



Manners and Means

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Dedication

Dedicated to my mother, Betty, Dec. 1939- Dec 2001. She always said I would write books. She was right.

Effusive thanks to Cindy, who gave support, encouragement, world-building, and a certain Kion Duchess. Could not have done it without you.

To all the wonderful people who read it as I was writing and gave thoughts and encouragement. You *are* my real life friends.

And to P. and R., who listened to me go on about it for days on end, sincerest love and thanks.

F oreward

Second Month of the Dark, 1549, Principality of Kazareen
Kallista, Estate of Lord Gregori Denivion

As I write this, my Lord lies still and silent in his bed, chest barely rising and falling with his breath. Earlier he struggled, gasping and wheezing as the poison seized his lungs. The convulsions came next. Now he is sunk in to the coma that will end either in death, or in recovery.

They have allowed me to stay with him, not so much because I begged, but because they feel there is naught else they can do, and they do not want the burden of bathing him and cleaning up after him when he soils. They will not understand that he is my Lord, and that I love him.

Cleo they will not let me near. They are more humane to him here than they would be at the gaol in Kazareen, and for that I am grateful. The guards here know Cleo, know he is incapable of hurting Lord Gregori, and so even while they know they must do their duty and contain him until he is tried, they treat him with kindness. It nearly breaks my heart.

I am Mistral, a scribe in Lord Gregori's house, and once his favorite. As I have all the time in the world upon my hands at this moment, I will take it upon myself to tell the tale of what has come about and how, in hopes of shedding some light upon the situation. It is my fond hope that noting it all down upon parchment will help me see something that I have missed,

will illuminate some clue as to who has done this thing, so that my dear Cleo may be a free man again.

I beg your indulgence in this, as events will be recounted as I recall them, and I am far from reliable in that way. I am biased as well, for I am in love, both with my Lord and with Cleo, and it tears at me to see them both suffer so. Pray for us, as I pray to the saints daily, to deliver us all from whatever evil has a hand in this darkest hour of my Lord's household.

M

hapter One

I should start at the beginning I suppose, with my entrance in to Lord Gregori's home. I was still a lad, barely four and ten when he came. My village was small, barely a handful of families, nomadic ice fishermen all. Far to the north of Kazareen we lived, and we were so small a community that we had no name for ourselves. My father was a fur maker, rather than a fisherman, which gave him some status among our little group, but it also meant much work for my mother, who scraped and cured the hides that my father brought from his kills. My family was large, with many brothers and sisters sharing our tents for warmth and I remember feeling like I never had anything of my own, and no time in which to enjoy the vivid daydreams that came to my mind.

I was never my father's favorite, I'm afraid. Not that I shunned work, for I would work hard, for long hours at a time. He felt that imagination was fruitless, and was a stolid, serious man. He found me frivolous and given to flights of fancy and my mother was often needed to mediate between us. My older brothers felt much the same way about me, though for different reasons. I was, and am, small and thin and pale and my brothers were inclined to trounce me for nothing more than that.

So, it was with great relief on both my part, and my family's, when Lord Gregori came and spirited me away. It was the Dark of the year I turned three and ten, and the rivers and inlet waters were solid ice, allowing for ease of travel when he came, looking for furs. Somewhere, somehow, he had heard of the fur of the great white bear, and heard that my father was the last man to kill one. At that time I never even knew that other people existed outside of us and a few similar groups of hunters and fishermen, I was so ignorant. So when my Lord came, in his sleigh pulled by ferocious looking hounds, bundled in furs and jewel colored cloth, I thought he was the most bewitching thing I had ever seen. It was as if he had stepped straight out of a tale told to me by my musha. He must be a king or a prince, I thought. Something more than human. Perhaps one of the very saints, come back up to the earth.

Apparently my Lord was much taken with me, even then, as filthy and illiterate as I was. I have very dark hair in contrast to my milk pale skin and light blue eyes, and back then my mother teased that I was more girl than boy, and that she was only waiting for me to sprout teats. The first night Lord Gregori was in our camp he sat at my father's fire with the old men trading stories and the smell of bear grease and roasted meat was strong about him, and his eyes sought and found me almost as much as mine did he. Looking at him made my belly ache, so much that I thought I was sick somehow. He was utterly lovely to me, and so foreign, though I remember being much impressed that he spoke our dialect, even if his accent was strange.

His long, dark hair was clean and neatly combed, and my fingers actually twitched to touch it, making me hide them in the folds of my coat, so dirty and cracked were they. I was ashamed of them. Next to his soft, fine hands mine were an abomination. His eyes were so dark, so deep, and flashed with a ruthless intelligence behind the calm surface of his face, and I wanted to just sit and watch him forever. Whenever his eyes met mine I felt a thrill, and when he smiled at me I thought I might just melt away into nothing.

That very night I dreamed of him, one of those dreams that wakes you with your heart pounding and your furs wet and my brother put an elbow to my stomach and told me to shut it, as he was trying to sleep. I was hot and cold by turns, thinking how bad it would have been to get caught doing that, and how good it had felt anyway.

The next morning I heard from my next oldest brother, Nimahl, that Lord Gregori had successfully concluded his trade with father and was leaving as soon as his sled was ready. I was devastated. Really, the affect on me he had was so profound I cannot express it within the formality of the written word. I wanted to throw myself at his feet and beg him not to leave without me. I wanted to stow away on his sled, even if it meant sleeping with his dogs at night. Instead I crept away, miserable, and hid among my father's furs, crying for something lost that was never mine.

My father found me there, who knows how much later. He was furious, I could see that right away, his eyes, which mine so resembled, were icy clear, more white than blue, and I

knew to shrink from that, although to run would have been a terrible offense, to be punished heartily once I was caught. He dragged me out of the small hut and shook me like bear-hound with a weasel and something in my expression must have spoken of insolence for he slapped me across one cheek, hard, narrowly missing my eye.

Then the most extraordinary thing to happen in my life to that point occurred. My father went flying backward, the sound of flesh upon flesh ringing in my ears, but it was not his fist hitting my face again, it was Lord Gregori's hitting my father. I vow, he looked like Saint Oligg, the patron of warriors, standing down my father. My Lord is neither broad, nor heavy, and was less so then, but he is tall, and imposing. His eyes blazed and his jaw was set, and his low, silky voice became a throaty growl. Instead of scaring me, it produced heat in my belly, but I could tell my father, great bully that he was, was terrified.

"He is mine now," my Lord said. "I have paid you for him in full. I will not have you damage him."

My father scrambled away, and anything he might have said faded into an annoying buzz as the great Lord's words became clear to me. I thought I might faint dead away. I belonged to him. He had bought me. Me! I did not care if that made me a slave, although my concept of that was cloudy. I was to go with this man when he left. I was to be his.

Shaking, I stood there, stunned, as he came to me and lifted my chin in his gloved hand and looked at my cheek, where the imprint of my father's hand must surely have been, and his eyes, oh his eyes were like nothing I had ever seen. Anger and sorrow and a whole universe of possibility wrapped in one. He tilted my face to one side, then the other, and a small smile curled his lips. "Mistral. I promise you, no one will ever hurt you that way again. But you must obey me, and do as I ask of you. Can you do that for me?"

Unable to speak around the lump in my throat, I nodded. The great, empty Dark seemed less threatening to me than it ever had before; the very air seemed warmer. It was somehow intimate, and I felt myself grow hard in the embarrassing way of a boy growing into manhood, completely beyond my control. Mortified, I tried to look away from him, but he

gently turned me back to face him and stroked my filthy hair back from my face. "Can you, little one? Be good for me?"

"Yes, my Lord," I answered, finally finding the nerve to speak, my voice tearing and wavering in the cold air.

"Good. Very good, my young one. The sleigh is almost prepared. I want you to bathe and dress before then. Come."

"Bathe! In the Dark!?" I slapped a hand over my mouth, unable to believe I had spoken back to him that way, but he only laughed indulgently.

"Oh yes, Mistral. Bathe. If I am to share accommodations with you, I want you to smell better. Luckily it is too bloody cold here for you to have much in the way of vermin."

Turning, he motioned for me to follow him, but I could not. My face heated with my shame, and I knew that I would never be worthy of this man, never be good enough. My feet seemed made of net weights, pulling me down, and I wished that the ice would crack and let me fall through to escape my misery. My Lord turned back and held out his hand, face going stern. "Come now, Mistral. I will not ask you again."

So I went, and endured my first bath since the Dark. My Lord's men scrubbed with brisk efficiency and my mother watched with sad eyes as she brought in water she'd heated for that purpose and I felt a pang for her. She was the one person I would miss out of the whole sorry lot, the only person who had cared for my ideas and feelings. When they were done with me, she wrapped me in a white fox fur from the last hunt before the Dark and whispered, "I love you, Mistral. Go, and have a good life, and think of me fondly."

I think I cried then, but I am not sure I remember anything past being dressed as a page of Lord Gregori's house and being bundled off in to the sleigh to start my new journey, to a place I did not even dare let myself believe existed.

hapter Two

"Has there been any change?"

The words bring me awake with a start, and my neck is stiff where I was bent over, forehead touching my Lord's hand. The speaker is Tupelo, my master's most trusted bodyguard. Would that he had been on duty the night my Lord was attacked. I look closely at Lord Gregori before I answer, and it makes me shake my head.

"No, Tupe. No change."

Tupelo resembles nothing so much as one of those great wrinkled dogs from the east, so he always looks sad, face creased in great, sagging lines. In real distress, his face becomes a sight to behold. "I'm sorry, Mistral," he says. "My wife told me to come and help you change the bed linens. And she said I should manipulate his limbs, to keep them from shrinking."

I am so grateful that I feel tears prick at the backs of my eyes. No one has seen fit to help me since the sawbones declared my master a lost cause. Trust Tupelo and his wife, Marina, who is something of a midwife to be the first to offer. "Thank you, Tupe."

"You're welcome. She says she'll be by later, with a meal for you, and a liniment you can use on his Lordship, to keep him from getting the bleeding sores."

"So many things I have not even thought of! I know I am not a fit caretaker for him Tupe. But what else can I do?"

"Love him. Keep fighting for him." One huge paw-like hand patted me atop my head, roughly, but with heartfelt kindness. "Do what no one else will. You have ever excelled at that, Mista."

Oh how I want to just put my head down and sob, but for Tupelo I assay a smile. "So, what news? Is there anything? How is Cleo?" I know that they will let Tupelo see Cleo. They have no choice, as he was once the head of the Guard in Kazareen and commands their respect like no other man.

"He is scared. I think... Mistral, if you go tonight, when Karlo is on duty, he will let you on to see him."

My heart thrills at this, but I quickly tamp it down. "I do not wish to get you into trouble, Tupe."

"You will not." He grins at me. "Karlo has a new lady friend in the capital. He wants someone to write love letters to her. Do this little thing for him, and he will give you one turn of the glass with Cleo a night."

I put my hand out to Tupe and he takes it in his; it is swallowed by his sausage-like fingers. "Thank you, Tupe. Will you stay with him?"

"I will. Wait until Marina comes and then you can go. Until then, I will help you with the bedding and with his exercises. That's what Marina called them."

"Very well."

