocking my sunlight, Dante."

He crossed his arms and scowled back at her. People veered to walk around him on the cobbled sidewalk.

"I would like to talk with you."

"Can't you see I'm busy," she said airily.

He glanced briefly at Lily, then sniffed and said. "I will not apologize in the midst of market."

Sera's brows shot up at that stiff declaration. He was going to apologize? Amazing. Such a thing was not to postponed or missed. Such a thing was to be savored to the fullest extent possible. She kept the self-satisfied smile from her face and leaned in to Lily to promise. "I will come and listen to you play tonight and applaud outrageously so that the tavern keep knows how valuable an asset you are."

Then she slipped off the wall and strolled down the street with the sure assumption that if he had convinced himself he had done her an injustice, he would surely follow. He did.

\* \* \*

Kastel woke up with the most dreadful traces of nightmare lingering in his head. The pounding of his heart was deafening. He could not recall what he had dreamed. He was not certain he wished to. There was wetness on his cheek though, to attest to the disagreeable nature of the nightscare. He hissed in disgust over his own weakness and threw the bed sheet back in a fit of violence. He summoned a cold, blue witchlight and stood, listening to the vast emptiness of the sleeping castle. He went to the window and thrust the shutters open and the glass window panels, needing to see the sky, even if it was night black and all but covered with clouds.

The brisk, chill breeze brought with it the faint smell of wood smoke from the city beyond, the more elusive smell of rain that had recently come to wash away even more of the snow that clung stubbornly to the land. Mostly, though, it brought a sense of freedom that he didn't think he could ever get enough of. Even the concern of his friends had been a yoke that weighed upon him, stifling and so clinging that he had been on the verge of fleeing this place that he loved to seek solace from it. But they had not come all of today, after Dante had left him. And

other than Keitlan with his meals, no one had intruded upon him.

So Dante trusted in his assurances of sanity, even if he felt far from such a state now with the oblique remnants of nightmare still fresh in his mind. Dante continually surprised him, going from stubborn single mindedness to complete preoccupation with something that drew his attention more strenuously than thoughts of Kastel's impending suicide.

Stupid, stupid thing to let himself be driven to. The thought of his own gullibility, his own weakness, made him sick. And angry. And worst of all, he could not quite manage to shed the images and the words, no matter if they were real or planted by Angelo, from the recesses of his mind. He pushed them away, but they always lurked about, waiting for an unguarded moment to sneak up on him. Perhaps they came out more fiercely in his dreams and drifted away tauntingly when he woke prematurely from the nightmares.

They fluttered about in the shadows now, waiting for him to return to bed before they might pounce again. He had been getting little in the way of restful sleep lately, a few hours a night at most. He had no desire to retreat back to slumber now. He put on the robe lying across the foot of the bed. It was a fine, elegantly embroidered affair that had been added to his wardrobe without him even knowing it. A good many things had cropped up without Kastel noticing at all. Someone at least had a care for his state of dress.

He tread softly down the hall, hesitated at the door to his study, but the pull of the books was not strong, so he passed it by in favor of padding down the steps towards the great hall, which would be blessedly empty at this late hour. As would be the kitchen which guarded the door to the wine cellar, which he had, now that he thought about it, only entered once and that long ago when he'd first

taken this city and made this castle his own. He had only ever entered the kitchens a few times more than that.

Servants had always fallen over themselves to attend him and he had always taken full and rightful advantage of their vassalage. It never occurred to him to act otherwise, until even the thought of a lowly servant intruding upon his solitude made him uneasy. And he dearly wanted a bottle of the very fine wine he kept in the cellars below the kitchen. Enough of the wine could chase even the nightmares away.

He stopped with his foot on the bottom step at the sound of laughter from the hall. He drew his brows, irrationally angry that someone should dare to occupy it when he wanted to traverse it in privacy. Then a burst of giggles again and he thought he recognized Sera's voice.

"Oh, Setha, you were so bad."

"Oh, the lads, they love it, Lady." Another voice he did not recognize. "Play the one about the lovelorn knight and his lady married to another, please. I want to hear it again, before I find me pillow."

"Oh, yes, that one's so tragic. It was the best you did." Sera sounded drunk. The other girl did. There was a quiet, murmured ascent by someone else that he couldn't quite hear, then a lilting procession of music accompanied by a hauntingly beautiful voice.

He didn't need to see the singer to know who it was. The voice triggered a flood of memories. In the midst of nightmare -- or had it been reality -- that lilting voice had been a break in the darkness that threatened to consume him whole. For no reason he could think of she had offered a lifeline -- it just hadn't been enough.

He slid down the wall and sat on the next to bottom step, trapped by the song. By the familiar nuances of a voice.

*Who are you?*

*No one.*



Her name was Lily. She had refused to tell him, ashamed of her slavery. He recalled her hiding her marked hand. He could see the gesture over and over in his mind. So very antithetical to the bravery she had shown in daring to enter his cell. It was why he had sought her out, because of the gesture. Because he could not get out of his head that that mark made her think she was worthless and yet she had been his only bit of salvation in that dank, windowless hell of the Prophet's making. Her worth therefore was immeasurable, even if his own had plummeted.

The song was over and he had drifted through it, hearing the voice but not the words. The girls were talking about finding their respective beds. Their footsteps pattered on the floor approaching the steps. He had of a sudden a great desire to be elsewhere, a total wish for anonymity. He made a gesture and gravity lost its hold on him. Floated upwards to reside in the deepest shadows of the alcove over the stairs. They danced up the stairs below, Sera practically skipping, humming to herself, the other girl, one of the servants, swaying in her path, hardly able to hold her balance. And the third girl, who held an instrument lovingly against her breast and climbed more sedately than the other two, head down and hair falling over her face as it always seemed to do.

Then they passed and the silence crept back. But the solitude wouldn't come with it, because the siren song wouldn't leave his head.

## Twenty-five

The stable master trailed nervously behind Kastel as he drifted from stall to stall, touching a velvety nose here, scratching under a forelock there as the bolder stable denizens thrust their heads over stall doors to get a bit of attention.

“The mare you brought from Thaldiea gave foal five weeks ago,” the stable master said and Kastel wondered down the row to see the mother and foal.

Chestnut mare. White foal. The sire had been his favorite. The one killed by Angelo at the western mountains. Killed because he had been too distracted by mundane battle to pay attention to what was happening on the arcane level. If he’d been paying attention, he might have erected a better shield.

He pushed away from the stall and curtly told the stable master to saddle a mount. He wanted out from behind the walls of castle and city. He was tired of the stares. The concern or the fear or the speculation in people’s eyes when they looked at him. Like they expected him to fly into a rage, or perform some unpredictable act or -- shatter.

A stablboy led the horse out for him. He scratched a ticking muscle in a thick furred shoulder. With spring coming on, that coat would turn glossy and thin. There was shedding now, hair coming loose at his touch, coating his glove. He brushed it off on his thigh and pulled himself up into the saddle. He was at the castle gate, the gate guard throwing him strident salutes when Kiro came pelting up on foot behind him, calling for him to wait. Impatient and knowing full well what was on his captain of the guard’s mind, he turned and stared blackly over his shoulder.

“My lord, let me arrange escort.” Kiro was out of breath and red faced.

“No,” Kastel said simply.

“But, my lord -- you’re not even armed.” Plaintive, highly displeased tone in his captain’s voice. As if a sword would make a difference against an enemy unimpressed by magic.

“No.” He did not wait for further argument, but urged his mount forward, kicked it into a canter that distanced him from gate and guard captain in short order. Out into the city, which was bustling with people on such a bright day. The iron shod hooves of his horse created a cadence upon the cobblestone streets.

No one accosted him, or stared and pointed out that their lord passed through them. He went hardly noticed at all, save for those who had to shift out of the path of his mount. He was not dressed today to impress, but rather to blend. Simple brown and tan, like any soldier or woodsman might wear. Even the guards at the outer gate did not give him much heed. No more than they would anyone riding out past their watch. They would give more scrutiny on the way back in.

The ground was muddy and slush covered. Tough, yellowed grasses starting to stretch their heads towards the sun. The rain last night had melted a good deal of the remaining snow. It clung in stubborn patches here and there, holding out more firmly against the distant horizon where the northern mountains loomed. He rode that way, veering off the very muddy track used by wagons and sleds that led to the northern forest. He had no wish to be mud splattered from the knees down and trusted the soggy, grass more than the water filled potholes of the road.

There were sheep and the shaggy cattle that thrived in the north dotting the plain to the west. The herders were quick to take advantage of snow free grazing land to fatten up animals kept in runs during the harshest part of winter. There were boys out there keeping watch, for no self respecting herder would trust his herd to safety when the passes to the north opened and the nomads from

across the mountains drifted down into more civilized lands to see what fruit was ripe for the taking.

The stable master would put the horses out to pasture soon enough as well. The stables had been full of agitated snorts and shifting, nervous bodies. They could smell spring in the air and wanted out. The horse under him was practically bouncing with its desire to stretch its legs. He gave it its head and the walls of the city shrank behind him.

The forest line grew. As did a cluster of moving darkness on the trail. A large party traveling towards the city. Traders down from the mountains with furs, mined treasures, hard to come by winter roots and delicate spring shoots only available in certain places in the high ranges.

He thought to avoid them, to ride by off the side of the road and just let them pass, for had not the whole purpose of this foray been to escape from all things human? But the practical part of his mind wondered if the northern passes were open and had these merchants seen signs of bandits or nomads from the Tundra. All things he should have been vastly interested in during the active time of spring thaw. He had to force himself to find an interest in them now. Had to force himself to guide his horse closer to the track as the distance separating him from them closed.

His eye reflexively counted twenty riders. No wagons or sleds, but their tough, small mountain ponies were laden with bundles of furs and skins. They were armed. He saw that when they were within a few hundred yards. Knives and swords and the occasional ax. Trappers were a surly lot, and dangerous, but did not usually travel in packs, nor so heavily armed.

One of them hailed him. He did not lift a hand in return, merely reined in his horse off the track and let them approach. Two riders split from the group and met him. The others mulled in the road, all dark eyed and irascible.

“Are the gates to the city open for trade?” One of the men asked. Scarred badly on the right side of his face, dark skinned, a fallacious smile twisting his lips. The smell was putrid. The other one circled Kastel’s horse like a wolf sizing up prey. That one he ignored.

“It is,” he said. The gate guard would not let them pass with such an assortment of cutlery. The gate guard might be wise not to let them pass at all. Not trappers at all, he thought. More like predators down from the heights.

“What passes are open?” he asked.

The two exchanged dark looks. “The lower Aldritch. The upper is still snowbound. The Creniin is passable for a brave man. Another few weeks and most will be open. Now answer me a question, boy. Are the rumors true?”

Kastel lifted a brow. “Which?”

“That Sta-Veron lost its lord?”

“No.” He lost not a beat.

“That’s good, then.” The scarred man laughed. His stench was beginning to become intolerable. “We’ve business to discuss.”

Kastel did not care at the moment to know what sort of business. Bandits. He was quite certain of it. And bandit politics at this time held no interest for him. He waved a hand towards the city, started to rein away. “Fine. Then you wish to be about it, then.”

The one that had been circling him moved his horse into Kastel’s path. “He has an attitude, Thuron. And him not even armed.”

Kastel met that one’s eyes. Dark, animal eyes filled with the purely human need to feel powerful over others. This was a man who killed not for gain, but to see the brief moment of utter fear on the faces of his victims. And all he saw in Kastel was the facade of youth, the lack of proper defense, an obvious distaste for him and his. Kastel perceived it in a glance and held back the desire to kill the man on the spot.

"Calm yourself, Gaston" the one said to the other.

Gaston smiled at him, revealing rotting, chipped teeth. Aside from killing him outright, Kastel did the thing that would most wound him. He ignored his presence entirely and rode around him, not even looking back. A few low murmurs behind him. The rattle of tack as the party gathered itself and continued on down the muddy track.

Bandits who wanted to parlay. They always wanted one thing or another. Some concession here or there that they never learned he would not give. Let Kiro deal with it. And rumors sped faster than horses if the one about his capture had managed to reach the ears of bandits hidden in the northern heights in so short a while. It was a wonder they hadn't been razing the villages in the north mountains if they thought he was gone.

He kept towards the forest at a leisurely cantor, entered the shadow and shade of age-old pine and evergreen where sound was muffled and the world was less harsh than it had been on the featureless plain. There was still a good amount of snow on the ground under the cover of evergreen canopy. Birdsong trilled here and there. The winter birds sparring for territory with the first of the migrating vagrants that flew up from lands unknown to summer here. It was peaceful here. He pushed thoughts of the bandits in the thin guise of trappers out of his mind. The cloying unease of the last several days began to fade. He only let himself feel the motion of the horse and the smells of a forest awakening to spring and the sounds of unobtrusive nature. It was a therapy of sorts.

There was a spring through the forest, an hour's ride into the trees that he thought to make his goal. It had flat rocks surrounding it and water that tasted so pure that folk carted barrels of it back to Sta-Veron. He dismounted when he reached the little glade and let the reins fall. The horse wondered over to the spring and stuck its nose in to nosily slurp cold water. Kastel stepped onto the rocks. Found a perch near the edge and settled down. The spring was fed from water trickling down the rocks from a

mountainous source to the north. It was shallow and clear, its bottom lined with small, polished rocks.

He pulled one knee up and rested his chin upon it. No pressure. No disgrace existed here. No expectations, that he felt incapable of meeting. That was the worst part. The fact that all of them, from the lowliest guardsman to Dante himself, looked at him and expected something of him.

Different things, granted, but they all pulled at him in their own way. They all believed he was more than what he was. When he knew that he wasn't, that he never had been.

It wasn't that he believed all the things that Angelo had slipped into his mind, it wasn't that he agreed with them in the light of sanity and reason. It was that he had allowed himself to accept them at all. That he had let it all overwhelm him in the first place. Dante wouldn't have. Dante would have laughed in Angelo's face, regardless of the pain and the humiliation. Gerad probably would have done the same. But, he, who had spent so much time working to expand his magic, to learn the secrets of the arcane, found that without it as a crutch, he crumbled. How had Dante managed without it all the time he'd had Angelo's wards on his wrists?

He pulled the other knee up, miserable now that his thoughts had betrayed the peace of this place. He had failed so badly to live up to his own expectations -- his own standards that he held for himself -- it just didn't seem worth it to try and rebuild the impervious, imperious face he had always worn. The one reflected in the spring just looked haunted and vulnerable. He looked away from it. Another reason to hate himself.

The shadows began to shift. The afternoon slipped into evening. The light was fading and it would be full dark before he got back to Sta-Veron. Kiro would be frantic. He rode back, in no particular haste to return. The gates

were closed for the night, and torches flared along the walls.

“Lord Kastel?” A voice called down and Kastel figured that Kiro had appraised the gate guard to anticipate his return. He looked up so they could see him, and heard them scrambling to open the gates. He rode past with all of their eyes on his back and through the city proper until he had to go through the same thing at the inner gates of the castle.

The stable master came out himself to take the horse, inspecting the muddy legs as soon as Kastel had dismounted as if he had ridden it hard over treacherous ground instead of merely through mud and muck. He was spattered with it himself. He had barely started towards the castle when Kiro came pelting out, the vast look of relief on his face quickly replaced by one of discontent. Kastel most strenuously did not wish to be lectured like a tardy child and was about to say as much when his captain said.

“We’ve bandits in the city, my lord. Emissary’s of Velo Hran himself.”

Kastel lifted a brow, pulling off his gloves as he walked, Kiro fast at his side. “I thought he was killed two winters ago.”

“As did I. But it appears he was in the Tundra playing diplomat with the nomads.”

“Diplomat? That’s a far stretch. What does he want?”

“He sent one of his brothers. He wouldn’t say exactly, claims he will only parlay with you, but I’ve the impression Velo Hran has formed an alliance with some of the nomads and has set his sights on expanding his territory. There was also some reference to another of his brothers being murdered last winter by a wizard in your employ, while he was *peacefully hunting*.” Kiro sounded rightfully scornful.

A wizard in his employ? The incident at the lake where Dante had decided to get creative. Wonderful. His head



was beginning to pound. He waved a hand negligently at Kiro and told him to arrange it, then climbed up the main steps as the captain hurried away. He pulled the door open with one hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose with the other, thinking this was a headache magic would not wish away.

He was a step past the threshold when he looked up and found the girl hesitating before him, so close he could smell the fragrance of whatever scent she had used to wash her hair. Lavender, he thought. She was clutching a lute to her chest, very obviously on her way out the doors he had stepped in from. He was very obviously blocking her path to the outside. For a brief moment she stared up at him, sliver of face between the straight hair, all dark eyes and slightly parted lips. Then she looked down, and the hair fell to hide her features. She made a quick little curtsy, proper deference, and tried to scoot around him and escape outside. As if she were afraid of him.

He forced himself to take a step and then another because he did not know how to deal with the catch in his throat and the erratic beating of his heart. It was easier to just walk away. The door shut behind him.

\* \* \*

The talk spread through the castle, from garrison to kitchen. The bandit Velo Hran was alive, and everyone had thought him dead two winter's past, shot through the heart by Sta-Veron soldiers. Apparently not. Apparently he'd been stirring trouble to the north and now came to Sta-Veron's doorstep demanding favors. Bandit's were an uppity lot. If they weren't trying to slit your throat in the night, they were trying to rob you under your nose while convincing you it was their god given right.

That was the talk among the servants at any rate. The talk in the garrison was considerably darker, as men contemplated a spring flood of raids among the villages

and outposts to the north. Bandits weren't half as bad as nomads, who hadn't a shred of human decency among the lot of them and the thoughts of the two banding together had many a brave man shaking his head in consternation over what the future might hold.

Keitlan knew all the details -- at least the details of the gossip and she was not hesitant to share them to any willing to listen. She burst into Sera's room with an armful of linen and a hefty burden of speculation to share and found the girl only half dressed and it being the middle of the day. Then she discovered that Sera was not alone. That Wizard was reclining upon her bed and he wasn't dressed at all. Even an honest woman couldn't help but stare. Sera let out a little sound and snatched a sheet across his hips, since he seemed disinclined to bother. He smiled lazily at Keitlan. Keitlan blushed. Sera did.

"Good morning, Keitlan." Sera finished lacing her tunic and held out her arms for the linens.

"Afternoon is more like it." Keitlan refused to be intimidated by that silver haired seducer of young woman -- and middle aged -- and old if you counted Cook's infatuation, and went to put the linens away herself.

"Oh, it's early yet. Perhaps we should stay in," the devil purred to Sera, who cast him an irritated glare and motioned him to be quiet.

"The castle's bursting with speculation over the bandits come to see his lordship." One had to get a little of the gossip out, even if the wizard was making her fidgety.

"What bandits?" Sera asked innocently.

Keitlan frowned. "Goodness gracious girl, if you left your room more often you'd hear what's going on. Does your father know what you're about with this -- debaucher?"

Sera opened her mouth.

The Wizard cut her off. "If he doesn't, and there is a god, then please let me be the one to tell him. In detail."

Sera glared again.

“What bandits, Keitlan?”

“Oh, from Velo Hran, who was supposed to be dead, with a treaty or some such nonsense for lord Kastel. The bandits have made some sort of compact with the nomads, which is no good news, let me tell you, and they’re here to demand gods know what. And supposedly they’re asking for retribution for Velo Hran’s brother which that one --” and she pointed a finger towards the wizard. “--- killed last winter after the bandits left the bag of heads on our doorstep.”

“Well, that certainly sounds entertaining,” the wizard remarked, shifting on the bed in preparation of getting up. “When is all this bargaining and retribution supposed to take place?”

“This evening.” Keitlan averted her eyes when he slipped off the bed and began looking for scattered clothes. Sera smiled at her painfully as she ushered her towards the door.

“Modesty’s not his best trait,” she whispered just before she shut the door in Keitlan’s face. The housemistress sniffed, thinking that it wasn’t a trait he possessed at all. But one had to admit -- if ever a man didn’t need it . . . .

\* \* \*

Dante sauntered into the great hall. There were more men at arms than usually occupied it mulling about. The tables had been pulled against the walls to open a space before the lord’s table which had been moved to sit parallel before the great hearth. Kastel was nowhere to be seen. Captain Kiro was in evidence, though, giving orders to a group of his men by the door. Gerad was also loitering by the fire, a cup of something in his hand. They met eyes briefly, before Dante lifted one brow and decided to ignore him.

Every one seemed on edge because an overzealous bandit lord got the bright idea to unite factions. Waste of time. Bandits and nomads, by nature did not work well as a concerted force. It wouldn't last. The only reason he bothered to come down at all, was because he was curious to see how Kastel would deal with it. Curious to see whether he had his poise back. And of course to see just what retribution was expected of him for the supposed death of this bandit leader's brother. He assumed it had been one of the men in the cave that had been unfortunate enough to attack him instead of cowering in supplication like rational beings.

A guard burst through the doors and spoke to Kiro, who waved his men into positions against the wall. Maybe twenty guards at attention. Dante leaned against the wall to watch. The doors opened and another few guards escorted six rough, fur and leather clad men into the hall. The reek of them immediately drifted through the air, as if the leathers they wore had been freshly killed and improperly cleaned, or more likely, they hadn't seen fit to wash their flesh since fighting free of their mother's womb. They were unarmed, aside from the offensiveness of the odor and belligerently fearless despite that. They stood in the center of the hall and one of them loudly demanded to address Lord Kastel.

Kiro looked like he wanted to just slice them down on the spot and said between gritted teeth that his lordship would meet them at his convenience. To which the spokesman bandit replied that they had better things to do than waste their time in this hall. There was very likely to be violence before Kastel ever decided to show up.

Then he did. Came down the stairs very austere made up, in a high-necked black tunic and very shiny black boots. The only ornamentation in the whole outfit was the gold clasp of his cloak. You'd never know to look at him that he hadn't been born of the bluest blood on the continent. He strode past Dante, with just a flicker of his

eyes that held a warning not to interfere. Dante shrugged and stayed where he was. Kastel walked around the table, the center of everyone's attention and sat down in the central, high backed chair.

The bandits were gaping at him, one of them even going so far as to take a step forward and point an accusing finger.

"You!" the loud one said.

Kastel fixed him with that icy glare that came so naturally and waited for the bandit to say something more informative. The bandits collected themselves, and the spokesman straightened his shoulders and declared.

"I am Thuron Hran, brother of the great Velo Hran and I come bearing his tidings."

The bandit, Thuron Hran paused, as if waiting to see if Kastel would respond. He didn't. Just sat there and stared unwaveringly at the man. Silence tended to unnerve an adversary and Kastel had always been so much damned better at maintaining it than Dante. This bandit was full of himself and his self-importance and refused to be intimidated.

"What? No warm welcome for your friends to the north?"

A moment more of silence, then Kastel said softly. "You came to me. State your business."

The bandit sneered. The men behind him shifted. Kiro did. Dante thought Kastel had seen more diplomatic days.

"You thought you had killed him, but Velo Hran is blessed by the deus of the cold north. He has forged a union between the tribes of nomads that wonder the endless Tundra and the bandit clans of the north. He has become supreme chieftain among the nomads and the clans."

"I have no interest in the Tundra," Kastel said. "Why gift me with this news? Does he wish to boast his accomplishments?"

“No,” Thuron hissed. “He wishes to reestablish borders. The northern mountains and all within them shall be our lands.”

Kiro made a little choking sound of fury. Kastel made no response.

“You will recognize him as lord of those lands and there shall be compensation for crimes done against us. For the murder of our beloved brother.”

Thuron conveniently forgot to mention the sack of heads. Dante began to quietly walk along the wall towards the table.

“The execution of bandits is not a crime,” Kastel said softly.

“He and his men were peacefully hunting when your wretched magician attacked and killed all but one of his party.”

Kastel glanced aside as Dante casually slipped around the table and draped himself over a chair, one leg swinging idly across the arm.

“Would you like his head?” Kastel inquired and motioned towards Dante. “Feel free to try and take it.”

Dante smiled at them all. One of the bandits stumbled backwards, eyes glued to him, whispering harshly. “That’s him. That’s him that did it.”

Dante did not recall the face, but the fellow was missing a hand and one could assume from the expression and the tone that it was the man he had let live to take warnings back to his fellows. Thuron Hran lifted a hand and the man shut up.

“My brother is a reasonable man. He offers you this chance for peace. The northern mountains will be ours one way or the other. And who would be so fool hardy as to try and take a wizard’s head? Twenty horses and a thousand pieces of gold will be due recompense.”

Dante laughed. He couldn’t help it, it was so ridiculous a demand. Kastel didn’t blink.

“It seems,” he finally said. “That you’ve wasted your time. You may take my refusal back to Velo Hran.”

Thuron’s face twisted in anger. He stalked to the table and slammed his palms down. “There are villages in those mountains that will pay for your stubbornness. They would willingly pledge to Velo given the chance. You’ve lost face, Winter King. The rumors spread even to the high north of your weakness. You were taken by an enemy and have lost honor - - “

He got that last word out on a choked breath. The ice started at his fingers and spread up his body like a quicksilver infection. Within one breath and the next a warm, breathing man had turned into an icy corpse. Kastel pushed his chair back from the table with a violence. The movement caused the frozen Thuron Hran to topple backwards. He shattered on the floor. Every weapon in the room came up. The bandits were crying out in rage and fear, even as guards descended upon them to keep them in one controllable knot.

Kastel stabbed a finger at them, all composure fled, his eyes flashing with rage and Dante thought, some small bit of consternation. “If one of my villages is attacked, I will personally send every bandit in those mountains to hell. You may take that absolute back to Velo Hran.”

He whirled on Kiro and ordered. “Get them out of my city. Now. Take what precautions you deem necessary.”

“Well,” Gerad came up between Kastel and Dante. “This should make for an interesting summer.”

Kastel glared at him, then stalked off. Dante glanced up at him lazily. “Are you planning on staying?”

“I don’t know what I’m planning. Does it matter to you?”

“Only as far as Kheron is concerned.”

“I don’t make her plans for her.”

“Humm.” He swung his leg off the chair arm and rose. Gerad took a wary step backwards, which was somewhat satisfying, but not nearly as much as finishing the fight

they'd begun a few days past would have been. But of course Sera would have fits and Kheron probably would and today he just didn't feel the need to kill Gerad as much as he had then.

Bruise him a little maybe, but not see him dead. For the moment, finding and sussing out Kastel's state of mind was more appealing an diversion than sparring with Gerad, so he abandoned the Master of the Divhar to the room full of edgy guards and followed Kastel upstairs.



## Twenty-six

Kastel, predictably enough, was pacing in his study. Looking spooked and angry and miserable all at the same time. He glared when Dante strolled in and spat.

"I don't want to hear it."

"Hear what, prey tell?" Dante asked innocently. "That I think their offer of twenty horses and a thousand pieces of gold was getting off cheap compared to my head. I'm worth so much more than that."

Kastel stared, then hissed through his teeth and went to stand at the side of the window, pressing his forehead against the stone frame. "I handled that badly."

"Nonsense. You were brilliant. I was highly entertained."

"I didn't do it to entertain you." Kastel snapped, then took a breath to get his emotions under control and added in a calmer voice. "He took me off guard."

"I know. It's okay. What're a few bandits on the warpath?"

"Sneaky and infiltrative and a damned nuisance. And I don't want to deal with it. I can not deal with it now."

That last was plaintive and desperate enough to make Dante wary. He moved over to lean against the windowsill, where he could see Kastel's face.

"All right," he said carefully. "Then don't. Take off and let Kiro deal with them. He's competent enough. Nobody says you have to be tied down here forever. Forever is too long. Go somewhere and get your head straight. You're due."

"I can't."

"You can do whatever you want. You're the second best sorcerer in the world." He meant it to be amusing. Kastel turned his cheek to the wall and stared at him mournfully.

"Am I?"

Dante frowned. He had not thought of Angelo in a while. Did not want to think of him now, because the last week had been blissfully happy, aside from a few minor incursions. Kastel still thought about him though, that was painfully clear.

Maybe bandits from the north threatening Sta-Veron territories was not a bad thing. Maybe such an infraction would distract from darker, more painful things. And bandit chasing in the spring and summer had to be preferable to doing it in the dead of winter. It might even be amusing. He didn't say such a thing though. There were certain things he had the restraint to be tactful with. Outright manipulation when Kastel was not at his best was one of them. Suggesting that the brutal attack of bandits and nomads might be an amusing diversion from other problems was another. Kastel had too much of a sense of responsibility for Sta-Veron to take that calmly.

"It doesn't count if all your power's stolen. And even then -- I don't know."

Kastel shook his head, wanting away from the subject. "I passed them on the road yesterday and knew they were bad omens to something and simply didn't care. I should have killed them all."

"Probably," Dante agreed. "I would have. It would have done wonders to shore up your reputation."

"Which is badly in need of repair," Kastel agreed morosely, then pushed off from the wall and took a few frustrated steps into the room. "That they would dare to come to me and make such demands! Did they think I would just docilely allow it?"

"Probably not. But it was gutsy. A very obvious show of antagonism, that this Velo Hran had the balls to approach you with such an outrageous list of demands. You make a move like that to bolster the spirit of your army -- even if it's an army of bandits and nomads."

\* \* \*

Every maid that could squeeze into the space around the kitchen door to see through the crack, or at the very least hear what was being said on the other side, did so. The lot of them pressed up against each other in their eagerness to observe dread goings on. It was a great excitement -- bandits bringing demands to Sta-Veron. Everyone knew of course, that no demand from a conniving bandit would be agreed to, and everyone wanted to see the rebuttal. So the serving girls gathered in the kitchen and jostled for position, changing places every once and a while so they all could see what transpired in the great hall.

Lily found herself caught up in the midst of the furor. She had to admit to a certain curiosity, though it sprang more from the desire to see the lord of Sta-Veron than the bandits that braved it. She was one of the last to press her eye against the cracked door. She saw the backs of guards and the gathered assembly of rough looking men that stood in the floor before the long table. The high backs of chairs hid their occupants from the view of the kitchen, until one of the bandits stalked forward and slammed his palms down onto the table top, dreadful words spewing from his lips. Then he hesitated, gasped with wide eyes and in no longer than it took for him to draw a breath he was a frozen thing poised at the edge of the table.

She wanted to see no more. She wanted away from the door, but the press of girls behind her kept her there long enough to see Kastel lunge up, his chair pushed backwards, and make a dire promise to the remaining bandits. She twisted and turned then, pushing through complaining maids to get away from the door and the terrible thing she had witnessed.

A casual killing. Like something the Master might do. Too many times had she seen someone innocently offend him and him kill them on the spot. No thought. No

remorse. She ran from the heat of the kitchen cook fires. Out into the yard where the wind blew laundry on the lines.

No. She could not in all honesty equate him with the Master. He would not kill in cruelty. He would not take sadistic pleasure in the act. But he would kill. And he did it in a way that mortal, mundane men could not fathom or defend against.

It was a dangerous, deadly creature that filled her dreams. She was oh so certain of that now and wanted flight badly. Wanted an escape from this place where she found herself caged with him. A cage with an open door that she could step out of at any time, but not without braving the world outside unprepared. That frightened her even more. Being a free woman and failing in the simple act of supporting and protecting herself.

She walked around the side of the castle, along the garrison wall and saw the guards bustling the surviving bandit's out of the courtyard. The garrison captain was barking orders and men were scattering at his commands, a great many of them following the group that had charge of the bandits.

She wrapped her arms about herself as men hurried this way and that, weapons clanking. She remembered his eyes last night, startled out of preoccupation, wide with honest surprise as he was confronted with her unexpected presence. Ah, God, he had the most bewitching eyes, snaring a body effortlessly. But she was good at distancing herself and had slipped free with a curtsy and a headlong rush out the door. But she couldn't escape the memory of it. And she wanted to, because she was afraid.

She could not stand to stay in the castle a moment longer this afternoon. She avoided Keitlan and further chores and slipped out the gates past the watchful, wary eye of the castle guard. Into the city and past the tavern she had been playing at. Further into the depths of Sta-Veron to prowl the other taverns looking for sign of other

minstrels. Other travelers who were free to leave when they chose.

She found them finally, drinking among themselves, not yet playing for the evening crowd that had yet to begin to fill the tavern. It was still early and they did nothing more than talk among themselves and casually tune instruments. Four young men. A luteist, a flute player, one with a small harp, the other who had a collection of wooden chimes and bells arranged before him. She recalled the sweetness of the music they made. Had listened one night, before she had gotten her own lute, for the entire time they'd played. Wistful and a little jealous that they had seen so many places. They told tales of the exotic courts they had visited. They spun litanies about great events witnessed or passed from harper to harper. It was their way to carry from city to city and town to town words of all the things men might wish to remember. Recollection fell to the harper since few men bothered to record history any more.

She wanted so badly to talk with them. To ask them a thousand things. To throw herself on their mercy and beg that when they left Sta-Veron they let her come with them. But all she could do was stand against the wall and rehearse all her desperate wants in her head, because to voice them might mean they would miraculously agree and as badly as she wanted to leave, the pull to stay was as strong. And crueler by far.

"Well hello?"

She blinked and found one of the harpers looking up at her. A tall, lanky redhead whose attention drew the other's eyes towards her.

"Have we another of Allun's admirers here?" A shorter, tow-headed one asked with a mischievous glint in his eyes. A handsome blonde who had been tuning a lute on his lap cast a perturbed glance at the other, then looked back to her and tilted his head.

“No, I think not. She’s the girl who sings at the White Hare Tavern.”

“So she is,” the red head agreed and repeated his original greeting. “Hello there, pretty lady with the sweet voice. Is this a professional call?”

“I --- I came to see you play,” she stammered.

“It’s a bit early yet,” the blonde called Allun said. “Sit down in the meanwhile.”

She slipped forward, took a seat on the bench beside the redhead who grinned down at her. “Sta-Veron is sorely bereft of talented players. But one can hardly be surprised, as far from the beaten track as it is.”

“But the money is good.” The tow-head said cheerfully. “And it’s not so bad in the spring.”

“My name is Dell,” said the redhead. “This abrasive one is Thizura, the quiet one is Crayl and the pretty one is Allun.”

The descriptions were apt enough to have the other three looking at Dell with unappreciative, wry stares. Lily blushed, uncomfortable among the easy familiarity.

“My name is Lily.”

“Ah, appropriate,” Dell said. “But a night variety I think. One whose petals only open with the kiss of moonlight.”

He was a poet as well as a musician. The others rolled their eyes. Lily almost did.

“So, you travel with no company, Lily?” Dell asked.

“Did you see one with her when she sang?” Thizura asked archly.

“I asked her, not you.”

“No,” Lily said quietly to cut off the bickering. She did not know whether to be amused or aghast. “I -- am alone. I have not traveled with a company in a very long time.”