It takes us much longer than I expect to change the bed, and wash my Lord, but it makes the time pass more quickly, especially when Tupelo begins to manipulate Gregori's arms and legs, bending them and turning them. I would never have thought of that, but I imagine being so still would make one stiff and sore after a time. It lulls me into a sort of daze, because Tupelo has a lumbering sort of rhythm to his movements that is like a dance.

When Marina comes in it surprises me out of my stupor, because the door bangs open and she bustles in, chattering like she always does.

"Well there you are," she says, and I have no idea if she means Tupelo, or me, or even Gregori. Apparently it is me she speaks to, because she comes over to me and sets a tray down on the small table beside my chair. A part of me rebels at that, for it is my Lord's favorite table, carved of wood and the tusk of some extinct animal, and he always hated people setting things upon it that might do damage. "I brought you soup, and bread."

Now I can pinpoint exactly which part of my body is rebelling. My stomach. The very thought of food makes me want to heave. "No thank you, Marina," I say. "I am not hungry."

She plants her hands on her ample hips and stares me down. She looks not at all like my tiny, pale mother, but in this moment reminds me of her. "You will eat, Mista. And now, if you please. The soup is full of all of the winter vegetables you like so much, and the bread is dark and rich. Eat."

Lifting the cover of the tray she's brought, she waves me to the food, and there is tea, which I am willing to try, and by the time I have one cup of that in me Marina has convinced me to try the soup and bread. I eat half before I begin to feel uncomfortably full, but she seems satisfied.

"I have the liniment here, Mista. It stinks rather strongly. You should go and check on Cleo."

With a wink, she turns her broad back on me and blocks my view of the bed, and I know she knows about the deal Tupelo worked out for me. As eager as I am to see Cleo, I find myself dragging my feet, gathering up my writing box and fiddling with everything and nothing. Finally Tupe puts a hand on my arm and looks into my face. "Do you want me to go with you, lad?"

"No." I shake my head. "I'm going. Thank you again."

They are holding Cleo in one of the old guard rooms within the house proper. Many years ago the Lord had a new guardhouse built, and prisoners are usually kept there, but they are cold, frightening places, and no one can bring themselves to take Cleo out there, thank the saints. Karlo is the only guard on duty, the rest of them gone back to their families to eat and rest, but it is not as if Cleo could overpower them. We must worry more that the garrison from the city will try to come and take him away.

"Hello, Karlo."

"Ah, Mistral. Well met. Come, sit with me and let me tell you about Anna."

After a interminable time in which Karlo raves about his new lady fair, and after I transcribe a letter of startling crudity, Karlo claps me on the shoulder. "You promise me you have not brought him anything dangerous?"

I simply nod, mouth too dry to speak. This will be the first time I have seen my poor Cleo since they came for him that night. I fear I will have no words for him either. Very deliberately, Karlo upends the glass and sand begins to fall. "I will knock when your time is up, to give you some notice. But you must come away when I tell you."

"Thank you, Karlo."

He simply nods and unlocks the heavy door and I step in to a room lit by a single taper. It makes me wonder if it is a kindness or a cruelty, the candle. Do they usually not give prisoners light? Or do they give them only one because they want to torture them with the constant dimming? I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt, and say the former, that they are not supposed to give prisoners anything dangerous, which includes a candle, but that they know Cleo is deathly afraid of the dark, and are being kind.

Still, the dim light makes it difficult to see Cleo, and I strain my eyes and clear my throat, so that I may let him know it is me. "Cleo? Love? Where are you? It is Mistral."

A sound, like a strangled sob, is all of the warning I get before a thin, human projectile hurtles in to my side. Cold, he is so cold, and his arms circle me, clinging desperately.

"Mista! I've been so scared. I've cried and I've begged for you and they only told me no. Oh, Mista, I didn't do it. You know that, dai? I couldn't do that. Please, you have to tell them..."

"Shhhh." I stroke his hair, which wants a good washing, and hold him as he shakes and cries. My poor Cleo. When he pulls back to look at me, his face is pale and stained with tears and it reminds me of the first time I saw him, all those years ago, so achingly young, with the face of an angel. "They would not let me come and see you, little one. They would not let me in. I'm sorry, Cleo. So sorry."

For a long while, the silence is rent only by our broken murmurs. Finally he pulls himself together enough to ask questions, and I try to answer him truthfully.

"Does he live?"

"Yes. He is gravely ill, Cleo. But he lives."

His relief is so profound and so genuine that I must wonder how anyone could truly suspect him. My poor love. "Thank the saints," he replies. "I pray for him often. They have left me little enough else to do. Have they decided when I am to be executed?"

My stomach tries to purge itself of dinner. The thought of them separating Cleo's head from his body sickens me. "They are going to try you first."

His laughter is bitter, short and sharp, and so unlike his usual happy burble that I blink at him. "A formality as you well know, Mista. When?"

"I do not know, love."

Tears form in his eyes. "I have missed that, Mista. The way you call me love. The way you touch me. The silly poems you write about Lord Gregori. Kiss me?"

How can I not? The kiss is flavored with fear, and sorrow, and some desperation, but for all of that it is sweet. The touch of his lips upon mine feels odd, though, and I realize how unused I've gotten to a simple touch in such a short time. It amazes me, to think how I've come to anticipate suspicion and disapproval, instead of tenderness and care. My hands find the skin of his back under his loose shirt and I feel his flesh warm under my palms.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you," I whisper against his lips, and his eyelashes flutter against cheeks. I can taste his tears even as they fall.

"It's not your fault Mista. They have reason to suspect me, even if it was obviously set up that way. There is no one else to blame. You did what you could."

"And it was not enough. To see you like this... and Gregori. Oh, Cleo. I am not sure I can do it."

"You do what you must, Mista. You always have. It's one of the things I love about you."

The peach fuzz on his face distracts me, and I rub my chin against his. "You need to shave."

"So do you. At least I have an excuse. They are looking for the man who did this?"

Nodding, I kiss his neck, touch his ribs, impress the feel of him upon my body. "Tupelo is. His men in the guard are. But there is very little to be found. Whoever did it made it look very much like it was you. No one really cares to argue."

"As long as you know."

"I know. And so does he. And I pray he will wake and tell us who it was."

We kiss again, harder and more needy this time, as we both know time is going to run out on us soon. He holds me with surprising strength, and I force myself to remember he is a young man now, not a boy. How I love him. The knock on the door rings loud in my ears and we jump apart guiltily.

"Time to go," Karlo calls from outside. "I am opening the door."

One last kiss, and I put a hand to Cleo's cheek. "We will keep trying, love. You know that. If you think of anything that might help, tell Karlo or Tupe you wish to see me, dai?"

"Dai. I love you, Mista."

"And I you, little one. We'll get you out of here. I promise."

He smiles, and I imagine I looked like that when I tried to reassure Tupelo. Then Karlo is there, taking my elbow to lead me out, and the last thing I see is the stark fear on Cleo's face as we shut him in there, alone.

When I return to my Lord's rooms Tupelo is still there, but Marina is gone. The bedchamber smells strongly of the liniment she used, and when I look at Gregori there is actually color in his cheeks. I know that it is likely a product of the warmth of the room and the unaccustomed manipulation of his body, but it makes hope surge in my chest. Perhaps he is still there, closer to the surface than I believed. Perhaps he is not so ready as I thought to leave us.

Tupe rises, and catches my eye. "Cleo?" he asks.

I shake my head. "He is terrified, Tupe. I... we must find out who did this. He cannot bear it much longer, and neither can I."

"I am sorry, Mista. We are trying."

"I know. You should go, Tupe, get some rest."

"So should you."

"No!" I know I have been too forceful when his face crumples into hurt, wrinkles piling upon wrinkles, but I cannot help it. "I'm sorry. But I cannot leave him. I shall be fine, Tupe. Marina's soup has done wonders. Go on, now."

He simply nods his head and goes, knowing that I will not be swayed. I settle into my chair, next to my Lord's bed. I stroke his hair back from his face, tangling the dark curls around my fingers. It is perhaps ironic that this is the most time I have spent by my Lord's side in perhaps a year. It was not always that way, and perhaps I should go back to my tale.

Chapter Three

The trip to Kazareen from my village was a blur of wind and snow and dark. I slept a great deal. When I was not sleeping, I curled into one corner of the big sleigh and watched my new master. He still looks much like he did then, tall and lean and dark, with flashing brown eyes set under a lofty brow. He fascinated me then, and he has not lost his appeal to me since.

I had no idea what was expected of me as a page in his house. I was not even sure what a page was, really, having no real concept of societal niceties. Somehow, though, I knew I was supposed to be seen and not heard, at least until told otherwise. That much was obvious, and not at all different from my parents' home. My primary education, during the journey that lasted nearly a full week of days, was of how to curse in my Lord's dialect, which, while similar to mine, was much more refined, less guttural. My new Lord could curse roundly and with great imagination. You may guess, that as a boy of three and ten, I found that amusing in the extreme.

There are not many cities in Kazareen, the province from which both Lord Gregori and I hailed, as I would learn, which I suppose I ought to explain for the reader who has never ventured this far north. And why would one? It is dismal. At any rate, we passed not one city on our journey, so when we neared Kazareen, the self-named capital of the principality, my awe was profound. Like all cities great and small in the northlands, Kazareen is located in a deep valley. The river runs right through it and provides most of the water for the city. The river does freeze there, but only a thin coating, unlike the plateau around the city, which freezes solid.

It was early morning when we arrived, and so the town was not lit up as much as it could have been, but to me it looked as if someone had lit the world on fire. So many lights, and as we got closer, each light resolved itself into a building, standing out as a darker shadow among shadows, and I was frankly amazed. Not to mention frightened. Never had I seen so many buildings, and certainly never ones so grand and imposing, with tall walls and great domes spires sticking up above the trees. I felt very much like a small child in a dreamscape, where buildings come alive as monsters, where doorways become great, gaping maws of teeth and windows become glaring eyes.

The city was still mostly asleep, and so the only noise was the whoosh of our sled's blades and the bells the driver had set out to warn unwary foot traffic of our presence. My Lord looked at me as we passed through the gold painted city gates, to gauge my reaction no doubt, and something of my stark terror must have shown on my face, because he held out one elegant, gloved hand. "Come and sit with me, young one."

I scrambled to obey, and took his hand, clinging to it gratefully. That tiny contact was enough to calm me somewhat, and when he pulled me close to him on the seat and wrapped one long arm around me I thought I might die of sheer bliss.

"Saints above and below, young Mista. You are freezing. Why did you not say something?"

"Don't want to be trouble, m'lord," I replied, hanging my head. Inside I was thrilled at the use of a diminutive of my name, a sign of affection. He shook me lightly.

"You're not good to me if you're frozen. Come, slide under the furs with me."

The furs were warm and dry and scented with my Lord's musk and it was enough to make that feeling come back that I had when I first met him. That warmed me as much as the physical presence did, and I felt my face heat painfully. He must have felt the stiffening of my body, but my luck was such that he mistook it for fear. Thank the saints.

"There's nothing to fear, little one. Soon we will be through the city and on our way to Kallista. My home. You will like it there, I think."

Much to my everlasting mortification, I fell asleep not long after that, my head on his shoulder. I vaguely remember the slightest pressure against the top of my head before I faded off into dreams, and looking back on it I realize that he must have kissed me then. The thought still has the power to warm my cheeks and heat my blood.

When I awoke, we were out of the city, well out of it, climbing into the hills. Completely disoriented, I scrambled to get upright, and strong arms wrapped about me, holding me still.

"Shhh. Mistral. You are fine. We are nearly home."

Home. This was not my home. My home smelled of drying skins and bear grease and cooking fires and unwashed bodies. My home was small and familiar and while not safe, it was at least what I knew. This place we were arriving at even as I looked about and got my bearings was a towering, fearsome stone building, taking up space on the horizon as far as the eye could see. I began to cry, great gasping sobs that shook my whole frame, scared senseless. Many men would have smacked me, and truly, I half expected Gregori to do just that, but he wiped away my tears and held me tight, and soothed me. If I had not been slavishly devoted to him already, I would have been then, receiving from him the sort of kindness that heretofore no one had shown me but for my mother.

We passed through an ornate gate and soon the sleigh stopped in front of an enormous set of doors. Disentangling me from him, my Lord stepped down, out in to the cold, and held out his hands for me once again, pulling me down beside him. "Kallista, Mistral. My home and now yours. You will love it here, I promise you."

With that, he swept us inside, where there were blazing lights and bustling servants and so many people and I was swept away from my Lord's side, and I did not see him again for the better part of a year. I did learn what it meant to be a page in his house, and right quickly. At first I was indignant and unhappy with all of the demands. They asked me to bathe almost daily! I laugh about that now, as I am nearly as fastidious as Gregori, but at the time it was a trial. The worst, in my estimation though, was the educating.

The Master of Pages, Illia, was appalled at my ignorance. When I met with him, three days or so after I arrived (I slept and ate and cried the first two days) he looked me over closely, pronouncing that I would do. Then he asked me to speak to him. He made me fearful, for he was a large and imposing man, with a shock of straw colored hair and deep set eyes, but I did as he asked. After the first three words he slapped his hand over my mouth and his face screwed up as if he had eaten something sour.

"He is a peasant! Saint Cyrillus! What am I to do with him? Can you read and write, boy?"

My face flamed, and I felt the weight of several sets of eyes upon me. There was a woman, dressed severely in all black with a huge ring of keys on her waist, and a man in half armor, with a sword, and several other boys, who tittered at me. I shook my head, miserable, shoulders slumping.

"I know you are not mute, boy," he said. "Answer the question."

"No, sir. I can't read. Nor write neither."

"Well then, my lad, you shall have to learn. And stand straight. A broken spirit is carried on rounded shoulders. Now, then, that tells me you need Master Nikkolaa first. You'll work with him, and you'll learn to do your Lord proud, do you hear?"

And so it began. My education and my new life. Just like that. Master Nikkolaa was far too young to be a master, barely older than I it seemed, but a master he was, and a kinder, gentler man I could not have asked for as my introduction into the manners and means of Kallista. He taught me to write, and to read, and more importantly, he taught me to love the written word. When my hand cramped from writing and my eyes hurt from reading tiny script by the light of only a brazier, he read to me. Fanciful fairy tales and deep philosophical treatises and plays from the theaters in Kazareen. Never once did he treat me poorly, and was my staunchest ally.

Which I desperately needed.

There were many other boys at Kallista. Many. Most of whom ignored me with upturned noses, but there were a few who took note of me. Took note, and took me for a threat. Which, in retrospect, they were very much right about. At the time I had no way of knowing what was to come, and I could not understand why they reviled me so. I was smaller than they, so I was often caught, and beaten, and I would crawl off to my small room after and pray to the saints for guidance, wondering why they disliked me with such intensity. Later, by years, I would understand that fear and jealousy all too well. But then, oh how it hurt me. How I wished to belong.

hapter Four

Of course, even now I do not belong. I am still looked at with suspicion and hatred. I am the one who refused to be put aside, who made a place for myself as my Lord's scribe and accounts manager. The one who made a lover of the favorite who took my place. My dear Cleo.

My Lord has moved! A foot only, drawing it up under the furs and blankets as though it is cold, but it is the first voluntary movement from him since before the convulsions began. Perhaps Marina's liniment and Tupelo's exercises had some effect after all. There is joy in my heart, and my first impulse is to run, to tell someone, but I rein myself in. We still do not know who did this, for I know that Cleo did not, and were the culprit to know that there was some sign of life, they might try again. Better to keep quiet for now, and add the tiny kernel of hope I have to my prayers. He simply must recover. He must.

I cannot resist the urge, though I should, to walk to the end of the bed and pinch Gregori's big toe. His foot moves, as does his lower leg, drawing his calf up against his thigh. Marina called that involuntary movement, a natural response, but before he was not doing even that, so I must take it as a good sign. Not so good a sign is his breathing, which rattles a bit in his chest. The poultice that Marina made for him is helping, but I think also it would help to prop him up in a seated position. I know that aids me when I have the chest inflammation, so surely it will help him.

Is it my imagination, or is his skin warmer than it was? Not feverish, but warm and damp. Oh, Saint Ivonna, please let him get well. He must. When he wakes he will be impossible to live with, for he cannot abide weakness, and it will take him some time to recover, I have no

doubt. Much of his skill in physical things will take time to regain, and it will chafe. There. He is more upright now, and with any luck he is draining, the very thought of which make me gag.

hapter Five

My own physical prowess, what there is of it, I owe to him and him alone. For a year after he brought me to Kallista I saw him not at all. Rumors abounded as to where he was and why, but Nikkolaa told me not to listen to such trash talk, that the Lord had his business, and it was better if one listened to the Lord. Certainly, I would have liked to, but I was convinced by now that he never came home for more than a day at a time.

Then, in the Lightening of my second year there, the Lord came home for an extended stay. He had no court duties in Town, had nowhere to travel, no one to see. The estate, which housed a full compliment of people at all times one way or the other, became a regular madhouse. It positively bustled. We all ate better, as well, though I can never complain about the quality of food here. Still, the cooks outdid themselves and all of us benefited.

I was thrilled, for now and then I would see Lord Gregori about the halls, clad in velvet and leather, passing to and fro. How I admired him! To me he seemed an awesome figure, and he was so very beautiful that he broke my heart. Completely enamored of him, I would lose myself in daydreams of him while I was to be working, earning myself the occasional cuff from Master Illia, or the quiet disappointment of Nikkolaa, which was worse.

Much to my bemusement, for he knew what caused such a lack in my studies, 'twas Nikkolaa who reintroduced us. He was, at the time, Gregori's account manager. Which he frankly detested. I found out much later that Nikkolaa planned for me to take his place all along, but then and there I had no idea. I thought he was being kind. Or perhaps that he was trying to disabuse me of my ridiculous daydreams with close proximity to Gregori. Either way, it changed the tenor of my life at Kallista completely.

We met in Lord Gregori's study, a room as imposing as the man. I did my best to be unobtrusive, just as I had on that long journey more than a year before. I did my best, that is, until Nikkolaa pulled me forward and presented me as his new assistant. Those dark eyes fastened upon me with all of the man's attention, and I felt the look all the way to my toes.

"Mistral." He said my name like it was a warm honeyberry tart that he was savoring. Too fanciful a turn of phrase, you might think, but truly that was what it felt like. He looked at me much the same way, reaching out to tilt my chin up. The touch jolted me, made my cheeks flush hot. The smallest smile turned his lips up at the corners.

"You've grown a goodly bit, little one." Turning to Nikkolaa, Gregori let his smile widen. "Thank you, Nikkolaa. I had quite forgotten he was here."

"I thought that might be the case my Lord." Nikkolaa's own smile was twisted, wry somehow. But then he looked at me, and his expression softened. "I thought it was time you took an interest in his education."

"You know me too well, lovely."

"I think that is a safe assumption, my Lord."

Gregori threw back his head and laughed, a sight that was simply riveting. I would not see it much over the years that followed, except in Nikkolaa's company. Something about the way he gave as good as he got amused Gregori immensely.

"Assumptions are never safe," Gregori replied, and I felt there was some elaborate and ongoing game there that I was missing out on. "But nonetheless you are correct. He is stunning."

Nikkolaa sketched a small bow, giving a slight "there you are" motion with his hand. I stood there, shifting from foot to foot, uncomfortably aware that I had no idea what I was to do, until they both sat to go over the accounts. Then Gregori held out a hand to me and gestured that I should come and sit with him. I did, and for the first time in more than a

year, I was content. I curled up next to him in his big chair and listened to them talk. He smelled of tobacco and brandy and the skin at the open neck was warm against my forehead. I dozed off mid-way through the discussion, much to my chagrin when I awoke.

Evenings such as that became a pattern, with Nikkolaa going to Gregori two nights a week and taking me with him. I learned a great deal from those sessions, mostly from simple observation. Not just about business, but about how Nikkolaa interacted with my Lord, and about how Gregori was in private, versus how he was out and about in the house, playing Lord of the Manor. I got to know him somewhat, which was good, because if I had to depend upon our later interactions to help me understand him, I would have been lost.

For such an imposing man, he was very affectionate physically, touching me often, sitting with me, or leaning over my shoulder with his hand on my back to gauge my progress at some assignment. Each touch made me burn that much brighter. And each touch that he favored Nikkolaa with made me furiously jealous. There were nights when he would pat me on the back and send me off to bed, but Nikkolaa would stay. A look passed between them on those nights, some sort of communication I was not privy to, but I knew how it made me feel. I was hot and cold and the pit of my belly ached.

hapter Six

My Lord coughs, bringing me back to the present with a racing heart. He shivers, and I rise to cover him, tucking the down quilt around him more closely. I cannot help but lean forward and kiss his forehead. I wish Nikkolaa were here with me, but he is in Kazareen at the art academy, learning from one of the Masters there. When I was trained well enough to take his place in the accounts, he went to Gregori and asked to be sent there, promising to return as soon as his apprenticeship was over. That was the year Cleo became the Lord's favorite and Nikkolaa has not been home since. I miss him.

Poor Cleo. In a way, I suppose I should be grateful that he was well on his way to being replaced. Whoever poisoned my Lord killed his newest boy as well. Which is no doubt one of the reasons Cleo was accused of the crime, but better arrested with a chance of escaping execution than dead by the means of a poisoned knife.

That reminds me to check the tiny wound on my Lord's abdomen. I am quite sure Marina checked it earlier, but I want to be sure that there is no infection. I move the covers aside enough to lift the bandages, and check the wound. Such a small thing to cause so much trouble. It shows no sign of festering, thanks Saint Ivonna, but it is the cause of my sorrow all the same, and I stroke a finger over it, watching the muscles in Gregori's belly jump and twitch.

That, too, is more response than we have had of him since he sank into the deep, dreamless sleep he has been in, and I am learning new words for hope. I cover him once more, and crawl up onto the bed next to him, in hopes of getting some rest. And this way I will know it instantly if he wakes. The position I find, finally, curled against his side with my head against

his should is so achingly familiar that it makes me want to cry, but I determinedly hold it back, and finally, I drift off into an uneasy sleep.

Something wakes me late in the evening, and I simply cannot believe I have slept so long. What if something had happened? I am ashamed of myself, even while blinking the sleep from my eyes. I must check on Gregori, and then go and see about Cleo. Groggy and out of sorts, I sit up and look at Gregori, and my heart jumps straight into my throat.