“A woman by herself on the road ---” Allun shook his head warily. “Not a safe thing in any land.”

She did not comment. Not willing to come out and beg for something she was not certain she could accept even if offered.

They accepted her easily into their conversation, birds of feather. And she thought she might enjoy traveling among them. They were witty and open, talented and as most good minstrels were, conceited of their skills. She liked them. Dell made good natured passes at her. Thizura made as many to Allun, often leaning across to brush against the blonde, a hand here, a graze of lips there. It was clear what relationship the two of them shared. And Crayl, who was older than the others, sat and observed, only occasionally adding a comment to the general fray. But she sensed that he led them. She saw it in the calm serenity of his lined gray eyes, in the way that even Thizura paid attention on the event when he spoke.

“What company did you travel with?” It was Crayl who finally leaned across and asked her.

She spoke the name of the master of the company who had bought her in her youth. Crayl drew his brows. “How long were you with him?”

“A few years,” she said hesitantly.

“I see. He taught you little.”

“She sings like an angel.” Dell defended her.

“Yes,” Crayl agreed. “But she has other, unexplored talents.”

Lily shivered. The other three looked at her as if she had suddenly turned blue.

“I think its time to strike up a tune,” Thizura said, waving an arm at the tavern which over the last hour had started to fill with men finished with their day’s labors.

They went to a space cleared by the hearth and began to play. The conversation lulled, men’s attentions drawn by the smooth flow of music. They started with a long song about the rites of spring, the fertility of the ground and of women. It was a favorite northern anthem. Allun sang and the others joined in on the chorus. It was beautiful,

but Lily found her mind wondering. What had Crayl meant? The same thing the Master had when he'd taken her? The same thing Sera claimed to have sensed? And why would he have expected the master of a company of musicians to have taught her more than the ways of song?

\* \* \*

Keitlan brought him his supper in the study and he could see on her face the overwhelming desire to berate him for closeting himself within its walls. Even his servants had grown complacent enough with his presence to dare and lecture him. He gave her a cold, dangerous stare while she stood with lecture on the tip of her tongue, until she blanched and thought better of spewing it at him and backed away.

There had been unease in her eyes, even a hint of fear. There had been a time when every servant in the castle had shown him fear. Now they barely remembered to show deference. Fear or lassitude. He did not know which he preferred. There seemed to be such a lack in proper middle ground. The one had almost driven him insane. The other would likely be his downfall if every enemy of his felt the same lack of respect that Helo Vran had exhibited.

He picked at his dinner, having little appetite. He should have been thinking about bandit alliances aimed against him and his, but he couldn't keep the train of thought. He would find himself staring out the window without even recalling walking to it, or into the flame of the candle burning on his desk. Unbidden he remembered the fire of the lash biting into his skin.

He flinched involuntarily and drew breath. The sweaty heat of the Prophet's body pressed against his back, the stale breath against his neck, the sordid, ripping impact of violation. The candle went crashing against a wall and lay there rocking, its flame trying to grasp hold of the



edge of carpet. He put it out with a thought and filled his glass from the bottle Keitlan had brought him with supper. He downed it and emptied the last of the liquid into his glass. He might chase the memories away that way when he couldn't manage to do it from will power alone.

Dante wanted him to go away and heal. With Dante things were black and white. He didn't understand the gray areas. Healing was such an insidious little word. How did one escape the baggage in one's own head? If it had been as easy as erasing a slave tattoo he would have. If it were as easy as hunting the girl down and making her sing one of those haunting melodies of hers to make the pain go away, he would have. Except it would have only been a temporary fix. And he couldn't abide the fear in her eyes.

He was weary, sleep having been elusive of late. He finished the wine and walked towards his rooms. Caught a serving girl on the way and told her to fetch another bottle. The night promised to be aswarm with bad dreams. He flopped down upon the bed fully dressed, lay across it sideways and stared at the shadows of the ceiling. They hinted at hidden demon faces in the depths. Things waiting to come out when sleep left him defenseless. He used to see them all the time as a child, so very long ago. But they hadn't all been imagination.

Unearthly, fey things that other children only imagined they saw, had been clear to him with his half human blood. He had known that some of the things that went bump in the night were real. They tormented children because they were powerless. They never bothered him once he'd gained the ability to destroy them or harness them for his own use. He dared one to test the shadows of this castle now.

What he got was the timid knock of the servant returning with his wine. She sat the tray with bottle and goblet on the table by the fire and scurried out. There was

proper respect there. Or perhaps merely fear of his black mood. He slumped into the chair beside the table, taking bottle and goblet in hand. She'd brought him a heady western red. It looked like blood in the goblet. He imagined it so, swirling it in the cup -- thick, crimson blood, let fresh from a vein. Trailing down lacerated flesh.

"Stop," he hissed, dizzy from wine and lack of sleep and all the morose gyrations of his mind. He frightened himself with such dark musings. In the corners the shadows gathered, expectant, scenting some brief insinuation of weakness. He shot up out of the chair. Grabbed the bottle and stalked out of his rooms. Down to the main hall where two maids worked late into the night by the low burning fire.

"Out," he snapped even as they looked up in surprise. They hastily gathered sewing, curtsied nervously and vacated the hall. It was great and empty and dark now, lit only by the weak light of the great hearth. With warm weather coming on its fires were not banked so high.

He sat in his high backed chair. It was comfortably cushioned now, thanks to Sera. All the chairs at the high table were. He put the wine on the table and sat like a predator in the dark, waiting for something that might not even come. He'd killed a man at this table today. Men had died in this hall before and by his hand. Men had died aplenty at his direction and he'd never blinked an eye. He should have killed every bandit that dared his hall and yet killing just the one had sent him upstairs in a fit of unease. How many deaths before there was no chance at redemption?

Redemption? No. That wasn't his word. It was the Prophet's. How could what the Prophet spewed get so tangled up with his own thoughts? He didn't know how to unravel the knots of convolution.

One of the main doors cracked open and he sank deeper into the chair, watching. The girl slipped in, softly

pushing the doors shut behind her. She had a natural quiet grace about her. She kept to the shadows, as if she were afraid to be caught unawares in the light. She did not have her lute with her. She moved towards the stairwell leading up, ignorant of any other presence in the hall. He would have let her pass by, still ignorant if the burning question of fear had not still plagued him.

“Are you afraid of me?” He voiced the question, not loud, but enough to carry through a hall as silent as death.

She froze at the bottom of the stairs, her head swinging around in shock to scan the room. She saw him and her shoulders tensed. Her head went down to let the hair fall across her face. She stood silently for a moment and he thought she wouldn’t answer at all. Then her head came back up and she said. “No.”

Almost he didn’t hear her, it was so quietly spoken. He didn’t believe her.

“Why not?” There was malice in the question. She lied to him and surprisingly enough it hurt.

She shook her head, looked about the shadows of the hall as if she too were wary of the demons that lurked in them, then back to him. “Why are you down here all alone, my lord?”

He hadn’t expected that. Not a question to his question. He thought he would gift her with the truth. It was colder than any fabrication. “Because when I sleep the nightmares come.”

Her mouth opened. She took a hesitant step towards him. Another.

“Of *him*?” she whispered, as if she were broaching a dread secret.

He looked away, not willing to go that far in his confession, even though, of all the people here, of all the people in the world, she knew best what he had endured.

“I dream about him too, sometimes,” she said, sounding frightened. “I wake up and think I’m back there.”

Kindred souls then. He dreamed that all the time, even when he was awake. "How long -- were you there?"

She made a little helpless sound. "I -- don't know, my lord. Six, seven months. Maybe more. Time loses meaning in a place like that. No night. No day." She shuddered. His own was hidden in the shadows.

Seven months or more and she was still sane. He was amazed at her resiliency. He had lost his own after a single one.

He had asked her before why she had bothered to try and help him and she had given him useless answers. He asked her again.

"Why bother, Lily? Why did you bother with me?"

With her head back she saw her eyes widen. Her breath quickened in her chest, one slender hand seemed to flutter as if she did not know what to do with it. She looked terrified, which only confirmed her earlier lie.

"Because I was alone," she whispered, sounding stricken. "Because no one would talk to me and I abhorred silence. Because you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, blood and all and I thought you might talk to me. Because I was selfish."

Then she fled. Just whirled and ran up the stairs as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. He sat staring at the place she had been, nonplused. She had come to him as a means to escape the torture of silence Angelo had placed upon her and he had spared her few words, so wrapped up had he been in his own misery. And yet she had come again and again, to gift him with her presence when he had offered nothing in return. Selfish. That was no more her word than redemption was his own.

## Twenty-seven

Gerad shifted in the saddle, shading his eyes with a hand as he scanned the distant forest line. Captain Kiro sat beside him, frowning darkly, caressing the hilt of the sword riding sheathed in its saddle harness. The man was uneasy and justly so with a city and outlying provinces to worry about and bandits very likely on the warpath. They'd seen the ones who'd dared the gates of Sta-Veron on their way. Established patrols about the city and tripled the guard about the walls, but a good bandit -- just like a good nightwalker could bypass the most strident effort of watchful guardsmen. A city was just too big to fully isolate. They might have done it in winter, when the travelers were few and far between, but with the onslaught of spring, merchants and mountaineers arrived daily at the gates of Sta-Veron.

"He should have killed them all," Kiro said blackly. "It was a mistake not to."

Gerad grunted, thinking the same thing, but surprised to hear Kiro vocally admonish his lord's actions. Kiro was Kastel's staunchest supporter. But Kiro was seeing what was obvious to anyone close to the matter; that his lord was shaken and not behaving in his usual manner.

"I should have had it done myself, once they were outside the walls," Kiro said.

"Maybe," Gerad agreed. "You would have caught hell for it."

"Better that than have them sparking the fires of revenge among Helo Vran's men. Nomads for the gods sake! No one commands the nomads. If what they said was true -- they are not a people I wish to see spill over into our lands."

"Can't be worse than the darklings across the eastern mountains."

Kiro gave him a wary, strained look. "I've commanded darklings and fought against them. They're slow witted with crude goals. Nomads are smart and believe me, any people who live year round on the Tundra are tougher than you might imagine. I should have killed those bandits."

"Well, its too late now. Unless you want to hunt them down . . ."

"No. But they will return sooner or later."

Probably, Gerad thought, riding back towards the walls of Sta-Veron. Nothing was ever easy, nor did the short periods of peace in his life seem destined to linger.

Kheron was on the wall when he rode in. She called down to him, a shadowed figure against the glare of morning sunlight.

"No marauders on our doorstep?" she called down.

"Not at the moment." He dismounted, handing the reins to one of the soldiers at the guard station. He joined her on the wide walk atop the wall. She was lightly armored today. Shoulder armor, bracers. Shin guards over white leather trousers that hugged her slim legs. She wore her long sword across her back. Very beautiful against the pale sky. Very dangerous.

She had about her an anxious look. Tense and nervous. She paced along the walk, and Gerad strolled at her side, figuring she would talk to him when she was ready. He had not seen her last night after the meeting between Kastel and the bandits. He'd been out all night with Kiro making certain the bandits were well and truly gone from Sta-Veron.

"So, how did it go last night?"

"You haven't heard?"

"Not from you."

"Bandit chieftain wants to become something more. Kastel didn't take his demands well. There are likely to be incursions along the northern border."

“Yes. Yes. That I understand. I was told that you and Dante had words.”

“Oh, you mean that. Well, just a few actually.”

“And?”

“And nothing. He was unusually civil.”

“Civil as compared to the last time you and he had words?”

Gerad shrugged.

“I hate this,” she hissed. “I hate you being at odds with him. I hate being angry at him because of it. I hate the fact that he won’t talk to me.”

“I wish I knew what to do, Kheron.” Gerad sighed. “He’s going to feel what he wants to feel and you or I can’t change that. He’s getting better, I think. I’m alive, aren’t I?”

She sniffed, as if that statement was not one that amused her. She turned her back to the outer wall and looked at him. “How can he punish me for finding you when he abandoned me long ago for Sera?”

“He’s a hypocrite and he’s selfish. You didn’t know this?”

She drew her brows as if it were only starting to sink in. Gods, there was a time she would have flown into a defensive rage if anyone had dared to denounce the center of her universe. Now she merely scowled darkly and gave the accusations deep and serious consideration. She nodded finally, as if giving her pledge of approval.

“I think,” she said. “That I shall speak to Sera. Perhaps at dinner tonight.”

Both Gerad’s brows shot up. Kheron and Sera were not the best of friends. Kheron generally considered Sera a plague that had infected Dante to which there seemed no cure. It was not a point of view that provoked deep conversation. “About what, pray tell?”

“Well, she seems to have this mystical power to sway him that no one else does. Perhaps she might influence him in this.”

Right. Sera would happily convince Dante to make nice to his former lover. Sera wasn't jealous of Kheron at all. Just like Kheron wasn't resentful of Sera. Gerad honestly didn't know what he felt about the subject. Uneasy at best. What he did know was that he personally did not wish to be present during such a conversation.

\* \* \*

Cook went to particular trouble with supper. Probably because last night's goings on had stirred everyone in the castle into gathering together to discuss the ramifications and possibilities. Those of Kiro's commanders that he did not have patrolling the forests to the north had all made appearances, with their ladies in close attendance. Rab-Ker who was to leave on the morrow had invited the old priest of the Goddess to come and converse with him on his last evening in Sta-Veron. The city constable had come at Kiro's behest to discuss keeping a closer eye to suspicious travelers come to market. The man had drawn in his wake a few of the local gentry who had occasion -- and enough prestige and wealth -- to present themselves in Sta-Veron castle. They brought with them a gimpish juggler and an acrobat to entertain the host during the meal and the doubtless interesting conversation that would take place after it.

The second best table was pulled up and sat perpendicular to the main one to seat the unusual number of diners. The lesser tables where the common guardsmen and those servants who were off duty sat, lined the walls.

Sera had not seen so many folk since winter festival. And then she'd hardly been in the mood to socialize, having been recently and cruelly abandoned by Dante. The thought of those dark days brought on a pang of disquiet, which she quickly forced away lest it ruin the good mood she found herself enjoying. They were all so worried about bandits plaguing the north, as if they hadn't



enough wizardly power gathered here to dispense with an army of ruffians. But, men were men and would dwell on violent goings on with single-minded determination.

She had no interest in being dragged into conversations about villages raided and traps laid in the mountains. She had rather go and spend time with father, who was leaving tomorrow morning. Dante declined to join her where Rab-Ker sat. He did it with such snide distaste that she glared reproachfully before disengaging her arm from him and marching away. Let him fend for himself then, listening to boring guard talk. Goddess knew he wouldn't condescend to talk to Gerad, whose company he enjoyed - when he wasn't at odds with him. And Kastel never lowered himself to attend these impromptu gatherings -- even before his present malaise. He hated crowds of noisy, chattering people.

She sat down next to father, his aide moving a chair down to make room for her. The old priest nodded to her warily, no doubt vividly recalling the fight with Dante on the doorstep of his temple.

The old hedge witch, Ayntha, sat across from Rab-Ker, having come to bid the man who had helped her flee the wrath of the lumber baron Thrax farewell. She had sat up a little tent within the market to sell her charms. Here in the north such things were well received. Sera wasn't sure, but she thought Dante had had a hand in helping the old woman start anew here. He hadn't said as much -- of all the things in the world to be modest about, he chose charity -- but Sera knew he rather liked the old woman, and she'd come with nothing but the clothes on her back. Certainly not enough to set up a charm and portent business on her own.

The kitchen girls brought out pictures of sweet cider and heady, dark ale, baskets of fresh baked bread along with crocks of honey sweetened butter. The hum of masculine conversation buzzed about the hall. The lighter tones of women talking eagerly about what might be

expected to come in with the spring trade caravans lay underneath it. There was concern there as well, that the tension last fall with the south might effect the trade. That the few luxuries they had here might be withheld.

One hoped not. One hoped that Teo had discovered the truth behind the Prophet and managed to sway the opinion of the people. One hoped fervently against the conflict of religion that Rab-Ker thought possible.

The fool was bouncing before their table, juggling four red balls, gibbering nonsense. Father's aide found him terribly amusing. Sera found him a bit tiresome and on the verge of annoying. She pondered giving him advice not to attempt to entertain Dante, whose tolerance for such idiocies was practically non-existent. But the juggling fool bounded away to harass the acrobat who was flipping and jumping across the cleared floor. A spattering of laughter went up around the room when the fool collided with the acrobat and the both of them went sprawling.

Sera sighed. There was a decided lack of refined taste here in the cold north.

\* \* \*

If Kastel had known there were so many people gathered in his hall he would never have come down. Of late the collection of people that actually ate together had been dwindling. Dante had been in a mood with Gerad and Kheron, so both nightwalker master and Stormbringer had been leaving the castle and venturing into the city to find dinner and whatever else they partook of that kept them late into the night and sometimes well into morning. Sera and Dante often missed meals altogether and one could not help but hear Keitlan grumbling about the two of them closeting themselves in Sera's chambers. So it was mostly just a few guards and servants that sat along the lesser tables. The kitchen staff ate in the kitchen, everyone else, including the other domestics ate in the hall. One had to assume the girl did too.

Although he had to admit to a certain ignorance in the hierarchy of his staff or where the girl's place was in it, she had to eat sometime. And after having her creep into his thoughts on more than one occasion during the day, coming down to take his dinner in the hall on the off chance that she might be about somewhere had not seemed a far fetched notion. It was his castle after all. No one might fault him for taking dinner where ever he wished. Besides he dared not --- most assuredly dared not -- go so far as to inquire of Keitlan or any of her overly talkative staff when and where a laundry girl took her meals.

He was not even certain he really wanted to do more than merely see her in the flesh to concrete the vision of her that had teased him all day and almost quit the idea altogether and retreated upstairs when the noise and the sense of a great many bodies hit him. He was hesitating on the bottom step when Kheron slunk silently down the stairs behind him -- obviously having picked up some of Gerad's habits -- and drawled silkily.

"Going to bless us with your presence tonight, Kastel? Whom should we offer thanks to?"

He glared at her. But he had to step down onto the hall floor to make way for her, and she wrapped her fingers about his arm, as if she needed escort into the room. Or more likely, and more accurately, she thought he might retreat back into the recesses of his upstairs haven. She had always taken pleasure in foiling his designs.

He called her a foul name under his breath and she laughed, amused at his discomfort.

"Look, Dante, I've brought you company." She accompanied him to his place, foremost and center in the midst of this gathering. Dante looked up at her darkly, then ignored her and focused on Kastel. He half smiled and lifted his cup.

"I thought you only came down to piss off bandits and create frozen, bloody messes on the carpet?"

He thought evil things about Dante too, but with so many eyes upon him, had no recourse but to slip into his chair and let a serving girl bring him a cup and fill it , then place a clean platter, knife and two pronged fork before him. Kheron stood a moment more between his and Dante's chairs, then went away without a word.

"Why are all these people here?" He took a deep draught of his ale. Dante was toying with his.

He leaned upon the arm of his chair, closer to Kastel. "Why, to talk about last night's goings on's. Obviously these people are starving for entertainment to get so worked up over an inconsequential thing like that. A little war would probably do them good."

"Gods." Kastel rolled his eyes in annoyance. He let his attention wander to the lesser tables, where guardsmen and servants broke bread and drank coarser ale than that which graced the main table. The girl wasn't there. He really hadn't expected her to be. Not amidst this crowd. She was a shy creature and not much inclined towards boisterous conversation. A dislike he shared.

An acrobat cart wheeled across the floor, a pantalooned fool, galloping after on all fours, barking like a dog. Kastel stared, disgusted.

And people were uneasy that bandits had occupied this hall. If they were going to attempt entertainment, at least let it be palatable. Which brought to mind the girl and her lute that she took into town to ply her talents nights. How disconcerting that the drunken patrons of some lowly tavern were able to hear her sing and the lord of the city was beset with barking fools and squealing acrobats. Not fair at all, when he very much wanted to hear her sing again.

A serving girl sat a platter of select meats before him. Others came with steaming accompaniments. He touched the girl's wrist before she could withdraw.

"I cannot eat with those creatures scampering about the floor. Go tell your mistress to have them withdraw."

She nodded, wide eyed that he'd spoken to her. She started to withdraw and he took a breath and plunged forward with the request he truly wished. "There's a girl who works in the castle who plays the lute, isn't there?"

"Yes, milord. Lily."

"Find her and ask her to come and play for us."

The girl nodded again and hurried away. Dante stared at him, both brows raised. Kastel pretended not to notice it.

"You know very well what her name is?" Dante accused lazily. "And you know very well she's a minstrel. What are you playing at, Kastel?"

"Nothing. She sings well, if I recall and anything would be preferable to those two fools."

Dante sat back, swirling his ale, a sly smile twitching at the corner of his lips. "Have you ever been able to lie to me and have me not know it? Ever?"

Kastel sniffed disdainfully, concentrating on picking a few pieces of meat from the tray. Anything but meet Dante's too penetrating silver stare. "I don't recall ever lying to you."

"Ha! Right. Shall I name some specifics?"

"I would prefer not." Stiffly.

Dante leaned in close and whispered. "You can play Winter King to everybody else, but I can read behind those pretty eyes of yours. You're after something. The little slave girl? She made an impression, humm? Why not just take her?"

"I am not. She did not. She is no longer a slave."

"Oh, that's right. You freed her of that burden. Magnanimous gesture. Since when did you start caring about the little people on a personal basis?"

Kastel cut his eyes about to glare at Dante. "You are offensive. I do not wish to continue this conversation." He hissed it in a low undertone, having no wish to entertain those around them.

“When’s the last time you took a lover, Kastel? I can’t even remember. What’s the point of having all the power if you can’t enjoy it? Or won’t? Did you take vows of celibacy behind my back?”

Kastel truly, dearly wanted to summon a particularly nasty blast of power and smite Dante where he sat. Only it would take out half the room with it and probably not accomplish the goal of sealing Dante’s lips. There were times when one could truly despise him. Then he happened to observe something equally as devastating to Dante as a high impact implosion spell and waved a hand across the room.

“Why don’t you worry about your own affairs. It looks as if Sera and Kheron are commencing negotiations.”

Dante’s head jerked up. He straightened in his chair, eyes following Kastel’s gesture. Kheron had approached Sera, bent to speak to her, and the two of them were retreating down to the end of the second table where there were a few empty chairs and a slim buffer of privacy.

“What the hell is that about?” Dante muttered.

Kastel could have cared less, as long as it diverted Dante’s predatory instincts away from him.

\* \* \*

Sera was wary, to say the least, of an invitation to private converse from the Stormbringer. Kheron, under the best circumstances they had ever shared -- those times when Dante was far and away and not thought to be coming back -- had never engaged Sera in private and heartfelt dialogue. She did not know quite what to say in the midst of such an unforeseen situation, so she smiled weakly and waved a hand to encompass the room at large.

“Rather a large turn out for dinner tonight.”

“I want to talk about Dante.” Kheron had never been one for trivial conversation. Her golden eyes bore into Sera’s as if she were preparing for battle. Sera blinked,

eyes traveling reflexively to the main table where the aforementioned subject of discussion sat.

"All right," she agreed carefully. "What about him?"

Kheron took a breath. "He hasn't spoken a word to me since -- since he walked in on Gerad and I in my room a week past. It is not reasonable or fair for him to hold such a grudge. Not after all the times he's done the same to me."

Oh, that was a thinly veiled way of saying, *not after he betrayed me with you*. Sera chewed her lip uncomfortably, uncertain what was expected of her. Of why Kheron chose to come to her with such a complaint.

"No," she agreed softly. "It's not fair. I'm sorry he hurts you."

"I want you to talk to him."

"I have. I made him promise not to harm Gerad."

"Gerad's not who he's really angry at. He'll speak to Gerad. I need you to make him forgive me."

Sera blinked at the sudden pain in Kheron's voice. The nelai're truly did anguish over Dante's scorn. "I can't *make* him do anything, Kheron."

"If not you, then no one can. You can make him see reason. For some reason I've never fathomed, he'll listen to you when he will no one else. Please. I know I've lost a part of him to you -- and I don't covet it now that I have Gerad --"

Sera lifted a dubious brow at that. Kheron seemed not to notice at all.

"-- but I miss the friendship we shared. I miss the Dante who raised me and taught me magic and how to fight and how to stand up for myself. Talk to him. Get him to talk to me."

Not quite what Sera had expected of dinner conversation. Not what she had expected at all. But she was a glutton for defending hurt feelings and Kheron had as bruised a look in her eyes as Sera had ever seen.

## Twenty-eight

Lily had finished her day's duties under the wash mistress, ran clean water in the cool stone environs of the wash room to rinse away the day's accumulated sweat and dirt and slipped upstairs to change into the clothing that would transform her from castle servant to minstrel.

Crayl had invited her to come and play with his little band of minstrels this night. A song or two after she finished at the White Hare. She was ecstatic that she had been invited. A chance to prove to them her talent. A chance that they might invite her to travel with them when they left Sta-Veron.

She had lute in hand when Setha came bounding into the room, out of breath and bright eyed with barely suppressed excitement. The girl saw her and her face broke into a wide grin.

"Lily! I was afraid I wouldn't catch you before you left. You're to come downstairs and play."

Lily stared at her silently, not understanding why she was to do such a thing and waiting for an explanation.

"There are guests aplenty in the hall for dinner. All come to talk about Helo Vran and his impudence. Some of the city lordlings brought a jester, but he was more pitiful than funny and his lordship said he didn't want to watch him during dinner and asked that you come down and entertain them. Isn't that wonderful? Guard captains and ladies and rich merchants tip well."

"Wh--who asked for me to play?" Lily could not quite get past that one sentence in amidst the rest of Setha's babbling.

"Lord Kastel himself, silly. Didn't I just say as much?"

"L-l-lord K-K-" She couldn't get the name out she was so astounded. Her fingers gripped the neck of the lute so hard the strings made a twanging sound of protest. Fear and trepidation and thrill raced through her. It was so



much more dramatic a request than Crayl's and so much more frightening.

"I can't," she stammered. "I've promised to play at the White Hare."

"The White Hare can wait. You'll never get another chance like this. Isn't it every minstrel's dream to be asked to play for lordly listeners? Besides which, you can't just refuse when our lord commands."

"He commanded?"

Setha gave her an impatient look. "He asked didn't he? It amounts to the same thing. Come on. You've already got your lute."

Setha took her arm, pulling her from the room and down the narrow servant's hall. Coherent thought left her on the way down and she just followed dumbly in the other girl's footsteps.

He'd asked to hear her play. He'd asked her if she was afraid of him. Oh, gods, gods, she wasn't -- not when she truly thought about it, but she was afraid of this sudden interest. She was afraid to go down there and have him watch her, afraid that she would fall apart under the scrutiny. That everyone would know how infatuated the silly former slave girl was with the lord of this castle. They would laugh at her and she would die from shame.

Setha pulled her into the hall. No one noticed her, everyone engrossed in a savory smelling feast and an undulating buzz of conversation. Keitlan bustled over, looking harried and displeased. She cast a dark glance back at the hall, muttering under her breath about not having enough for second courses if everyone kept eating as much as they were and the rudeness of dinner guests showing up without at least a day's proper notice. Then she glared at Lily, as if Lily were personally responsible.

"Well, girl, I trust you'll do better than the fool and the tumbler. Go to it, then and take their minds from food. Cook didn't have forewarning to prepare."

Lily took a breath. Another huge one to chase away the terror. Whatever she might be the rest of the time, when she performed, she was a professional. She knew the way to charm an audience. She knew the ways of garnering attention when she sat with a lute across her lap. Attention that she despised at any other time. She straightened her back, trapped into this now, and softly asked of Keitlan.

“Could you have a stool brought out for me, please?”

Setha ran and got one, brought it out and sat it in the center of the open floor space. Lily’s vision centered on that spot. No different than playing at a tavern, or in a gypsy circle where travelers stopped for a bit of rest and a night of song and dance. Those traveling players -- those gypsies had been the first to teach her how to charm an audience. How to steal their attention in music and dance and whatever else might earn a coin to line their pockets. No different this. Setha was right. The gratification here might be worth the effort. Find that frame of mind she’d been taught by the wanderers and seduce them all.

She walked out to the lonely chair and the conversation hardly faltered. No one noticed her, or if they did, found only enough interest to pause to see what she might do.

Surreptitiously her gaze swept the hall. Soldiers and their ladies, servants and guards. A wizard or two, the tunics of priests. Avoid looking at the main table, because her downfall was there. She struck a chord and began a melody. No words this. Merely an enchanting tune that would slowly make them aware that there was a harper in their midst. It was a tavern tactic, a way to draw in a noisy, drunken crowd and make them receptive to her workings. She bent over the lute and let herself be drawn into the music, floating with the currents of her creation. The end of the melody melted into a song with lyrics. A rite of spring song that she’d played nightly at the White Hare. The people here seemed to embrace anything to do with the escape from winter.

The conversations did not stop, but they became softer, as people half listened to the song. She did a lighthearted tune about the fisherman's daughter and her dilemma over a netted fish that promised a wish if she let it go. Afterwards, there was a spattering of applause, mostly from the lesser tables where the guards sat. Their appreciation was the only thing that let her know she had worth. It always had been and she gathered it in and hoarded it like a miser with his gold.

\* \* \*

One tried not to appear entirely enthralled. Especially with Dante's malicious presence close by. But it was difficult. Kastel would have appreciated her talents even had she been some harper fresh from the road that he'd never seen before. She perched on her stool, voluminous red skirt falling about her legs, one knee propped up so she might rest the lute upon it. The hem of the skirt parted to reveal slim calf and sandeled foot. Her toe tapped in time with the music she made. Her hair hid her eyes most of the time, but one could see her lips moving to form the words. Naturally red lips and white teeth. There was something almost elemental about her when she sang. Some vague underlying sense of strength that she hid so well the rest of the time.

She wouldn't look in his direction, which annoyed him on one level and granted some relief on another. If she didn't look at him, then he wouldn't have to pretend the glance did not affect him.

He slouched back in his chair, steeping his fingers under his chin. There had to be a solution to this foolishness. He did not know this girl. He had barely exchanged words with this girl. If he was beholden for her generosity in the past, then he had discharged that debt. He owed her nothing, save that occasionally dreams

of her voice and her rare looks chased away more dire nightmares.

"She's not half bad," Dante said grudgingly. "They're still over there talking."

Kastel did not comment, although his eyes did flicker momentarily away from Lily to the place where Sera and Kheron sat. One might, if one was vindictive, wish uncomfortable things to happen to Dante as a result of that détente.

She began a love song and the females in attendance, both guest and servant, tittered appreciatively. For the most part the men still talked about bandits and military strategy. He half heard Kiro talking to Gerad two chairs down from his own. Half heard Kiro's expressed worry about the bandits that had but recently been driven out of Sta-Veron.

-- still would rather know they're long gone than worry about fifteen vengeful men lurking in the forests beyond the city. If they haven't flown straight back to their master, they'll be hell on trappers and the like coming down to market."

"My offer still stands to hunt them down."

Kastel frowned, attention pulled further away from the songstress by the muted discussion. He had not been at his most attentive the day the bandits had ridden into the city, but --

"15?" He leaned towards Kiro. His captain looked at him blankly. Gerad lifted a brow, equally curious at his sudden interest in their talk.

"There were 20 or more on the road in."

Kiro kept staring, his raw boned face slowly turning a shade of agitated pink. "The gate guard stopped them, my lord. Confiscated their weapons. There were only fifteen men. We only escorted fifteen out of Sta-Veron. Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"I don't make mistakes like that."

“Which means there are five, minus the one Kastel iced, still loose in the city,” Gerad surmised. “Makes sense. I wouldn’t have sent my whole force in one lump group. Not if I was planning on creating some mischief.”

“But --” Kiro started, beginning to look very upset.

“How many merchants or trappers or caravans from highland towns came in that day? Did you keep track of every one of them? Or only the dangerous looking ones.”

“Damnit.” Kiro cursed, pushing back from his chair. He beckoned sharply to his commanders and men broke their conversations. “My lord,” he promised stiffly to Kastel. “If we’ve made such a mistake, then I will see it corrected.”

He marched towards the door, stopping to collect the city constable on his way out and converging with his men, pausing to give them hushed directions, before the lot of them hurried outside.

The hall was suddenly emptied of over half its occupants. The remaining ladies and servants stared at the egression with wide, uncertain eyes. Lily had faltered in her playing, twisted on her stool to watch the departing backs. She turned about and for one brief moment, while everyone else looked towards the doors, her eyes locked with Kastel’s. She was breathless from the songs, and there was a reckless, almost brazen light in her eyes, as if the music invigorated her. Or empowered her.

He broke the stare first, unnerved by the directness in her eyes when before there had been none.

“Well, I’d say dinner is over,” Dante drawled. He was looking across the room, where Kheron and Sera had risen, one walking towards the doors, the other along the back of the tables towards them. Sera stopped behind Dante’s chair and slipped her arms around his neck.

“What’s going on?”

“They missed a couple of bandits,” Dante said, twisting his head to look up at her.

Sera smiled benignly. "Oh. Well, it will give them something to do, then. Lily was wonderful, don't you think? Much better than the fool and the acrobat."

"Much," Dante agreed warily. "What were you talking about with Kheron?"

"Oh, this and that. Kastel, don't you think Lily was good?"

She had a look in her eyes that Kastel did not like. Sera with a cause in her stubborn little head was a thing to be cautious of. He pushed back his chair, officially signaling that this dinner was over. The commander's wives were getting up, clustering together on their way towards the doors, the servants were scattering, taking plates and mugs towards the kitchens as they did. The priests -- or at least Rab-Ker and his aide, were coming towards them, probably with plans of bidding Sera good night. Dante was scowling while Sera whispered to him to be good.

And Lily had slipped off her stool and was headed towards the main doors with her lute tucked under her arm, no doubt off to play in whatever tavern it was she took herself to at nights to ply her musical trade.

Having no wish to be caught in the middle of a dialogue between Dante and Rab-Ker he retreated along the table and down the side of the hall towards the stairs leading up. Lily disappeared through the doors. He hesitated at the bottom of the steps, thinking about bandits loose in his city and hapless girls traveling the streets alone at night. She shouldn't have been out at the hours she kept even without the threat of cutthroats.

He passed the stairs and continued on to the doors. Stepped outside into a cool, star filled night and surveyed the courtyard. There were men being organized, torches and lanterns bobbing about the yard as guards ran here or there. Kiro was shouting at a group of men, perhaps the men who'd been on gate duty when the bandits had come in. The castle gates were open, men riding out in small companies or marching out afoot. If they accomplished

anything tonight other than alarm the populace he would be surprised. And if he walked through that yard he'd have more questions and demands of his person than he wished to deal with.