His eyes are open.

I can barely breathe. Marina has told me that this might happen involuntarily, just like his foot moving when I pinch his toe, and that it means nothing, and so I hesitate to do anything. The disappointment will be crushing if there is no sentience behind those eyes. But I must try. I lean over him so I am directly in the line of his sight and stare at him, trying to find something that will tell me that he is aware of my presence. He does not so much as blink, and I want to scream.

Maybe... perhaps I should scream. I remember the sawbones telling Endyion, the head steward, that when and if he recovered it would be in stages of awareness; that at first it would seem to Gregori that we were all very far away. Before the coma began, the sawbones would yell at Gregori, tapping his arms and chest heartily, trying to get his attention. It is worth a try.

I put a hand to his chest and lean closer, then shout his name. "Gregori! Wake up!" Feeling utterly foolish, as well as cruel, I slap his face lightly. "My Lord. Please wake up."

He blinks. Not the slow raise and lower of an eyelid that Marina said came with involuntary response, but an actual blink, and it may only be my desperate need to believe, but I swear his focus sharpens upon my face. I may very well be sobbing.

"My Lord? Can you do that again? Can you blink? Blink if you hear me." Practically sitting atop him is probably not good for him at all, but I have to have leverage, and I straddle his

prone form. "My Lord, please. Please try, please..." It becomes a litany, a prayer. I am begging him, and I know that he would chide me for being so but I cannot help it. "Please?"

The last is almost a wail as hope is getting dim. Perhaps it was simply a muscle spasm. It is entirely possible that I have gotten my hopes up for nothing. Just when I am about to give up, though, he blinks again.

"Lord Gregori? Can you hear me?"

He blinks. Oh saints and giants! "I am quite sure you will be furious at me for asking, Lord, but can you do it again?"

This time the blinks come in a series of three, very deliberate, almost exaggerated and I know that he hears me. My Lord is awake! And even more importantly, aware. I have no notion as to how long the paralysis from the poison will take to fade in the rest of his body, but he is still here with me. And he will be able to clear Cleo's name!

"I will go get Tupelo and Marina," I say and clamber off the bed, heading for the door in a dead run. I throw it open and run smack into a very hard chest, denting my most prominent facial feature, my nose naturally. It sets me back on my heels, and it takes me a moment to clear the involuntary tears from my eyes, to get a good view of my assailant.

"Nikkolaa!" The figure is as familiar as if he left only the day before, tall and solid, with his dark traveling cloak still over one shoulder.

"Mistral. Where are you going in such a rush? And where are the guards?" He peers past me in to the Lord's chambers. "Where are the doctors? By all the saints, what is going on here?"

"I need to go get Tupe, Nikka. I can't talk now." I try to get past him, but Nikkolaa plants a hand against my chest and shoves hard. I stumble back and land flat on my bottom on the floor, and he steps in and closes the door behind him, face hard and set. For a long, guilty moment I think he must have been the one who did it. Must have, because he looks angry and tense and he has never once laid a hand on me with intent to harm before now.

"Stop, Mista. Tell me what has happened. Has he turned for the worse?"

I pull myself to my feet and look back over my shoulder at Gregori. I look back at Nikkolaa, suddenly fearful, and he reaches out to me, face softening. Clever Nikka, he could always read me. "You startled me, is all, Mista. Made me fear the worst. Now tell me what it is."

"He is awake."

He pushes past me, straight to Gregori's bedside. "Gregori? Oh! Oh, Gregori." He turns to me, his face bright with joy. "He looked at me! He is awake. Can he not speak?"

"I do not think he can yet. The poison still has too good a hold."

"Damn." He turns to me, and his look turns speculative. "We should get Tupe, but you mustn't leave the room. I shall go. If anyone asks me I shall tell them he has taken a turn for the worse. If anyone knocks, do not open it."

"But... Nikkolaa? Why?"

"Because, sweet, we still don't know who did it. Can you be strong for me?"

He is undoubtedly right. And most definitely not the one who did this thing, despite my moment of doubt. I nod. "I will stay. Get Tupe. We will go from there."

I lock the door behind him, and return to my Lord's side. "He's right, you know," I say. "I was rushing off in all directions. What was I thinking, leaving you alone like that?"

Muscles twitch in Gregori's face as if he is trying to speak, but his eyes are drooping, as if he is worn from just that effort. "Sleep, my Lord. So long as you promise me you will wake again soon. I do not wish to be without you."

His face relaxes, and I know he knows I am there and will not leave him. "Shall I tell you a story until you sleep, my Lord?" Whether it is deliberate or not, he blinks, and I take that as an affirmative. "I have been writing my story, Lord, in the journal you had made for me. The one with the leather binding and the fantastical endpapers. I sharpened a new quill just for it. Today I was thinking about how grateful I was when you started paying your attentions to me. How happy. I thought I was the happiest young man on the face of the world."

Settling more comfortably, I wait for Nikkolaa and Tupelo to return. "Do you remember, how you told me I needed to take fencing lessons? You said that you thought I needed more strength, more grace. I was crushed. You must have known, for you offered to teach me yourself, as long as you were home, and I was dizzy with the thought of being so close to you." Here I have to stop and laugh, for I can so easily remember the joy that did not dissipate even when he knocked me on my backside five times in one turn of the glass.

"You worked me until I felt my arms would simply fall off. I tried so hard, though, for you, even though my arms are much better suited to the pen than the sword. You could make the most, even of my small talents, though. I became passable. More interesting to me were the times you sparred with Tupelo. He was on the same level of skill, more or less, and you fairly glowed when you fought him. You took real pleasure in it. That was my first lesson in how you appreciated people who could be your equal."

His hair is soaked with sweat, and I imagine it must from the tremendous effort he made to stay awake and communicate. "I shall have to wash this for you. That was why I learned to play chess. I wanted to be your equal in something. The night I beat you. That was the first time you ever kissed me. Really kissed me, I mean. You were so proud, and I was frantic, so happy that I was bouncing and I overbalanced and you caught me. And you kissed me."

Shifting, I feel my face heat remembering it. "You kissed me like I once saw you kiss Nikka. You did not know that, did you? I saw the two of you once, and it was my first real introduction into what two people might do together. The kiss you gave me was even better than the feel of my hand the night I watched you with Nikka. It made me want to scream. The feel of your lips on mine, of your tongue just barely licking at my mouth... oh I was dizzy with it. Giddy. I was not sure what to do with my hands, and I was so hard, and

terrified that you would feel it. But you just kissed me and held me while I rocked against you and did not laugh at me when I spent like the boy that I was, quickly."

The beginnings of an erection stir my cock, and I am suddenly aware that some part of me that was locked away in my fear and tension has loosened. Still, it is inappropriate and I try to squelch the feeling. I need to be focused on my Lord, not what is hanging between my legs. He seems to be resting now, chest rising and falling regularly, and I can only hope that his waking was a sign of recovery, not of the last effort before death.

Pounding on the door jolts me, and I slip off the bed and go to it. "Who comes?"

"Nikkolaa, Mista, and Tupe. Quickly, let us in."

I open the door and it is Nikka and Tupe and Marina. She goes immediately to my Lord and tests his arms and legs for responsiveness, then gasps and steps back, hand going to her bosom. When I step around her I can see that it is because my Lord has once again opened his eyes and is glaring at her, focused much more intently than he was. His arm is warm under my fingers when I reach out to stroke it.

"She is only trying to help you, my Lord. I believe her care is what brought you out of it. Let her do what she must."

The tension leaves him somewhat, and I think if he could nod, he would. Leaving him to Marina's tender mercies, I join Tupe and Nikka in the corner, where they are talking in low voices.

"What are you planning?" I ask, without preamble.

"We must not let people know he is getting better," Nikkolaa answers. "In fact, I think we must make them think he is worse. If we announce his improvement, it will only open him up to a new attack."

"Dai." Tupe nods vigorously. "We must draw out the attacker."

My chest tightens, and I must strive to keep my voice even. "What about Cleo? Are you to use him as bait? Is that it?"

A large hand closes over my shoulder, and Tupe looks at me with sympathy. "I am sorry, Mista, but we must. We will do our best to keep him safe. Nikka? Tell him what you think."

"Sit with us, Mistral." I sit, though still stiff with mistrust and fear.

"We will announce that the Lord is dying. At that time, we will move Cleo to the tower rooms, to keep him safe until his "execution"."

"Execution!" Jumping to my feet, I stare down at Nikka. "He is innocent. And he is to be tried, not executed."

"Sit, Mistral."

Looking at me steadily, Nikka waits. waits and waits, not saying another word until I do as he says. I have never seen him so, commanding and deadly calm, much like Gregori himself in a crisis. "We will move Cleo to a tower room. We will move the Lord up there also. We will tell the estate that he is dying and I will send word to the magistrate that the people here have become unstable, and that the guard plans to execute Cleo as soon as the period of mourning is over for the Lord. They will brook no trial. Word will spread, and the culprit will no doubt wish to come forward and see the execution. By that time, with any luck, Gregori will be able to speak, and can tell us who did it, and all we will need to do is arrest the fellow when he arrives. Cleo will be much safer than he is now, and you will be able to be with him as well as Gregori in the tower."

It sounds so reasonable that I spend a moment looking for the catch. Then I nod, slowly. "Very well. I shall try it your way. As long as we can keep them both safe."

"We will," Nikka says, his tone grim. "Or we will die trying. No one will hurt him again."

"No. Not again." That settles me, his conviction, because I know he wants what is right, not just what is easiest. "So what do we do now?"

"Now we learn to playact. Marina will stay in here, "tending" Gregori. Tupe will guard the door for now, and rotate with his trusted guards when he needs a break. You and I will leave for now, saying that Marina has thrown us out because of our hand wringing and general uselessness. And then sometime today, she will announce Gregori's death. Agreed?"

He looks at both Tupe and I in turn, and we both nod.

"Your hands on it, gentlemen."

Despite my misgivings I give him my hand on it, agreeing to a course of action that is as dangerous to us all as it is dubious. But it may very well be the only way.

Once the plan is set we do not tarry. Both Nikkolaa and I clasp hands with Tupelo. "Saints go with you," Nikkolaa tells him, and I add, "Be careful."

"Dai."

Before we go, I stop by Gregori's bed and kiss him lightly on the lips. "I shall see you soon, my Lord. Get well."

Nikkolaa kisses him as well, and then the playacting begins. As he nears the door, he begins to shout. "No, Tupe! I will stay with him. You cannot make me leave now. Please."

Poor Tupelo looks genuinely distraught, and I cannot blame him. Nikka sounds positively anguished. Still, he holds up to it, stomping across the floor and yelling back, voice thunderous. "Go, now. Both of you. Marina will care for him. Go."

On the last word he flings the door wide, and pushes me out. It is unexpected, and I stagger, landing on my backside for the second time of the day. Nikkolaa follows closely, propelled by one huge hand, and I am forced to scramble as he nearly falls on me.

"Parasites. Both of you. Preying on a dying man. Go."

The door slams, and I know that on my part it does not take much to act unhappy. Nikkolaa, too, is pale suddenly, leaving no doubt in my mind that he feels keenly the closing of that door as well. I climb to my feet, and Nikkolaa follows me, and it occurs to me that he has no room of his own here, now.

"Would you like a room prepared, Nikka?"

"I would like to stay with you."

Stopping as suddenly as I do makes him plow right into me, and I teeter ominously. Before I can fall, Nikka catches me, which is good, because I begin to fear for my bottom. It may never recover. My face must show my consternation at that, because he gives me a tight smile.

"Come, Mista. It makes sense. That way we shall be together if there is some change. I have no intention of leaving now that I've come."

"Very well," I mutter, rather ungracefully I fear. Is not so much that I do not wish to share my rooms. Frankly, I do not want to be alone. But I am not sure I wish to be with Nikka either. He is not as I remember him, and I am confused and shaken by both that, and by the sudden change of events. My hands are shaking and I feel light headed.

A warm arm supports me as Nikka begins to make his way unerringly to my quarters.

"Come, Mista. Let us have some food, and some wine and you will feel better."

My rooms are cold, the fire in the hearth long since gone out, as I have not been back there in some days. Nikka rings for food and wine, as well as someone to lay the fire and for hot water. I sit numbly, and watch his preparations, and we do not speak until the door is firmly closed and all of the servants are gone.

"Would you like a bath first, Mista? You look as though you need it."

I do. Wrinkling my nose, I slip out of my creased, wrinkled garments and into the hot tub of water. I scrub until my skin is pink and my scalp tingles, washing away the smell of the sickroom. "Do you think the plan will work, Nikka? Really?"

"I think it has a good chance." He has loosened his clothing and poured himself a deep draught of honeyed wine. Hip propped against my writing table, he stares into his goblet, unblinking. "I have no guarantee, though."

"What about Cleo? May I see him?"

"Not yet. That would look too suspicious. Bad enough that this happens on the day I visit. If it makes you feel better, Tupe posted an extra guard before we returned to Gregori's chamber."

"It does." Indeed, it does. I want nothing more than for Gregori to recover, and for Cleo to be safe. "I am still frightened, Nikka."

He turns to me then and smiles, an odd little twist of his lips. "Always so forthright, Mista. I admire that about you. I know you are. So am I, come to that. Are you finished?"

Nodding, I climb out of the tub, and he picks up a towel, coming forward to wrap it around me. He does not step back; instead he enfolds me in an embrace. "All will be well, Mista. I promise."

My face rests against his chest, which is wider than I recall. He smells of sweat and exertion, and of winter spices, which he uses in his soap. Such a familiar thing, one thing that has not changed, and I fear I will simply break down soon. He holds me tight, and suddenly I know he really is a frightened as I, he is only better at hiding it, and this is Nikka, and I missed him.

"I am glad you are here."

"So am I, little one. So am I."

He tilts my chin up, and the move is so reminiscent of Gregori that a sob escapes me. His mouth finds mine, a kiss, just like a hundred other kisses that he and I have shared, but not at all the same, and I taste fear and need and hope on his lips. I wonder what he tastes on mine. The kiss deepens, and I know that we both need this, know that I have gone too long without a kind word or a soft touch. Is it this bad for him in the city? Does he feel like an utter exile? And if he does, poor Nikka, because he is there all of the time, and has only just been allowed to come home.

My hands find his shoulders, slipping under the open collar of his fine tunic to touch skin. Warm skin, vibrant with life, and I have to feel more. Gregori once told me that making love was one of the best things to remind us that we are alive, that we go on, and I think perhaps I understand that now in ways I never have before. Struggling against the engulfing bath sheet, I manage to get his blouse open completely, and his chest is bared to my hands and mouth. His nipples are hard for me, his belly tight and firm, and I use my mouth on his collarbones and his shoulders and the place where his arm meets his body.

"Mista... oh dai, please." Yes. He needs this as much as I. It has been so long, so long. Both of us were trained to pleasure by the same man, both of us learned how to give and to take in the same way. It is not hard to find the spots that please him the most, even if too much time has passed since I touched him. Somewhat harder is to push both Gregori and Cleo out of my mind, but I do, if only for a short time, concentrating instead on the way his skin feels beneath my hands, on the salt and cloves taste of his flesh.

I kiss his mouth again, feeling his hands cup beneath my abused bottom, feeling him hard against me through his breeches, letting my mind go blank with the pleasure of it. This is my Nikka, the one that has no secrets from me, the one I understand and know. I struggle with the tiny buttons on his trousers while he caresses my back, my ribs, my buttocks, fingers digging in and releasing tension while arousing at the same time.

Without words we stumble together, back to the bed, and he helps me climb upon it before shedding the rest of his clothes. He is harder, more mature, and a wicked looking scar bisects his right thigh. When he is near enough to me I reach out to trace it with my fingers, and Nikka catches them in his, bringing them to his mouth instead. Each finger receives a kiss, and then he is on the bed with me, warm and heavy and as beautiful as any of Gregori's lovers have ever been. The sheer variety of us astounds me sometimes. I, small and dark and hawkish. Cleo, with his spun gold hair and blue eyes, tall, but delicate and boyish. Nikka, with his beautiful black hair and gray eyes, tall and manly and strong.

His hair draws me, a soft, heavy fall of silk, dark as the sky outside, and long, as Gregori prefers it, which makes me laugh. Even years away from Kazareen, the mark of my Lord stays upon him. I rub my cheek against it, savoring the feel, remembering another time, in what seems another life, when Nikka wrapped his hair around my Lord's heavy cock and stroked him until he spent. The memory makes me more desperate, and I push him flat on the bed, straddling his hips. His eyes are laughing up at me, for he always teased that my attitude in the bedchamber belied my looks, and I kiss him for it, pushing my tongue deep into his mouth.

He is hard against me, and hot, and I rub against his prick with mine, causing us both to moan. His hands have calluses that were not there before. One small part of my mind catalogs that, even as I reach between us and gather both of our cocks in my hand.

"Oh, Mista. Dai. Like that."

Always more vocal than I, at least when we are like this, and that is another thing that has not changed, and it makes me happy. Makes me hum with pleasure, and roll my hips against him. Such a simple thing, touch, and one does not even know how starved one is for it until it goes missing from their life. I wish now that I had something slick, so that I could take him inside me, but I do not, and it has been long enough that saliva will not do. Perhaps I can generate my own slickness, though. I climb up until I am astride his belly, taking his hands in mine and bringing them to my prick.

"Touch me, Nikka. Please."

He does, eyes hot, voice rough with needy sounds, and together we stroke until I feel I cannot take anymore, until I feel in my back and behind my balls that I will shoot with one more pull, and he squeezes, running his thumb over the tiny opening, and it is too much. I arch back, spending myself on his chest and belly, crying out loudly.

I fear I have almost outsmarted myself, because I can feel the lassitude stealing through me, my breath loud and labored as I try to calm, but I cannot disappoint him, and I can feel him like a brand against my backside. I use my own seed to slick both Nikka and me, and stretch myself quickly, while he watches me with a hungry stare.

"Do you want this, Mista? Really want it?" he asks, grasping my hips suddenly, keeping me from moving.

"Yes. Nikkolaa. Yes. I want you."

Nodding, he helps me shift into place, and then he is pushing inside me, and saints I have missed this. Lord Gregori and Cleo have been away from me for too long. I bear down hard, taking him in quickly, and he grunts, pushing up and still up with his hips, head moving restlessly on the pillow. When I begin to move, he trembles with the effort of letting me set the pace.

"Nikka. Harder. Please."

He gives in, planting his hands on my hips once more and pulling, thrusting up into me until I see lights behind my eyes. He is killing me with pleasure and I think I will happily die and he thrusts hard and fast. When he shoots into me it is truly an explosion of pleasure, his whole body snapping tight, and my own spent cock gives a few feeble twitches, as if sympathetic to his plight.

When it is over, we both find comfort in the presence of the other. Enough so, that for a short time, we sleep.

When I wake, I see my writing book and quill upon the table next to the bed. Nikka is there, by the fire, reading accounts from the looks of it. Well enough, I suppose, for I have done little enough with them since the attack.

I sit up, and Nikka glances over at me, smiling slightly. "Are you feeling better, Mistral?"

"Yes. Except that I am starving."

"There's bread. Meat and cheese. And cook sent some of that awful tuber soup that you like so."

"Thank you. How did you get my book?"

"Early this morning I went to Gregori's rooms and pounded on the door and yelled very loud. Tupe made a great show of opening the door and flinging your things at me. You slept very hard, Mista. I was worried about you."

"I was tired."

There does not seem to be much to add to that, and I eat silently, while he goes back to his reading. We spent many a quiet hour this way when we were younger, before. Before my Cleo came. I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell that story, while I wait for some word that our plan is to be put into action.

hapter Seven

When I was sixteen, my Lord took one of those trips, much like the one he found me on. You must believe me when I say that he does not take these journeys for that reason, but if he finds a beautiful boy that he sees potential in, he brings that boy home with him. It has become a very simple fact in my life.

Cleo comes from the south of Kazareen, in the more civilized lowlands. They have less of the Dark, there, I suppose. More towns, as well. Cleo was the son of a small landowner. Important, at least to himself, and by and large a miniature despot. I was not much with the pages anymore when Cleo came, but I do remember him then, and it took him months of the relatively kind treatment at Kallista before he stopped flinching every time someone raised a hand or a voice.

I was not at all jealous of Cleo when he came, and that tells me how arrogant I was then. I was just coming into my place as Gregori's favorite, and had the strength of being the main focus of his attention and of his pleasure. No, to me, Cleo was strictly an academic consideration. Something aesthetically beautiful, that I could admire, then think no more about.

Truly, my Cleo is like an angel. Despite the fact that he is more man than boy now, he retains the same looks as he had then for the main. His hair is the color of the finest Rhudestan gold. Pale and pure and silky-fine, it glows in the light. His eyes are blue, like mine, but the only resemblance between our eyes is the name of the color. The only color I have in my mind to compare Cleo's with is the blue in the sky of the mural of my Lord's chambers, which is an idyllic scene of a countryside completely unlike Kazareen. My Lord calls it Kion. It is not just his complexion and coloring that makes Cleo stand out. He has a

boyish face that shows every thought, and more importantly to someone like Gregori and, eventually, to me is his air of profound innocence. Even when utterly debauched, pale skin mottled with love bites and body covered with seed, Cleo is innocent. And so loving.

Add to that his profound musical talent, for Cleo has the voice of an angel, and can play any instrument with strings, and it is no wonder I stood not a chance when he came of age. I had a good run. Three years at my Lord's side when he was at home. Three years as his primary companion. Three years of being the one the others came to when they wanted to share his bed.

But, as Nikka would say, it was only a matter of time. Perhaps I was too sure of myself. Too complacent. There were those who tried to warn me, Nikka included, but I would not hear it. I was talented, and loving, and easy to be with. Hadn't Gregori himself said so?

Chapter Eight

Nikka stirs, and I carefully put my book away for now. "What is it, Nikka?"

"Tupe should start soon. I only hope he and Marina can stand against those who will want to see the body."

That thought had not even occurred to me, and it should have. "Someone will have to act as witness."

"Yes. And I intend for that to be you. The grieving lover. Are you up to it, Mistral?"