It was easier just to whisper a word; conjure a flight spell and rise silently up into the darkness. He came to earth on the other side of the wall in the shadows of a building just outside the gates. She was just passing through the gates, slipping around a pair of horses skittish at being roused so late and put to duty. She clutched the lute to her breast and looked back at them as she hurried on. He almost let her pass, calling himself a fool and a lackwit for having more concern for a mere girl than he did for the threat of bandits loose in the city.

"Its dangerous to wonder the streets alone at night."

She almost squealed when he did step out behind her from the shadows. She backed a few steps up, head up and eyes a little wild with the fright he'd given her. She kept staring at him, breathing hard, as if he were some demon come to claim her soul. And she'd said she didn't fear him. He half smiled at that ironic little lie. They all did at some level or another. Every mortal being he'd ever had a connection to -- with the possible exception of Gerad -- eventually grew to fear him and what he was. It was only the immortal ones, the ones with the connection to the arcane, that clove to him.

"You frightened me," she said in a small, whispery voice.

"I know," he said sadly. "There are enemies loose in Sta-Veron. Best if you did not stray from the protection of the castle at night."

"Not my enemies," she said reasonably. "What grudge would they have with me?"

She argued with his efforts to protect her and he could not come up with an answer that did not sound foolish or condescending to reply to her with. He did not quite know what to do in this situation he had thoughtlessly put

himself in. What had he expected her to say? To ecstatically thank him for his concern and rush back to the safety of the castle?

"You're right," he said levelly, numbly. "I wasn't thinking." He didn't know why he admitted the last, save that it was blatantly true. She was staring at him. Actually staring without her hair hiding her eyes and he could not manage to collect his wits enough to utter something poised or elegantly cold in passing.

"You were interrupted before anyone had a chance to express their appreciation for your performance. Perhaps a few coins ---"

"I don't wish your silver." She cut him off, actually sounding a little angry.

He blinked at her, surprised. She took a breath and amended. "You're the master of this city, my lord. You need not pay for me to entertain you. It is my honor."

That was said with the voice of a consummate performer. An impersonal and well-used speech that somehow managed to prick him. He looked away from her, nodding, wishing he had gone upstairs and let her go about her business. Wishing he could make proper decisions instead of the disastrous ones he'd been producing of late. He took a step away, wanting away from this embarrassment. She made a distressed little sound, reached out and touched his shoulder.

"You misunderstand, my lord," she said. "I've been beholden so long, I wish to earn my own way."

He didn't turn, couldn't quite manage to speak because her fingers still rested on his back and the touch was electric. Silly girl. She had earned it. He had not been prepared to offer her anything that her talents did not warrant. Perhaps she took his silence as offense, for she withdrew her hand and murmured an apology.

"Thank you for your kindness, my lord," she said softly, eyes downcast now, hair spilling over to cover her blush. "I'll be on my way. It isn't far."



He found his voice. "Where?"

She bit her lip and shifted the lute in her arms. "The White Hare Tavern and Inn."

"I'll see you there."

"Oh." A small, surprised sound. "You don't have to do that, my lord."

No. But he might as well, having come this far. He took her under the elbow before she could protest further and started her moving. She ducked her head and walked at his side. After a few moments she looked up at him from under her hair.

"Do you know where it is?"

He had to admit to ignorance, not having the tendency to frequent the taverns and ale houses of his city.

"Three blocks up and to the left," she supplied quietly.

He nodded silently. A pair of guards on horseback passed them on the street, but paid them no heed. Lily shied a little closer to Kastel at the swift passage of heavy horse body. There were people on the streets, the hour being relatively early as far as the nighttime revelers were concerned.

"I think you were right, about the bandits, my lord," she offered quietly, taking him off guard with that unexpected statement.

"I've heard the servants and the guardsmen talking," she continued, almost shyly. "And they all seem to think you should have -- done to all of them what you did to the one. Killing them all -- that would have been something the Master -- the Prophet would have done. You would have had all their blood on your hands then."

He drew a breath, half laughing. If she only knew how much blood stained his hands. She was so naive. "I've blood aplenty. Theirs would have made no difference."

She shuddered. Horrified, he thought, at that admission. But she surprised him by saying. "You're a fool, my lord, if you think that. You let the words of men like the Master taint you. I don't believe the words of the

priests. You're only a sinner if you believe in the sin. There's nothing that can't be repaired, or forgiven or changed. See, even a slave can be a free woman again." She held up her hand, free of blemish for him to see. Behind it she smiled. An encouraging little lift of her lips. He did not know what to say to that optimism. Pessimistic musings were more his nature.

They came to the corner and turned it. "You can not understand," he told her quietly. She hadn't the scope or the years to comprehend all that he'd done.

She sighed, and stopped, pointed up the street and said. "It is just down there. I'll be fine from here on."

He inclined his head, sorry to part her company.

"Thank you," she said and stood there hesitating as if she wanted to say more, then from down the street someone called her name.

"Lily, is that you little love?"

Her head swung around. Two men walked towards them. A tall redhead and a shorter, brown haired young man. They sauntered up, the former putting his hands familiarly on Lily's shoulders and the later looking Kastel up and down speculatively.

"We were worried when you didn't show up to meet us."

"Who's this? A new friend?" the shorter asked with insinuation in his voice. Kastel narrowed his eyes at the familiar way the one had his hands on Lily.

"Ah --" Lily was floundering, not knowing quite how to answer.

"Since you are in the company of friends, I'll take my leave. I might suggest you get them to accompany you home." He inclined his head at her, ignored the two men, spun and strode away.

He did not look back. He was annoyed for no good reason. He was not prone to jealousy. Not over a woman at any rate. Very few things had been denied him once he'd come into his power. He'd been on the verge of

conquering the world and here he was, irritated over the fact that some drunken dandy was comfortable enough to put his hands on Lily -- a laundry girl -- when he himself could not bring himself to do it.

Dante was right. He dearly needed to take the time to get his head together, because there was only so much irrationality he could tolerate from himself before he gave up and went completely mad.

## Twenty-nine

Lily twisted out from under Dell's hands and glared balefully up at the tall minstrel. Why ever did minstrels have to be such a *friendly* lot? She had never known a one who practiced proper decorum when it came to the opposite sex, or the same sex, depending upon the minstrel in question. She'd seen Kastel's eyes ice up the moment Dell placed hands on her. Just turn hard and emotionless before he'd whirled and stalked away and all because Dell had a tendency towards familiarity.

"Who was that?" Thizura asked with a definite gleam of interest in his eyes.

One just didn't say, *the lord of this province*, and not seem the fool or a liar.

"An acquaintance."

"A fair one, hmmm?"

"Where were you? Crayl sent us out to look and see if you'd been ambushed on the streets." Dell put his arm back around her shoulders and she let him guide her towards the lights and noise of the tavern.

"I was asked to play at the castle," she said, still rather amazed at the fact herself. But not half so flabbergasted as she'd been at Kastel's appearance afterwards. She could hardly convince herself it had happened. He had been concerned for her. He had talked with her. Actually talked with her like a real person and not a lord to a slave -- a servant. He'd wanted to hear her play. She had touched him.

Bold, bold, bold. How had she ever managed to work up the courage to do that? He had taken her elbow and walked her here. And Dell had ruined it. Come up and put his hands on her like she and he were closer than they really were and Kastel who could not know the ways of minstrels and performers -- had taken it at face value.

“You played for the Winter King?” Thizura wanted to know.

“Yes.”

“Did you get lots of gold?”

“No.”

“No? Why ever not?”

“I didn’t require it,” she said quietly, but firmly.

They exchanged looks over her head.

“Sooo, was that a lover?” Dell asked.

“No!!” Vehemently.

“Ah. But someone you wish was?”

She blushed furiously, refusing to answer. Instead she asked. “You came to the White Hare looking for me? I thought I was to meet you after your own performance?”

“We decided to come and listen to you play. Obviously you didn’t show.”

Inside the tavern there was still a crowd. It was not so late that adamant drinkers would be driven home.

“We found her,” Dell said, as they reached the table where Crayl and Allun sat. “She was playing at the castle.”

“Was she now?” Crayl smiled up at her. “And did you woo them with your silvery voice, Lily?”

She blushed. Her face felt hot from the amount of blood rushing to it this night. She did not get the chance to sit down, for the barkeep, upon seeing her, bustled over, wiping his hands on a dirty towel.

“Where were you girl? Customers were asking for you.”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t get away from the castle, master Harden.”

He waved her excuse away. “No help for it then. Play a few songs for the latecomers at any rate.”

“Yes, do. We came here to listen to you and won’t be denied.” Dell encouraged her.

So she sat down and played a string of popular favorites. A collection of small coins were tossed her

way. A mediocre night at best, even for only half a set. The minstrels applauded energetically when she'd finished. One could not find a more obliging audience. They passed her a mug of ale when she sat back down with them and for a pleasant time talked shop.

"We're headed south in a month or so -- once summer hits full on. The western coastal cities are always awash with wealthy travelers that time of year," Crayl said. "There is a fair in Silvercroft during mid-summer that every minstrel and performer worth their weight will attend. A great many master harpers will gather. There will be much to be learned. You ought to go."

She drew her breath, at a momentary loss. "I-- I've heard of the Silvercroft Fair. I've never been. I would love to -- but I don't know if I could make my way alone."

"He's not asking you to go there alone," Thizura said with a mischievous grin.

"You could travel with us," Crayl offered. "A female voice to blend in harmony would be a boon. And we've no one to sing the love ballads of heartbroken maidens."

"We would be honored to have you," Allun said softly, smiling briefly at her.

Her eyes grew round, her heart thudding beneath her breast. How incredibly ironic that she should be invited to join their troop -- a thing she had wanted desperately up until two hours past when all her carefully constructed dreams of traveling the lands had been upset by a sudden show of interest from Lord Kastel. How untimely that Crayl should ask her this when all she could think about was the lord of this city.

Crayl saw her hesitation. Must have seen the dilemma in her eyes, for he reached out and covered her small hand in his. "No need to decide now. We've the rest of spring till we leave. This is your home, I understand. Not so easy to up and leave."

It wasn't the place that pulled at her heart. And one had to be pragmatic. The thing that did was so far beyond her reach as to seem impossible. No matter that he took the trouble to see her through the streets on a dark night, or lifted the mark of a slave from her hand.

"It's not a home to me," she said. "I've not lived here long. To travel to Silvercroft Fair would be a dream come true for me. I think I would like very much to join you on the road there."

\* \* \*

"What were you talking about with Kheron?" Dante shut the door to Sera's room behind him and fixed her with a no nonsense stare when she turned to look at him with those large, innocent eyes of hers. Her room had become their sanctum. It was warmer than his, and insulated with carpets and wall hangings and pillows. It might as well be their room, since a good deal of his accumulated belongings were there. He had hardly slept anywhere else since their initial reconciliation.

"Whatever do you mean?" She inquired sweetly. Too sweetly, which made him wary. She slipped up to him, stood on tip toe and brushed the side of his mouth with a light kiss. "You're paranoid."

"I'm not. I'm very much the antithesis of paranoid, but you -- you -- make me nervous when you've got that look in your eyes."

"I make you nervous?" She put both hands to her chest in mock disbelief. She shrugged a moment later and flounced around to sit on the bed. She pulled one knee up and rested her chin on it, watching him. Not so innocent not to use a pout and a coy gaze from under her lashes to draw him forward against his better judgment, when he should have been pressuring her to discover what she was up to. But his curse had always been being too easily

distracted by a pretty face. Sera's welcoming one was an aphrodisiac he could not get enough of.

He put a knee on the bed beside her, leaning down to kiss her. She met him eagerly, falling backwards with him on top of her. With the advent of soft lips and softer breasts under his hands, suspicions retreated into the shadows. He trailed his lips down her neck to the hollow of her throat.

"Did you plan," she asked while he was attempting to work at the ties of her blouse. "To take Kheron as a lover when you found her as a child and took her under your protection?"

His fingers froze on the silk of her blouse. Hers were making little circles on his back. He could feel her nails through his shirt. It was damned distracting. The throbbing between his legs was even more so. Malevolent, crafty little witch to spring such a question when he was intent on pursuits of pleasure.

"I don't normally plan that far ahead," he ground out, irritation warring with arousal. "And I damned sure don't want to talk about it now. I thought I'd settled this with you?"

"With me, yes. I just want to be clear on a few things."

"What the hell has she been talking to you about?"

"You raised her as if she were your own. Protected her, taught her. Then something changed and you became lovers, is that right?"

"Sera, Damnit!" He pushed himself off her, out of the mood suddenly and restless. Damn Kheron for bringing Sera into this. As if Sera's brand of interference could do anything but create a rift between them. He in no way wished to discuss this with her. He did not want to discuss it with anyone, more content to let the wound fester and become putrid. He did not admit weaknesses to anyone. Even to her.



He stood, with every intention of ending this conversation by walking out on it, but she made him hesitate with her next words.

“If our daughter had lived, would you have loved her as much as you did Kheron when she was a little girl?”

He drew a breath, narrowing his eyes. Mention of that lost child from her was not a thing he could ignore, or rail at her for. Whether she knew it or not, it was an effective weapon against him. He could not defend against it, so he stared at her silently, sullenly, refusing to answer. When he didn’t, she went on.

“Even though she isn’t of your flesh, Kheron was like a daughter, wasn’t she? Your first one. A first child is special. Didn’t you want the best for her? Didn’t it matter to you that she was happy?”

“She was happy,” he hissed. A dozen -- a hundred instances flashed across his mind of the child and the girl Kheron had been. Shy, quiet little thing that had turned into something more. Determined girl. Jealous girl. Oh so eager to make him proud of her achievements. He could not even recall now, when the turning point had come that changed their relationship forever.

“Don’t you want to see her happy now?”

“This is not your business.” He almost yelled it at her. He wanted out of this room. He did not want to think about the whys and wherefores when unreasoning anger served better. Unreasoning emotion had always served him better.

She did not take offense. She merely tilted her head and smiled sadly at him. “You don’t hate her for betraying you. How can you hate a child you raised? You hurt her by this black mood you direct towards her. She loves you, you know and you’ve done far more to deserve her hate than she ever has to warrant yours.”

He had never held himself accountable for any of the things he had done. No one had ever had the power to call him on them. Up until the point that Sera had

wormed her way into a position of surprising power over him, he had never let himself feel regret or admit to guilt. It didn't matter that he bruised the people that he valued. He knew they would not desert him. There had been a war going on and world to conquer then, but now things seemed to have changed.

The children he'd raised in his own image had concerns that did not solely revolve about him. Kastel was more interested in preserving the north and the vestiges of his own warped guilt, and Kheron chose to elevate Gerad in importance over him. That stung more than if she'd simply chosen to take the man to bed as casually as Dante had taken a hundred different women to his own and forgotten them afterwards, during those years of campaign.

That realization struck and gnawed at him insidiously. And Sera -- Sera never let things rest. She was never content to take the easy route or the smooth course that might avoid conflict. She was too easily willing to tear into issues better left untorn. Things he might have preferred left unsaid. Perhaps that was one of the things he found irresistible about her. That stubbornness that reminded him of his own, yet stemmed not from any desire for self gain, but rather from one to truly help.

Kheron was more like him. Or he had made her more like him. There had been a time when their goals had been the same. Power, the thrill of conquest. Somewhere along the way she had lost interest in that. He didn't know what she wanted now -- other than the nightwalker master. All the things before had been the things he had desired. She had lived her life mimicking his aspirations. The only time she ever seemed to create an agenda of her own was when she thought him dead and gone. The first time after Teo's kingly father and Rab-Ker's little coup, she'd been gung ho to help create a Utopia governed by wizards. The second had been less grand, but perhaps more useful. Gone with Gerad into the eastern mountains

to help the destitute orphans and widows of the past wars  
And she'd been willing to give it up at a moment's notice  
for him.

It was not his fault. He had never made her do anything. Her choices were and always had been her own. They had merely never collided with his interests or his feelings before. Not when she was free to make her own decisions at any rate. He had never put stipulations on their relationship. He had never needed to -- because he had trusted her to never betray him. He had trusted her like a daughter. And what was the greatest betrayal any daughter might perpetrate upon her father?

To place another man above him in her heart. To give another man her loyalty and her trust.

He glanced at Sera, quietly staring at him from the bed and wondered how much resentment Rab-Ker held against him for his daughter's blatant desertion. A faint smile touched his lips. A fair amount he'd wager.

"What?" she asked. "I don't like it when you smile like that. Nothing good comes of it."

He shook his head. "I won't discuss this tonight. If you insist then we'll both sleep alone."

She lifted a brow, considering that. "All right, then. My lips are sealed on the subject."

He was vaguely surprised at the capitulation. She was generally more doggedly stubborn in her arguments. She looked satisfied though, as if she saw something in his face that agreed with her sense of righteousness. He frowned darkly at that, but she ignored it and held out a hand.

He was more pensive when he lay beside her this time, thoughts distracted by other things. She did not seem to mind.

\* \* \*

The gates to the city stood open. A half dozen sturdy wagons loaded with furs and other valuable resources of the north waited on the road outside. The merchant who owned them was ecstatic that his generosity in allowing the priest Rab-Ker to travel with his party had been rewarded by an escort of ten mounted and armed soldiers from Kastel's garrison. There would be little danger of bandits on the trip south as a result.

It was little enough honor to grant a man as worthy as Rab-Ker. Little enough to make Sera feel more comfortable with her father's departure. It was not a totally selfless act. Men of his accompanying Rab-Ker south and back into the heart of the alliance of southern kingdoms would be an invaluable source of information about the state of those kingdoms. They would serve as messengers for the Great Priest, if he felt the situation had escalated into something that might require outside assistance.

Kastel had not yet decided if he would commit forces to such a thing as a holy war -- especially one brought on by the desertion of the Prophet, but Gerad and Kheron had pledged their support should Rab-Ker and Teo ask it of them. One hardly knew what Dante would do, but it might be assumed that preserving Teo or Rab-Ker's best interests were not high on his agenda.

He sat on his horse beside Kastel now, scowling and impatient as Sera bid farewell to her father. She was crying and apologizing for not going with him. Dante's frown grew darker each time 'I'm sorry, father' escaped her lips. Rab-Ker patted her shoulders reassuringly, bending his head to speak with her privately. She threw her arms around him and cried even more. Dante said something offensive under his breath.

"You'd think he was going to his death," he muttered afterwards.

Eventually Sera unwrapped herself from Rab-Ker and he stepped towards Kastel and Dante with her at his side.

“Lord Kastel. Again, I thank you for your generosity. I shall see your men back in short order.”

“Hopefully they’ll return with good news.” Kastel said quietly.

“Goddess willing,” The Great Priest agreed. Kastel did not second the prayer.

“Good traveling,” Gerad wished from where he stood with Kiro and Kheron. They had all come to see him away and the street leading to the gates were filled with curious bystanders, eager for a look at their lord and his wizardly companions. Kiro’s men kept them at bay, armed soldiers and heavy horse dampening too much enthusiasm.

The Priest nodded at the nightwalker master, then with an audible breath turned his piercing eyes to Dante, who had not bothered to dismount or utter a single word of farewell or good luck to the Great Priest. Dante returned the stare petulantly.

“Since my daughter has chosen your company over mine, it is the very least you can do to promise me to see her well cared for. It is a father’s prerogative.”

“Do you doubt it, old man?” A faint, taunting smile touched Dante’s lips. Sera frowned up at him. Rab-Ker sighed. The Great Priest was well aware of the futility of engaging in such a debate with Dante. None of them had the time to see it to its fruition with the merchant eager to be on his way.

“I’ll be just fine, father,” Sera assured him, since Dante was being stubborn. “We’ll see each other again soon, I’m sure of it. Please be safe and don’t worry about me.”

She kissed him on the cheek one last time, then he inclined his head towards Kastel and took the reins his aide held out for him. The caravan started off, trundling southward. Sera stood in the road for a bit watching. Then she realized everyone was waiting for her, and with a sigh, and returned to the little grey mare she’d ridden to the gates upon.

With a clatter of hooves on cobblestones the whole of the party dispersed from the gates.

"You didn't have to be so mean." Sera complained. Kastel only half heard Dante's reply to that. They bickered back and forth for the span of several blocks. One learned to tune it out. The squeak of saddle leather and the sound of iron-shod hooves on stones was more comforting.

People cleared a way for them on the streets. It was early still, and men were just traveling to their work. Merchants only now opening their stalls. There was the smell of smoke and various different breakfast feasts emanating from taverns and inns. The cries of children running in the streets, the barking of dogs and the yelling of men and women who bade each other good morn.

A city waking. A pleasant city, Sta-Veron. A city full, for the most part, of honest, hard working people. Occasionally it amazed him that such a sturdy, healthy place owed allegiance to him. That such a people welcomed him as their lord, even knowing what he was. When he'd conquered it, decades ago, he'd had no more thought for the welfare or loyalty of its people than he'd held for any of the cities his armies had taken. It was not a thing that would have occurred to him then. Loyalties and allegiances were things that were taken by force and held by right of fear and power. Dante had taught him that.

Only somewhere along the way, this province, with its harsh climate and its people that stubbornly hacked out a life here all the year round, fighting the long winters and the systematic raids from nomads to the north -- had started to appeal to him. It had been a place away from the glitter and the political machinations of the south that proved a valuable refuge. Dante had ridiculed him for making it the place he returned to time and again during the latter years of their conquest of the south. But, Dante was easily bored and tended towards luxury and the

trappings of wealth -- even if he despised the wealthy elite. One learned not to take all of Dante's opinions at face value.

They were on the road leading to the castle when the first arrow hurtled down from the rooftops.

## Thirty

No warning. Nothing but the sounds of the city stretching its limbs in preparation for a new day. Then Dante jerked in the saddle. He didn't even cry out. Just toppled backwards with enough force to send him over the rump of his horse with the short fletched bolt of an arrow protruding from his left eye. Kastel's horse shied before he even hit the ground and the bolt that would have taken him through the heart lodged just under it, slamming breath from his body.

Sera was screaming. Dante's horse bucked into his. Another bolt hit him in the side and this time he saw the movement of a figure on the rooftop to his left.

Kiro was screaming at his men. Kastel didn't hear what orders. He ignored the cries and the pain, and looked down once at Dante, who wasn't moving, blood staining the left side of his face and his hair. Sera and Kheron were scrambling towards him.

Movement on the rooftop again and he cried out furious words to a spell. The facade of the building exploded, sending shards of stone flying into the street. People screamed as they were bombarded with shrapnel. The building seemed to sag in on itself. He was too full of incipient rage to care for the damage or the innocent lives spent. He could not at the moment think of anything other than finding and destroying the assassin who had dared attack them.

He took to the air, cloak billowing around him like dark, unfurling wings. Saw the collapsed roof of the building, and in the alley below, a figure stumbling away, frantically running as if the hounds of hell were on its heels. They might as well have been. It would have been a kinder fate.

He spat a word and extended a hand. A wall of sharp edged ice reared up blocking the far end of the alley. The



fleeing man cried out and veered sharply to the side, hurtling his weight against a door. It burst under the assault and the assassin escaped inside. There were startled screams from within, which was the only thing that made Kastel hesitate in blasting a second building to oblivion.

He hovered for a moment, gauging that the man would flee out the opposite door to the next street. The front door of the building slammed open and a man stumbled out, shouldering his way through the early morning crowd. People cried out angrily at the rough treatment. In the midst of so many people firing a spell down at his quarry would take more lives than that one. Almost -- almost it would be worth it. Dante hadn't moved when he'd hit the ground. An arrow into the brain. Fatal for a normal man. Fatal for most abnormal ones.

The assassin cut through another building and out onto the next crowded street. The market street, where people were already crowded so thick it was hard to follow the man's progress. He might lose him in that crowd. The man just might melt away into the anonymity of a busy trading day. That could not happen. Would not happen.

Kastel saw the brown clad shoulders, the long, unkempt hair and beard bobbing amongst a dozen other people. There was a clear space ahead, where a wagon sat in the midst of being unloaded. The street exploded with ice. It gysered up, engulfing the wagon, and snaking along the street in a jutting ridge to form a haphazard barricade. People were hurt. Slammed backwards at the sudden growth, or grazed by sharp stalagmites of ice. But it wasn't the type of ice that would engulf a living body. He was not so careless in his rage now to slaughter the people of his city.

Panic swept the crowd, regardless. Screams of terror at the sudden apparition spread down the street. People stumbled over each other in their attempts to get away from the area. Kastel touched down in the middle of the

avenue. He put up enough of a shield to keep from being knocked down and swept away with the frenzied migration of people. He knew where his prey was. Running away from the barricade along with everyone else. The man had a short crossbow in his hand. There was a bolt loaded. His attention was fixed behind him, towards the ice wall, as if he expected pursuit from that direction. He did not notice that it was before him until he was almost upon Kastel. Then his eyes widened and he whirled, fighting his way past the remnants of scattering people.

One foot froze to the ground. The ice crawled up his calf and stopped at his knee. He screamed in more panic than pain. The leg would be beyond pain, numbed by the cold. He twisted to glare in rage at Kastel. Lifted the cross bow and fired. The bolt shattered harmlessly against Kastel's shield. An inarticulate cry of anger escaped the man's lips. His face was lined and scared from years of hard living and harsh weather. His clothing a patchwork of leather and furs. Not a man of this city. A man of the mountains. A bandit seeking vengeance.

"You will die!! Just like the dark wizard!!" The bandit cried, spittle flying from his lips. The frozen leg shattered. The man's eyes went wide and he teetered on one leg, before he crashed to the ground, screaming, clutching at the jagged edge of his knee. Strangled gasps went up from the people cowering along the side of the street. They hid in booths and tents, staring out with wide, stunned eyes.

Kastel ignored them, eyes narrowed, fixed unerringly upon his prey. The man was trying to pull another bolt from a pouch at his side. The fingers of that hand stiffened and froze, shattering one by one. The blight continued up his arm, until that too cracked and shattered between shoulder and elbow. Piece by piece he fell apart. His screams were nothing but shock and pain filled terror now. Blood that wasn't frozen solid, pooled on the street

around him, pumping the life from his body. But not as fast as Kastel wrenched it from him. It would not do for the man to die on his own before Kastel had the chance to finish it.

It did not occur to him, until there were nothing but shards of frozen flesh on the street that this man might have told him where his compatriots were. That the bolts that had taken Dante and himself had been too close together to have been fired from a single archer.

He heard his name whispered from the people on the street. Slowly turned his head and saw a collected visage of fear on the faces. Justified fear. He left the remnants of the archer on the street and rose into the sky.

\* \* \*

Sera couldn't think. Couldn't formulate coherent thought to fight away the panic, so reflex action took over. Dante was bleeding all over her. So much blood that it soaked her tunic and slicked her hands. The brown feathers of the bolt's fletching were spattered with it. She could not stand to look at it. A riderless horse shied into her, throwing her off balance. People were still screaming in the street in the aftermath of the explosion that had taken out the building across the street.

Dante wasn't moving. She couldn't think.

"Sera!! Sera!!" Kheron shoved roughly at her shoulder, forcing her attention away from the ghastly wound. She blinked up, moon eyed and terrified.

"We've got to get the bolt out. He can't begin to heal himself with it there."

She stared, dumbstruck that he could heal an arrow through his head. But, goddess, he'd come back from worse. Though if Kheron were certain, why did she look so pale and frightened?

"Hold his head." The nelai're commanded, wrapping her fingers around the four inches of shaft that protruded

from his eye socket. Reflex took over. Sera drew a breath and held his head firmly between her hands, forcing herself not to look away as Kheron tensed, then yanked the bolt out. Blood spurted with it and what looked nauseatingly like flecks of brain, gelatinous and glistening. They'd done more harm than good with that, the barbed end of the bolt having ripped already torn flesh on its path out. Sera sobbed and leaned over him, concentrating all of her healing power on trying to repair damage that was beyond her capacity to deal with. He wasn't breathing. She could not sense the beat of his heart. She felt like her own was about to explode from the sheer ache that trembled within it.

"Help me get him to the castle." Kheron was yelling. Sera realized she wasn't talking to her, but to the few remaining guards that mulled nervously about them. The rest were gone. Gerad was gone. Kastel had disappeared.

Two of the men bent to lift Dante between them. Sera rose with them, her hands still on him, infusing every bit of healing force she could muster into his body. Kheron paced on the other side.

They were inside the gates and half way across the yard, when heat began to radiate from Dante. It went from an onrush of warmth to a sudden and violent wash of energy that blew them all backwards. Sera tumbled to a halt, throwing her arms up to shield her face from light and blaring heat. She could barely see him in the midst of the glare, his body arched and rigid where the guardsmen had lost their hold on him. If she had felt nothing from him before, it welled forth now. Mindless, crackling power that sent out errant little fingers to strike cobblestone, a barrel by the well, a discarded metal helm, the roof of the guardhouse by the gates. Servants that had come out into the yard to see what the commotion was cried out and ran for cover. Guards tried to be more valiant, but had little choice as the ricochets of energy grew worse. Sera erected a shield. Ground her teeth and

crouched behind it when what she really wanted to do was get closer to Dante.

A horse was hit by a strike of white-hot energy and crashed down, screaming and thrashing. The smell of burnt flesh permeated the yard. Goddess. Something had to be done. She rose, still maintaining her shield and circled him to join Kheron who crouched ten feet away from him on the other side. The nelai're's shields were by far more powerful and Sera let her own down as she stepped within the boundaries of Kheron's protection.

"He's healing himself?" Sera was not completely certain that was a factual statement.

"Something is," Kheron agreed.

"Is there anything we can do to make it less violent?"

Kheron looked at her grimly. "I don't know. I can't recall him ever having an arrow through the eye before. I would imagine its rather disconcerting."

Someone cried out in pain, clipped by a stray bolt. Sera winced. "Can you shield me if I try to get closer?"

"Probably," Kheron admitted. "I'd rather let him deal with it on his own."

"Well I would too, if it weren't so damned destructive. Just help me, please."

Kheron shrugged and rose from her crouch, moving forward through the heat and the energy until Sera could get her hands -- or as close as she might get behind Kheron's shielding -- on him. She tried to slip the healing fingers of her own magic through the power enveloping him, but her magic was not strong enough to pierce it. So she wrapped her arms around his rigid torso and pleaded for him to wake up.

"It's not working." Kheron pulled at her shoulder, looking a little strained now at protecting them both. "Come away and let it run its course."

Then without warning it ceased. Just evaporated like water in the desert and he went limp in her arms. She frantically pushed his hair back to see the wound. Blood

still covered his face, but his lid was whole under the gore.

“Come on, help us with him,” Kheron ordered the hesitant guards. She and Sera had him almost up between them when the men came to lend their strength and get him up the steps and inside the hall. He came awake when they were debating the best way to get him to the upper level -- just let out an inarticulate cry and began thrashing.

He caught Sera on the side of the face with a fist and the guards dared not try and restrain him, so Kheron threw herself atop him and did her best to pin him to the floor. It wasn't hard, despite the weight difference. There was nothing quite sane in his eyes. The one was bloodshot and dilated. Power was building. Defensive, reflexive power to banish what his disorientated mind could not process.

Which at the moment, considering they'd just ripped an arrow out of his head along with bits and pieces of his brain, was probably everything. He could take this castle down if he was allowed to lash out unchecked.

“Dante. Dante. It's me.” Kheron was crying, trying to keep her grip on him. Sera struggled to her knees, and crawled over. Saw Keitlan and a group of her girls gathering about.

“Get out,” she cried frantically. “Go outside where it's safe.”

As if it were safe outside where assassins lurked in the shadows. She pressed herself against his arm, adding her weight and her voice to Kheron.

Keitlan wasn't paying heed to her advice, although a few of the girls had run outside. Most stayed stubbornly to the hall. She saw Lily and Setha behind the housemistress, all of them wide-eyed and concerned. Stupid not to run with a wounded and confused sorcerer in their midst.

“Stop it, Dante!!” she screamed. “Stop it!!” She drew back her fist and hit him, startling Kheron to no ends. The nelai’re looked up at her in shock. Her knuckles hurt from the blow. She hit him again.

“What are you doing?” Kheron yelled at her.

“Trying to get through his thick skull,” she yelled back, nose to nose with the other woman.

“Didn’t that arrow do the job for you?”

“What? Would you have him destroy this castle?”

“I wouldn’t hit him when he was wounded.”

“Hah. Maybe that was your mistake. If you had a little backbone he’d have never run all over you in the first place.”

Kheron gasped in outrage. Tears streaked both their faces. Somewhere along the way he’d stopped struggling against them. Sera felt his fingers grasp her waist.

“God -- stop yelling.” His voice was a bare whisper.

“Oh, Dante.” Sera wrapped her arms about him, pressing her face to his, regardless of blood. Kheron pushed back, anger fading to be replaced by uncertainty. He caught her wrist before she could retreat and met her eyes over Sera’s head.

“I forgive you.”

Stupid man, Sera thought. As if he had anything to forgive, but it was good, because Kheron let out a little whimper and threw herself against his other side and Sera shifted away this once to let him wrap his arms about her, this being something well in need of mending.

\* \* \*

The courtyard was in a shambles. A wagon near the wall was in flames. There was the smoking carcass of a horse. The guard tower had a chunk out of the side of it. Guards ran here and there, manning the walls and delving into the city. Servants clustered outside the main doors, talking fearfully among themselves. The lot of them turned and stared with wide, bewildered eyes when Kastel

landed in the yard. They scattered to make a path for him up the stairs. The doors were flung wide. He saw Kheron and Sera kneeling on the floor beside Dante and had a moment's fear of the worst before he moved, pushing himself up to a sitting position. Sera moved to help him and he shook off her hands. He saw Kastel before the others did. His face was bloody and terrible.

"Did you get the son of a bitch?"

Kastel took a breath and step forward. "Yes. One of them."

"Our missing bandits?"

"Yes." Another step. He tasted copper in his mouth and staggered a little to one side.

"Goddess," Sera cried. "You're wounded, too."

He'd forgotten about the bolts embedded in his body. He'd been too focused on the anger. He looked down and saw the stubby fletch of one bolt protruding from his ribs and another just above his hip. He felt faint at the sight of them. His thinking went fuzzy for a moment and one knee collapsed out from under him. He went down to hands and knees at Dante's feet, then pitched to his side when Sera put her hands on him, trying to ascertain where the bolts were. Dante leaned over him, a grim, humorless smile on his lips.

"Well, wasn't this a fucking wonderful day?" Then he moved his hand down Kastel's shoulder and laid it next to the bolt. "They've got to come out."

"Fine. Do it."