"I can see why you did not tell me this part of the plan until now," I say, keeping my voice even by dint of much effort. "What a schemer you have turned into, Nikka."

"Do you doubt that I love him, Mista?"

"No."

That I do not doubt. My thoughts about Nikka are kaleidoscope, but that I never doubted. And I no longer worry that he is at the root of the attack. He could easily have killed Gregori at any time, that much was apparent once I had food and sleep and was thinking clearly. Have I said that before? I am spinning.

"I suppose I will have to be convincing."

"You always are, my love. That is why I am counting on you. So is Cleo. And Gregori."

"Bastard."

"Dai. But you will do it. For him."

"Dai."

We stare at one another, and I rise and dress in clean attire, knowing that soon I shall have to do something I am not at all sure I am up to. The clothing is like armor, and I make sure I wear my most sober brown account manager attire, the stuff that Gregori calls my dull hen cloth.

This whole farce comes too soon upon the heels of my Lord actually making his way through death's door, or so I thought, and now my relief wars with my apprehension until I feel physically ill. A thought occurs to me, and now I think I truly will void my lunch.

"What of Lord Gregori's wife?"

That same hard expression I saw last night crosses his face. "She will hear the news with the rest of Kazareen city, I imagine. And if she is the one who has done this, she will be punished."

We go quiet then, neither of us wanting to pursue the topic, and as if our silence is a signal, the pounding on the door starts, jolting us.

"Mistral! Mistral, Nikkolaa! The Lord. Tupelo says you must come quickly. He is... Mistral, please."

I hurry to open the door, and I spare a moment of sorrow for Piodr, the page who was sent to us to tell us. He looks horrid, face red from exertion, tears running down his cheeks. Then I am off at a dead run myself, knowing I must play this part, hoping indeed that this is the

plan at work, and not a reality. Nikka's footsteps sound behind me, and it is now or never, and I steel myself for whatever may come of our folly.

Tupe waits for us at the door, and as we skid to a halt he gives us a hard look. "You, Mista, and only you. Nikka may not come in. Marina needs a witness."

"But, Tupelo."

"No. You go."

He opens the door just widely enough for me to slip through, and I stop just inside, feeling the panels hit me in the back as Tupe closes it. Superstitious fear, that saying it makes it so, holds me in place until Marina moves away from the head of the bed and I see Gregori for myself. Slowly, ever slowly, he turns his face to me.

"Mistral."

His voice is raw, like it is forced out of an unwilling throat, but is unmistakably Lord Gregori's voice, and a sob bursts from my chest. Marina comes over and guides me to the chair I so recently vacated beside his bed and pats my shoulder.

"Quietly, Mistral."

Quietly. When I wish to shout from the rooftops. "You're alive."

I take his hand and it is no longer lax and cold. It is warm, and he squeezes my hand with the barest pressure. "Yes. Thank... you."

The crying will not stop. Tears of relief and joy, and even through them I manage to glare accusingly at Marina. "You left us waiting long enough."

The look she gives me reminds me that she has two sons and a daughter of her own. Unwillingly, I am chastised by it. "We had to wait," she says. "Make sure he was strong enough to move. Make sure he could tell us who did it."

"My Lord?" I turn eagerly to my Lord, waiting for a name, hoping to clear Cleo and bring him back where he belongs.

His eyes, so dark and angry, bore into mine, and he shakes his head as much as he can. "Steffan."

"Steffan," I repeat dumbly. "But... the assassin killed him too."

It is impossible, what he is saying. Steffan was Gregori's lover, and the primary reason that Cleo was a suspect. Marina comes to stand beside me, rubbing my stiff shoulders. "May I tell him, my Lord? What you told Tupelo?" A fractional nod, and my Lord relaxes, watching me intently but no longer straining to speak.

"He says that it was Steffan, Mista. That he attacked him just before they went to bed that night. With a dagger. Flew at him like a man deranged and managed to wound him. A complete surprise."

"And then turned the dagger into his own gut? I find that hard to believe."

"Give me some... credit, Mistral."

Marina laughs, quickly stifling the sound, just in case. "Dai. Give your Lord some credit. He was not immediately affected by the poison, and the wound itself was shallow. He killed Steffan himself."

My face heats. Of course. "Pity you did not find out who he was working for first," I snap, embarrassed and unhappy.

"What do you mean?" Marina asks, and I laugh sharply.

"Oh come. Steffan hadn't the brains Saint Epon gave the horse. Why would he do something like that? He had it good and he knew it quite well. Someone must have enticed him into it."

A sharp nod is my reply from Lord Gregori, as if he had come to the same conclusion, and Marina looks stricken. "Then we must still use Cleo as bait," she says.

"Dai. We must."

"Ne'aat. Not Cleo."

"He is being held for your murder, my Lord. I assume Marina and Tupe did not tell you that."

He glares at Marina, and she glares at me, and I begin to wonder how this whole mess is ever going to work. Still, my Lord is alive, if weak, and fading into sleep, and Cleo is innocent, and I have much to thank the saints for.

"I am glad you will be well, my Lord," I say, just before I kiss him lightly, so happy to feel his lips move under mine. "I love you."

The Lord is asleep once more. I know that soon I shall have to go out there and play the crushed lover, but I am content to sit and wait for the signal. Marina bustles about, making preparations to move Gregori up to the tower, which will be achieved by wrapping Gregori in a sort of shroud and moving him up as quickly as possible. That will be safer than trying to move him through the passages, as he is not fit for such an arduous climb as those tiny, narrow steps.

Not that I think he will be able to do a great deal of anything for a goodly while. I wonder how he will feel about being wrapped as though dead. Not happy, I imagine, but happier to be alive. While he sleeps, I amuse myself with his writing box, staying very deliberately out of Marina's way. I do not have my book, but I feel a certain need to continue my story, wanting

to set it down. Perhaps it is the uncertainty of the situation, or perhaps simply the idea of my Lord's mortality, which I have never questioned before.

He has always seemed to me to be more than a man. One of the Saints, mayhap, walking about in the guise of an Earl. The late events have planted a seed of fear in my heart, that I will die, or he will, or Cleo, without me being able to set down our lives. Why I should think that anyone might be interested in such small dramas I do not know, but it has become a compulsion.

Gregori coughs in his sleep and I move closer, settling on the bench at the foot of the bed. I spent many a long hour sitting there over the years, watching him work. Watching he and Nikka, and then later he and Cleo together. I know many a young man who spent an hour or two there himself, watching Gregori and I.

Chapter Nine

The very first time we were together was that way, with Nikka there watching, waiting for any tiny sign from Gregori that he was welcome. I knew, by then, what was expected of me. I had been in Nikka's position, watching, when Nikka was in mine. My Lord had also spent time with me, touching and kissing, like that first night when I was so quick to spend my seed. He was patient, and tender, and Nikka was good to me as well, telling me how well he liked it, how I would also. He was right. I not only enjoyed it, I excelled at it.

Once again, though, I am getting ahead of my story. It is an important part, however. Not so much my sexual awakening which, while important to me, is not central to the story. I mean instead that the important part is the pattern of relations between my Lord and his favorites. There is a pattern that he follows, and does not deviate from it. Or rather, he never had. Now I have the urge to scrape all of this off the page and begin again. I fear I am making little sense.

Let me try it this way. My Lord was with me as he was with most who came before me. As I have said before, he began spending time with me, doing things with me, such as fencing lessons and games of chess. Often Nikka would be with us, and later I would learn how that was part of the pattern. The current favorite was expected to help train his replacement, after all, so that he could see and accept his imminent ousting. That I was unaware of that was a credit to Nikka, who took everything in stride. If he raged against his fate he did it in private.

Gradually, I became more and more a part of my Lord's private time. Often to the point that he would send Nikka away on errands when we were together, especially on those occasions when we were physically intimate. Realize that by this time I was nearly ten and six, and fully

capable of, and eager for, sexual acts. So his kisses and touches were most welcome. So were, indeed, the more furtive and educational touches from Nikka, and a few of the other boys I had slowly learned to be friends with.

So you may understand when I say our first time together I mean the actual act of sexual penetration. Which sounds somehow medicinal. You may trust that it was not. How does one describe the most extraordinary event of one's life?

I was used, by that time, to the idea. I was primed by kisses and touches and soft words. I was ready. So was my Lord, I think, ready to taste the pleasures my body could offer. Throughout dinner he practically smoldered, in that way he has, and I vibrated with excitement. Nikka was there, pouring Gregori's wine, quietly waiting for the command to take me away and ready me for my Lord's touch, and when it came I shot from my chair and practically dragged Nikka from the room. The preparations are best left to the imagination, but I was cleaned and oiled and readied and I spilled into Nikka's hand before returning to my Lord's presence, a fact that embarrassed me mightily until Nikka kissed my cheek and told me it was good, that I would be more relaxed that way, and certainly with my youth I would be able to become erect again.

We went in and my Master was there, waiting for me, wearing a dressing gown of gold silk. He had prepared too, and was bathed, his hair down around his face and all of the blood in my body rushed south. I vow, I thought I would simply pass out, and that would be an end to it. I did not, and when he held out his hand to me I went willingly, happily, longing to be his alone.

The touch of his hand upon mine was a physical shock. It jolted me so that I jumped, and he chuckled, a more open, happy sound than I had ever heard from him. He brought me forward and kissed me, lightly, on the lips.

"Are you ready Mistral? I would not force you to do something you would not wish to. Or coerce you either. I want you to know that there is no obligation, no matter what you might think."

"I want to, my Lord. I love you."

I meant it with every bit of me, just as I do now. I wanted so badly to share myself with him. He nodded, smiling, and kissed me again. A real kiss this time, opening my lips with is and pushing his tongue gently inside my mouth. He tasted of the brandy he enjoyed, dark and smoky, and underneath I tasted his desire for me. I was drunk on it immediately, fisting my hands into the fabric of his robe and rubbing against him.

Oh, it felt like nothing else ever. Nothing at all like the kisses we shared before. It was as if Gregori no longer felt constrained by my inexperience. He cupped his hands beneath my bottom and lifted me to stand on my toes, pressing his lips to mine until I was bent back, unable to balance myself. He was strong, so strong, his lean frame so deceptive. There was no doubt that he could hold my admittedly small frame, and hold me he did, lifting me with an arm about my waist, turning in a dizzy rush and placing me on the bed.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Nikka settling on the bench at the end of the bed, and I felt a pang for him, knowing what it felt like to be there, and then I had no more time to worry about Nikka, because Gregori removed his dressing gown, standing beside the bed, letting me see him fully nude for the first time. How beautiful he was! Tall, muscled, fully erect. I had a single moment of absolute blind panic looking at his shaft; something that large would surely rend me. The fear was so debilitating that I felt myself go limp. Scared that he would send me away, I curled into myself, making myself as small as possible.

He did not laugh at me, or summarily dismiss me. Instead he put his hands on me and uncurled me, stretching me out before him. "Do not worry, little one. I promise I will not hurt you. You must relax and let me love you."

With that he stretched out next to me on the bed, pulling the sheet across his waist in a considerate gesture that brought tears to my eyes. Everything was so close to the surface, every emotion ready to burst out, and my skin felt too tight to contain it all. The kisses that came next were slow, exploratory, and I heard myself making happy noises. They relaxed and aroused me, which made my Lord happy, for he praised me between kisses, telling me how beautiful I was, how perfectly lovely.