Dante didn't hesitate. Just grasped the shaft and jerked it out. It hurt like hell. Kastel almost didn't feel the second one ripped from his body. Just shut his eyes and pressed his face against Dante's outflung leg and let someone wash his body with healing magic. Fates knew his own healing reflexes were unpredictable enough unless life was on the line.

"I'm going to help them search the other archer down." Kheron's voice, fading as she moved away.



The hurt abated. Breathing he had not even realized was difficult eased. He sighed and opened his eyes. Sera helped him sit up. He was still a little sore, the afterimages of wounds that were no longer there. Dante's doing then, because Sera's healing was not so all encompassing. Servants were filling the hall, guards were creeping in from the yard to make sure matters were in hand. He felt foolish sitting on the floor between Dante's sprawled legs with Sera hovering over the both of them. He could not quite manage to make himself stand up. Dante seemed comfortable enough.

"Did you find out anything from the assassin?" Sera asked hesitantly.

He stared at her, then away. Yes, he knew the man could scream to the last. He knew the people of Sta-Veron would never forget that casual display of power. That brutal execution in the middle of Market Street. The terror in their eyes had been as exacting as that in the eyes of his victim.

"My Lord?" Keitlan's voice intruded. "Let us get the both of you off the floor and to your chambers." He looked up at her and caught sight of the pale face of Lily behind her. Wide, worried eyes under the fall of hair. And a hint of horror. For a brief moment her eyes met his, locked there as if some force held their gaze, then she broke free of it and melted into the ring of servants.

He pressed his lips together angrily, rising without anyone's aid. The feel of cooling blood on his tunic and down his pants leg was clammy and repulsive.

"Was anyone else hit?" he asked, wanting no innocent lives taken because he had been careless enough not to tell Kiro about the bandits and their number on the road in the first place.

"No, milord," one of the guardsmen said. "Only the two of you."

The wizard that had killed Helo Vran's first brother and the one that had taken his second. At least the bandits

were careful in their targets. For now. One hoped Kiro and Gerad had tracked down the other archer.

\* \* \*

The bandit archer did not even know he was being followed. Gerad had picked up his trail four blocks from the scene of the attack. Had slipped from shadow to shadow in the wake of the grizzled, grinning assassin. The man thought he had escaped. He thought he had been successful in his mission. He might have been for all Gerad knew. Dante was down and Kastel had taken hits, Gerad had not wasted time hanging around to find out the end results of that. Kastel, he figured was all right, from the burst of magic that had leveled the building the second archer had used as his vantage.

Two archers, one of either side of the road. Gerad had pin pointed them almost the second the first arrow had hit. Seen the one disappear in the wreckage of the building and the other slip away in the confusion. Kiro and his men were like dogs on the hunt, rushing through the streets with no stealth or anonymity. Easy to hear coming. Easy to hide from if one were adept at concealment. A mountain bandit would be. But not from a master of the arts.

Gerad hoped the man would lead him to the rest of the bandits that had managed to stay behind when their party was ousted, but the man entered a tavern after ditching the cross bow in an alley and planted himself at a table by himself, seemingly content to sit and drink the morning away. No one came to join him. Not stupid these men. Not willing to foolishly endanger themselves by meeting up after so brazen an attempt at the life of this city's lord. Damned smart to take out Dante first. A simple, mundane and entirely efficient way of doing it. If it worked, Gerad would be surprised. Dante had the tendency to snap back from atrocious things perpetrated upon his body.

So a smart bandit wouldn't make a mistake and lead Gerad to his compatriots and Gerad hadn't the desire to wait all day in the hopes the man would willingly make a mistake.

He walked into the bar through the front door. Only a few patrons were here so early in the morning. It was too far away from the palace for word of the assassination attempt to have stirred the men to speculative conversation. No one looked at him. The bandit didn't even look up from his mug of ale. He leaned a hand on the table beside the archer and said softly.

"Good shot with the Silver Mage, but you fucked up royally with the other. The Winter King's out for blood."

The man didn't even look back at him. Just grabbed for a long knife in his boot and swung about with it. Gerad caught the wrist, twisted it cruelly and slammed it down upon the edge of the table. Bones cracked. The knife left nerveless fingers. He flung the man around and slammed an elbow into his jaw. The other patrons had risen from their tables, startled at the sudden flare of violence in their midst. The bandit was heavy, but slow, more adept at slaughtering townsfolk and killing from a distance than combating a well-trained warrior. Gerad grabbed a handful of greasy hair and smashed the man's face into the tabletop. That took the fight out of him, enough for Gerad to manhandle him up and towards the door. The other patrons didn't say a word, just stared in shock as he left.

He shoved the bandit into the adjoining alley, kicked him to the ground into a pile of empty crates. The man glared balefully up at him, eyes darting about the dingy alley, looking for anything that would give him an advantage.

"Easy or hard?" Gerad asked, looming over him.

"Fuck you, running dog."

"No, no, no. That's not how it works." His foot shot out, caught the man's knee and shattered it. The bandit

howled like the dog he'd called Gerad, clutching the injured leg. "How it works is you tell me where the rest of your men are and I see to it that you die quickly and painlessly. Maybe even with a little bit of honor."

"My only honor is thwarting you." Spittle flew from the bandit's lips, hitting Gerad's pants leg. He looked down in distaste.

"Wrong again. Hard it is, I guess."

When he'd finished, the bandit had lost all pretense of stubborn vindictiveness. Gerad thought he had been truthful in the frantic babbling that had spewed from his bloodied lips. He wiped the blade of the Great Sword clean as he walked from the alley, marking it to send Kiro's men back to retrieve the body. Two more in the city, waiting for the chance to commit mischief. They would not get it.

He was walking down the street when Kheron appeared in the sky above him, her face filled with grim intent. The look worried him.

He asked before she had had quite touched down. "Dante?"

"Alive. Did you find him?"

"I did. He was kind enough to tell me where his friends are staying. Would you care to make a visit?"

She nodded once, silently, never one for a witty rejoinder. They walked towards the outer eastern rim of the city. A poor section of town. As close to slums as Sta-Veron got, with shanty houses built close together and narrow streets that were in need of repair. People were beginning to become aware that something was not quite right within the walls of the city. The guards were out in force and whispers were beginning to spread. Gerad heard a boy, out of breath from running, tell a group of loitering men that the Winter King had murdered a man in the middle of market. There was no mention of bandits or assassins. He frowned and grabbed that same boy's arm, asking.

“Where is Sholaki the Bookmaker’s shop?” The boy thrust his jaw out belligerently, angry at the rough treatment, then his eyes took in Kheron behind Gerad, her large, not quite human eyes and fine armor and the pommels of the swords they both wore at their backs. He pointed up the street and stuttered out directions. Gerad nodded, then bent his head to suggest.

“Don’t spread rumors, boy.”

The bookmaker had rooms above his shop that he let out. The bookmaker supposedly had black-market dealings with bandits to the north. Shelter and weapons had to be supplied by someone within the limits of the city, since the bandits had been stripped of their own steel at the gates. Gerad would have preferred to wait and watch and see who came and who went from the premises, to get a feel for his prey, but Kheron was not so patient or so reserved in her thirst for vengeance. He started veering off towards the other side of the street with every intention of sitting up surveillance from the shadows, and she split from him and stalked towards the front door.

Gerad gaped and swore and trotted to catch up with her. “If we barge in and they’re not here, then we’ve lost any chance of finding them,” he advised her.

She gave him the arched brow look of a sorceress who had never learned the meaning of the word caution, much less circumspection.

“Fine,” he grumbled and kicked in the door before stepping back and ushering her in. It slammed against the wall with a rattling of thin, haphazardly attached panels. A pale, balding man looked up from a table inside. The walls were lined with paper marks, there were cages along the floor that held a variety of game birds used for fighting. A muscular dog on a chain growled in a corner. The place stank like the pits of hell from poultry, canine and human excrement.

“What’s with the door?” the man demanded, rising from the table where he had bookwork and marks scattered. Kheron drew her sword and strode forward, the tip of the blade under the flabby chin before the man had the chance to backpedaled away.

“Where are they?”

“What -- who are you? I’ll have the city guard after you for this.”

“Where are they, you vermin?” she repeated the question with slow, deliberate words.

“Personally, I’d answer the lady,” Gerad suggested amicably, content to play the good guy to her villain. A little streak of energy radiated the length of her sword. The bookmaker’s eyes widened in fear.

“Wh--who?”

“The northern bandits that you give shelter to? The ones who will die because of the monstrous affront they have made this day,” she hissed.

The man’s eyes widened. Oh, he knew. Gerad could see it in his face. But the fear in his eyes was more for the arcane sword under his chin. This was a man in the midst of a crisis. There was the slight creak of floorboards above. A little curl of dust fell down from the ceiling. Gerad glanced up and smiled. He drew the cursed blade and laid it across his shoulder.

“I think I’ll take a look upstairs. You don’t mind, do you? Glad to hear it.”

He was past the table and up the narrow stairs at the back of the room. He heard Kheron push the bookmaker against the table and move to follow him. Upstairs was one big loft. Bare floors with a few cots against the walls and crates and boxes taking up the rest of the space. There was one window and a man was in the midst of crawling out it.

“No,” Kheron roared from behind him and a bolt lanced from her out flung fingers and caught the fleeing man square in the back. It singed the hair on Gerad’s arm it

passed so close. The man let out an aborted cry and toppled out of the window with alacrity than he'd probably planned. Another man stood against the wall, very still, very intent. His hands were pressed together, his lips moving in the silent words of a chant. Not like any of the other bandits Gerad had seen. His skin was leathery and brown. His face broad and flat, forehead sloping sharply backwards into lank, inky black hair. His eyes were dead as night. So black even pupils could not be discerned.

He looked -- uncivilized. That was the closest Gerad could come to describing him. He made the bandits seem absolutely domesticated. There were tattoos on his cheeks and forehead. Rune signs that slipped up the arms of his sleeves and peeked out from the backs of his hands. A nomad. He couldn't say how he knew it, but he did. This was one of the elusive nomads that everyone was so spooked about, nestled within the backstreets of Kastel's city. And he was in the midst of casting a spell.

The air hummed around them, and rather suddenly the floor turned rubbery beneath their feet. Or their legs went weak, one or the other. Kheron let out a startled, angry squawk and dropped to one knee. Gerad cursed and staggered against a crate, flinging out the Great Sword and calling forth a blaze of power. Force rippled towards the nomad. The man held up both hands and the runes on his face seemed to glow. The energy of Gerad's strike forked around him, blasting sections from the wall on both sides.

"Goddamnit!!" Gerad cried. The nomad put his fingers together again and the runes on his hands pulsed. Of a sudden the floor was crawling with blue, ridge-backed snakes. Serpent hisses filled the air.

Kheron screamed and rocketed right off the floor, launching a bolt attack at the nomad shaman. Gerad sliced around his legs at the serpents, having no notion whether the things were real or illusion and having no

desire to be bitten either way. Magic snakes could kill as effectively as real ones.

“*Sar Heshar!!*” Kheron screamed a spell and Gerad almost called out for her to stop, having no desire to be so close to ground zero of a lightening ball spell. It was too late anyway. It formed about three feet before her and barreled down onto the nomad, who frantically waved his hands to try and block it.

He almost did, but the building around him was not so resilient and crumbled. The ceiling collapsed and the floor gave way. The nomad was caught in the slide and Gerad found himself helplessly sliding afterwards, amidst crates, and squirming snakes. Kheron caught him under the armpits, heaving him up, protecting him with her shield as chunks of roof crashed down. She swept them down to the street, intent on finding the nomad and finishing this little duel. But the fall had done it for her. He lay sprawled under a section of wall, neck twisted at an unnatural angle, black eyes wide in death. The bandit that had tried to escape lay a few feet from him, charred from her initial lightening strike.

“Well,” Gerad said, eyeing the debris warily for signs of snakes. They seemed to have disappeared. “That was to the point.”

People were rushing towards the disturbance. The bookmaker was crawling out from under the sagging frame of his door, moaning and bleeding. He had sheltered them. At least Kiro might question him and discover something. It was better than nothing.

“Was that a nomad?” Kheron asked.

“That’s my guess.”

“They have magic. And not a flavor I’m familiar with.”

“Me either. What would life be without these little inconveniences to make it interesting?” he said cheerfully.

She looked at him dryly. Not particularly happy.

“Oh, well.” He shrugged, sliding the Great Sword back into its sheath. “Look at it this way. Not a whole hell of a



lot else can happen to top today's list of calamities and disasters."

She frowned. She didn't look like she believed him.

\* \* \*

The old man was stooped and bent, his large hands veined and splotched with age. He might have been sixty. It was hard to tell from the planes of his face. A strong face once, but now twisted and ravaged by the stress of time or harsh living. His hair was gray streaked brown and tied at the nape of his neck in a tail. But his eyes were sharp and intelligent.

His eyes frightened the merchant who stopped his caravan at the behest of the lone traveler. What harm was an old man alone, traveling along the western trade route towards the north? None the merchant thought, until he saw those intense eyes. Then he wondered if he should not have just passed by when the man waved them down. But the old traveler had gold and plenty of it and asked only for a place in the caravan.

*You travel to the north to trade your goods, do you not?*  
The old man had asked.

*Yes. To the capital itself. Sta-Veron. The trade is good this time of year, even with the troubles between north and south.*

The old man's eyes had glittered. The forests of the western mountains were an infinite backdrop beyond the road. The merchant wondered where the old man had come from? What city was close enough for such a man to have walked from? Keladedra sat fifty leagues to the south on the other side of the mountains, but that was the closest town or city to this desolate section of road. The old man might have hailed from there, with all the gold he carried.

*Why are you walking alone?*

*Because God no longer walks with me.* The old man had laughed at that. A mad, frightening laughter that almost made the merchant forget about gold. But greed won out. Greed and something else, something that tickled at the back of his mind and made him feel pity for a lone traveler. That made him open his heart and offer the protection of his caravan to the old man.

*What do you seek in Sta-Veron?* The merchant asked, when the traveler was settled in the wagon beside him. The intense eyes locked on his. Even with the haggard lines, his face was mesmerizing. There was something alluring and enticing about him. A man that had a power to his voice and the very aura of his presence.

*Retribution.* He said and the merchant hardly understood that. But he forgot it had ever been said a moment later, his eyes glazed, his mind blank. Then he collected himself and thoughts of trade and profits filled his mind. There was a goodly distance to cover before they crossed the thawed passes that led to the north. If a man wasn't careful, the journey might not prove profitable.

## Thirty -one

The not too distant scent of magic permeated the eather. Kastel sensed it. Dante did and they hesitated on the stair. A quick burst and another. Nothing tremendously powerful. Nothing to make the city shake or the skies darken. Dante shrugged it away.

“Kheron doing some damage,” he surmised and did not give it more interest than that, with Sera urging him from behind to continue up the stairs. Kastel couldn’t make himself retreat, despite the very great desire to rid himself of the bloody clothing. He let them go back up and went back towards the courtyard, through the group of servants that Keitlan was chasing back to their duties with sharp words and waving hands. She cast him a sidelong, worried look, but did not dare to try and implement her tendencies towards dictatorship with him.

He walked out of the doors and into the confusion of the courtyard. Men cast wary stares his way. There was a sense of uncertainty mixed with the purpose in this yard. A clamor at the gates and guards clustered there, containing some disturbance. The hoarse screaming of a man, the unsettling murmur of a small crowd. He motioned to a guard and the man ran up to him, out of breath and grim-eyed.

“What is this at the gates?”

The man shook his head almost reluctantly. “My lord - the merchant who owned the shop down the street -- there’s a crowd.” The man hesitated.

“The building that was destroyed?” His memory of actually destroying it was vague, he’d been so blinded by anger. The merchants were angry about the building. He shook his head, dismissing it. “Tell him there will be recompense.”

“My Lord. There were folk inside. His wife and daughter were killed when the roof fell in. It's not recompense that has them at the gates -- it's grief.”

He stared at the gates, stricken, breath gone shallow and fast. More innocents to grace the field of dead that mocked him from that other place. And these from the ranks of the people he had chosen to protect. More blood on his hands. Angelo was right. He could not escape the nature of his existence. Two more anchors to pull his soul down to hell.

“Let him in,” he said softly and the man blinked, surprised. Stood a moment more then started to run towards the gates, when Kastel started walking that way himself. They opened the lesser, man-sized gate and the guards kept the rest of the small crowd of people back while they let one, ravaged faced man in. He saw Kastel in the midst of the guardsmen and stumbled towards him. Guards made to stop his approach, but stopped when Kastel held up a hand. The man stopped a few feet distant, tears running down his face and cried.

“They’re dead. Maggie and little Tryn. And not even by our enemies!! You did it. You killed them. You were supposed to protect us.”

“I’m sorry. It was not meant to happen --”

“You’re sorry? Sorry?” The merchant screamed. “What good does your sorry do me? Will your black sorcery bring back my little girl?”

He spat. It hit Kastel’s tunic, dripped there with all the blood. He flinched, aghast at the hate in the eyes of such a powerless, mundane little man. The hate and the grief that allowed such a man to make an affrontage to a sorcerer that could destroy him out of hand. He had not seen hate directed at him from the people of this city since he had taken it so many years past, and then he hadn’t cared. The things that mattered now had been shadows then.

"You should have never come back," the bereaved merchant cried. The guards had had enough. They caught hold of the man, gently but firmly and forced him back towards the gates. Kastel stared, hollow-eyed until the gate was closed and all he could hear was the murmur from outside. Someone said something to him, but he didn't catch it, suddenly overwhelmingly aware of the blood that lay upon him like a shroud. He rubbed his hand down the front of his tunic and it came away smeared with it. He stared at it, horrified. Tried to wipe it off on his cloak, but it left streaks. His blood. But it might as well have been the blood of innocents that he'd spilled. Thoughtless, thoughtless thing to do. To cast such a spell in the heart of his city.

Keitlan was hovering at the door when he went back into the castle. Whether she had heard what had been said or not, he didn't know or care. Numbly he said to her.

"The man whose family -- was lost -- see that he gets -- adequate --" He blinked, train of thought lost momentarily. "-- give him whatever he wants.

"My lord." She was white faced and distressed.

He left her at the doors, still wiping his hand uselessly with the edge of his cloak. The blood was persistent. It would not come off. He'd wanted the blood of the bandit so bad the chase had consumed him. But the satisfaction of killing that man did not stick so firmly in his mind as the faces of the people that had watched it.

God, god, god, when had it ever mattered? He could not find that elusive disregard anymore. It was lost with the part of him Galgaga had destroyed. That Angelo had destroyed. For the first time in weeks he could not find his focus. The blood interfered, it brought back images of other blood shed, which he could not easily deal with.

He stopped at the half-open door to Dante's room and stood there, listening to Sera recounting how frightened she had been and Dante's grunted reply that he hadn't felt a thing then, but his head hurt like hell now. She walked

past the door with discarded clothing in her hands and saw him. Stopped and half smiled at first, then the smile faded and she moved towards the door, opening it.

“Kastel? Are you okay?” She peered up at him, her fine brows drawn. Dante sat propped against a great pile of pillows at the foot of his bed, divested of his own blood-drenched clothing and wearing loose silken trousers. His hair was wet and clean of blood, though his eye was still deeply bloodshot.

Kastel held up his hand helplessly. “I have blood on my hands. I can’t get it off.”

“Well go change clothes, idiot,” Dante snapped.

As if it were that easy. He stared at his hand while they stared at him. “I killed a child and her mother in that building -- murdered them and the spell didn’t even get the assassin.”

“What building?”

“Oh, goddess, Kastel.”

“How do I get rid of that? There are so many innocent dead, I can’t see the end of them sometimes.” He looked away. Felt wetness on his cheek and wondered if it were the crimson red of blood. It ought to be.

Sera reached towards him and he shied away from her, wild-eyed. Held up a hand to wave her sympathy away. Tried to regain composure while she was staring at him, stricken and Dante was glaring from behind her.

“Pull it together,” Dante hissed, uneasy support at the best of times. Now he was irritated and ill tempered from the ache in his head. He did not -- could not understand. Kastel didn’t know if he did. He was acutely aware that he was flirting with the boundaries of that place he had been in the days following his return here. It was not a good place. He dreamt about it enough not to wish it upon himself during waking hours. But it was not easy to distance himself from once its nightmarish tentacles wrapped around him.

He forced his eyes to go cold. As cold as he could with wetness spiking his lashes and inclined his head.

“Don’t worry.”

He spun and stalked down the hall, Sera peering out the door behind him. Don’t rub at the blood while they could see him. He balled his hand into a fist and held it rigidly at his side until he was through the portal to his chambers and safely behind closed doors. He shed the ruined clothing and tried to rinse away the residue of blood on his skin with the basin of clean water the maids always left, morning and evening. He was not completely certain he’d cleaned it all away. It was not within his capacity to convince himself of his immaculateness. Guilt was too familiar a companion.

*You’re only a sinner if you believe in the sin. There’s nothing that can’t be repaired, or forgiven or changed.* The girl’s words. She was naive, but she didn’t condemn him, even though he occasionally saw fear in her eyes. He still wasn’t sure it was fear of him or something else. He wondered what she would say when she heard of the innocents that had lived right outside these castle walls that had died by his hand.

\* \* \*

Lily slipped out the kitchen gates in the confusion. There were twice the normal amount of guards there, but they let her pass, used to the sight of her by now and more interested in the furor that had taken up residence within and without the castle walls this morning. She had to leave, duties or not. If she stayed in the castle she would go mad. She had to banish the memory his blood and those terrible bolts piercing his body.

The other wizard had healed him, she’d heard that while she was hiding in the kitchen courtyard, but being so close and not being able to see for herself -- it made her head spin. So she had to flee.

The city was a familiar maze to her now. But today it was crowded with excitement and fear and resentment. She heard the rumors as she passed. She saw the great, crumbled remains of what had been a two-story building. The shop of a glass artisan, she thought. The crowd outside it was wretched. There were covered, still forms under blankets on the rubble littered street. A man crouched over them, howling his misery to the world. Guards mulled about nervously.

She hurried past, white faced and sick, towards the tavern her minstrel friends frequented, hoping they would be there. She need not have worried. The tavern was full. Fuller than it might normally have been so early in the day. The room was abuzz with conversation. The words swam together forming one large cacophony of noise. She saw Dell's head through the crowd and worked her way towards him. Allun and Thizura were with him, drinking at the bar, listening intently to the discussions flowing around them. It was the way of the harper, to listen to the gossip and the news and spin it into fables that might be carried from one place to the next.

Thizura saw her fist, fixed her with his dark eyes and nudged Dell with an elbow. Dell turned, mug half lifted to his lips and regarded her with an arched brow, curious look. She blushed under that gauging stare, not certain why she was the recipient of it.

"Lily, what brings you out of the castle so early? Don't you have duties to attend?" Dell asked, making room for her at the bar. Allun jumped off the stool he'd been perched on and offered it to her. She was not much of an ale drinker, but she felt the need for a mug now and signaled the barkeep.

"No one noticed," she explained. "It was crazy there with -- with all that happened."

"Oh, yes. We've heard," Dell said.

"And saw," Thizura added. She looked at him uncertainly. There was a hint of malice in his voice.



“A most amazing display,” Dell said. “We were at market when the Winter King took a man apart piece by piece. How privileged you are to justify such an escort through the night.”

She stared, wide-eyed, not fully understanding, but realizing that they had ascertained who had walked her to the tavern that night.

“What are you talking about? What happened in the market?”

They told her and she sat and gripped the mug until her fingers were numb. Finished the ale in a few breathless gulps and sat there shaking. Minstrels were very detailed in their descriptions. But they spoke as if it had been some innocent bystander that Lord Kastel had decided to butcher out of hand.

“He was an assassin,” she said in defense. “A bandit that tried to kill Kastel -- Lord Kastel and Lord Dante. They were both injured. It was just, what he did.”

“No, no, no,” Dell laughed mirthlessly. “Just is a hanging or a beheading or even a good old knife through the heart. I was there, Lily and what was done to that man was brutal.”

“No more so than any of the things done during the wars.” She shot back and wished she hadn’t said it because Dell got a smug look on his long face and leaned close to remind her.

“Oh, and how many of those much more brutal things were perpetrated by your precious Winter King? Quite a few, I would imagine. Shall I name a city or two destroyed personally by him?”

“No,” she whispered, having heard the same tales he had. But it wasn’t the same anymore. She knew that. She had to hold onto that, because one could hardly feel the things one did about a monster and still live with one’s self. She did not want to talk with Dell anymore. She wished Crayl were here to temper the conversation.

She rose, ready to abandon them to their own assumptions, but Allun caught her arm and smiled at her encouragingly. “Ignore him. He’s high on all the speculation. Play with us this evening. We’ll do a duet, you and I. The Moonswan song. You can do the Kaulura dance and take everyone’s mind off the tragedies of this morning.”

He had such a sadly, sweet smile, he was hard to resist. And they did sing beautifully together. Thizura was jealous, they blended so well. Allun gave Dell as reproachful a look as he was capable and suggested. “We’ll go practice now if you’ve the desire to stay away from the castle.”

She bit her lip. Dell sniffed. Thizura glared. She nodded and Allun took her arm and the two of them waded towards the back of the tavern room to the stairs leading up to the rented rooms above.

The one the minstrel’s shared was in the loft. Bare floor and blankets, and slanted ceilings forced one to duck near the walls. A cheap room, but large enough for four minstrels. Their instruments were carefully stored. More carefully than clothing gear. Allun picked up his lute and sat by the open loft window. She sat with her back against one of the supports in the center of the room. He did not bring up uncomfortable subjects. They sang the song. Practiced harmonies and experimented with variations. They tried another one. A very old one from the times before. *Lost in the wind*. She had never sang it herself, for it required layered harmonies and she’d always sang by herself. It was good to be a part of something. It felt right, the essence of the music, the way it made her spirit soar and forget the hurtful things.

When they’d finished, Allun sat staring at her, half a smile on his lips. “There’s something about you, when you put your heart into a song. You exude something. Crayl does too. It’s powerful.”

She looked down, embarrassed. “It’s just music.”

“Just music? Blasphemy from the lips of a harper. For shame, Lily.”

He made her smile.

“You waste your talents away, working as a servant in the castle.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“Come stay with us. Join us and you don’t ever have to be a servant again.” *You need never be enslaved again.*

“I was a slave. Being a servant is not so bad.”

He stared at her. She rubbed her hand self-consciously. She did not want to be a servant. She did not want to stay in that castle where her heart was constantly torn to pieces. Better if she were away. Better that the thin threads that did exist were severed.

“Would it be okay with the others?” she asked uncertainly.

“Crayl suggested it. Dell is too eager, but don’t fret, his bark is worse by far than his bite. He is a gentleman at heart. Thizura likes you.”

“Even if he is jealous?”

Allun blushed a little. “Even so. He’ll get over it. He always does.”

She took a trembling breath, felt herself on a precipice that once crossed, could not be regained.

“I’ll need to go back and get my things.”

\* \* \*

What few things she owned could be carried in one arm. She left the drab maid’s uniform, which had not truly been hers to begin with, on the bed and left in her vivid harper’s colors, lute over her shoulder and small bag of belongings under her arm. She would have liked to speak to Sera, who had been a friend to her, but that lady was not to be found. One suspected she was with her wizard and one did not wish to intrude upon him.

She found Keitlan and informed the housemistress of her plans. The woman frowned her distaste and commented how boundless the life of a traveling harper was, but gave Lily a whole week's pay, despite the fact that it was only half over. The woman patted her on the cheek in a moment of affection and told her to be careful of scoundrels and to watch her purse and her person if she insisted on frequenting taverns and inns.

"You're a good girl, and you did my lord a service. Take care, for this is not the safest time to be wondering the city, what with bandit assassins and nomads in our very own city, and I promise to tell Lady Sera where you've gone -- if she can ever be pried away from that rogue who's bespelled her." This last was muttered under the housemistress's breath.

Lily smiled. Looked up the stairs that led to the residential wing and bit her lip. "Please -- please express my thanks to Lord Kastel for his generosity."

She could not say more. So she turned and hurried out the doors. She took the main gates this time, the guards letting her out through the portal to the side. She stood outside and looked back once, certain that she would never pass them again. And in a few weeks she would be out of this city when the minstrels left to tour the south and then she could start to forget.

\* \* \*

Gerad and Kheron were in Kastel's study, along with Kiro and a reluctant Dante. From the look on his face, he wanted to be there about as much as Kastel did himself. He sat slouched in a chair, fingertips massaging his temples, eyes shut. One had to recall he'd had an arrow through the eye no less than six hours past and miraculous healing abilities or no, that sort of injury did not vanish without side effects.

He was lucky it was nothing more than a headache he could not magic away. He was still in a black mood. He'd glared at Kastel when he'd stalked in as if the whole thing were his fault, then claimed the only other chair in the room besides the one behind the desk and sat there, refusing to comment, while Gerad and Kiro discussed what had happened, how lax city security was, and what they might do to improve it.

Kheron stood with her arms crossed by the window, looking impervious and grim, only speaking when Kiro pressed her to explain about the nomad shaman she and Gerad had taken out. Nomad magic was earthy and rune oriented. They were, despite their fierce demeanor and nomadic qualities an intensely spiritual people. Which was what made them dangerous. They had no fear of death. No care for the world outside their own existence. It was an amazing thing that a mere bandit chieftain had managed to spur them into a pact to extend their territories. It was amazing that one had taken the trouble to travel to Sta-Veron.

Kiro discussed retaliation and strategy. Kastel's attention drifted from the conversation, less interested in troop formation and movements than he was thinking about the face of that merchant who'd accused him of murder.

No one else had. No one else had mentioned it -- at least within his hearing. He would not be held accountable -- just as he had not been held accountable in the past. Who would dare, other than a grief stricken father and husband, to point the finger at him?

He looked at his hands, scrutinizing them for some tell tale sign of blood. Then shook his head to clear it of such madness. Fool. Fool. He'd washed it all clean. He clasped his hands before him and pressed his lips against his knuckles.

"My Lord?"

Kiro was staring down at him, concerned. Kastel looked up at the expectant stare, having lost completely the thread of conversation.

“Do whatever you think necessary,” he said, an adequate answer for whatever he might have been asked. He trusted Kiro. Dante opened one eye to look at him. He avoided that stare, rose instead and abandoned them to their talks of assassination and revenge. He had already taken his and he did not at the moment feel the need to track mountain bandits through the wilderness to inflict more. He might feel differently later.

To his rooms, he retreated and sat in the window seat, staring out over the city beyond the walls until the shadows lengthened and cast the world in shades of purple. Keitlan came in with an armful of folded clothes and asked if he wished his supper in his rooms or if he would take it downstairs. In his rooms most definitely. She put the clothes away. He thought he recognized the tunic from this morning. Washed of blood and mended of slits made by assassin’s bolts. He’d rather it had been thrown out. Then he thought of the girl, who worked in the laundry and wondered if she’d had a hand in the cleansing.

“Mistress Keitlan,” he said to her as she was bustling out of his rooms. “The girl -- Lily --?” He stopped, not knowing exactly what he wanted to ask of her. Not knowing what he could ask of her without making a fool of himself. Keitlan stood there, waiting, until she realized he had no intention of finishing the question.

“What of her, my Lord? She left the castle today, if that’s what you’re inquiring about?”

He blinked at her. “Left?”

“Ah, silly girl has the notion to take up the life of a minstrel. Worthless bounders the lot of them, if you ask me. But it’s in her blood. I gave her a weeks pay, knowing that she helped you in that place. She was a good girl, if not a bit quiet, so I wish her well.”

She had gone. He had seen the horror in her eyes that morning. She had run because of it. He felt betrayed and there was no good reason for it. Lies when she said she wasn't afraid of him. Respect and loyalty were so fickle. The people outside his gates had cried justice, as if he were some marauder instead of their liege lord. Dante had always refused such a responsibility -- the ruling of a land -- he complained that it was too hard a task to win and keep the allegiance of a people. Easier to just conquer them and give the task to someone else with more patience. He supposed he deserved it. Being abandoned. By her, by the good faith of his people. It was a consistency in his life. One learned to expect betrayal when it happened enough. But it never quite stopped hurting.

## Thirty -two

He did not quite plan to go and find her, only the sense of betrayal drove him beyond perfectly reasonable actions. A day full of too many irrational things forced him beyond clear thinking. He left the castle and the things it represented and went into the night dark city. In plain clothing and cloak, no one was the wiser that he walked among them. No one curbed their tongues in passing rumors or speculation over the events of the day.

He had never in all his time sitting as lord over Sta-Veron, prowled the streets of the city. It was not in his nature to mingle with people. It was not precisely, as the rumors went, because he was cold, or thought he was above them, but more from the apprehension that he would find no acceptance among the ranks of common men. He had tasted the bitter brew of being a feared and hated outcast in his youth and fiercely strove to avoid sampling it anew.

There was a goal in it now. So he sought out the place he had taken Lily before, but found it lacking. There was no minstrel vying to be heard over the humm of conversation. He heard his own name mentioned a dozen times in the brief foray he made, looking for her. He tuned out the words that followed, not wanting to hear. He didn't know where to go after that and stood outside where the air was fresh and the noise was less, trying to decide what to do. There were dozens of taverns in the city. Where would she be? Was she even practicing her trade? How much of a fool would he make of himself seeking her?

A boy came out to dump a bucket of dirty water on the stone of the street.

"Boy." Kastel beckoned and the lad gave him a surly, quarrelsome look.

"What? I'm busy."



“The girl who sang here. Lily. Do you know where she is?”

“How in hell should I know? Probably with her minstrel cronies at the Crimson Stag.”

“And where is that?”

The lad peered at him as if he were slow in the head. “What? You think I give out directions how to get to the competition?” The boy sneered and spun and marched away, bucket bouncing against his skinny leg. One did not lower one’s self to arguments on the street with bar boys, even if one was terribly offended by the attitude. But the boy had made a casual wave down the street to the west when he’d mentioned the name of the tavern.

A place to start. The sagacious part of his self had not yet managed to convince the less sensible to give up this mad pursuit. He passed a handful of taverns, none of which boasted the name of Crimson Stag. He shied from asking directions from the men on the street. Shied even more from the patrolling guards who were out in force and would have been more likely to recognize him. If rumors were flying now -- one shivered to think what would follow from this present madness of his, if it were to come to light.

He saw the wooden sign that bore the symbol of a blood red stag eventually. It swung under the awning of a tavern and inn snuggled between a stable and a leather smith’s shop. It was filled to overflowing with patrons. The men spilled out onto the sidewalk. The faint sounds of music could be heard from within. Too many people. Far too many boisterous, drunken folk for him to feel comfortable. Almost it was not worth it, to plunge into that mass of humanity. But that would be a sort of cowardice and he had too much pride to allow himself that. So he slipped in among them, a svelte and lissome intrusion, amid so many less graceful bodies.

There was a great commotion from the crowd at the back of the tavern. A swelling of men that caterwauled

and stomped their feet about a clearing at the back. The sound of music, lively and spirited made a tempo that even the blare of conversation could not overcome. It was a battle to get closer and even then he refused to press in amongst the crowd to see fully what intrigued them. He saw enough in the flashes of parting bodies to know the floor had been cleared for a dance. He saw the flash of red skirt and the swirl of dark hair and knew that it was her. There was no getting closer, so he retreated to wait it out. She would retire from it eventually.

A waitress came up to him, pressed against his arm and yelled over the din asking if he wanted a drink. His stare drove her away. It could not quite drive away the closeness of the others. He might have accomplished as much with a bit of subtle magic, but he did not trust that it would not be recognized by some too perceptive soul and his charade given away. Anonymity was a precious thing so seldom received. Now doubly precious considering how uncertain he was in this foray, how uncertain he felt about the sentiment of the city towards him.

He should not have come. He told himself that for the umpteenth time. He had no right to censure Lily for what she did or did not do, for where she chose to go or who she chose to associate with. Shared experiences did not automatically mean shared loyalties. Almost he convinced himself out of the tavern and back to the safety and the isolation of the castle -- but the music died and the dance stopped.

\* \* \*

There was a certain heady power to pleasing a crowd. A certain euphoria that came when she knew she had the attention of a room full of observers, that she held sway over their emotions. That she could make them feel sad with a tragic ballad, or laugh at the whimsical rhyme of a comical song, or even lust when she performed a wild,

gypsy dance like the Kaulura and every male eye in the place was glued to her avidly. Heady and intoxicating that power and she reveled in it; the only power she had ever held in all her years as a slave, the power to sway the emotions of her audience.

She bowed low at the finish of the dance, a thin sheen of moisture glittering on her skin, her hair sticking to her face in thin tendrils from the heat of the tavern and the exertion of the dance. A shower of coin hit the floor at her feet. A pittance, really. Nothing but copper and bronze, perhaps a silver or two amidst the bounty, but a great deal from a tavern full of working men.

It was a success. Her first real performance with her new troop and they as well as the audience had been pleased with the results. She scooped up a handful of coins. Thizura and Allun were gathering more from the floor. Dell swept her around in one arm, the other holding his lute and laughed in her ear.

“You dance that like you were born a gypsy.”

“I was owned by one, does that count?” she retorted, laughing back, giddy from the applause, from the passion of the dance. She felt so good, it seemed as if all the years of slavery could be washed away. Crayl and Thizura began a melody, lute and flute, that required no words, giving the others the time to catch their breaths and regain their voices. Someone thrust a mug of ale into her hand. Watered down brew, which meant it was complements of the house. She swallowed it greedily nonetheless, craving replenishment. She pushed sweat-dampened hair out of her face and Dell grinned down at her.

“Why don’t you do that more often. You hide your face too much.”

She might have blushed at that flirtation if the performance had not imbued her with boldness.

“And have everyone flirt with me as outrageously as you do, master Dell?”

He started to answer, but his eyes fixed beyond her and widened. His mouth dropped open and she felt a moment's dread that something had come to ruin this buoyant mood of hers. To ruin this moment of absolute freedom. She almost did not turn, but Dell pushed her into it, grasping her shoulder and urging her around.

And saw him. Amidst a crowd of oblivious men, who were either too drunk or too stone headed to realize what walked among them. She picked him out easily enough, no matter that he wore plain brown cloak and simple gray tunic underneath. The clothes could not disguise the pure aesthetic aura he exuded. Or the underlying current of power he carried with him.

He did not belong in this place. He most assuredly did not and she could not for the life of her immediately imagine why he was. He stared at her, she saw his eyes flicker behind her to Dell, who had his hands still on her shoulders. His face didn't change, but something in those crystal blue eyes of his flickered. With offense maybe. Or hurt.

"By all the gods, what's he doing here?" Dell leaned over her shoulder to hiss in her ear, sounding none too pleased with the fact. And that whispered intimacy did it. Kastel whirled and started to weave through the crowd. She shrugged out from under Dell's hand and glared at him.

"Stop doing that!!" she accused, him having twice now driven Kastel away from her. She didn't spare him a moment to gape at her in bewildered and none too sincere innocence, but pushed her way through the crowd after Kastel. She could not very well call out his name. Not here and most certainly not this particular evening. So she plowed roughly past men half again her size and forgot all pretense of subtly or humility and snatched hold of his cloak and the arm under it to make him stop. He turned stiffly about to fix her with his ice lord stare and she almost blanched and removed her hands from his

person, but the boldness of the performance was still upon her. She needed to know why he had come here. She needed to know what had prompted such an uncharacteristic act from him.

“Why are you here?” she forged past the glacial stare to implore.

“I don’t know.” Stiff reply, but she could still see the hint of hurt in his eyes. He tried to hide it, but it was so clear to her that he was bruised and not quite thinking reasonably, otherwise he would not be here, standing amidst the clamor and sweat of a crowded tavern with her. She thought about all the things people were saying, all the rumors and the accusations that were flying about the town. He had to have heard. How could he have not? And beyond that even, was the weight of those deaths upon his shoulders. She knew very well that guilt was a weakness with him. The Master had used it well enough against him.

“Will you talk with me?” she asked, pleaded, trying to sound calm and rational when her heart was pumping so fast it felt as if would come right up her throat. He stared at her, the coldness threatened by just a little bit of uncertainty. “Please?” she added, pulling gently at his arm.

She felt him give in. A fractional loosening of his muscles as he let her pull him through the crowd, past Dell and Allun, who were staring in unabashed shock, towards the only quiet place she could think of - - the loft, a part of which had become hers.

There was a lantern still burning on a peg by the door. It cast the slope ceilinged room in a dim circle of light. He took a few steps into the loft and just stood there. She pressed her back against the door, not knowing what to do now that she had him here.

“Why did you come here?” she repeated softly.

He wouldn’t turn to look at her. “You lied to me.”

She blinked, dumbfounded. “I did?”

“You said you weren’t afraid and yet you ran away.”

She caught her breath, some small glimmer of understanding seeping past the turmoil of emotion. He was so determined to believe everyone thought the worst of him. And he was not entirely wrong. She had fled from a sort of fear. But it was not what he thought.

“I couldn’t live the life of a laundry girl, when one of minstrelsy offered itself.” Half truths.

“No,” he agreed. “But the blood helped make the decision.”

The blood? Who’s? She licked her lips, surmising that the ground this conversation was taking was unstable at best. There was a haunted tone to his voice.

“What blood?”

He turned to look at her, holding his hands forward as if to display them. It was not just his voice, but his eyes that were ghostly and miserable. “Theirs. I tried to wash it off, but --” He faltered, looking away, drawing a tremulous breath. “-- The stain is still there. I wanted to find you -- but you were gone.”

“Find me? Why?”

“Because no one else -- I needed -- something --”

Panic. She saw it building, bringing confusion with it. It made her suddenly angry that all those wizardly friends of his were so oblivious as to let him reach this state, for it was no sudden thing. What were they about that they couldn’t *see*? Were they so wrapped up in their own selves that they couldn’t recognize how badly he needed support. Did they expect what the Master had done to just evaporate like it never happened?

“My Lord--”

He balled his hands into fists, squeezed his eyes shut and growled. “I’m not! I don’t deserve it.”

“Because of today?” She took a tentative step forward, touched his clenched fists. He flinched from her. It was not her, she thought, but himself that he feared. “It was an accident. You didn’t know. You’d been shot, for the

god's sake. You struck out in response. People will always take up the worst things to gossip about. It's the nature of humanity, but it will pass. They'll find something new next week and forget about it."

"How? It's just one more thing. Do you have any idea how much blood I've spilled? You're right to be afraid. If you're not, you're a fool."

He hated himself so very much. An old, old hate that he did not know how to let go of. *Fool*, she thought, *this is a trap that won't be easy to get out of*. But she was still heady from the dance, still brazen with her own sense of power.

She stepped forward and kissed him. Felt his shock through the tenuous connection, but he did not flinch away. Merely stood there numbly and stared down at her when she broke it. Flushed. Breathing a little hard. If he hadn't she would have felt more the fool and would not have reached up and touched the smooth skin of his face.

"I'm not. I swear." Then she smiled at him, a little gypsy slyness entering her tone. "It's better if you help."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried it again. He loosened, she felt his hands almost hesitantly reach around her back. There was an urgent, untrained honesty in his kiss that made her think he had not allowed himself passion enough in the past to be adept at it now. Gods knew that she was. She had been taught all the things a proper, pretty little slave ought to know to please a man. She had never actually wanted to, of her own free will, until now. It was patently unbelievable that it was happening at all.

She pulled back a little, arms still around him, to look at him. To gauge what was in his eyes. She felt vaguely amoral, seducing him into something he might or might not have come here for. She hadn't decided yet whether she was taking advantage of the vulnerability she felt in him, or helping to soothe it. She laid her head against his shoulder and stood there. He seemed content with that.

She didn't know what to call him. Honorariums made it seem as if she were being paid for a service. Not fair to him or her, considering.

"Kastel," she said softly, against the material of his cloak. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving. I owed you that."

He did not respond. She sighed and shifted to push a little apart from him. She kept her fingers wrapped in the edge of his cloak. He was so distressingly beautiful and those soulful, tragic eyes just ate into her soul. All the time she'd spent mooning over him in the Place Without Windows and she'd never, ever expected this. But he stymied her, for she was not quite certain what he wanted of her. He was too uncertain himself. So it was left to her to edge around the question clumsily.

"Do you want to --" she bit her lip, blushing a little. She had certainly never in her life *asked* a man if he wanted to lie with her. This one was making her work, even if she personally thought he needed it a great deal more than she did.

Then she looked about the loft and realized it was not the most comfortable of places. He was used to much better. She was embarrassed then and lowered her head to let some of her hair slid over her face and cover it.

"What am I thinking? This place is --"

"Yes."

He drew her back towards him. Gentle hands. Very careful hands. *Calm*, she thought. *Calm*. Don't think about the trap or the threat to freedom. Hesitate now and there might never be another chance and she wanted him too badly to risk losing it. The minstrels would not come up here, no matter how disquieted Dell and Allun had looked, they would not pass that door if they had to sleep in the stables tonight. An unspoken courtesy among traveling troupes, who found comfort where and with whomever they could.



So it was hard floor covered by blankets, which neither was of a mind to notice. She was better at the coordination of it than he was, having, she was certain beyond a doubt, more experience by far. Clothes went. He banged his head on the low slanted ceiling. She drew him down to kiss it away. He was the most wonderful thing she'd ever had. And the most dangerous because he was addictive and persuasive without even realizing it.

And afterwards, when they lay, limbs intertwined he reminded her that he was, despite all his other winsome qualities, still a man. "Come back to the castle with me."

She didn't answer. She couldn't. How did she say she'd just escaped those walls and given herself a freedom that she had always dreamed of, but never known? How did she say she did not want to be trapped within walls of any type just yet, without offending him?

Gods, she did not want to bruise his feelings. So she avoided the issue by distracting him and used skills she had not practiced the first time, when it had been the pure passion of discovery, to unsure that the answer to that question was the farthest thing from his mind. He was easy enough to manipulate. She might even have felt a little guilty, if she had not enjoyed it so much herself.

But in the back of her mind, she knew he would ask it again. But not until morning. And then she stirred before he did, used to rising early to start her chores and lay propped on an elbow staring at him, wondering what she was going to do. Nothing cold, or powerful, or frightening about him when he slept. He just looked young, which he wasn't, and innocent, which he could also not lay a claim to. A dilemma. A very attractive dilemma, which she had not been prepared to deal with.

\* \* \*

Kastel woke up with the feeling that he was being watched. Came instantly awake and aware in a place

other than his bed. For one brief moment disorientation set in and his mind flashed back to other dark, terrible places. No small bit of reflexive, defensive energy swirled in the eather around him, attracted by his panic, then he saw Lily looking down at him, felt the silky length of her leg touching his and memory flooded back.

Pale light crept in from the cracks in the shutters. The morning air had a bite. He blinked up at her. She smiled. One side of her hair was tucked behind an ear, the other fell down around her face, half hiding her features.

“Good morning,” she said, and there was just a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

And it was. He had whiled the night away here, devoid of any nightmares save the brief waking one. Had come here last night looking for maybe this very thing -- maybe something entirely else and ended up on the hard floor of a tavern loft with Lily. Not an unappealing situation, but a curious one. Not one he would have predicted for himself. Not one he completely pretended to understand. He would have found more confidence in it, had she not looked quite so uncertain herself.

He sat up, careful of the low ceiling. He’d already banged his head more than once and stared back at her, trying to gauge what was behind her dark eyes. He was out of his depth in so personal a situation. He did not know how to ask the questions that needed asking. Why was there the hint of distress in her eyes? Did she regret it had happened? He felt a little alarmed at such a thought.

“How old are you?” she asked. Not what he was expecting. He thought about it, and thought she might not like the answer, but she was sure to have heard tales. One could not escape the tales.

“Over a century.” Quietly said. She tilted her head, pushing back the other half of hair.

“How much over?”

He calculated, having lost interest in trivial things like birth dates, years ago. "Not much. Eighteen -- twenty years."

"Oh. I don't know how old I am. No one ever told me when I was born."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not. Is it true? What they say about you? What the Master said about you?"

He drew back. Not wanting, oh god, not wanting to tread on that ground. He did not want to see disgust and fear enter her eyes. Could not bear it.

"Which thing? There are so many."

She sighed. "About your father - - -"

"Being a demon?" he finished bleakly, bitterly. "Probably. I don't know. I never met him."

"Is that why you think you're so tainted? Is that why you were so willing to believe all the terrible things the Master told you?"

He drew breath, offended by that calm spoken attack. She had no idea. No notion what she spoke of. A shield of defensive coldness began to seep over him. Familiar ice that had always faithfully protected him against hurtful emotions. But she leaned forward, all silken skin and limpid dark eyes and pressed her lips against his forehead.

"It doesn't matter. None of it does. I believe in you."

He was shocked. Profoundly shocked. At the touch. At the words. At the expression of utter -- *trust* -- in her eyes. No one had ever looked at him like that before. No one that hadn't had some trace of fear or some hope of gain behind it. It splintered the ice.

"How much -- did you hear?" He could recall only a pittance of it himself. It blurred into one lurid, inescapable nightmare. She invited herself next to him against the wall, dragging the blankets with her.

"Enough. You were a passion of mine. I lurked about in the shadows constantly. He was a madman. You know

that, don't you? I've never wished anyone dead before -- but I hope he's buried under that horrible place. I hope he rots in hell."

There was such vehemence in her voice, such poignant hate that he was taken aback. He did not expect it of her, who believed any sin could be redeemable.

"Did he -- hurt you?" It was a hard question to ask, bringing to mind all the ways the Prophet had to destroy a person.

"No. Not like he did you. But, I was always the good slave. I always knew my place. I tried to tell you, remember?"

"Yes. I don't think it would have made a difference. That wasn't what he wanted of me."

She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. Her weight was nice. It was comfortable and comforting. No one had made him feel that way in a very long time. Had she answered his question last night? About coming back with him? He could not recall.

He started to ask her again, but a sharp rapping on the loft door interrupted the peace. "Hello? Hello? Everyone alive in there? We'd like a change of clothes if that's not too much to ask."

Lily laughed, amused. Kastel drew his brows, not quite so. One imagined the offensive, red-haired minstrel behind the tart request. He had managed to acquire a distaste for the man in the brief moments he had seen him.

Lily reached for a handful of discarded clothing, sorted it, tossed him his tunic while she slipped her blouse over her head. She leaned forward and impulsively kissed him while he was staring at it, for the second time this morning thinking how improbable a situation this was. There were so many facets to her that continually amazed him.

"You should probably get back," she suggested. "They'll be worried about you."

As if he were on a curfew. She must have seen his affronted expression, for she tempered the statement.

“After yesterday, everyone is bound to be a little uptight.”

“Will you come with me?”

She froze in wrapping the sash of the skirt. He saw it the moment her eyes became shuttered. She looked down to see the knot she was tying, letting her hair fall to cover her eyes. “What would they say? A serving girl? You don’t want that kind of talk.”

He let out a breath of indignation. A breath of anger. But his anger was always the cold kind.

“If I wish to bring a servant or a slave to my castle, it is mine to do so. If they talk, I assure you they will not do it within my hearing.”

She lifted her head, bitten by the cold. “But they’ll do it within mine. And you do care what they say, whether you admit it or not. Don’t make it a fight, my lord. I’m not a thing to be conquered. And I’m not a slave anymore nor a servant. I’m a minstrel. A free minstrel. Grant me that, will you? Let us deal with the rest later.”

He didn’t want to. He did not like to leave things unsettled. He also did not like stalemates. But she was right, he was on the verge of making a battle out of it for the mere reason that he was not used to being denied. He nodded his head, acceding to her. For now.

### Thirty-three

With early morning, the tavern was empty of patrons. The bargirls were all asleep, either in their own rooms or in the rented rooms of men who'd offered a coin or two for their company. The barkeep was drowsily sweeping away last night's debris from the floors while the minstrels loitered around the low burning fire. There were various twangs, plunks and jangles, as they entertained themselves with the tuning and cleaning of instruments. The lot of them looked up when Kastel and Lily descended from the upper level.

It was annoying, the blatant and unflinching stares directed their way. All of them either openly curious, speculative or smirking with the sure knowledge of what the two of them had come from. One had to color with discomfort, not used to openly flaunting affairs. Not used to affairs at all, truth be told and most certainly not accustomed to the leering grins of common bards who thought they knew more than they did.

"About time." The red head rose from the tabletop he'd been perched upon and sauntered forward, fearless and familiar in his stride and his expression. "Did you sleep well, love?" he grinned at Lily.

Kastel thought about turning his insides to frozen lumps of flesh. Actually had the words of the spell tumbling about in his head when Lily squeezed his arm closer to her bosom and smiled softly at the minstrel.

"Be nice, Dell, or he'll think bards are a mannerless lot."

The redhead -- this Dell person -- looked him full in the eye for the first time. There was some small portion of jealousy in his green gaze, and behind that just a touch of apprehension. Ah, so they did know who and what he was.

“No, we wouldn’t want him to think that.” There was something in the look that reminded Kastel vaguely of Dante. A reckless, fearless bravado even in the face of insurmountable odds. It did not particularly endear him, not with the attached sarcasm, but it did promote a kernel of respect.

“These are my friends,” Lily said. “Dell. And that’s Allun and Thizura and Crayl who leads this troupe.” She indicated each in turn.

They nodded carefully at him, somewhat more cautious than Dell. He did not return the nod. He did not bother to introduce himself. He was not in the habit of mingling with bohemians traveling through his city. He was not in the habit of interacting at all with the common folk. Lily looked as if she were unsure of whether she should go about it herself. She looked up at him, at the frozen look that had come over his face and bit her lip. Some of her humor faded. She said in a quieter voice.

“You know who he is.” Uncomfortable. He made her uncomfortable and he did not know whether he should be guilty for it, or offended. He felt increasingly ill at ease himself, not knowing her mind. He felt the tension in her body, pressed against his. Did she fear for the safety of her friends? Friends in who’s company she obviously felt more comfort?

“We know.” Crayl, who was thin-faced and wise-eyed nodded. Not friendly, not hostile, merely accepting. Not one of them called him *My Lord*, or offered obeisance. This was not the place for it. Not the circumstances.

He pulled his arm from hers, making a distance between them. She would not come back with him and he would not linger here a moment longer under their stares. He inclined his head at her, the mask back in place and repeated his offer.

“Think about what I asked. I’ve duties to attend.” Which he did and none of which he intended to undertake. But it was an irrefutable excuse. He strode out

without waiting for her to reply. Hit the street outside where it was easier to breath and the morning light made him blink and squint his eyes. No one close by. No one that would notice if he couldn't stand to cling to the ground any longer and summoned air elementals to buffer him skywards.

Straight up. Fast. Until the city was a child's model beneath him and he was alone enough to scream if he wanted to out of sheer frustration. But he didn't, for the frustration was tempered with such a feeling of euphoria that he could hardly bear it. He felt powerful. Wild energies gathered in transparent currents in the air about him, drawn by the exhilaration of his mood. He waved a hand at them, laughing, casting an offhanded snare and the elementals scattered, wary of being trapped. He didn't really want the service of any of them, having no few at his beck and call as it were, and these being of the small, relatively powerless sort. They were always drawn to power, they always lurked around the edges of workings, curious to the core. One ignored them mostly, or chased them away if they became a distraction. They did not usually get this close to him, rightfully fearful. He could only imagine the aura he must have been exuding for them to be so bold.

They came back, keeping a little more distance, still inquisitive. He felt the interest of an older one, drawn by the play of the younglings. This one pricked *his* interest, even past the giddiness. Cold and powerful and old as the mountains. One of the big ones that rarely showed themselves. One of the ones he might have gone to a great deal of trouble to subdue and force into servitude, if he'd been in the magic gathering mood. He wasn't. He was in the mood to think about Lily. To dredge his mind for all the instances she'd been around when he hadn't had the will to notice or had been pretending she didn't matter. She'd sang him so many songs that he only half



remembered in the darkness of that place. Fought for him in that place when he'd given up fighting for himself.

The ice elemental ventured closer, intrigued by the flavor of his power and his disinterest in it. Very old. Incomprehensibly powerful. It swirled around him and the little ones flocked to it like moths to a great, frozen light. The mage part of him couldn't ignore it any longer. He reached out a tendril of inquisitive power to gauge it and it recoiled, skittish and obviously ignorant of human magic.

*Don't pry then, if you do not wish to be investigated in turn.* He told it and it swept away at the sending, startled. Some elementals engaged in conversation. Some had no more inkling of corporeal thought than the running water of a stream.

The winds had taken him out from the city. It was nothing more than a small black spot in the distance. She was right. They probably were wondering where he was about now. He ought to get back, if only to avoid the inevitable questions. Back towards the city then, but not before he noticed with nothing more than passing interest the thin line of a caravan traveling across the plains from the southern mountains. One more group of merchants to fill the markets with goods from the south. It might be a profitable season after all, even with the upset caused by the Prophet's machinations.

\* \* \*

Lily sighed, clasped her arms about herself and forced her eyes to move from the door Kastel had walked out through. Think about the offer? It was all she could think about. That and last night. And her incredible good fortune and the miserable dilemma that she still had no answer to.

"What did he ask?" Crayl idly adjusted the tautness of a lute string. "For you to return to the castle with him?"

She blinked at him in surprise. He was too observant by far.

“Will you?” he asked when she didn’t answer.

“I don’t know.”

“More the fool you,” Thizura said and added emphatically. “Gods, he actually looks better in the light of day than under cover of night. I’m in love.”

“You fall in love twice a week at least,” Allun said calmly, rubbing oil into the melon shaped belly of his lute. “And out of it as quickly. And even if he weren’t out of your league and had a taste for boys, which he obviously doesn’t -- I believe his heart lies elsewhere.” Allun smiled at Lily, who felt a blush rising at the talk of hearts. Mere sex was not as fearful a ground to tread with her as that of love.

“He doesn’t like our Dell. Jealous,” Allun added.

“You don’t have to be jealous not to like Dell,” Thizura shot back. Dell glared good-naturedly at the both of them.

“Please,” Lily said. “I wish you’d stop bantering about this.”

“Then you shouldn’t have taken him upstairs for a private dance,” Dell said, with a little more malice. “Does he live up to his name? Are you frost-bit from the cold?”

“Dell!” There was a tone of admonishment to Crayl’s usually soft voice. “Let her be. It’s no small matter.”

No small matter. Oh, what a dreadfully massive understatement that was. All her life, she’d never had decisions to make that would impact her existence. They’d all been made for her. No choice. No freedom. And now everything she might ever have wanted was offered her and she was forced to choose between her lifelong dream of becoming a true minstrel and the very new and painfully vital pull of -- what? Lust? Love? A connection of some sort that pulled at her heart, that

alternately hurt her and elated her. There was no having one without loosing the other. No small matter, indeed.

\* \* \*

Kastel landed on the tower roof. He hadn't been up here since his attempt at suicide. It made him uneasy, recalling that state of mind. He had to magic open the door to gain access to the stairs. Back to his chambers with no one the wiser. It still was relatively early. He changed clothes, getting rid of rumpled plain garb and donning more elegant garments. Keitlan was coming down the hall when he stepped out with a tray in her hands and a thoughtful expression on her broad face.

"My lord." She was surprised to see him about. "You won't take breakfast in your chambers?"

"No. Not today."

She blinked at him. He was breaking habits and she did not know how to deal with the deviation from order. He walked past her, leaving her standing there with the tray in her hands, staring at his back. Down to the hall where breakfast was always laid out on a table by the hearth for armsmen, servants and guests alike to partake of. Gerad and Kheron were down there, sitting side by side, talking low-voiced to each other. Half a dozen guards were hastily filling plates and wolfing down poached eggs, thick slabs of ham and fresh bread before heading to duty. Sera was, but not Dante. She smiled at him, but there was a bit of exhaustion behind her eyes, as if she'd had a sleepless night.

"We don't usually see you this early." She stated the obvious. "You look better than you did yesterday. You okay?"

"Yes. Is Dante?"

"His head still hurts, but it's getting better. I think it'll take a few days to go away. It's probably a ghost injury anyway, since he can't magic it away. Goddess, you

don't know how nasty a wound that was, Kastel. I really thought he was dead."

"So did I," he admitted.

Which was why he'd overreacted with the spell. Which was why there were innocent people dead. He sighed, having managed to avoid thinking about that so far this morning. He could not recall exactly what he'd ordered done about it. Recompense, he thought. But, truly, it deserved something else. He was at a loss what that something might be, not in the habit of begging pardon for his actions. Perhaps Sera might be of help. She was terribly good at getting to the root of people oriented problems.

"I do not know exactly what to do about the man who lost his family," he said carefully. He took a cup of strong, hot coffee, but declined food, not in the mood for it with this problem back on his mind. She looked up at him, large-eyed and sympathetic.

"That poor man. I heard what happened yesterday at the gates. I understand why you looked so spooked when we saw you. It was grief speaking. You know that, right?"

She sounded like Lily. He followed her to the table where Gerad and Kheron sat.

"Perhaps," he grudgingly admitted. "Still, it shouldn't have happened. I was remiss. I was sloppy."

"You had two arrows lodged in you," Gerad mumbled between mouthfuls of ham and eggs. "Things happen."

"It's not a war," Kastel said, remembering all too many times when a mere two innocent casualties would have meant nothing. Not a speck in the mountains of bodies that had piled up during the wars.

"It is if the bandits make it one," Kheron said. "They declared it the moment they aimed at you and Dante."

"Not in this city," he said firmly. "I will not have it in this city. When I came back here after Galgaga, I promised these people my protection. Now they spread

worse rumors about me than they do about the bandits. Those assassins killed none of the people of Sta-Veron."

"All right," Sera interjected. "That's understood. No one wants violence in the streets. What we do want is that people understand it was an accident. That you're as horrified by it as they are. Giving the widower gold will just seem like you're buying him off. What you need is a show that you're not the ice cold wizard up in his castle that doesn't give a damn."

He looked at her silently. She had that look in her eyes that said she was brainstorming. Her nails tapped a rhythmic little beat on the tabletop.

"Offer to hold memorial services here," She said, brightening.

"What?" He blinked at her.

"What greater honor for the family of a common merchant? We get Father Cittaro down here to perform the rites. Let all the merchant's relatives and friends attend and you be there so everybody can see that you mourn too."

"But --"

She waved away his objection, eyes alight with the fervor of her own creation. "You bedazzle them with your generosity and your heartfelt regret. Word spreads and all the bad talk turns good."

"It's not half bad," Gerad said, finishing off the last of his breakfast and sitting back with a look of contentment on his face.

Sera beamed at him. "It's perfect. It's just a matter of making arrangements. Someone official looking. Maybe Kheron and I would be impressive enough to make the offer seem heartfelt."

"I do regret it," he said sourly. "You do not have to make it seem as if it is all some great charade. I just have no great desire to make a temple out of this hall."

"Not for long." She patted his hand in a motherly fashion, as if he were being intractable and she felt the

need to coax him out of it. He looked at her narrowly and pulled his hand out from under hers.

“Do what you will. I leave it in your hands.”

He left her, not wanting to find himself trapped talking about funeral rites in his own hall. Not comfortable with that notion at all. He took himself back upstairs to his study and worried at the notion of townsfolk crowding his hall. Resentful, accusing townsfolk, to whom he was supposed to look rightfully apologetic. He could not do that and maintain the shield. And if he could not maintain the aura of ice then he couldn't protect himself against the stigma of their judgment. If the ice was thick enough, it didn't matter what anyone thought.

*I hate this.* He rested his head in his hand and stared sightlessly at the grainy pattern of the desktop. *I wish Lily would come here with me.* But nothing was ever so simple or easy.

“What in hell did you let Sera talk you into?”

He blinked, startled, and straightened. He had no notion how long he'd been sitting there in contemplation. Dante stood in the doorway, disheveled looking, a vaguely annoyed expression on his face. It might have been the headache.

“The funeral rites?”

“Stupid idea.”

“It makes sense.” Kastel sighed, forced into the position of having to defend a plan that he was in no wise comfortable with himself.

“You start making this grand a gesture and they'll expect it of you for every little thing.”

“No. This wasn't a little thing. I can't let it be a little thing anymore. It's not the same as it was.”

Dante stared at him, then sniffed and plopped gracelessly down into the chair facing the desk. “You've gotten so conscionable, Kastel. Such a good little liege lord.”

“Are you trying to be discourteous or is the ill-temper from the head ache Sera says you still have?”

One dark brow arched at that. A long fingered hand fluttered up to massage one temple and he admitted grudgingly. “A little of both, maybe.”

“I’m sorry,” Kastel said. “I’m sorry for your pain. It’s my fault they were here to make mischief in the city at all.”

“God, don’t presume to carry guilt because you couldn’t protect *me*.” It was sullenly said. Dante was feeling most definitely surly. Kastel’s head was beginning to hurt. He wasn’t surprised Dante had no liking for Sera’s proposed expression of sorrow. Dante very seldom admitted to misdeeds of any kind. Much less actively repented them. He wondered what Dante would think of his other problem. Gods, he wanted to talk to somebody and there were so few people that he trusted with the baring of his soul.

Two now, if he counted Lily. Oh, and he wanted to. He wanted to loose himself in her, but was so dreadfully afraid she would repel him. That she might turn on him and pierce him to the core. Besides, she was the problem, not the solution in this case.

But, Dante on the subject of women was highly predictable. Dante was not tactful in the least sense. Dante trumpeted his conquests for the world to see. Kastel was not so willing to have his own affairs made light of. He went back to the other issue instead.

“A gesture needs to be made. I wasn’t in control when I cast that spell. I didn’t think where I was or who might be caught in the backlash, I just reacted. How many years did you spend trying to teach me to avoid that? Lately things just seem to be slipping. I can’t seem to focus and I despise it. I hate not being fully in control. I’d rather not have the power.”

Dante stared at him for a long, deliberative moment, the sarcasm and the irritation gone.

“Then you have to get it back,” he said finally. “I’ve told you what I think already. That you need to get away from here, but you’re too stubborn to take my advice, much less my help. You’re not as malleable as you were when you were eighteen.”

Young minds were easy to mold. And Dante had managed to take a boy with terrible emotional scarring and mold him into an articulate and powerful wizard.

“I know.” Kastel sighed. “I still wonder if everything wouldn’t be easier sometimes without the stigma of having to control this magic. What was it like, when you were without it? With those rune bracelets?”

“Hateful.” Dante drew in a hissing breath. “There is nothing about not having magic that I find attractive. You think life would be easier without it? Maybe you’re right if you’re content to be a farmer or a fat merchant, or a foot soldier in some army. I would have gone mad if I’d been without it much longer. I don’t care who you are, or how virtuous you think you’ve become, once you’ve tasted power, you can’t let it go. And the first time something you love is threatened and you can’t defend it - - you can’t imagine how it feels.” For a moment, his eyes were clouded with too vivid recollection, then he shook his head and a spark of wryness came back.

“You’re getting maudlin, Kastel. A funeral in house is a wonderful idea, now that I think of it. It fits your mood perfectly.” He stretched his legs out, leaning his head back against the back of the chair. “Well, now that you’ve got Sera occupied, I’ve nothing to do to entertain myself. I’d go hunting bandits if they were close enough to reach in a reasonable amount of time. I wish one of you had left a live one for me. *I* happen to appreciate a little bloody vengeance and I don’t feel guilty about it afterwards.”

“I don’t feel guilty about that,” Kastel said. “And you’re welcome to chase down any bandits you want. I don’t feel inclined to leniency with them anymore. I



would love to set you on them -- but you're right, they're likely well hidden."

"They'll show eventually." A slight smile touched Dante's lips. "In the meantime, I need something to chase away the idea that my head ought to be hurting. I hate ghost wounds. I need a distraction. Care for a game of Pirates and Kings?"

Kastel almost laughed, it was such an innocuous suggestion in the midst of all his other troubles. It was one of the few games he had ever taken the time for, being a puzzle of strategy rather than mere lazy recreation. Dante had taught it to him. One of the few things he and Dante had shared between themselves when he was growing up that Kheron had not been a part of. She had never had the patience for it. She hated loosing to Kastel and she always did, so she'd stopped playing.

"You're the pirate, of course." He rose to get the board. Dante was always the pirate. It fit him so much better than the guise of the king.

"Of course. Prepare to have your kingdom sacked."

In times past Dante had generally won. Four out of five was the age-old ratio, but it had been a long time since they'd played.

A very long time.

## Thirty-four

In the span of a day, the castle was transformed. It spoke eloquently of the tenacity of women, or one woman rather, who took notions in her teeth like a hound on the hunt and ran with them.

Kastel left them to their work, turning his hall into a place fit for funeral rites and sheltered behind the doors of his library where none, save Dante, dared disturb. He supposed things were going smoothly. Sera had said as much when she'd slipped by the study later that afternoon, mercifully interrupting a game that had gone dreadfully wrong from the first move.

It seemed the merchant had reluctantly accepted the offer of funeral rites. Sera claimed to have spoken to the man at length, but did not go into details. She understood people in a way that he nor Dante ever could. Her tolerance was boundless. Her acceptance was generally universal.

The work went on into the night. The smell from the kitchens permeated the castle into the wee hours of morning. Kastel honestly did not know what to expect, nor what was entirely expected of him. Sera had been vague about that.