Time passed in a haze of pleasure, and before I was even aware what was happening, Gregori was testing my readiness, sliding his fingers along the crease between my buttocks and teasing the opening there. His fingers slid inside me and I had not the wherewithal to be afraid anymore, so I simply spread my legs wide for him, rubbing my own prick along his much larger one, melting into the kisses he gave me and pushing back against his fingers, trying to take even more of him in me.

My response seemed to inflame him, for he groaned my name against my lips and arched against me, and I slipped a hand between us to touch his cock, marveling at the heat and size of it. A battering ram, it seemed to me, but I was no longer fearful, only greedy. I stroked hesitantly, and was rewarded by a tremendous jump from the flesh in my hand, and I fear I giggled at it, which made Gregori chuckle as well. It is a great gift to have a lover who will laugh with you, as I have learned through the years, and Gregori was just such a lover.

"Enough, Mistral, or I shall arrive before we are anywhere near finished." I drew away, stung, and he kissed my eyes, my nose, my lips, soothing me. "It was too much, pleasure, little one. We must save the rest for when I am inside you."

"Dai. Oh, my Lord."

Fevered, I rubbed against his hands and mouth, begging without words for something I did not know and barely understood. Smoothly, so gently that I hardly noticed, he raised me up and turned me so that I was on my hands and knees.

"A pity I cannot see your face this way, love, but it will be easier for you. And easier for me to pleasure you as well. I promise, it will be good."

Oh. There are no words. I, who have words for everything have none for the feeling as he slid inside me from behind, huge and hot and I could feel the pulse of his blood in the length of him inside me. It hurt, but not so badly that I wanted him to stop, and it caused such a flurry of emotion in me that I cried out. As if he knew I was not in real distress, Gregori

forged ahead, stopping only when his hips were firmly seated against my bottom, his chest against my back.

Only when I became dizzy did I realize I held my breath. It all whooshed out of me when he moved the first time, a tiny roll of his hips that had me gasping. The feeling of our joining spread throughout my entire body from one spot he hit when he moved just so and I was beyond any kind of rational thought. I was a tight ball of sensation, totally at his whim.

The pain faded to nothing. It did not matter. What mattered was the feel of him, and his sweat dropping on my skin and the sound of his breathing in my ear as it went on and on, in and out, relentless. Soft sounds burst from me with every movement and his voice was a dim thing, so much that I could no tell whether he cursed or prayed. Finally, finally I felt his hand upon my own straining flesh, closing around me urgently, pumping and pumping and I could no more withstand his touch than I could hold back the Dark. With a glad cry, I spent myself into his fist, shuddering and bucking, listening to his own harsh groan, feeling the heat and wet of him pulse inside me. It was the single most amazing event of my life to that point.

We collapsed, and lay there together for long moments before he finally disengaged from me, with slow careful movements. When the ringing in my ears subsided I heard soft sobs coming from the foot of the bed, and I looked to see Nikka wrapped in on himself, crying with great but quiet gasps. When I touched my Lord's arm and nodded to Nikka, he raised a single brow at me, questioning, and I nodded. He held out a hand, and with an expression of dawning gratitude, Nikka joined us in the big bed, content to spoon against my back as I snuggled against Gregori's chest.

In the days that passed after, I would come to realize that that night was the end of my innocence, such as it was. Not because of the things we did together. There is no shame in that. But because of the many difficult days that had yet to come.

Chapter Ten

Once again I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having aroused myself with my memories and not being able, or for that matter willing, to do aught about it. Marina is staring at me, and I realize she has Lord Gregori completely prepared excepting his face. She looked closely at me, and asked, "Are you ready, Mista? You must be. We cannot stop once we have begun."

My heart begins to pound. But I know I must go through with this, for my Lord Gregori, who looks at me steadily as well, waiting. I did not know he had woken. Hesitating no longer I nod, both at he, and at myself. "Dai. Let us go. Are Tupe and Nikka ready?"

"Yes. They gave the signal. Come and tell Gregori it will be all right."

Most likely it is not Gregori she seeks to reassure, but I, and I go to the side of the bed. "Are you ready, my Lord? We have planned this carefully, but we can delay it until the morrow if need be."

He shakes his head minutely, and small though it is, I am encouraged by his gain in mobility. He is constrained by the shroud, but I can see his shoulders twitch as if he wished to reach out to me. "You," he says. "Cleo. Want to be... safe."

Saint Simonus! This was the man who sneered at attachments. Who once told me love was for weaklings when I professed mine for him. And he can think of nothing more now than keeping Cleo and I safe. I do not answer except to nod.

"Then we are ready, Marina. Return the signal."

She nods sharply, and goes to the door, rapping upon it once. There is an answering knock, and she opens the door to let Tupe and Nikka, along with two stout guards into the room. While she does that, I kiss Gregori's forehead reassuringly, and cover his face with the shroud, admiring Marina's handiwork, for I can tell he will have no trouble breathing. I know what I am looking for, though, and most of the estates inhabitants will not. They have a litter for him, and they transfer him carefully to it, and we are ready to go. I am on my way to the door when Marina grabs me by the shoulder. Turning me toward her, she slaps me sharply on both cheeks, making my face sting and my eyes water.

"There," she says, "Now you look like you're grieving. Stupid boy, do you want them all to know? Wipe that smile off your face."

That hurts, but she is right. I was not grinning widely by any means, but I was still smiling over my Lord's words, and I need to be very aware of what is going on around me and what mien I present right now. I compose myself into a sorrowful, small figure, and tread solemnly along beside my Lord's litter, sniffing occasionally. Tupelo gives me a tiny nod, and we are off, taking the Lord's "remains" to the tower for the period of vigil.

The trip is silent and tense, at least for us. For the many servants and household members, it is a procession of wailing mourners. The sounds grate upon my nerves, producing guilt and anger in equal quantities. Guilt, because many of theses are good people, who will be hurt by our charade. Anger, because somewhere out there is the man or woman who precipitated the act, who guided Steffan's hand.

We turn the final corner leading to the tower stairs, and are met by another group of guards, tightly squared, with Cleo in the middle. My heart jumps into my throat, for this is unexpected, and I have no idea what to do. The silence hurts my head. Everyone from the guards to the clerks to the scullery maids stares at me, waiting for me to react. I have been Cleo's staunchest supporter, and they will take their cues from me. The burn in my chest is agonizing, for I know if I am to uphold the plan we began, which is to make everyone believe Cleo will be executed, I must hurt him now, and I do not wish to.

Tupelo unobtrusively nudges the back of my leg with his knee, and slowly, on shaky legs, I move forward. The guards part just enough to let me see Cleo, my beautiful boy, and his pale face and wide eyes belie his fear. There is nothing for me to do but keep my face still, my expression cold.

"Murderer." Loud and clear I say it, and there is a gasp from the crowd behind me, as if they are one person, one entity. Cleo gasps too, and shakes his head, eyes so blue they hurt where their gaze touches me.

"No! Mista. You said... you believed me."

"He's dead, Cleo. And you killed him. Be grateful I do not let them kill you now. It is only thanks to me that you will be spared until after the vigil." I let my face twist as if disgusted. "I will not have his ritual tainted with your blood."

Pasty gray, Cleo sways, his eyes rolling back as he goes limp, passing out. One of the guards catches him, thank goodness, and carries him up, leaving a seething mass of enraged people behind us. Only once we are safely in the tower, with the guards gone, Gregori freed from his shroud, and Cleo safely in the luxurious main chamber, do I allow myself to be quietly and thoroughly ill.

The day seems endless. From the long wait this morning through the long wait now for either of them to wake, it seems as though it will never stop. Tupelo ventured out after he got us all settled, and he brought me my book, and Gregori's writing box. He cannot read, but he wisely reminds me that other people on the estate can, and I should keep my story safe. Nikka sits across the room from me, brooding from the looks of it, no more willing to cross the chasm than I. We are both alone with our thoughts.

hapter Eleven

My thoughts range to Cleo, and the first time it occurred to me that he was being trained to take my place. I have said before that I was too arrogant to find him a threat at first. By the time I knew he was a threat to my place at Gregori's side I was half in love with him myself and the point was moot.

My Lord began to have Cleo with us more and more often, inviting him to sing for us, inviting him to play for us, holding him while I read poetry, or the latest novel from the city. Cleo was a joy, so fresh and so completely lacking in guile. So starved for affection. He came alive when Gregori paid him attention, so much that he fairly glowed, and I admit I was attracted to his light. When Gregori had him join us in the bedchamber that first time, sitting at the foot of the bed as he loved me, I knew.

I tried very hard to hate Cleo, or at the least foster resentment for him in hopes that it would wipe away the more tender feelings I had for him. I could not. He was so genuinely sweet-natured and loving that I could not help but adore him.

Which is not to say that Cleo is, or was, perfection personified. Far from it. Mischievous, irreverent, and possessed of an atrocious sense of humor, he can be a trial. Still, he won my heart as easily as he won Gregori from me.

There was a time, when Cleo was well on his way to favorite status, and Nikka had left, that my spirits were so depressed that I was not sure how I would go on. There seemed no place for me in the grand scheme, no reason for me to be there anymore. Unlike Nikka, I had no talent to serve me well in Kazareen, and no reason to apprentice to anyone.

Surprisingly, it was Master Illya, the master of pages, that snapped me out of it. Master Illya, with his big hands and booming voice who came to me one day and cuffed the side of my head so that my ears rang, and called me a donkey's ass.

"Stop your moping," he told me. "You have a way to him with your words and numbers. Use it instead of letting some crusty old fool ruin the accounts. And Cleo fancies you. Use that to your advantage, boy."

Many other things were said during that conversation, mostly uncomplimentary, but he had a point. Not that I wanted to use Cleo, really, but he and I were close, and if I could parlay that into time with Gregori, why should I not? That was when I began to out stubborn the old men who had taken over the accounts from Nikka when he left, and from myself when I lost interest some months before. That was when I offered to assist Cleo in improving his abysmal fencing skills. That was when Gregori took notice of me once again.

Chapter Twelve

Cleo stirs, moaning, and both Nikka and I start. Carefully putting my writing aside, I go to him, and wait for him to wake fully. A hand to his cheek tells me that his skin is cool, and clammy, and I hate myself for what I did to him.

"Cleo. Wake up, my kedvesem. I need to talk to you. To tell you how sorry I am."

His face creases querulously, and he curls more firmly into himself, but Nikka is there too, and he shakes Cleo's shoulder. "Cleo. Get up."

Nikka's voice is sharp, and Cleo's eyes snap open as he cringes, suddenly awake and on the defensive. He sees me and his expression crumples into despair, tears filling his eyes and I feel horrid, monstrous.

"Cleo, no," I say, holding out a hand as he flinches away from me. "I'm sorry, love, so sorry. It was an act, to set a trap for whoever did it. I did not mean it. Please."

Suspicion is not something I have often seen in his eyes, and it is a terrible thing now. He looks from me, to Nikka, and hope wars with disbelief. Nikka is nodding at him, urging him to understand, to see that I tell the truth, and I am crying, and he backs away, shaking his head.