Sleep came hard that night. Between anxiety over this upcoming public display, the reason for it, and recollections of last night's activities, he lay awake and very much ill at ease. He was tired and fuzzy headed when morning finally did creep over the horizon and pulled on a bit of his arcane reserves to chase away the fatigue. He did not quite know what to do with himself. Keitlan sent one of the kitchen girls by with his breakfast, which meant she was mightily distracted by this whole thing and too busy to do it herself. The girl looked uncomfortable, but he thought this once it was less him and more the events of the day.

He picked at breakfast, drank the coffee and sorted through his reduced wardrobe for an outfit severe enough for the occasion. Black. The same thing he'd worn to the impromptu meeting with the bandit representatives. And hadn't that encounter gone abysmally well? He tried not to be superstitious, but sometimes the urge got the better of him. He put it on just to spite himself, looked at himself in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door and thought it made him look ghostly and pale. His eyes, rimmed with the purple of too little sleep, seemed too large in his face, which made him seem damned young and that annoyed him. He narrowed them and glared at his reflection. Better. He still looked like he'd barely seen twenty, but at least he didn't look apprehensive and uncertain. A convenient lie, that.

He hoped Sera had planned the rites for morning, because he didn't think he could stand to wait all day. He felt stupid not asking for details. Yesterday he hadn't wanted to know. He prowled the upper levels until he got tired of wandering like a lost soul and went looking for Sera. She wasn't in her rooms, but Dante was, still abed and threatening dire and unpleasant things if he was not left in peace. One supposed he had no intention of attending the funeral rites. It was probably just as well.

He stood on a balcony overlooking the main courtyard, hands gripping the stone latticework railing, thick columns casting him into shadow. He leaned against one of them and watched the activity below.

The guards were out in full dress uniform and a great many of them. He suspected Kiro had been even less enthusiastic about Sera's plan than he, with recent assassination attempts and a dismal lack of security to think about. Opening the castle gates for the city to pour in had to have him on edge.

Even now, citizenry were drifting in the wide-open main gates. Merchants, craftsmen, common laborers, one could almost tell from their dress what class of folk they

were. The guards were not lax in their scrutiny of those entering. Everyone was stopped at the gate and politely checked for hidden weapons. Kiro was not taking chances. Kastel wondered what other precautions his captain had taken.

There was a flurry of activity just outside the gates. People already inside gathered to look and see out. The guards cleared them back, making a path for a garland draped wagon, bearing two painted, wooden coffins. A white robed priest followed after, his reedy voice chanting a prayer. Behind him came more people. Family, close friends. A man in the midst of them that might have been the father and husband. Kastel could only indistinctly remember his face. So it had begun.

A priest of the Goddess was performing the rites and he didn't know how much pomp and ritual funeral rites looked over by that patron goddess entailed. He did not wish to be trapped down there if it were going to take forever to get the thing started. He very much wanted to make a dutiful appearance and flee. Plainly astounding that he did not flinch in the face of armies or challenging incredibly powerful elementals, and yet the prospect of this morning had him nervous to the point of distress.

They passed the gates and beyond his view into the main hall. Everyone seemed inclined to follow and the yard was left with nothing but guards standing at ready. He chewed on his lip and waited, assuming Sera would send someone after him when she thought he needed to be there. The door to the solar opened quietly and Keitlan approached him, looking relieved to have tracked him down.

"Milord? The priest is starting the rites and Lady Sera sent me to ask if you'd come down."

He nodded, schooling his face into neutrality, and walked past her. Down the stairs and into the main hall where he knew every eye would be drawn to him, every face filled with accusation. And they were. He felt it the

moment he left the shadow of the stair, as if they had all been waiting for him to appear. A hundred sets of eyes that slowly migrated his way, drawn to him by the notice of their neighbors. A rustling of clothing and bodies turning. Of small whispered comments. But not all filled with denunciation. Most were heavy with awe, with no small nervousness to be here in this hall, in the presence of the Winter King himself. Probably none of these people had ever crossed the boundary of the castle gates in their lives. Probably none of them would again. Yes, there was accusation there, but it was tempered with other less troublesome things.

They had taken the coffins to the front of the hall where a platform had been constructed before the hearth. There were heaps of garlands surrounding them. He couldn't guess where Sera had come up with so many with spring so newly upon them. The old priest was standing behind and above them, behind a podium.

He hesitated for a second and Sera and Kiro descended upon him from different directions. Kiro didn't say a word, just settled himself a step behind him, while Sera took his arm, entwined it in hers and guided him towards the front of the hall. Everyone was standing. All the chairs and benches had been cleared out, although the tables had been pushed to the side of the wall and covered with linens in preparation of a funeral feast after the ceremony. She did not force him into the forefront, merely stopped with him along the sidelines against the wall, at a respectful distance from the real mourners and stood there with him, a presence that everyone in the room was aware of.

It might have been a signal she'd worked out with the old priest. The old man raised his voice and gathered the attention of the room to him. He launched into a dissertation of the afterlife. Kastel stared at the coffins dismally, blocking out the words. He'd heard too much

debate on the state of the soul in regards to the righteous man from the Prophet.

It was finished eventually, with much crying and sobbing from several female relatives along the front line of mourners. The coffins were taken out one by one, to be loaded back on the wagon. Tonight there would be a funeral pyre outside the city where the winds would catch the ash and whisk it away to freedom. They did not bury their dead here in the frigid north, for most of the year the ground was too hard to break.

Sera squeezed his arm and whispered. "Five minutes." Which he supposed meant she wished him to remain at least that long. She unwound herself from him and melted into the crowd. Kiro stood a yard away from him, stern faced and silent, watching the gathering of mourners as if he expected them to draw knives and start attacking.

Someone else came quietly up along his other side. Kiro's eyes flicked that way, then back to the crowd, unconcerned. He almost didn't look himself, he was so preoccupied.

"My lord." Very softly, very deferentially spoken. Lily stood far enough away not to seem presumptuous, a black shawl over her red skirt and white peasant blouse. He drew in a breath and stopped himself from taking a step towards her. He could not quite keep himself from staring.

"This is a very good thing you've done," she said.

"A good thing for a bad one," he returned, very softly.

"Things even out," she said, shrugging. "The word on the street today is better than it was yesterday. Most know it was not your intent. That actions other than yours were the cause of this tragedy."

Her mind worked the same as Sera's. Practicality of a vein that he did not possess. He wished Kiro wasn't so close. He wished he could draw Lily away to a private place because he just wanted to touch her again.

“You came.” It wasn’t even a whisper. He mouthed the words and she understood and her eyes beneath the hair flickered uneasily away from him.

“I heard of the open funeral rites,” she said, an explanation. An excuse. It hurt. He looked away and into the face of Sera coming towards him with a man in tow. A man he did recognize now. The merchant. He drew a breath, blindsided and not prepared after having his wits scattered by Lily.

He schooled his features, giving away no tell. He did not even know this man’s name. Why hadn’t someone told him his name? He felt Kiro straighten behind him. Lily stepped back a pace, but no further. Sera smiled slightly at him, her arm laced with the arm of the merchant.

“Lord Kastel, this is Master craftsman Cornel. I have expressed to him the depth of your regret over what happened.”

The man stared. The anger on his face had faded to weariness, the grief eating up all the other more fiery emotions. There still resided in his eyes a simmering denunciation. How could it not? What had he said the last time he’d been face to face with this man? He could not recall. If he repeated himself, so be it.

“My condolences, Master Cornel. Your loss -- this thing should not have happened. I regret it.”

“You regret it?” the man said dully. “How can you know the meaning? How can you know what I’ve lost?”

Kiro almost took a step forward, protectively, as if words were a threat. The merchant ignored him, ignored everything but his own clenched hands. “I fought for you when I was a young man, during the last war and you never cared then when innocents died. Why should I believe you now? I know assassins drove you to it, I found that out since, but it don’t make much difference to my wife and girl. All that talk from the caravans from the south about magic being the devil’s work and it being the

destruction of us all sooner or later -- never believed it before. But now, after what you did -- because the magics you practice took my girls and you weren't even aiming at them -- makes me believe it."

The man shook his head once, then shrugged out of Sera's arm and walked slowly into the crowd of his fellows. They swallowed him up with sympathetic embraces.

Sera looked after the man, torn. Her eyes huge and worried. "Oh, Kastel --" she started and he lifted a hand to silence her.

"No." Just no. He wanted out. Even the draw of Lily's presence couldn't keep him here another minute. He walked past Kiro, face gone impassive and cold, shields slammed back into place.

Up the stairs, seething with guilt - outrage - indignity - recollection. He did know the meaning. He did understand the loss.

"My lord."

He was at the top of the stairs. Lily was half way up, looking as if she feared being caught there with him. He glared at her and whirled, angry at her for that. Not wanting forced sympathy from her when she did not wish to be here to begin with.

She followed him down the empty hall. "Please wait, my lor --"

"Don't call me that," he hissed at her and did turn and fixed her with his coldest, most menacing stare. She closed the distance, not balking at the look.

"Forgive me," she said and stood there staring at him as if she expected a yea or nay answer to that plea. He opened his mouth. Shut it. Stymied by her calm, expectant stare.

"For what?" he finally asked, grudgingly.

"For whatever it is that I've done to make you look at me so balefully. I didn't mean it, I assure you."



Whatever she'd done? For raising his hopes and then dashing them. For being a witness to what that man said.

"Nothing. You did nothing." *Thank you for coming. Enjoy the festivities.* He turned away from her.

"Kastel?" She didn't touch him. She didn't have to. He froze, shut his eyes a moment, while his back was to her. She shattered his shields so effortlessly with something so simple as his name upon her lips. How had this happened? If he kept playing this game she was going to hurt him.

"I didn't come for the rites -- I came to see you," she said it steadily, coaxingly. He glanced over his shoulder at her and she smiled shyly. "It was a good enough excuse to get into the castle without Keitlan wondering if I was back to steal the silverware. She has a low opinion of bards."

Someone was coming up stairs. He heard the tap of boots on stone. She did and bit her lip. He caught her hand and pulled her down the hall and into the library. Tried to let her go, but she clasped his hand with her slender, callused fingers.

"Loss makes people cruel," she said. "I know what you said is true. And I know you won't let it happen again. Don't dwell on it."

"I had no such intention."

"Liar," she accused softly. "I could see it on your face."

He didn't know what to say to that. So he didn't say anything, just stood there uncomfortably with the heat of her hand burning his. She sighed. Looked about the room, at the books and the various collected items on the shelves.

"I -- dreamed about you last night," she said, then smiled a little wickedly. "Some of them were even sleeping ones."

He colored a little at that. She was not the shy girl one might take her at upon first glance. She had proved that

beyond a shadow of a doubt two nights past. She had learned things in her scant years that he in all of his, had never dreamed of.

"When I was a little girl and traveled with my second master -- he was the leader of a gypsy troupe -- I used to look at his books. He kept them in a chest. There were maybe five of them. I'd never seen a book before. He treasured them more than gold. I remember loving the pretty pictures. He taught me to read music but not words. I was always sad about that, because I knew that wonderful stories went with the pictures. You've read all of these?"

"Most of them."

"Is it true, that they hold worlds within them?" There was such a look of yearning on her face.

"I -- could teach you to read, if you like?" he suggested it hesitantly, offering it like a bone to a dog he wanted to lure within his reach. "But, it would take time."

"I would love that." Wistfully said, as if she knew she hadn't the time.

"You won't come back here to stay, will you?" He phrased it as a question, but he knew the answer.

"I didn't say that."

He drew a frustrated breath. "I don't understand you, Lily."

"I'm sorry," she said softly, and slipped in so close to him that he had the reflexive urge to step back. All he saw was the top of her head until she looked up, inviting. Gods, she threw him off balance. He didn't know what to expect of her.

She sighed again, he seemed to be making her do an awful lot of that, and rose to her toes, placing a light, brief kiss upon his lips. "I think I should go. But if you wish, I might come back tonight? If you could arrange it --?"

\* \* \*

It was not what he had hoped. But it was better than not having her at all. It was simple enough to manage, since she had a fear of wagging tongues. She never had to pass a gate or walk by the scrutiny of a guard. He fetched her under cover of night and with her clinging to him as if she were convinced the winds would give out and drop the both of them to their deaths, flew up to the tower roof and through that unlikely entrance down to his chambers.

He felt like an adolescent doing something he ought not with all the subterfuge, but he wasn't sure she would have come had he walked her in through the main hall. He put a spell on the door to keep anyone out who couldn't magic it open and spent a very pleasant night losing himself in her.

And a dismal morning after when she woke before him at an hour he had not willingly risen in recent memory and begged to be spirited away. It was entirely frustrating and yet he found himself backed into a not terribly uncomfortable corner with her. If he pushed, she got skittish. Got that look in her fathomless dark eyes that said she was on the verge of running. He thought he understood her to a degree. She was young and newly granted her own head. She needed to run with it. She needed to taste freedom -- and her concept of it seemed to be wondering aimlessly about the country with a pack of penniless musicians -- more than she needed permanent stone walls hemming her in. At least for now.

*He* had her uncertain of her own wishes. But he was not adept enough of talking a woman into, or out of anything to know what pretty words to say that might change her mind. He should have talked with Dante.

As it was, he was content enough having what he did of her. She made him feel good. She made him forget old guilts and old betrayals. She told him of her life as a slave. Of the things she had done, of the many men and of the shames she had endured. She was frightened he

would think less of her for it. That was so very clear in the nervous catch in her voice, in the way she let her hair shift to cover her eyes. He told her things he had never willingly told anyone before and she did not recriminate him for them. Her sins were so much less than his, but somehow it seemed an even exchange.

Days passed. Bandits did not plague them. The city did not rise up in arms against him. The people in general were well pleased with him, according to what Lily had picked up and she seemed to be in the hub of gossip and speculation due to her profession. The fates were generous. And as always, it was only a matter of time before their fickle favor turned the other way. When they gave with one hand, they always sooner or later took away with the other.

## Thirty-five

The caravan passed through the gates just after noon, when the day was warm from a morning of clear skies and almost no breeze blowing down from the God's Tooth mountains. Like every other trading procession that entered the city, it was stopped by the guards at the gates and given a cursory inspection. It was clearly from the south. The men accompanying it were most certainly of southern decent. Nothing of the northern highlands about them. Nothing to arouse suspicion. The caravan carried mostly luxury goods that Sta-Veron grasped for hungrily. Fine western wines and ales. Dried fruits that could not be grown in the cold north. Bolts of silk and linen. Things for the most part that would find their way into the wealthier houses of the city.

No one noticed the old man. No one paid him the slightest heed. He walked in beside the merchant, so thin he appeared anorexic, a face that was lined and non-descript. The guards hardly looked at him and when they did they suddenly discovered other things to occupy their attention. He walked into the city as if he didn't exist and after he'd passed, the guards did not even recall his presence. He moved slowly, like an aged man. Leaning upon the sturdy length of his staff. The city moved around him, uncaring. He slipped through the noonday crowds like a wraith. The neatly cobbled streets eventually led inwards towards the tallest structure Sta-Veron boasted. The castle, which rested within its own walled boundaries. The old man stood on the street outside it, staring up at gray stone and limply hanging banners.

He did not remain long. No longer than any other tourist to Sta-Veron might in viewing the castle of its ruling lord. Cane in hand he made his way back into the

commoner section of the city. He paid for a room at a moderately priced inn, in great need of rest.

Physically, his body was weary from the travel. Physically he was failing with no easy way to halt the degradation. It was an annoyance that drove him beyond reason sometimes. That his body ailed when his mind was sharper than it had ever been. When he saw things clearer than he had ever seen them. Power licked at him from the inside, hammering at the mortal shell that had never been meant to contain it. He held it at bay, being old enough and wise enough to have learned the ways to bypass it. To cheat when it came down to this eating away of mortal flesh. The decay was quickening now more than it ever had in the past. He did not have long before the body was gone completely and then, he had no notion what might become of the soul. He was not quite certain anymore that heaven would welcome it. And that doubt ate at him, as well.

He slept the day through and woke when the chill of night drove away the last of the warmth. He found the cold distasteful. It made his bones ache. He wrapped a cloak about himself and wondered out of the inn, following the migration of the evening crowds to places of warmth where people gathered. He listened to the talk, finding bits and pieces of interest. He inserted himself into conversations with the smooth eloquence of a born speaker. Men listened to his words and eagerly volunteered information at his asking. They trusted him, the look in his eyes, the tone of his voice, the aura of the personality that he let the world see. They always had.

He drifted from place to place and finally found himself at the door of a tavern where the lilting sounds of music seeped out onto the street. Not the bawdy tunes he'd heard in other taverns, but the sweet, melodic strain of a love ballad. He stepped inside, something hypnotic and familiar about the flavor of the voice.

Ah. He saw her seated amidst a half circle of other musicians. There was such a power that she radiated, sitting there with the attention of the crowded bar upon her, that he almost did not recognize her. But her voice could not be forgotten. It held an illusive magic all its own. Surprising to find her here. He had assumed her dead.

He needed to sit down and think and someone made a place for him without even knowing why they did it. He took the chair without a word, hidden by the crowd, one long fingered hand stroking his jaw.

There were many, many nuances alive in this city. Many patterns to ponder and he had never acted hastily or rashly in his stratagems. Even with the decay threatening to devour him, he had to take the time to find the best pathway -- the easiest route to his goal. And his eventual triumph.

\* \* \*

It was full summer now. As warm as it ever got in the northern plains lands between two great mountain ranges. One could go outside in nothing more than a tunic and skirt and not even feel a hint of the cold. Children ran about shirtless, shoeless, reckless in the summer abandon. It would not last for long. No more than a fraction of the summer the south enjoyed. The minstrels were growing restless. They had been stuck inside the walls of Sta-Veron for the whole of the winter and wanted to stretch their wings.

Lily wanted it, too. She wanted to see the world from a perspective never seen before, that of a free woman. She wanted to choose her own destiny and yet the thought of leaving this city -- the very thought of stepping outside those great gates made her heart pound with dread. Made a ball of pain curl up somewhere between heart and stomach and perch there, tormenting her. She tried not to

think about it, knowing it would make her days miserable, knowing that it would linger on her face when she did see him during the nights and remind him of it as well. Not that he didn't dwell on it enough.

Oh, he didn't ask her anymore. He was by far too proud to pester her over it, and too honorable to pressure her when he saw that she was coiled into a knot over it. He was cold when the subject came up. But the cold was his defense. She did not take it to heart. She knew what was behind it.

She thought she had never loved anything as much as she loved him. It frightened her beyond reason. She was so afraid that she would lose herself, her will, her own ideals if she let herself be encompassed by him. Sometimes she could hardly breathe in the anticipation of seeing him. Sometimes it hurt so much leaving him that she almost gave in to his desires and stayed. Sometimes she thought it would be easier to urge the minstrels to leave now and get it over with.

She saw Sera in the market and the two of them browsed the shops together, talking idly. Lily had the money now to buy a trinket if she liked it. To even treat Sera to a sweetmeat and a glass of cold cider. It felt good to be able to do that. To spend money honestly earned -- her very own money -- on a friend.

"Are you still leaving to enthrall the south with your talents?" Sera asked.

"Maybe. There are so many places I wish to go. My friends have been to all of them."

"Ah, the life of a bard." Sera grinned, then it faltered. "I wish I could go back home. I hardly know what welcome I'd receive. Dante is getting restless here. It must be catching."

"You'll go with him?" Lily asked hesitantly.

"Of course. You don't think I'd let him loose on the world without me there to keep him in line? He keeps talking about a villa by the sea that he's in love with. I've



never lived by the sea, so it might be interesting. I suppose anyplace Dante is can't be boring."

"Oh," Lily said, feeling awful and selfish.

"I don't know what Gerad and Kheron are going to do, but I heard him talking about maybe heading east, back to the boarder where he had a lot of men left high and dry when he took off after me and Dante last year. Goddess, it's been almost a year since all this started. Hard to believe. I guess when we all take off Kastel can have his castle back again and some peace and quiet. We upset his solitude terribly."

"I don't think he minded." Lily almost whispered it. A bit of moisture gathered in the corner of her eye. All of the people in the world he trusted gone their separate ways and he would be alone again in that great stark castle. And the ice would creep up because it was the only thing that protected him against loneliness. She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes, miserable.

"Lily, what's wrong?" Sera asked.

"I don't know if I can leave," she moaned. "Oh, gods, I want to, but I don't think I have the strength."

Sera blinked at her. "Why ever not? What's keeping you?"

She looked up, one brazen tear rolling down her cheek. She wanted to tell someone. Someone other than the minstrels, who were biased one way, or Kastel, who was very definitely biased the other.

"If I leave, I'll be leaving someone I love. Who maybe loves me."

Sera opened her mouth. Blinkered in a moment's surprise before covering Lily's hands with her own. "Oh, Lily. That's wonderful -- oh, but maybe not, if you want to go on the road playing as badly as you do. Maybe not wonderful at all. What are you going to do? What does he say? Who is he?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do. He doesn't say anything anymore. He won't pressure me and that just

makes it worse, because I know he's just being considerate."

"Well, how serious is it? Has he asked you to marry him?"

"What?" The question caught her off guard, the concept did.

"Some people do, you know? If they're not wizards above the rest of the world's idea of ethics and morality, that is," she said this last rather grumpily. Lily blinked at her owlishly.

"Okay," Sera continued. "So do you think he'd wait for you to get it out of your system and come back?"

"I don't know."

"Would he come with you?"

"He's -- he's got responsibilities here."

"More important than you?"

*Yes. Just tell her, Lily thought. Just tell her who and see if she thinks the same. No, don't tell her, she'll side against you then. She'll only back him and add her voice to those that want to make you stay.*

"I don't know. Maybe," she said it dully, because her mind kept telling her that no matter what Sera said now, she would not be her ally in this if she knew who her lover was.

"Then maybe it's just as well."

"Maybe." She was tired of a sudden. Her head hurt and she wanted nothing more than to find the sanctity of her shared loft and release the pressure with sleep.

"Please, please talk to me before you make a decision. I want to help," Sera offered.

Lily nodded, slipping away. She rubbed her temples absently, trying to massage away the feeling that her head was suddenly twice its normal size. She walked blindly for a while and miraculously found herself in the loft. It was empty, all her erstwhile roommates out in the city. The shutters were open, letting in air to cool the room. It was still dim in the corner she had taken for herself. The

corner where she had first slept with Kastel. She sank down upon the blankets, bemused at the extent of her weariness. She shut her eyes.

“You little whore.” A voice hissed by her ear.

She gasped, startled. Tried to force awareness and energy to her limbs, but they were too leaden to move. She managed to pry her lids open and stared up into a shadowed face. A body that leaned over hers, one hand resting on the floor by her head.

“Dirty little slut.” Again the hissing voice that was as much inside her head as something she heard outside it. “You lay with him when you knew he belonged to me. You knew the sin you committed.”

Gods, gods, no. What she could see of the face was altered, but the voice was the same. The intimidation radiating from it made her shrivel up inside with fear. How could *he* be here? How could the Master have survived the destruction that took the Place Without Windows? Why had he come after her?

Then it occurred to her, though the horror that clawed its way through her body, that he had not come for her. That she mattered very little in the scope of the Master’s desires. That he had come here for something else entirely. Then the fear turned cold and frantic, but try as she might, she could not even get a scream to pass her frozen lips.

\* \* \*

The thought of another winter in Sta-Veron was unbearable. Dante was not a creature by nature that thrived in the cold. Fire was his element, fire was his nature. Hemmed in by the snow for one long northern winter had liken to driven him mad. He had no wish to be trapped for yet another one. There were only so many places open for him to go. A fair deal of the south was off limits unless he wanted a series of small wars on his

hands. A number of the places that had been his before the final days of Galgaga were gone. Cities destroyed, towns eaten up by the destruction, estates just flattened. He used to have a world open to him, now he found his options severely limited.

He hated it. Hated the notion of anything being declared off limits. If he'd been in a more irritable mood, or Sera had not become an attachment he had no desire to shake, he would have ridden into Alsansir or Ludas or any of those other high and mighty jewels of the south and dared them to make an issue of his presence. He would have gladly taken on Teo and his high council, Rab-Ker and his self-righteous clerics and all, for what they'd done to Sera. But she was adamant against that. She was adamant against any type of confrontation with the southern alliance. It was too tense a situation already, she preached at him, for him to insert his very volatile self into the picture.

So he thought about Keladedra on the coast, which he did favor, and which he thought Sera would like very much. One would not mention that it had been his and Kheron's getaway for longer than Sera had been alive. One hoped the Stormbringer would not see fit to mention it either. Fair was fair, after all. If he allowed the thing with Gerad to go on unhindered, the least she could do was not find ways to make Sera hard to deal with.

Sera would have been perfectly happy to stay here. Sera could make a home anywhere. She could insinuate herself into any situation and make herself welcome and cherished. He was not so easy to tolerate. He made people uneasy. He frightened people. It was not a characteristic that he found in the least annoying. He didn't have that niggling little need for acceptance that plagued Kastel. The apprehension in people's eyes did not in the least fracture *his* self-esteem. It bolstered it, if anything.

They would be just as happy to see him go as they would be sad to see Sera gone. He'd had to promise her they'd come back. She had almost been in tears at the prospect of a permanent separation. Why she'd formed such an attachment to so drafty and rustic a place as Sta-Veron was beyond him. There was nothing here that he found in the least appealing, nothing that might particularly draw him back -- save perhaps for its lord.

Kastel was the only thing that made him hesitate in his plans for migration to warmer climates and that only because he was not completely certain the younger wizard was quite recovered from the ordeal with Angelo. That thing with the blood over the deaths of the merchant's family a few weeks past was a sure sign of things not quite as stable as they ought to be. If the damned bandits would get their wits together and start plaguing the city and its outlying provinces things would get better. At least Kastel would have something to focus on.

Sera came into his room, fresh from shopping in the city while he was thinking about Keladedra. She had bought him a cloak clasp made from beaten bronze and silver, boasting six bear claws about its diameter. It was barbaric enough to catch his interest. She was pleased that he liked it, but preoccupied enough otherwise to make him inquire what was wrong.

"Oh, I'm just going to miss it here, is all. I've made so many friends."

"They'll still be here." He shrugged.

"Not all of them. Lily's probably going to leave. I spoke with her today."

"No loss there, she was imprudent. She compared me to the Prophet."

Sera waved a hand at him, brushing away his opinions. "You deserved it. You were being an ass. It's refreshing to see someone stand up to you once and a while."

He sniffed indignantly. Sera did it constantly. She backed him down most of the time, which was frankly amazing.

"I'm going to go and listen to her tonight," Sera said. "She was upset when I talked to her today. She wants to leave so badly, but there's someone here she doesn't want to say good-bye to. I thought I'd talk to her again tonight. Do you want to come?"

He shrugged, half remembering the interest Kastel had tried to hide in the girl. Kastel so rarely showed interest in trivial things like females, that when he did, it stuck in the mind. He wondered idly what had become of that.

"It might be entertaining," he admitted. Taverns full of drunken people generally were.

They decided to take dinner out since they were going, and as soon as the sun began to sit, were on their way. Dante, for no other reason than sheer perversity, paused by Kastel's library on the way out and asked in a preternaturally congenial tone of voice.

"We're going to see your little slave girl sing, care to come?"

Kastel just blinked at him owlishly, startled out of some passage or another he'd been scrutinizing, completely at a loss for words. He might have thrown a lightening ball, there was so much shock in the expression, which was as good an indication as any that Kastel hadn't totally forgotten about the girl.

"Oh, guess not," he said with a blithe smile and a hint of malice, and whisked away to catch up with Sera.

They walked, the weather being nice. She took up his hand, which was foreign and pleasant and made him feel not quite as intimidating as he generally liked. People stared, but people always stared at him, either covertly or openly. He was not an entirely unfamiliar thing to them, having wasted a good bit of time within the boundaries of the city before Sera had admitted him back into her good graces. Though he had by far a darker reputation than

their own lord, he was somewhat more attainable, and a great deal more likely to mingle with common folk. With Sera at his side, he was treated somewhat like a tamed tiger on leash. A hazardous, temporarily safe thing, to be treated nonetheless with utmost respect.

He liked the boisterous noise of taverns, they suited his nature. Someone cleared a very nice table for them, and a nervous, but bright-eyed barkeep brought out what must have been his finest bottle of wine. Serving girls and girls for hire flocked about their table, intrigued. Sera glared and leaned against his arm possessively whenever one got too forward in her attentions. That jealousy amused him greatly.

There were two bards already playing, an effeminate little blonde and a tall redhead. They were singing a tune that blended tenor and baritone harmoniously. Sera asked one of the hovering bargirls where the rest of the musicians were and the girl replied that the evening was just getting started and the rest would be out in due time to give the first two their reprieve.

Gaming began at a fair number of tables. Dice and cards and Highjack stones. Nothing so sophisticated here as Pirates and Kings. Dante found more interest in the games of chance than he did with the music. Even when the other minstrels came out he let himself be distracted by a card game. The other players were a bit apprehensive of his presence, superstitious wariness in their eyes, until he sincerely promised that cheating at cards was not one of the uses he put his magic to. It would have been rude not to take him at his word and no one in their right mind was purposefully rude to Dante Epherian. Besides it was a game of chance more than strategy and he lost as much as the next man and his coin, tainted by magic or not was just as attractive as any other.

He was a great success, once the drink began to flow freely and the patrons had decided he was not going to cast evil spells on them. For the most part he forgot

Sera's presence entirely. She was somewhere closer to the place the minstrel's were performing and he trusted no one to molest her since she had very clearly come in his company. The only time he paid any heed to the bards at all was when the girl put down her lute and took up one of those sultry, gypsy dances. Most of the men in the tavern found themselves distracted by that. He lost a hand of cards because he wasn't paying attention. Won it back the next round and ended up with about the same amount of coin he'd started with by the time he'd finished.

Sera drifted back to the table eventually, when the minstrels had finished their set, and only one of them remained strumming a tune on his lute. She had a disconsolate expression on her face.

"She was too tired to talk with me," she said, pouting. Her eyes had the look she got when she badly wanted to pry in someone else's business. He wrapped an arm about her waist and pulled her into his lap, more than a little intoxicated from all the cheap ale he'd consumed after the one good bottle of wine. She wrinkled her nose at him distastefully, not drunk in the least herself.

"Some people don't need your guiding hand in their lives." He surmised, not at his most tactful at the present. He ran a hand up her thigh and she glared at him, primly removing the member from her leg.

"Well, be that as it may, she was abrupt and it just wasn't like her and I think she must be really upset for it to be effecting her like this."

"Let's go back to the castle. I've got an itch I need you to scratch."

"Dante!" She blushed and looked around the table at the grinning faces of the other players. She wriggled off his lap, which in itself practically had him standing at attention and looked down at him, hands on hips. "You're drunk," she accused, as if amazed at this rare occurrence within the boundaries of a bar.



"I can be not drunk like this!" he snapped his fingers, or tried to and missed, then attempted it again successfully.

"Then why don't you?" she suggested dryly.

He grinned at her lazily. "Because it feels good this way. You should try it."

"My father taught me better."

"Figures." He waved a hand to dismiss the notion of Rab-Ker and his pious ways.

"And, I didn't come here to get smashed, I came to see a friend."

"Who didn't want to be seen," he reminded.

"Which is reason enough to assume she's unhappy."

"If she's mooning after a man, you sure don't have what it takes to make her *not* unhappy, little girl."

"Oh, shut up," she snapped, spun on her heel, storming away from him and heading towards the door. Perhaps they might get back to the castle promptly after all. It was just a matter of lightening Sera's mood.

He finished the last of his ale and surged to his feet to follow her. He brushed past an old man on his way without out even noticing. But the old man's eyes followed him. Stayed glued to his back until he was well and gone from the tavern, then slowly drifted back to the place where the musicians had been playing.

For a while, the old man hadn't been able to breath properly. The air had rattled harshly and unevenly in his chest, so eaten up by rage and frustration had he been. He'd sat at a booth against the wall and watched Dante so intently that the barmaids who passed by gave him wide berth and anxious glances. Most everyone else, the folk that did not have the job of tending the tables, didn't notice him at all. Could have stared right at him and not realized he was there. He had ever been the master of shielding his true nature. It was nothing to shield the depth of his burning hatred, the vast scope of his seething power, even from those that should have been sensitive to such things.

He had not expected Dante though. Had not expected the dry tinder of his hatred to be ignited. His head hurt from it. From the fact that he dare not act on it. That despite all his delusions of power, he could not overwhelm his enemy. Not with this mortal body, at any rate.

But soon he would have another. The pathway had already been paved and it would only be a matter of time.

## Thirty-six

Lily was like a puppet dancing to the tune of a demented puppeteer. She moved and spoke and performed not of her own violation. She had no will of her own, except deep down where she was pounding at the walls of a mind and body that imprisoned her. He invaded her with no regard for anything but his own hunger, plundered her memory to take what he wanted. She had no defenses against him. She was not trained to keep unwanted attentions from within the sanctity of her own mind. He had never done it to her before. He'd never had to. She had always been tractable and subservient. Always the perfect, obedient slave. She'd never had anything to hide, so he'd never had the need to rip her open and take what he wanted. She did now.

So many cherished things. She had no notion what he gleaned from her. She had no way of knowing what he left untouched and what he sifted through. He did it with such contemptible ease that she would hardly have known he was there, if he hadn't wanted her to know. If he hadn't taken pleasure in her active knowledge of the violation. He hated her now. She saw it in his eyes. Hate along with something else. Madness that had not been there before. She feared for her friends, that he would harm them merely because they were close to her. But he seemed to care nothing for the minstrels. He made them blithely unaware of his existence, even though they passed him a dozen times.

He blanked a part of her mind, everything but the parts it took to perform -- to dance -- and she did so with all the skills available to her. One of her best performances someone -- maybe Dell -- said. Sera appeared out of the crowd to catch at her arm, mouthing words of concern. She stared, hopeless and speechless, until something took over her mouth and words that were not her own spouted

out. She spun away and left Sera looking surprised and hurt. Went upstairs where it was dark and quiet and just collapsed into her blankets as if her strings had been cut.

She lay there, the only control she had over her body, the tears that leaked from the corner of her eyes. She had to stop this. She had to find some way to break out of this manipulation. She had to warn Kastel. She had to do something -- but gods how could she break free from the Master?

He came upstairs not long after her. She heard his slow passage. He was so changed. So old looking now. How had a man who looked no more than forty aged so quickly in so short a time? He crouched over her, not touching her, breathing hard and furious.

“He was here. Did you see him? That demon spawn! And that little trollop, Sera. She’ll pay for betraying me when I kill him. Do you know what I offered her? That bitch? She chose him!! She chose him over the prophet to the one god. I’ll see her burn in hell. But not before he goes first.”

He wasn’t talking to her really. He was rambling, demented and irate. Fine. Let him focus on his hatred of Dante and Sera. Let him forget the other things. But no --

“It’s almost that time, isn’t it, girl? When you’ll sneak out to meet him. When all that’s on your mind is fornication -- you dirty little whore.” A sly smile spread over his lined face. He bent close. “Perhaps if you play your part well, I’ll reward you. When I possess that body you lust after, I’ll come to you and give you one last taste of sin before I send you to hell with the rest of my enemies. You can look into those beautiful eyes and imagine it’s him. But it won’t be.”

He laughed and she couldn’t even get out the sob of terror that lodged beneath her heart.

\* \* \*

Kastel had not been able to concentrate since Dante had asked him if he wanted to go and see Lily sing. It had been a malicious request at best. Dante was prodding for reaction and how he had gotten on the scent to begin with was mystifying. Dante had the habit of seeming indifference, which generally hid a too keen perception. One had to be careful around him, lest he shake all the secrets from the rafters like so much dust.

He couldn't read the book any longer, all he was doing was staring at the same page, glossing over words that didn't make sense. He closed it and put it away. He went downstairs to the hall where a few folk had gathered after dinner to while away the time. Gerad and Kheron were at the end of the high table, engrossed in conversation regarding men of hers and his left in the eastern mountains. Of the logistics of traveling back, of the best route from here. Of supplies and mounts and the disposition of the southern alliance at their reappearance.

It was depressing, the talk of their exodus. He had never particularly striven after their company, even when they had been campaigning together. He had always distanced himself from getting too close, cleaving dearly to the reputation he had made for himself as Winter King. Ruthless and cold and unapproachable. The only regard he had ever actively sought was Dante's and that had been a fickle regard at best. It was better now. A boundary had been crossed -- he didn't know where exactly -- that had changed things. Aside from that one terrible month, this winter had been -- agreeable. The castle was warmer than it had ever been and that had nothing to do with the addition of rugs and tapestries and cushions for all the benches.

He would miss Gerad's bluster and unrefined good cheer. He would even miss Kheron with her cold sarcasm and her disdain that always had the flavor of sibling rivalry. He didn't want to think about Dante's plans and he very badly did not want to think about the intangible

thing that pulled Lily away and what that would mean when it happened.

He must have looked disconsolate, because Gerad looked up at him and frowned and asked what was wrong. He shook his head, denying that anything was. Pushing maudlin thoughts away.

“When do you think you’ll leave?” he asked to detour the subject.

“Next few weeks maybe. Some of my men are staying. A few of them have made attachments to local girls. I encouraged them not to break them if they’re serious.”

“They’ll find places in my service,” Kastel promised.

“I’d stay if I thought this bandit thing was going to heat up, but it looks like it’s going to stew for a long while. No reason to sit around and wait for them to creep down out of the tundra. Not that you can’t handle it by yourself, but I wouldn’t have minded sinking my teeth into it. They got my ire up with that stunt last month, let me tell you.”

“Of course,” he agreed tonelessly.

Gerad kept frowning at him. “If you need my services you just call, you know that.”

He inclined his head, wanting to drift away outside, maybe walk about the gardens that were beginning to come into early summer growth. It would be as good a means as any to while away the time until he could go and meet Lily.

The stars were out in blatant brilliance. It was a fine, quiet night. Any activity within the yard that surrounded the castle was centered either about the main gates where the barracks and stables were located or around the kitchen, which seemed to never completely sleep. There were so few folk who cared about the gardens. He hardly did, except for an occasional place out of doors to find solitude. He supposed there was a gardener on staff, for the hedges had been trimmed and the weeds trimmed on regular basis. Someone had to be doing it. It struck him as odd, to think that there were people working for him,

for years maybe, that he had no knowledge of. He barely took the interest to remember the faces of the main castle staff. He was better with the faces of the men at arms, but only those that had been with him for years. He had become over time, isolated and reclusive, spending far more time fending off alliances than building them. Tonight's morose musings on upcoming departures only drove home how very isolated a world he had made for himself. It was safe though. So much safer not to feel, than to feel and be hurt when the things he became attached to went away. And they always did.

Time to seek Lily. He fastened the buttons of the loose, silken overcoat, ever articulate in the face he presented the world. He left the grounds, silent as a whisper and with none the wiser. Set foot to ground in the circle beyond the inn where she stayed. There was a stable on one side and a series of shops, closed for the night around the others. In the center a low stone fountain that had presumably not worked for years dominated the circle. The stable used it to water its charges. The stars lit the cobbles fairly well, but there were still shadows clinging to the buildings.

Whether she wanted to or not, he would press her for an answer to the question of whether she would stay or go, tonight. The need to know was too burning for him to ignore longer.

He did not see her immediately after he'd landed. He searched the shadows for her, taking a few steps into the circle towards the fountain. She might have been delayed in the tavern. The business might have been so good that the tavern owner prolonged his hours and insisted the minstrels play longer.

But then he saw her. She stepped out of the shadows of a furrier's shop. Slim and graceful, she moved into the starlight and stood staring at him across the distance of the circle. The fountain was between them. He moved around it, since she had stopped. She held herself stiffly,

her head high, her dark eyes shadows that the starlight could not penetrate.

Something was wrong, he thought and on the heels of that, the presumption that she had made her choice, that she had decided finally that she would not stay here. He faltered, not particularly eager to confirm that suspicion.

“Lily?” he asked, uncertainly, because she made no move to speak or step closer to him. “Are you all right?”

A breath, two and he thought her hands were trembling. “Yes. I’m fine,” she said finally, haltingly. Something glinted in the fey light. A tear that gathered at the corner of her eye and threatened to spill. Concerned, he stepped forward.

Movement caught his eye. The tapping of a wooden cane upon cobblestone. An old man moved out of the shadows. Thin and gray haired, face so gouged by lines that it was a latticework of shadow. He stopped behind Lily, laid one hand upon her shoulder under the fall of her dark hair. A familiar touch. Kastel stared, confused. He knew her minstrel friends by sight, but not this old man. The old man leaned and seemed to whisper something in her ear. She did not flinch from it, or take her eyes from Kastel.

He was affronted by it. By this unexpected intrusion that she allowed. By the whisper that spoke of secrets shared that he was on the outside of. If she was playing some game, it was beyond him.

“Lily, what is this? Who is this?”

The old man lifted his eyes and the starlight revealed a sharp, predatory gaze. “Don’t you remember me, Kastel?”

He blinked, the eyes, the smooth sibilance of the voice bringing simultaneous blows of recognition. The Prophet.

Before he had even drawn a shocked breath he was throwing up shields and something was slamming against them. No magic that even tickled the air in the circle, but the insidious mental kind of assault that the Prophet was



so good at. No time to think how he had gotten here. How he had entwined Lily in his web. He could not let the pounding of his heart, or the fear that he couldn't quite dam, distract him. Something slipped past his mental shields as if they were water, and visions of darkness and torment blinded him. He reeled, staggered back and felt the stone of the fountain against his thighs.

No. Force it out. Don't crumble. Oh, please, please don't crumble. He summoned power, mouthed the desperate words to a spell and the energy crackled in the air around him.

"It will kill her before it kills me, boy," those hated lips sneered. Those skeletal hands tightened around Lily and she stood passively, numbly in the grasp. He hadn't even thought, in his panic. He would have cast that spell and obliterated her and it probably would not have been enough to take out the Prophet.

He felt the magic that ensnared her now. There was no effort to hide it. The same mind magic that was trying to worm its way inside his head. Familiar, crawling fingers that he loathed. He tried to shake them off, tried to regain a portion of control.

"Let her go," he hissed, voice low and trembling. Trying to think of something to do that would separate her from him. He didn't trust his own ability to deal with this. To his core he was shaken and fear and magic did not always make stable bedfellows. Summon Dante, then. Anyway he could. A blast of power would do it. Something loud enough to alert anyone magic sensitive that something was afoot.

"I don't want her," the Prophet said.

Kastel knew that. He pulled the power that had dissipated back down around him. Angelo shook his head.

"She'll die. And it will be by your hand. I'll channel any energy that is released in this circle through her, whether it be your spell or mine, she'll be the conduit. There'll be nothing left of simple mortal flesh to revive."

It was possible, since he was in contact with her that he could do such a thing. He looked at her face. Her eyes had a bit more life to them now. Frantic and huge. *Do it.* She mouthed the words. Then, struggling to break free of the will that held her she whispered. "Do it, Kastel."

"She'll die for you. How noble," Angelo sneered. "Will you kill her? Or shall I?"

Something static and lethal gathered about Angelo and Lily. She stiffened, as magic induced pain seared her nerves.

"No," Kastel cried.

"Drop the shields, then. They're stronger than I remembered. You impress me."

"No." Lily was shaking her head. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Please no."

He needed her gone from here. He needed her not to be a barrier between him and the Prophet. Distract the vile creature then. He knew the best way to do that. He knew very well, what passions drove this man. He bowed his head in capitulation, let his shields drop, one by one, shuddering in horror that he was doing it at all.

Not a second was wasted. The Prophet slammed into him with all his considerable mental abilities. Flooded his mind with all the things he had used to shatter him months before, found all the weaknesses and used them to rip him asunder. He screamed, folding to his knees, doubling over and clutching at his head as if it might explode. Vaguely he heard Lily scream with him. Vaguely he thought he saw Angelo let her go and take a step towards him. He flung out shields unexpectedly, putting them not on himself, but on her. He threw every bit of power his scattered wits could find onto that protection, breaking the hold the Prophet had over her.

Angelo realized it. Hissed in irritation and threw out a hand to cast a spell on her.

"Run," Kastel screamed at her, keeping those shields upon her and when she hesitated, staring at him as if she

were thinking about stubbornly refusing to flee, he flung out his own arm and summoned a wind that picked her up bodily and flung her out of the circle and tumbled her none too gently on the street beyond it. He started to bring something more dangerous down upon Angelo, but the man lashed out with the end of his staff and caught him on the side of the head with it. That was as disorienting as the mental violation. He curled on his side on the cobblestones, blood leaking from his ear, concentrating on keeping up the protections on Lily while the pain thrummed noisily inside his head.

The air hummed with the release of a spell. The heat of it made the night air shimmer. A high-impact fireball spell. He heard her scream even before it hit her. Felt it impact shields of his making and felt them shudder. If it got through she wouldn't have the magical reserves to recover. Please, please let the shields hold. He didn't know whether they did or did not. Angelo turned back to him, muttering curses. The air shimmered and seemed to tear behind the Prophet. The man stepped towards him, cane raised as if to strike. Kastel drew in a hissed breath and called down the quickest, easiest strike he could. A fist of energy formed in the air above their heads and slammed down towards the Prophet. But the man wasn't there. The rip in space slipped forward and swallowed him a moment before it arched down and consumed Kastel.

The blast hit the cobbles and blasted out a pit as wide as a man and half as deep. Somewhere a dog barked at the disturbance. No one was in the circle to hear it.

\* \* \*

Lily slammed into the corner of a building, screaming as a comet of fire obliterated her. She held up her hands, squeezing her eyes shut, expecting burning, horrible pain and discovering nothing but a warmth that was

uncomfortable but not unbearable. She fell to her knees as it dissipated, scrambling mindlessly to the dark cover of an alley, not at the moment thinking of anything but escape. She sat there, huddled against piles of trash from the tavern, sobbing, chest hurting from a terror that had resided there for too long. But her mind, even numb with fear, was hers again.

There was a loud crack of impact from outside the ally, then silence. Profound silence. She lowered her head into her hands, pulling at her hair in misery. What had she, in her weakness, wrought?

The fool. The great fool, to have sacrificed himself for her. She climbed unsteadily to her feet and staggered out of the alley, pausing cautiously at the corner to see if Angelo still waited to destroy her. But he wasn't there. And Kastel wasn't. There was only a crater beyond the fountain, from which smoke trailed lazily upwards.

Oh, gods, gods, no. She stood swaying, tears streaming down her face. Devastation hit her like a fist. She stumbled against a wall from it. She did not doubt, for one second that the Master could and would do what he had promised. He was so powerful. So invasive and he had already broken Kastel once. Had already been on the verge of taking what he wanted. She screamed into the night, a wail of desperation and denial. Of loss, because Lily could not conceive of how it could be stopped.

\* \* \*

"I said no." Sera primly crossed her arms and searched about for her sewing, which sat in a basket by the fire. She was being unreasonable. Dante was becoming irritated with her.

"You were the one that wanted to go there, tonight," he said sulkily. "Don't blame me if things didn't turn out as you wanted."

"I'm not. I'm just not in the mood tonight." She turned irate amber eyes towards him, ready to spar. She said something else, but he hardly caught it, attention drawn elsewhere.

The skin on the back of his hands tingled. There was the thrumming awareness of a fair amount of energy being released and not far away. So close in fact that he could almost sense the heat of it. A fire spell. A high impact, focused fireball spell. Kheron was the only wizard in the city other than himself, capable of that particular spell, but he knew the flavor of her magic as well as he knew his own, and it didn't taste of her. But it was vaguely familiar. Then on the heels of the first a second, non-elemental strike that boomed through the city like thunder. The windows rattled. Sera jumped up, startled.

"Damnit," he hissed. He did know the signature of that casting. The sure premonition of disaster reared up within him. That first spell. That first spell -- he had felt its aroma before. He whipped out a hand and the window, along with the wall around it exploded outwards. He was out of it before the glass and stone began to shower down, flying low over the city, homing in on the dissipating pulse of energies.

Nothing more. Not a single whisper of magic. But the impact zone still radiated it. Not a block down from the very tavern he and Sera had been earlier that evening. People crowded the street in confusion. The wall of a building smoldered, burnt and charred and beyond that was a cul-de-sac with a blasted out crater in its center. Water leaked over the cobblestones, the wall of a large fountain ruptured and spilling all its contents. The crater was already a quarter full of dark water. Other than that, it was empty, people only just starting to creep closer to see what had happened.

"Where the hell are you?" He touched ground, creating a powerful witchlight that chased the shadows away. It

hovered over his head like a thing alive and the folk who had been edging closer to the circle gasped and surged backwards. Except for one figure, who broke through the bewildered people and rushed headlong towards him. He almost blasted her backwards out of hand, high strung and having damned, damned unnerving suspicions about that first spell. But he recognized her. Recognized the lingering traces of magic upon her. Familiar benign magic.

She almost slammed into him, slipping on the wet cobblestones, clutched at the sleeve of his shirt with desperate fingers. She was crying and hyperventilating so badly that he could hardly interpret her babbling.

“G--gods! Y-y-you’ve g-g-ot to h-help him. I-it’s m-m-my fault. My fault. I c-c-ouldn’t s-stop it.”

He caught hold of her shoulders hard enough to hurt and shook her. Her head snapped back and forth like a doll's. She kept trying frantically to grab at him. “What happened?” he demanded. “Tell me what happened?”

“M-m-master.” She got out and seemed to shrivel in upon herself with that proclamation. He stared at her. Pushed her away and cursed. He’d known it. He’d damn well known that spell aura.

“Where the fuck is Kastel?” He stabbed a finger at her, accusing her, ready to tear her apart if she had been responsible for something happening to him.

“I don’t know,” she whimpered. “Gone. Gone.”

He took a threatening step towards her. “What do you mean it was your fault?”

“Dante -- no,” Kheron slipped up from behind him. He hadn’t even realized she’d arrived. She had a naked sword in her hands and was half dressed at best. “She wouldn’t have hurt him. Give her a chance to explain.”

He glared at her interference. It was hard to back down, the rage and the dread had his blood at the boiling point. The girl was cowering, looking miserable and guilty. Kheron laid a hand on his arm, carefully. He took

a breath and backed up a step to distance himself. Kheron stepped around the edge of the crater, bent down next to the girl and asked in a low, gentle voice.

“Calm down, Lily. Hysterics will gain us nothing. Breath. And tell us what happened?”

## Thirty-seven

Translocating was not a magic Kastel thought possible. Not by any creature living. Not without exacting and time consuming spellcraft and effort at any rate. He remembered dimly reading something about slyphs - beings long extinct -- being able to flee through a hole in space when threatened. An entirely defensive mechanism and not one expected from a human sorcerer. He hadn't even been certain that's what had happened until the disorientation of the passage left him and he discovered he wasn't lying on the cobblestones of the cul-de-sac anymore.

It was like being picked up by the collar and jerked bodily through a gravity heavy space that compressed a body and dizzied a mind. Blackness and stunning lights at the same time. Cold and warmth that ate into bones -- A static scream that could be heard inside his head, but not outside it.

Then it was gone and so was the star speckled sky, the nighttime sounds of Sta-Veron and the shadowed bulk of the city. All of it was just vanished and he was plunged into caliginous blackness. He was on a surface so smooth and flat it had to be metal. It was cool and dry -- bone dry, and coated with a film of fine dust. A sound. A scuffle of something very close by and Kastel scrambled backwards, ignoring the ringing in his ears, and the wave after wave of chaotic images that pulsed through his head. His back hit a wall close by. He flung out an arm, summoning a witch light. It was hard coming. He felt the magic stir at his invocation, but it was reluctant to do what he wished. It felt -- frightened -- almost.

But it came anyway -- if he couldn't summon a simple witchlight, then he was truly lost -- and the cold bluish light illuminated a section of plain, unadorned hallway. Metal walls. Lines cut so straight and precise, so surgical



in their design that it seemed no man's hand had made them. There was a low, vibrating hum that came from somewhere, that permeated the floor and the walls and the very air. Not magic. Not anything he had felt before, but it hinted at power.

A movement from the shadow of the hall, which seemed to go on forever and Angelo stepped forward, staff raised as if he intended to strike Kastel with it again. Six steps away. Kastel hissed out the words of a spell, a summoning spell that would set an ice elemental loose upon the Prophet. The man would probably beat it back, since Kastel didn't have time to cast a more powerful spell, but it would give him the moment he needed to get his head together. He spoke the last word of the summons and nothing happened. No trace of the elemental creature that had served him very well in the past. Silence save for the soft slap of Angelo's boots on the floor.

He gaped, thinking, could this be the place without windows? Elementals wouldn't pass the wards when he'd tried to summon them before. The staff came crashing down, Angelo's face a twisted mask of rage-victory-maniacal pleasure, behind it. Kastel held up an arm and blocked it, saved his skull from the impact and with a sickening crack, felt his arm go numb instead. A second later, pain blazed and he cried out, clutching the member close to his body, scrambling backwards, away from the Prophet.

Angelo laughed. A little mad. A little unsteady. Not the very smooth, very in control man he'd been before. "Magic doesn't like it down here. The things here chase it away. But I know magics that aren't afraid. They're not magics at all. I used to think it was a gift given to me by God, but now I think something darker bestowed it upon me. I ruled the souls of half the old world by virtue of them. They bowed to me. They worshipped me as the spokesman of God. Trusting fools! Can you feel it? The fingers of it in your head, my pretty sinner?"

He did feel them. They crept inside his head like snakes, seeking any slight entry and forcing their way past, writhing and convulsing their sinuous bodies until they widened the gaps of defense. It was repulsive. The serpents had been there before, freely slithering inside his head, let in by hopelessness and pain. They'd brought with them visions of guilt and madness that he still felt the lingering traces of. They told him now to let go, to stop fighting, that there was no prospect of beating Angelo here, in the heart of his lair. His secret place. The place down below, where the Prophet had never let anyone trespass. Where Lily had warned him away from desperately so long ago, when he'd still had the will to seek escape. Kastel shut his eyes, clutching his head and screamed out the words to a spell, gathering power with all his desperate will to feed it.

An energy blast the width of the hall answered. It was weaker than it might have been, considering all the power he poured into it. It lit the hall like a wash of lightening, swallowing Angelo, blasting him backwards. Kastel *knew* he wasn't down. Felt it in the shimmering response of shields, in the insistence of the invasion inside his thoughts. He climbed to his feet, using the wall as support -- his arm throbbed torturously, broken perhaps, and retreated down the hall into shadow, his witchlight a feeble support at best.

No wards down here. They would have repelled that energy blast and that had not happened. So what was making magic so hard? He couldn't think. He tried to insert mental blockades to stop the inward seepage. What should have been simple for a mind trained in the highest sorcery, he was finding impossible. He should have been able to protect himself from this assault. He should have been able to at least shut out the worst of it, but it had him staggering, vision tunneling. With distance it became more bearable, though. He could focus again.

The hall went on forever. There were indentions where smooth, handelless doors were, faded, peeling numerical symbols stenciled on the walls next to them. Everything was made of the same metal. Blue gray and seamless. No bolts, no welded seams. Like something from the old world. Like something seen within the wreckage's of shattered cities, inside the shells of buildings that had seen less damage than the rest. But nothing in those graveyards had ever been this unscathed by the Final Destruction. Nothing had ever been this whole. Occasionally there were strips of light along the wall near the floor that still faintly glowed. Occasionally some of the doors stood open and inside those dark rooms were things from another time. Dust coated memorials.

What was this place that Angelo had built his fortress atop? Kastel stretched out his senses, and felt the weight of a world resting above him. He could not even begin to feel the air above the stone and rock and earth.

There was an intersection ahead. He took a turn without pausing to think, rushing into darkness with the witchlight threatening to abandon him at any moment. He could not hear sounds of pursuit, but he knew Angelo was there. Waiting for the moment to strike.

He had not been prepared for this. He had blocked all possibility of Angelo's existence out of his mind. Easier to convince himself the man was dead than think the creature was out there waiting to strike. Easier to let himself slide into the mundane reality of Sta-Veron and the unexpected discovery of Lily and all she represented than prepare himself for this.

Fool. He should have known. He should never have let his guard down. *Had he ever even built it back up?* So here he was now, with a madman who knew the byways of his mind better than he, who wanted his magic and his body to house it and would destroy his soul to get it. And then he would try to destroy everything he loved once he had it.

He paused and put his back against the wall to catch his breath. The featureless facade of a door was next to him. A panel beside it with its faceplate hanging by exposed wires. The humm was an undertone that drifted through this place like a ghost.

A vision slammed into him.

Lights and bright halls. Men and women striding purposefully along, all in similar cut clothing. Uniforms with shining brass buttons and various marks of rank. A few others among them in more casual, civilian clothing, all of them seeming as if they had great business to conduct. The world outside, hundreds and hundreds of feet above flared with terrible explosions. With the far more devastating biological menace that was -- Galgaga.

Yet these people were safe from it. Shielded while the rest of the world writhed in torment. A thousand people in this place. Miles of bunkered hallways and stored supplies. Nuclear power beneath them that would feed life into those halls for a millennia. A place of safety for a thousand souls, a place that would support them and their offspring for as long as it took for the world to regain its composure.

Only the world never had. Not the way it used to be and they weren't alone down here, for they had invited a serpent into safety among them. He walked down the hall in the company of privileged men and decorated soldiers, his white robes and gold trimmed skull cap making him seem angelic and holy. An old man, white haired and frail, with kind eyes and a benevolent smile. The oldest man here. He wouldn't live to see the day when the shielded bunker doors were opened to let civilized man once more walk the upper earth. He hadn't the strength to endure so many years. Not of his own, at any rate.

Kastel drew back against the wall as the insubstantial figures passed, the old man staring blindly through him, but the others -- the soldiers and the officers and the aides and the priestly attendants that trailed the old man -- their

eyes found him. Looked at him as they walked with longing and dread. As if they recognized him or wanted something of him.

The darkness came tumbling back, taking the witchlight with it. Kastel remained against the wall, bracing his legs to keep from sliding down it. Beginning to shake from reaction. Had Angelo slipped that into his head or had it come from something else?

He thought he knew what this was now. One of those places where the survivors had hidden, before they had come out, years later and declared an end to the technology that had ruined their world. Most of those places had been destroyed and all they represented along with them. Most of those places were whispered legends, but they were known. How could there be one left that still had power fueling it, technology humming within it that repelled magic as surely as the wards had protected the fortress that had resided above it?

He called the witchlight back and it almost hurt this time, it was so much of an effort. The magic did not wish to function here. He set off again, a little more careful of his pace, the arm sending screaming jolts of pain up past his shoulder. It was enough to take his mind from the constant outside pressure worrying at him. He didn't think he had a whisper of a chance at healing it. Not if it took so much effort just to summon a witchlight.

What had happened to Lily? He wished her alive and well. Angelo hadn't the time to cast anything else at her. He'd gone through the hole in space before Kastel had been entrapped by it. Grant her enough sense to go find Dante and tell him what had happened. Dante would know something was wrong. He would have picked up on the cast spells. It was just a matter of him knowing the specifics so he could do something about it.

Do what, though? Cast another of his incredibly inventive witchcraft spells? Not likely, at least not for another cycle of the moon. He needed a full moon, if

Kastel recalled Dante's scribbled notes correctly and that had been two nights past. Not another one for a month. No help there. They still didn't even know where this place was, other than the assumption that it was somewhere in the mid-western mountain range. That covered a lot of ground.

There was a double door just ahead that seemed the crux of three halls. He passed it and it slid open as if by ghost hands. He scooted back a few steps, managing to avoid a curse of surprise. A wash of cool, oddly scented air flowed out at him. He almost expected Angelo, since the door had apparently opened by magic, but there was no movement and no attack.

Curiosity got the better of him and he stepped forward, slipping quickly and cautiously through the animate doors. His light seeped into the room. Large chamber, filled with lines of tables and chairs. A eating hall perhaps.

The tabletops were covered with oblong shapes beneath moldering canvas. Hundreds and hundreds of them. There were more piled along the walls haphazardly, as if someone had gotten tired to stacking them neatly and decided to drop them with no respect to order. He stepped on something brittle and it crunched under his boot. He looked down. A skeletal hand flung out on the floor, flesh eaten away by time, bone gone yellow from the same culprit, the rotten remnants of clothing still clinging like spider web to the frame of a body.

He carefully stepped back, suddenly wary of what he would see if he looked too closely to all those other shapes in the darkness. A thousand people down here when this place was alive. How many skeletal corpses in this room?

Something brushed at his arm like a whispered caress and another vision blared behind his eyes.

People were dying. It had gotten in, somehow. The infection -- the germ released by Galgaga had somehow slipped in past all the safeguards and it was eating them

up from within. It went through them like death waving his scythe in a field of wheat. They fell, with no regard to rank or placement. It even struck the holy. But the old man, in his dying moments, struck out in desperation, using the innate power of his mind, and the scant power given him by what he thought was the messenger of his god and discovered a way to prolong his existence. There was a man beside him, sick and dying, but not so far along as the old man, broken with the sure knowledge of impending death. A hopeless man with no reason to fight, when a determinedly righteous mind invaded his own, crushed his soul and drew out the essence of his life.

The old man left his body and found himself a new one. Not healthy by any means, but buffered by the combined life-force of two beings. He was like a vampire feeding on the weak. So desperate was he for existence that he threw away whatever compassion he held for the sanctity of life. They were all dying anyway. What did it matter?

They never knew what hit them. They never knew the name of the second plague that ate away at their resources. He went through them all, because each body he took weakened and had to be disposed of. He took the healthiest if he could. He tore apart their unguarded mundane minds and reaped the benefits of their bodies.

And somewhere along the way he gained enough power to purge himself of the virus and he went out into the world. But he left behind a warren full of ghosts, a maze of souls that he'd torn from their hosts all in the name of a god whom he thought had preordained his survival over the survival of all others.

A filmy haze shifted at the corner of Kastel's vision. He couldn't be sure it wasn't part of the hallucination. He turned his head, trying to follow it, and there was another wisp further into the room. A pale luminescence that hovered like fog over the tables piled with bones. Almost it seemed to light the room. But it was no fog. It was nothing natural that clung with desperate fervor to the

remains of men and women dead four hundred years. With growing dread he felt the forlorn, tormented cries of murdered masses. Heard the whispers -- the wind blowing through a forest of dry leaves -- of countless voices crying to be avenged.

It wasn't a mere twenty some bodies Angelo had taken over the centuries. It was hundreds and hundreds and the evidence lay here, a vile collection of bones and the whisper of ghosts who had no power to avenge themselves.

"Oh god," Kastel said very softly, taking a step backwards in horror.

"There is no god," Angelo whispered from behind him.

He whirled, backpedaling in shock, holding his hands to his ears uselessly as what had been ghostly whispers turned into a banshee wail of allegation and fury. The filmy presences swirled about the chamber like a hive of angry wasps. The pulsing lights strobed in his eyes. Angelo didn't seem to see it. He stared with maddening intensity at Kastel, nothing but the sickening assurance of victory in his eyes.

"Can't you see them?" Kastel cried, panicked, backing away steadily into the graveyard of the Prophet's making.

"What? These old bones?" The old Angelo smile flickered into place. The missionary's smile. "They gave their lives for the good." He held out a hand. "Don't fight me, boy. It's inevitable."

Something whipped past Kastel's head and he ducked, staring after it. The Prophet's gaze followed his, his eyes narrowing as if he thought some joke were being played upon him. A tick began in his cheek. His gaze flickered about the room uncertainly.

"Don't try and distract me," he hissed.

Kastel almost laughed, aborted it with a strangled sound and accused. "You killed them. They *trusted* you and you fed off them."



Angelo's eyes widened. His lips pulled back in a snarl of utter rage. "Shut up! Shut up!"

Kastel felt the power gather and had just enough time to form a haphazard shield. A high impact energy spell hit him, battered him backwards and ate at his shields. The dry rotted canvas that covered the remains on the tables went up in flames. Bones burned. Another blast hit him and he slammed backwards into a table, overturning it, falling in a shower of brittle bones.

Something snapped. Fear, revulsion, desperation, anger all came to a head and he pulled power recklessly, siphoning inner reserves when outside magics were sluggish to respond. He bombarded Angelo with an ice spell. A hurricane hammer of cold powered energy that blew bones and tables against the walls in its eagerness to envelope the Prophet. The Prophet in his mad rage had not even a shield up. He was that sure of his dominance. It blasted him back, through the open doors and against the hallway wall. Red blood splattered the frost-covered wall. Angelo slumped to the floor, his shoulder a bloody mess, his left arm just gone. Ice rimmed his hair and brows, crusted on his robes.

He didn't move. There was no hint of breath frosting the air.

Kastel's did. Quick and hard and he crouched there, panting. The power for another strike hung in the air around him, waiting to be directed. He pushed himself up, stood there swaying, with bones about his feet. Bones all around.

*You -- little -- bastard --*

It clamored inside his head. Burning tendrils of pain lashed behind his eyes. He cried out, lost the tenuous hold on the power he'd gathered and it vanished as if it were running for its life.

*You think I can't destroy you?* It seared, like a brand into flesh, only it was mental passages that were being tormented -- destroyed. He felt gashes ripped inside his

head. He doubled over, trying to fight it off. Tasted blood in his mouth and felt it trickling down his lips, running from his nose.

He threw out a frail blast of energy force, and it hurt -- god it hurt so bad to direct that feeble bit of power. Only Angelo wasn't where he had been. There was nothing there but a blood splattered wall. He couldn't see the ghosts anymore. Either they had fled, chased away by the magic, or he just couldn't see them anymore with the agony in his head. He whipped his head around, more interested in finding Angelo than the ghosts. The room was dark now. Not even the witchlight, which had dissipated at some point during the exchange.

The pain sliced into him again, and he screamed, crumpling back into the bones. This time he knew it was more than mere pain -- there was damage done. There was a wrongness in his senses, in the natural pattern of things.

*Do you think I don't know the byways of your mind, Kastel? Do you think I didn't map out the channels of your demon-spawned power? Do you think I can't burn you out, if I want? Do you think I haven't done it in the past when the sinner I needed was too stubborn to give in without destroying the magic that sustained them? So much trouble and time to heal, but I'm a master of the mind, am I not? And I'll have all the time in the world once I have your body to heal what I destroy in order to take it.*

The voice was inside his head, like the ghost voices, but it brought with it fire and suffering. He knew what was wrong now. It was Angelo wrecking the pathways that allowed power to flow. The channels that so very few people had, that allowed them to be sensitive to magic. He knew of wizards who rashly used more power than they were capable of channeling, who burned out their own abilities, but he had never known it possible to wreck that same circuitry from the outside. Yet that's what it felt

like was happening. It felt like open, raw wounds were being gouged inside his mind.

It hurt. It hurt worse than any torture Angelo had subjected him to. It blinded him to everything but the white searing destruction. He couldn't fight it, because Angelo knew the ways past his mental barriers. Had probably planted pathways past before Dante had ever gotten him out. He stretched out his cringing, wounded mental voice and desperately tried a summons. Find an elemental bold enough to venture down here despite the humm of technology. Something that didn't require power from him, other than in the calling. Something that would attack of its own violation and under its own strength.

He couldn't grasp hold of one. His summon spells fell on deaf, or stridently preoccupied ears. Anything then. Draw in anything, even the little ones who owed no fealty to him and let them run rampart down here long enough to distract Angelo. But the little ones were rebuffed by the engines that ran this place.

But something else came sniffing, curious of his desperation, curious of the strange power of this bunker. Not afraid of technology, because it was not a thing that had ever been threatened by it. It held some hint of familiarity. Senses fading, Kastel held onto the faint recollection of the elemental he had perceived the morning after he and Lily had first slept together. The very old, very powerful presence that had come on the tails of all the younger, more gleeful elementals. It seeped down now, mindless of the earth that sat between sky and this place, a vastly, ominously ancient force that he clutched at with failing mental fingers and implored succor of.

He didn't even try to command it. Did not begin to think, even under better circumstances that he could bring it to heel by force. It delved into him, who had called it, with much the same force that Angelo was invading him,

but with less finesse and a trailing residue of much, much more power. It grasped hold of the pain and the fear and the hatred towards this place and the man who had made it his liar. It was not used to human emotion. It had never known the taste of a human mind. What he had seen of it, he realized in some astonishment, had only been the tip of the proverbial iceberg. It was beyond fathoming, the extent of its power. Ancient, ancient elemental out of the frozen northern poles that even the nomads did not venture. And despite all that, it latched onto his emotions -- *fear/hatred/destroy* -- took it into itself and went wild.

Angelo sensed it as it began to release its energies. He called down a massive fire attack to drive away an ice elemental, and the fire sputtered and was lost in a growing maelstrom of wind and blowing ice. The floor began to freeze over, ice forming and growing, thicker and thicker until it started to creep over the scattered bones, to encase the tables and chairs, to seep up the walls and coat the ceiling. Angelo screamed in fury, yanking his attention away from Kastel, trying to master the elemental that was in the midst of throwing a mammoth tantrum. And the thing recognized the object of the *fear/hate* and descended upon him.

Half a scream got out, before the ice swarmed over his body. Kastel hadn't even realized where he was before that physical scream alerted him to the position. And then all he saw was the swiftly thickening ice and the winds battering the indistinct shape so forcefully that pieces of it began to chip away, until the whole of it was battered down to nothing. Nothing but shards of frozen ice and blood and bone that mixed in with all the others that were flying about the room.

And it didn't stop. It circled outwards, the ice eating into the walls and bones of the bunker itself. Taking over room by room, level by level of a place vast enough to have housed a thousand people. It climbed over the generators and the great engines that ran this place and

they ground to a halt. It seeped up through the earth and went mad with the currents of air to feed it.

It grew. Concentrically it devoured the earth, wider and wider. Trees were frozen solid in moments, toppling at their own weight. Animals were caught unawares and frozen in motion. It began to create a tundra all of its own in the mountains of the west.

Kastel felt its hunger, its madness. Felt the ever-growing pattern of its destruction and could do nothing. All he could do was sit untouched by a thing that was systematically destroying everything in its path. The center of the storm that still raged in the death chamber. Kneeling there, miserable and hurting, with a cold so violent that even he was affected by it. He wrapped his arms about himself, not quite believing the Prophet was gone. But there was no new pain inflicted inside his head, just the burning sensation of the old; the throbbing of mangled power channels.

He tried to call the elemental back, desperate to halt its destruction, even though the effort cost him dearly. It did not respond, utterly beyond his control and he thought he might have worsened the damage inside his head. He cursed helplessly, tears sliding past his lashes. They froze on his cheeks. His clothing was stiff with ice. It frosted his hair. His flesh might be immune to it, but at the rate the ice was growing down here, it wouldn't matter, he'd been encased within a frozen tomb.

## Thirty-eight

Lily did not recall being brought to the castle. She did not recall what conversation, if any she'd had with Dante and Lady Kheron on the night-dark street beyond the tavern. It was all a blur of hazed memories and confused, terrified sensations. People moved around her, spoke in hushed voices about her, or about the events of the night, or about gods knew what else and she couldn't find it in herself to gather an interest for it.

She sat curled in a chair with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, shivering, eyes huge and blank, reliving over and over those last terrible, helpless moments. She could not get out of the loop. The recollection of her own powerless body moving forward, speaking not of its own accord, beckoning him closer by her very oddness. The look on his face when he'd recognized the Master. The utter shock. Fear. Even a little betrayal to see her standing passively in the monster's employ. Magic had happened, most of which she was blatantly unaware of, and then she was free. By then it was too late.

He'd forced her away, she knew very well it had been him and not the master. And when she had the nerve to scramble back -- there was nothing. Nothing but the sibilant promises the master had made. Nothing but the overwhelming anguish and dread certainty that if she saw Kastel again, it wouldn't be him. It would be a fiend wearing his form and that thought was more than she could bear.

Sera hovered about her now and then, worried and gently urging her to take hot tea and to eat. She refused the food, but the tea felt good on a throat raw from crying.

"You could have told me," Sera said once, soft reprimand. "I could have helped if I'd known."

She didn't respond. She didn't know how Sera could have helped. Her mind kept circling back to the Master's

threats. She couldn't shake the depression that began to shadow her heart. The concrete assurance that there was no hope. She had lived too long under the Master's thumb, under his all controlling influence to assume he would not get what he wanted.

It was day again -- or perhaps the day after -- she might have sat the morning, afternoon and night in a stupor, lost in her own fearful contemplation. She was so tired her vision swam. Sera tried to get her to climb into bed. She didn't know whose room this was, it was not the one she had used when she was a servant here. She had not seen Sera's wizard, or any of his brethren since she had been brought here. They had disappeared with the night and she'd not had the presence of mind to inquire. Sera might have mentioned it, but Lily did not recall.

She slept and awoke to the whispering of girls. Two of the upstairs servants at the door to the room, one with a tray in her hands. Both caught in the midst of speculation about her presence. One of them said her name, when they saw she was awake and smiled a little nervously. Not malicious smiles, but curious ones. She wondered what rumor had spread about the castle by now. She didn't know what time it was. Or how much had passed.

"Has lord Kastel come back?" she asked softly, not caring what they thought of that unsubtle question. It blared too persistently in her head not to ask it. They shook their heads, wide-eyed.

"Is it true?" One whispered. It was not the Master's appearance or the subsequent disappearance of their lord that they asked about. Lily was silent on that, pushing away covers. She still wore the red skirt she'd performed in.

"Who's room is this?" It was someone's room, for it had accumulated possessions sitting about that did not collect in the guest rooms.

"Lady Sera's."

Oh. They set the tray down, but she had stopped paying them heed. She was staring out the window, which had the faint light of morning seeping through the leaded glass. Where was he? Was he even still what she knew and loved? A chill swept over her body, so harsh and violent that she bent double, wrapping her arms about herself. Goose pimples rose on her skin, her teeth chattered uncontrollably.

A sign, she thought, panicked. A dread sign of death. The coldness of a grave. But he'd never see a grave, at least not his body, that would come back with the Master behind those eyes and it would wreck vengeance upon her. And upon all the others the Master considered enemies. Upon Sera.

She jumped off the bed, ran down the hall looking for Sera. Calling her name in desperation. The maids, who had been talking around a bend in the hall looked at her, startled. But, down at the end of that corridor Sera stuck her head out of a door. Lily ran to her, grabbed her arm with frantic, clutching fingers.

"You've got to hide. He said he'd come back for you. He said he'd kill you."

"Lily. Lily! Who said?" Sera stared at her wide-eyed.

"The Master," Lily wailed. "He'll destroy him first and then he'll come back for us." She started sobbing again. Heart wrenching, hurtful sobs. Gods, she hated crying. Sera wrapped her arms around her, trembling a little.

"Dante won't let him," she promised. "Dante will stop him."

"How?" Lily cried. "How can he, if he has all of Kastel's power?"

"You underestimate Kastel," Sera whispered, but there was fear under her veil of assurance.

"You don't know the Master. You don't know how powerful he is."

"I know. I know very well."



“If he comes here it will be too late. We’ve got to hide.”

Sera held her at arm’s length. “I can’t hide. If you’re right -- if he takes Kastel and he gets past Dante -- then still, I can’t hide. He killed my baby. He’s hurt us so badly -- I’ll fight him to my dying breath if I have to, but I’ll never give him the satisfaction of seeing me cower.”

Lily shook her head, numbly. She could not understand the mindset of sorcerers, of warriors, of people who refused to bend even when the wind would surely break them if they didn’t.

Kastel was the same. She’d seen that from the very first. He fought until he shattered and then there wasn’t anything to fight with anymore. She loved that stubbornness no matter that it frustrated her. It occurred to her that it was not only the fear of the Master coming back and taking out vengeance upon her that made her insides crawl up and quiver. It was the thought of him doing it in Kastel’s body; the thought of knowing what she loved was gone, and seeing the reminder of the theft in soulless, blue eyes. She did not ever want to see that face with the Master’s evil mind behind it.

She wished she had Sera’s faith, but she had only started believing in something -- in someone -- very recently. She didn’t have the practice Sera did. The only thing she knew how to do was run. Better not knowing, than to face that which would break her heart.

\* \* \*

The western mountains shivered. Their evergreen covered spines became weighted with more than dirt and stone and grasping tree roots. Ice sank its claws deep into the skin of the earth and clung there. It spread like disease, stopped on one side by the sea, racing along in the other three directions unhampered. Nothing survived in its path. The vibrant spring lands were decimated,

flattened by the ferocity and the weight of snow and ice. Villages were frozen over, people caught unawares trapped in the maelstrom and frozen as surly as the trees and animals caught in its path.

It grew slowly, marginally as the breadth of destruction became wider. Forty-miles from the eye of the storm. A hundred. The ocean didn't freeze but ships as far out as ten miles were caught in the cold fingers of storm, crusted and weighted with ice and drawn under the waves by the sheer added weight. Two hundred miles out and it threatened the sea port cities of the south western coast. It had already covered Keladedra and Sethapia and various towns and villages on the plains to the east of the mountains.

One did not have to be particularly sensitive to magic to sense it. It blared power across the lands like a sieve. From the moment it had begun Dante had felt it. Two weeks and it hadn't let up. Had grown wilder and more unrestrained. An elemental power gone crazy. It hammered at the senses until one had to consciously try and block it out. Even then it got through.

He sat at the edge of the eye of it now and looked into a swirling panorama of white. Snow and ice driven by gale force winds that slowly advanced. When they'd reached the edge of the encroachment, the land on one side had been green and growing and on the other a jagged line of white. Growing, ever growing.

Horses that had better sense than men and most assuredly wizards had stomped their hooves in abject terror, wanting nothing but retreat. But they'd pushed on. Protected by magic, until they'd reached the heart of it.

He stared up into the heights of the storm, drawing breath, brows knit as he tried to pierce the fabric of the thing that drove it. Not one of Kastel's spells. Oh, most certainly not a thing to be mastered by any wizard, but something sympathetic to the essence of his magic. A

thing most definitely not sympathetic to the essence of his own.

Kheron's horse shifted up beside his. He couldn't see her face for whipping black hair. He didn't need to. Her worry was clear in the tenseness of her body, in the way her knuckles gripped the reins. They'd ridden hard and fast, the three of them. Using magic to sustain their mounts, using magic to take routes normal riders could never have managed. There was no doubt of their goal. They were drawn to it like moths to a flame. Anyone with a shred of magical sensitivity could have found the center of this disturbance. Anyone who had the strength to survive the storm raging around it.

"Gods," Kheron said, voice carried away by the winds. It was an adequate statement. They were having to erect shields to protect themselves from the wind and ice now. It was advancing that quickly.

"There's no way we're getting through that," Gerad said from behind them.

"No," Dante agreed. Not considering how far it was to the center from this the outer rim. The further in it got, the more intense the weather and even though it was slowing along the edges, it showed no hint of stopping. And since none of them had a chance in hell of reasoning with an ice elemental, it had to be driven away by force. It was not the confrontation he had been anticipating.

He flipped the reins over his horse's head and handed them to Kheron.

"Shield yourselves."

She stared at him, ready for argument. "But you can't --

"If you don't, the storm will eat Gerad."

She had no argument for that.

He swung down, forgetting them altogether and walked to the edge of the storm. The winds attacked him. He couldn't see from hair in his eyes, so he lowered his

lashes and sent out mental tendrils, searching out the heart of the elemental that was wrecking so much havoc.

There, closer to the heart of this thing, a simmering, powerhouse of boundless rage, lashing out at the world. The rage was all it knew. Rage and fear and hatred. All human emotions. It had picked them up from somewhere and took them to heart with all the passion of nature.

He delved deeper into the maelstrom of swirling ice and snow. Everything was white fury. He shielded, rising high and fast, homing in on the power behind it. He gathered power as he went, hoarding it and holding it simmering and restless, waiting to be released.

Over countless miles, all obscured by driven ice, and he felt the presence of the thing ahead. It stirred from its mindless litany of destruction, aware of something fleshy and warm within the boundaries of its presence. It did not like the warmth. It stirred against him. He was ready for it. He mouthed the words that would release his gathered power in a spell. The world shook. The whiteness was obliterated by a blossoming corona of black power. Heat came with it, volatile and unforgiving. Dante was a tiny speck at the center of it.

The spell could have destroyed a city. Or a mountain. The winds howled their fury and the snow crept back, swarming with pelting ice, like a hive of bees shaken out of their nest. The elemental swelled with offended outrage. Something like a fist of concentrated ice and wind came out of the storm and slammed into Dante. It shook his shields to the core. Another of the same power struck him from behind, then another from a different direction. He bled from the impacts. He felt the blows in his bones, even though not a chip of ice got through to actually touch his skin.

He hated dealing with elementals that weren't tamed, that had not taken the physical form that man required of them in order to control them. It was damned hard to hit an insubstantial foe with a concentrated spell like Hellfire

or Inferno. You had to use the all encompassing, power eating variety of magic that a body just could not fire off one after the other without a chance to recuperate energy.

He summoned a fireball spell just to piss the thing off and it was swallowed by the storm in moments. But it didn't like it. Ice elementals didn't like fire. He didn't have a fire elemental in his arsenal powerful enough to best this thing. He didn't know if he could destroy it. Which meant he had to annoy it enough to make it give up its present tantrum and drive it away to more peaceful climes. He needed heat. Persistent, white-hot heat.

He took a breath, formulating a spell, devising a slight variation in the casting. He gathered power, opened himself wide to keep it coming -- and he started to burn. His shields were blasted out from the inside. His clothing was burned away in the first flash of bluish flame. A small sun flared in the midst of the blizzard. A man writhed at the heart of it, drawing power from inner sources that most wizards could not even fathom existed. And still it seemed hardly enough. The spell was designed for a great blast of flame that would explode outwards, quickly consume anything in its path and then receding. He was keeping it fueled, not allowing it to dissipate and it was sucking power from him so quickly he felt lightheaded.

He moved ponderously into the heart of the elemental. It raged against him, but it couldn't keep him out. Bits and pieces of it melted at his touch. It hated him. It was determined not to be overwhelmed by him, but it hated the heat of his flames more. So it retreated. He followed. And it retreated further, but did not flee outright.

In frustration he demanded more power, drawing it from the eather, from the air, from the distant and closely connected aura of Kheron, who sensed his need and opened herself freely. The globe of fire expanded, heat and width doubling, until it licked the earth and ate at the substance of the dark clouds that had gathered at the

elementals bidding. The tundra beneath it melted and wet earth sizzled and smoked. The elemental screamed in fury and aversion. It had come out of curiosity after all, and the emotions it had picked up and driven it were fading in the face of the discomfort it was experiencing. It rather disliked humans.

It gathered itself into a wispy current of cold air and power and sped away back towards the frigid north that had spawned it. The winds slowly began to cease. The mini sun flickered and burned out. Dante barely controlled his plummet to the earth. He came down on hands and knees, naked as the day he was spawned. The snow continued to fall, but it was a light, drifting snow, not a driven, ice laced one. The ground was wet and muddy, but starting to freeze over again. The elemental might be gone, but the cold system would take a while to dissipate.

He hated the cold. He especially hated being naked in the cold without the energy to do a Sartor spell or even a decent warming one. He wrapped his arms about himself and shivered, thinking dark and evil things about ice elementals and mad men who thought they spoke the word of god.

He looked about himself. He was in the lee of a mountain, but the earth was as desolate as the ice fields of the far north. Trees were nothing but toppled, ice crusted shapes that lined the mountainside. It was that way for as far as he could see and sense. Nothing but razed land. This had not been Angelo's doing. If Angelo had survived the release of this thing, he would be surprised.

He hoped Kastel had -- if for no other reason so that he might smack him repeatedly for summoning something he had obviously not been able to control. First rule of wizardry, don't summon a creature you aren't damn certain you can overcome if need be.

Hell, *he* hadn't overcome it, he'd merely annoyed it enough to drive it away.

He sighed, rubbing his arms for circulation and managed to gather just enough strength to heat himself. Then he started walking.

\* \* \*

He found Kastel before Kheron and Gerad found him. An hours walk from where he'd come to ground and he saw the ice covered bones of a decimated fortress. It was not recognizable as Angelo's. He'd only seen glimpses of it then after it was destroyed by its own warding spells, before he'd been snapped back to Sta-Veron by his counter-summoning spell. Now it was nothing but blocks of ice that looked different from the more natural shapes of iced shrouded trees around it.

He climbed up amongst the haphazard blocks, slipping here and there, cursing the ice soundly before coming upon something that was not ice, but flesh and blood.

Kastel sat against a man high chuck of ice or stone, with his arms around his knees, staring blindly out across the distant, white valley. He was scuffed and bruised and dried blood smeared his skin. Half healed cuts and abrasions marred his face and hands.

Dante stood there for a moment, half afraid that it wasn't Kastel at all, then common sense set in and with it the realization that it could be no one else, for certainly Angelo had more sense than to just sit here lackadaisically while the world was eaten up by ice around him.

"Are you insane?" He snapped, angry and miserable and testy with the surge of relief that flooded him.

Kastel slowly turned his head and looked up at him, squinting at the sun behind his shoulders. He blinked. His eyes were bruised, but sane.

"You don't have any clothes on."

"No shit. You don't have the slightest bit of sense. Why are you sitting out here doing nothing? Why didn't

you try and get home? Where the hell is Angelo?" He crouched down to be eye level.

Kastel shook his head, at a loss for reasonable explanation. He unfastened his over tunic instead and handed it to Dante. Dante grimaced and accepted it. He would rather have had answers.

"Why didn't you make new clothes?"

"Because I spent all my energy chasing away your damned elemental."

"Oh -- Angelo's dead."

Dante sat back in the snow. He'd thought as much, but to hear it confirmed -- he didn't know whether he was elated or disappointed. He would have dearly loved to kill the bastard himself.

"What happened? Why the hell did you summon something that goddamned huge? Do you have any notion what it's done?"

Kastel shivered, looked away from him as though he were ashamed. "I -- I didn't mean to. He got inside my head. I panicked -- I was reaching for anything and *that* responded. I couldn't control it afterwards. I couldn't even sense it. I didn't know until a few days ago it was still active."

"Why?" Dante raised a dubious brow.

"It took me that long to get out of the tunnels."

"Again, why?" Something was wrong here. Something more than shell shock and guilt. "It's been two weeks, Kastel. Why did it take you that long to get out? Why didn't you just blast your way free? How the hell could you not sense the damned elemental freezing the west coast solid?"

Kastel hugged his knees tighter, opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out, then he shook his head, took a breath and said softly.

"He burned me out, Dante. And I finished the job when I tried to stop the elemental. I can't summon any power. It just won't come. I can't sense anything. It's as if I'm



blind,” he said this last with his forehead pressed against his knees, miserable and forlorn.

Dante stared at him, stunned, not quite believing it. Probing himself to see what signs he could of such a claim. He could fix almost any physical ill, but the mental ones were beyond him and the channels that focused power and magic were purely mental. He could sense the scarring though. It pulsed with heat and dull residue pain. It was why he hadn’t been able to sense Kastel before this -- there had been nothing of his unique power signature to latch onto. It was all locked away behind mangled mental amplifiers.

“Oh my god,” he said softly, aghast. A deep set, helpless rage began to build. Angelo had done this and Angelo was beyond his reach. He needed something to strike out at in his fury. He cursed and Kastel flinched.

“I’m sorry,” Kastel said.

“What the hell for?”

Kastel just looked at him. He was dirty and injured, looking hardly older than the day he’d found him and just as miserable. Damned annoying. The only living soul other than Sera and Kheron whose pain made a difference to him.

Dante wrapped an arm about him, roughly pulling him close. Kastel went stiff, not expecting it, then he shuddered and relaxed, pressing his face into Dante’s shoulder.

“I will fix this,” Dante promised. “Sera’s better at the mental stuff than I am and her damned father’s even better. We’ll mend what’s broken.”

“What if you can’t?” Dully asked, more than a little fear behind it. “What good am I without my power? I can’t protect Sta-Veron. They won’t have me without it. You won’t -- have any use for me without it.”

Ah, back to the old fear of abandonment. Understandable fear, at least as far as Sta-Veron went. Dante felt a little miffed that Kastel thought he was so

shallow as to extend it to him. But, he'd never gone to lengths to dispel that myth.

"I stopped having a use for you a long time ago, remember? So if that were the case then I wouldn't have bothered to come all the way out here looking for you. With or without out, you have my regard, and not many people do. So get over it, Kastel, I'm tired of boosting your ego."

Kastel kept his silence, took a few breaths and pushed away from him. Sat back against the icy stone and looked at him skeptically. Dante put his back to against the adjacent corner, putting a little more effort into the personal heat spell. The over tunic wasn't long enough come between his bare ass and the damn frigid ground. He sent out a little tendril of power towards Kheron, just to make certain she knew where to come and hoped she didn't waste any time about it. Maybe in a little while he'd have the energy for a Sartor spell.

Kheron showed up about half an hour later, airborne and worried. And very, very relieved when she saw the both of them. Gerad was somewhere behind her, making slower time with the horses. She looked Dante up and down dubiously, lifting her arched brows at his bare legs. She started to offer her cloak, but he waved her away, having had enough handouts for one day. With her here, he didn't particularly care if he drained himself of the energy he'd managed to recover. There was nothing alive in these white-sheeted mountains that she couldn't handle. There might not have been anything alive for miles and miles. He cast the Sartor spell as simply as possible. Black, black and black without a speck of ornamentation.

She asked Kastel to retell the story he'd already told Dante. He did, haltingly, giving her an under the lashes belligerent look, as if he dared her to criticize him for any of it. She didn't. She just stared at him, narrow-eyed, then surprised the both of them when she swooped down

and hugged him. He was more uncomfortable with her embrace than he had been with Dante's and she broke it quickly, a little embarrassed herself and scooted back.

The two of them, Kastel and Kheron, had never particularly shown affection for one another -- they'd fought like cats and dogs for most of their lives -- and grudgingly backed each other up when the occasion warranted, during the rest.

There was no need to make Gerad cover the inhospitable distance with horses in tow. Kheron took all three of them up and across the mountain and valley. It took her almost two hours to reach a perceivable end of the path of icy destruction. She was exhausted by the time they spotted Gerad and the dark forms of horses against the snow. Somewhere along the way, they'd flown over the collapsed, frozen bones of a shanty village, probably a logging camp, or a trading outpost. There was nothing alive there now, and Kastel had gone deathly silent at the sight of it. It must have begun to occur to him, what else the elemental storm he'd brought about had done along with turning a good deal of the western mountains and coast into tundra. He wasn't talking much by the time they set down and Gerad had to get the details second hand from Dante and Kheron.

It was not a particularly pleasant trip back home. They followed the edge where the storm had stopped. There were refugees quick enough, or close enough to the outer rim of the maelstrom that had escaped, that had set up desperate, threadbare camps with what little they had been able to save from their villages, waiting for the hot sun to make the ice recede. Their eyes were dull and bewildered. They were more than willing to part with a mount for Kastel for more gold than they'd probably seen their whole lives. Enough to buy a new life somewhere, since the old one had been eaten away by ice.

It was a week into true summer when they came within view of Sta-Veron's walls. Aside from the gate guard

who were plainly jubilant and sent runners ahead to the castle, no one on the streets paid them heed. They were travel worn and dirty, save for Dante, who couldn't abide filthy clothes and created new ones when it suited him.

Kiro had the gates open and waiting for them. The castle staff turned out in high spirits, Sera hugged them all, even Kheron, babbling almost incoherently between breathless kisses with Dante.

"I'm so glad you're all back. Is he dead? Do you know what I did? You'd be so proud of me."

They took it inside the cool shadows of the main hall. Kiro was more informative than Sera. Kiro had the faded traces of a slice along his jaw and limp when he walked. The bandits had attacked the city while they were gone. Brazenly, bolder than they'd ever been in the past with nomad shamans to back them up. The north wall had almost been breached. Men had been killed, but not many on their side. Sera who had been the only one with sorcerorous skills available had done admirably in shielding Kiro's men long enough for them to take out the shamans and drive away the marauders. Sera was terribly proud of herself.

"You'd all have done better than me, but I think I made a pretty good showing. Kiro wouldn't let me take up a sword."

"Smart man," Dante remarked casually, but Kastel grew paler than normal and looked visibly shaken. He looked like he wanted to be elsewhere. But he latched onto Sera and urged her a few steps away from the gaggle of listeners and asked.

"Have you seen Lily? Do you know what happened to her?"

Sera's face fell. She had never been good at hiding her emotion. It showed through now like a shroud of doom and Kastel almost took a step back from her in denial.

“She’s gone, Kastel. She left almost a month ago with her minstrel friends. She was afraid -- she was afraid Angelo would come back instead of you.”

She might as well have said Lily was dead. Kastel shut up then, slipped through the people in the hall to the silence of the upper floors. No one saw him for the rest of the day, until Dante brought Sera to his room to see what she could make of his mangled power channels. She sat in a chair opposite him for a long time, her eyes closed, a light sheen of sweat making her skin glisten, then she opened her eyes and said uncertainly.

“I think maybe we ought to get Father to take a look. There are a few channels that are just singed and raw that will heal on their own, but most of it is just terribly mutilated. I’m sorry, but it’s beyond me. I -- I don’t even know if father can do it and he’s the best mind healer I know of.”

And that was that. If Kastel had an opinion about her declaration he kept it to himself. He showed no emotion whatsoever in face or action. No depression, no anger, no uncertainty of the unknown. Just cold neutrality that no one could see past.

For three days he hermited himself in his room, not even venturing into his library to read, although Sera had privately surmised to Dante that he probably had a head ache severe enough to make the one Dante had boasted seem inconsequential. Then one night he knocked for entrance to Gerad’s rooms.

Not surprisingly, the Stormbringer was in attendance, and the both of them looked to Kastel expectantly, it being the first time in all the months they had been here that he had ventured into either of their rooms.

“You said, before this happened, that if I needed your help here, you would freely give it,” he said softly. “I need it now.”

Gerad stared at him, sword across his crossed legs, polishing rag in hand. He opened his mouth, but Kastel held up a hand.

“Protect these people. Dante does not have the sense of responsibility to do it. I cannot. I cannot be lord here if I can’t defend this land.”

“Don’t be stupid, Kastel,” Kheron snapped. “You’ll heal and you don’t need magic to rule a land. Only a handful of rulers do, the rest get along fine.”

“We’re not talking about them. We’re talking about me.” He didn’t return the rancor that had been in her tone. “Will you do it?” he asked.

Gerad drew his brows, catching something subtle that Kheron in her irritation did not. “You asked. You know I will. What are *you* going to do?”

Kastel shook his head. “I don’t know.” Then he was gone and Kheron and Gerad were left to ponder the burden they had just accepted.

## Thirty-nine

The town of Tardash Knoll had been built, predictably enough around a gentle knoll in the north western plainland south of the Great Northern Range. A large, centuries old oak tree dominated the small hillock and under its spreading branches many a town festivity was held. The houses spread out around it, all humble, but well made abodes with neat thatch roofs and sturdy walls. Tardash Knoll was a farming village and the fields spread out beyond the town, well tilled and well planted. It would be a prosperous year.

It was already prosperous, at least for the taverns and inns and general stores, for a great many refugees from the terrible and unnatural winter that had struck the western plains and mountains had drifted into town, looking for shelter, for food, for a place to build a new home. Tardash Knoll was a small town, but there was room for growth and not so many had come that the town was at a disadvantage. Most would probably return to remake what they could of their homes since the summer sun was quickly melting away the ice.

It was a good town for minstrels to ply their trade. Devastated people were always in need of good cheer. And the humble folk of Tardash Knoll were elated at the passage of well-traveled and talented bards. They were as hungry for gossip from the world outside their small village as they were for the songs and dances the minstrels delighted them with.

It was the sixth town they'd passed since leaving the foothills of the Northern Mountains. Every village had welcomed them with open arms. They'd left with pouches full of small coin. Not wealthy by any means but enough to buy them comfortable beds and hearty meals where ever they stopped. Enough to buy trinkets at markets, fine gauzy scarves and bells to enhance the lively dances that the townsfolk seemed to like so much.

And still it wasn't enough to stop the tears that ushered Lily into sleep every night. The applause, the coin, the freedom of the road, the camaraderie of fellow musicians, all the things she'd always wanted and none of it could wash away the heartache. They tried to help -- Dell, Crayl, Allen and Thizura -- but they were romantic enough at heart to realize that hers was hurt that could only heal with time. Kind words and sympathetic ears were only temporary balms. She could not have asked for better friends than what she found in them. They even put up with her sad songs. She hadn't the heart to sing the happy ones. Even her dances were achingly sensual.

She walked through the muddy streets now, up towards the knoll, her lute under her arm, a gaggle of town children skipping beside her chattering noisily, asking if she'd play this song or that for them. Asking her to tell them things about the great wide world outside. It had rained hard during the morning, and a fine mist still drifted down, keeping everything drenched. She wore an all weather cloak that kept her clothes mostly dry, but her hair hung in sodden strands about her face.

There were venders up under the shelter of the great oak on the knoll. Tents where savory food could be smelled all the way down in town. There was a festival of sorts going on, despite the weather. It was end of first harvest day. The newly picked crop had been sent to market just yesterday and today the townsfolk celebrated.

Allun and Thizura had been up all night and well into the morning carousing with the harvesters and were still asleep back at the inn. Crayl and Dell might have been playing a few songs at one of the two taverns the town boasted. She thought she might go up the knoll and sit under one of the awnings and strum a few tunes. The rain made her melancholy worse. She had a few tragic ballads scratching to come out and tavern patrons generally didn't have the tolerance for more than one sad song in a row.



No one up on the knoll could chase her away, it was common ground.

So she went there and played. The children stayed for a while, but soon drifted away, looking for more uplifting things to entertain them. Some of the refugees gathered around her, welcoming the mood, needing to wallow in it. They didn't have coin to give her, but she wasn't playing for coin, she'd do that when the festival began, now she was merely playing to relieve her own emotional strain.

"Sad songs," said a woman with patched clothing and weather worn, wrinkled skin who sat under the canvas roof of one of the tents, minding a kettle of simmering stew.

"Yes," Lily said, half smiling, softly strumming strings with callused fingers. "I've got to stop singing them."

The woman shrugged. "Sometimes they're appropriate. Sometimes they're all a heart can bear to hear. I lost my oldest boy a year ago, and I still feel the way you do now. Nothing light-hearted will do. Who'd you lose?"

Lily blinked at her. "I don't know," she said helplessly, voice trembling. "I ran away before I could find out."

The woman stared at her, not understanding. Lily got up and left, dreading she might be asked to explain.

Down the hill, down the street with mud squishing in her shoes. The mist had turned into light rain. She sheltered the lute under her cloak. She moved around an empty wagon pulled by two swaybacked, draft horses. Another horse plodded through the mud towards her. Head down she reflexively moved out of its way. Only it stopped and its rider swung down and she had to look up then because her way was half blocked. She blinked water out of her eyes, peering past dripping hair.

"Lily?"

Oh, gods. She stood rock still, clutching the lute under her cloak so hard the strings bit into her hands. Her heart beat so hard she thought it would burst from her chest and dance around in the mud at her feet. She couldn't form a

word. All she could do was stare, half in fear, half convinced she was in the midst of particularly cruel fantasy. *Kastel*. Wet, mud splattered, hair two shades darker from the rain, lashes blinking water out of uncertain -- oh so very uncertain, blue eyes. Not the eyes of something she should be afraid of.

"Is it you?" she found her voice.

He nodded, whisper of a smile crossing his lips. "Just me."

"Oh --" she felt weak in the knees. She felt like she wanted to run and hide from shame. How did she explain to him her cowardice? How could she justify her lack of faith? She couldn't. "I'm sorry - -" her voice choked up.

He shook his head. "Don't be."

"No," she whispered. "You don't understand --"

"Then I forgive you." Very softly spoken. She hardly heard it over the rain.

A wagon passed by close enough to spook his horse and the animal shied a little, making him take a few steps to the side. It broke the spell that rooted her to the ground. The lute fell to the mud, forgotten. She rushed forward, wrapping her arms around him, pressing her face into his shoulder and holding on with all her strength just to convince herself he was solid and real.

"I thought you were dead. I thought if I ever saw you again it would be him and I couldn't bear that."

"He's gone now. Dead."

She sobbed her relief. "You came after me." She was amazed at the notion. If he wanted her to go back, there would be no resisting him. Not now that she'd gone through the hell of believing him lost to her.

"I love you," he said, simple explanation. There was nothing he could have done that would have bound her heart as unconditionally to him as that plain statement. She almost started sobbing -- it wouldn't be noticed in the rain -- but she hated crying and she'd done so much of it lately. So she swallowed it back, and pulled a little away

from him, looking up to study his face, to see what scars were lingering in his eyes. He almost looked peaceful, wet hair mingling with his lashes, water dripping off his elegant nose, down the fine line of his jaw. An all weather black cloak hung about him, but under it he wasn't armored, or dressed in a manner particularly fitting his station. There was a sword in a harness on his saddle, but he was otherwise unarmed. She wanted to ask what had happened, but she was afraid to. He would tell her if he wanted her to know.

"We should get out of the rain," she said lamely, struggling even for those words. There was a stable by the inn she was staying at. She led him there. It occurred to her that he was alone. No escort, which was unusual. She peered down the street in both directions, half expecting to see men at arms waiting at a discreet distance.

"You're not alone?" she asked.

They passed under the thick-beamed doorway of the stable. A sleepy stable boy stirred on the pile of straw he'd been dozing and ambled towards them, eyes widening a little as he recognized the high quality of the steed which had entered his domain.

"I am," Kastel admitted.

She couldn't comprehend why. "They let you --?" she faltered, uncertain how the mechanics of being a ruling lord worked, but absolutely certain that such a being never undertook expeditions without some sort of honor guard or escort.

He wiped dripping hair out of his eyes, handing the stable boy the reins to the horse along with an unidentified coin. The boy was as impressed by the coin as the horse and promised the best of care.

"I neglected to mention I was leaving," he remarked carefully. "It was preferable to an argument."

She blinked at him, amazed. "But -- won't --? They'll be --? You'll want to hurry back."

“No. No particular hurry. Circumstances have -- changed.”

She didn't understand. She stared at him, blinking. “But, what will you do?”

He glanced away from her, using the boy unsaddling his horse at the back of the stable as a distraction. The uncertainty flickered in his eyes again briefly.

“I thought --” he looked back to her, voice soft, like the brush of velvet across her flesh. “-- I might stay with you for a while. If -- you have no objection to my company.”

An almost hysterical laugh escaped her. If she had no objection --? Oh, gods, if her lungs didn't need air to breath or her body blood to keep it warm and pliant.

“Why?” she whispered, huge eyed and trembling. “Why would you want to, with all the things that you have?”

“Not so many things. Let me tell you later. Not here.”

He was a little scared, she heard it in his voice, saw it in his eyes. She was terrified. And rapturous and shivering from more than cold and rain. She stepped in close and pressed her lips lightly to his. Not as much as she wanted to do, but there was no need to entertain the stable boy.

“All right,” she agreed. “I can't think of a single objection to save my life.”

Of course she didn't know what the minstrels would think, she was part of a troupe now, but she thought they'd be relieved to have her sing things other than sad songs. She felt a rather joyous one bubbling up in her now. She let out a little squeak of dismay as she recalled her lute, discarded in the street outside and dashed out into the rain to retrieve it. Kastel followed her, looked down at her muddy, instrument in concern as she hastily tried to wipe it clean with her cloak. He extended one side of his own cloak to shield her from the driving rain as they walked towards the inn proper.

From within the lighthearted strands of music could be heard. It drifted into the street pulling other travelers in towards it. She thought it would be a very good night.

*The End*

Look for more adventures of the Silver Mage in third book of the Silver Mage series: The Black March.