"But you said... you called me a murderer."

"I had to, Cleo. I had to."

"Cleo." The voice is rough with disuse, and weak, but it is unmistakably Gregori, and Cleo looks both terrified and amazed. He stands, pulling away from Nikka, who had held him to keep him from overbalancing, and wobbles as he makes his way to Gregori's side.

"Oh. Oh my Lord. You're alive. You're... it's true then. It was all an act."

"Dai, Cleo," Gregori says. "We have a murderer to catch. But it is not you."

Collapse may well be imminent for Cleo again, but this time in relief and joy, not fear. He drops to his knees beside Gregori's bed, sobbing, and lays his head beside my Lord's arm, letting out too many days of pent up feelings.

"Oh, my Lord. I love you."

Gregori smiles, moving his hand, freed from his impromptu funeral clothes to touch Cleo's hair. I exchange a look with Nikka, happy to see Gregori move more than his head, and my happiness is reflected in Nikka's eyes.

"Dai, little one. I know. Tired. We will speak. Later."

Gregori closes his eyes to return to his healing sleep, and Nikka and I take Cleo away, back to his pallet by the fire, so he can rest easily for the first time since this all began.

Once Cleo is asleep, Nikka calls Tupe to the door and asks for bathwater. Tupe looks at me, and his shoulders round a little, and he apologizes. In that moment I realize that he set me up, as far as the scene with Cleo was concerned. I am reminded that he may be a gentle giant to most of Kallista, but he was once the Head of the Guard at Kazareen. He is a shrewd man. I simply wave him off with a smile, and he looks much relieved.

The bath will be a welcome thing, although I will let Nikka have it first, as he has been longer than I without one and will need it. Cleo needs one as well, but I wish to let him sleep. We will call for more water when he wakes. The silence between Nikka and I grows strained, and finally he comes to stand before me, tilting my chin up to face him.

"I'm sorry, Mista."

"You knew. Like Tupe."

His expression is wry, but now that he has begun he will continue. He is no coward, our Nikka. "Dai. I knew. Tupe and I knew that the only thing that would make the entire house believe we were going to execute Cleo was your accusation. And I knew that you would rise to the challenge, as you always do."

"What if I had not? I love him."

"You love Gregori more."

What can I say to that to disprove it? He has the right of it. The water begins to arrive then, and I pull the tub out from behind the screen in the corner. When everything is set and the door closes behind Marina, who brought the last bucket, I gesture to the tub.

"You first, Nikka."

He smiles at me, knowing he is forgiven, and strips off his clothes. "The tub is big enough for the both of us, Mista."

"I know. But I want to wash your hair."

Oh, that makes his eyes light, and I wonder how long it has been since someone did that for him. Settling into the tub, he pushes down deep, wetting his hair for me, and I find the soap Marina left and lather my hands thoroughly before sinking them into the long, heavy mass. I have always loved Nikka's hair, and can understand why Gregori was so taken with it. It hangs well past his shoulders, and is dark, so dark that no light shines in it. Like fine furs, or the soft fabric from the south, it slides across my fingers until I reach the ends, where it tangles just a bit.

"You need a trim," I murmur, and he simply groans a little as my fingers massage his scalp. He may not be a coward, but I fear I am, avoiding the difficult questions in favor of this simple pleasure. Scrubbing gently, I wash every strand before admonishing him to keep his eyes closed, and rinsing him completely. The ritual of it calms me, and I think it makes him happy. His shoulders relax, and he sinks down into the water again, sighing.

"Are you going to join me now, Mistral?"

"Dai."

Once I pour one more bucket of warm hot water into the tub I slide in, moving to sit at the opposite side. Nikka opens his eyes and shakes his head at me.

"Come, sit here, duska."

Patting his chest, he spreads his legs, and I move between them, back to him. The water is perfect, and he feels solid and warm against me, his breathing rising and falling against me, lifting me in the water. The motion is so soothing I think I might doze, until Nikka begins to bathe me with lazy swipes of his hands on my shoulders, chest and belly. The touches begin impersonally enough, but soon become more intimate, and I accept them readily, knowing that Nikka and I are good at forgetting for just awhile.

"Dai, Nikka. Feels good."

"Yes." His breath heats my ear. "Very good, Mista. Let me touch you?"

I nod, his wet hair falling forward over my shoulder as he sits up tall and leans forward to kiss my nape. He starts with my chest, tracing my collarbones and sternum with careful touches, and continues with not so careful touches to my nipples, twisting them. Gasping, I arch into the sensation, rubbing my bottom against his stiffening cock. So easy to slip into the pleasure and simply let it all go.

When he touches my prick I let my head loll back into the hollow of his neck and shoulder and lift my hips into it, begging silently for more, and he gives it to me. Lovely, lovely Nikka, hard against me, stroking me with loving attention, gasping things into my ear that would make Cleo blush. Wanting only one thing, his kiss, I strain back, reaching for it, and he gives that as well, pressing his lips to mine. The kiss feels better than the rest, which is not easy, but makes it all the more intimate, which I think is what I miss the most.

"Mmmmm." The noise comes from both of us, I believe, passing one to another, feeding us both. He tastes of berries, and I think idly that he must have been in the kitchen, stealing tarts from cook. Then he pushes a finger inside my body and I do not want to think, simply feel. Still a bit sore, I wiggle around until it is less tender, until Nikka moves just so and finds just the spot. That spot that makes me cry out and shudder, and Nikka kisses me again.

I can only let him give me pleasure. I cannot do anything for him, and I want to, but he seems content to rub his prick against my buttocks and touch me until I simply feel like I will explode. He bites down hard on my shoulder, marking me, surely, and pumps my cock roughly, and that is all it takes. Biting my lip to keep my cries inside, I jerk back and forth between the finger inside me and the ones wrapped around me, spending violently.

Nikka moves against me, his only sound his harsh breathing, and it is not long before I feel him shudder behind me, feel the jet of his completion against my back. The water lapping at the sides of the tub is the only sound while we recover, and when the water becomes uncomfortably cool, heave myself up and out of the tub, holding out a hand to Nikka.

Once we're both dry he turns me to him and kisses me gently. "Thank you, Mista. For everything you have done and will do."

There is a lump in my throat, and I simply nod, ducking my head. He kisses me again, on top of my head and I turn away, back toward the fire. Cleo is there, awake, watching us with wide eyes.

"Mistral?"

Sighing, I go to him, settling next to him on the pallet. "I have been so lonely, Cleo. And Nikka... he is special to me."

"I know. I just wanted to make sure I was not dreaming. I have dreamed many times about you and Lord Gregori, and about you telling me Gregori was alive. I thought... I was not sure." He brightens. "Is there still bathwater? I am so dirty."

The guilt that floods me is terrible, but he does not let me dwell on it. Kissing me gingerly, he scrambles to his feet, wobbling a bit and heads for the tub.

"The water is dirty, too, Cleo love."

"Not as bad as me. I shall stand and scrub and rinse with hot water."

Which is just what he does, with Nikka and I helping him. Only then do I notice how pitifully thin he is.

"When was the last time you ate?"

Cleo's legs are shaking, and Nikka wraps him in a bath sheet and picks him up, carrying him easily despite his lanky frame. Marina brought food as well as bathwater, and we make sure to feed Cleo as much as he can hold without becoming ill. I am hungry myself, as I voided my stomach earlier, and I eat more than I should, I imagine, and soon we are all sleepy from the food and the bath and the strain of the day. Before long we curl up together, all three of us as Cleo seems relaxed in Nikka's presence now. Soon their even breathing lulls me, pulling me toward sleep, and I spare one moment to wish were all piled together in the big bed with Gregori before I fall into dreams.

Chapter Thirteen

Waking is a slow, blurry thing. The room is dark and cold, though my bed is warm, thanks to the long body wrapped around me. Dear, familiar, something I thought I had lost. Cleo. His hair tickles my nose, and I work not to sneeze, as I do not wish to startle him. Nikka is no longer there, and I wonder where he has gone off to.

We have put off the talking about the rest of the plan long enough, I know. We must walk a fine line as well, between giving Gregori time to recover and making sure we catch the killer as quickly as possible. Thinking about it makes my stomach clench. I am a coward, I vow.

Nikka is with Gregori. I see him when I sit up. They are talking, Nikka holding Gregori's hand, voices low and indistinct. They stop when Nikka notices me, but it is not a guilty silence.

"Come, Mista. Gregori would speak to you. He is feeling better."

The happy tone of his voice draws me, and Gregori looks more alert than he has since he woke, his dark eyes clear and intelligent. Oh. Thank the saints and ancestors. Gregori reaches out for me, and takes my hand, and I sit next to him on the bed.

"Thank you, Mistral."

"I did what I had to, my Lord."

"You did more than that. I am grateful."

With that he pulls me down to him, with more strength than he has yet shown, and tucks my face against his chest. I just stay there. And cry. The next minutes, or perhaps hours, pass in a blur, and Nikkolaa withdraws in search of Tupe, so that we may plan. I simply let Gregori hold me, and he drifts once more to sleep.

Asleep, Cleo looks like a child, for all that he is ten and nine. I have wandered back and forth between my Lord's bed and Cleo's, watching them sleep, waiting for Nikka to return with Tupelo. He is beautiful. His face relaxes into soft cheeks and even softer lips and the effect is devastating. Even when I was a small boy my features were too sharp to look so. No small part of Cleo's appeal, that face, and one of the reasons he lasted so long as Gregori's favorite. Sadly, I fear that is the main reason Steffan was able to do what he did, stabbing Gregori. Also, I suspect it was the reason someone was able to convince Steffan to do it.

Chapter Fourteen

Let me reverse myself a bit. The status of favorite is an informal, but ritual thing. When one is chosen to be trained, it becomes obvious, as I have mentioned, by the amount of time Gregori spends with the boy. No one ever mentions it, and the only way the new favorite knows what is happening is through listening to gossip. Or, if they are lucky, like I was, they have someone like Nikkolaa to explain it to them.

Steffan was unlucky. Lord Gregori was, and is, quite taken with Cleo. I admit, I did my best to keep him interested in me as well, and between the two of us we kept the Lord well occupied. So, when Cleo turned ten and eight, and the cycle should have begun anew, it did not. Cleo and I both knew that Steffan was to be next, but we did not wish to be supplanted and so we were not. I fear I make no sense.

When it came time for Gregori to begin spending time with Steffan, to begin his training, he was indifferent. Steffan suffered for it, becoming sullen and unhappy, although he had not the brightest disposition to begin. Still, he was mostly ignored, or forgotten, and it made him bitter, for the other boys were quick to tell him what he was missing. To be fair to Gregori, Steffan was not pleasing in manner as a child, and when hit with the change to young manhood, had lost much of the beauty he possessed as a boy.

So it was that Cleo remained the favorite, with I in my self-made niche along with him, until the rumors swelled to the point that Gregori could no longer ignore. My Lord abhors weakness, and Cleo began to seem like one, an opening through which someone could gain control over my Lord. So he began to court Steffan, and train him, but it was too little too late.

The jealousy that Steffan harbored would make him an easy target for someone who wanted to harm Gregori. I only wish we knew who it was. My Lord has many enemies in Kazareen, and some here in his home, and we must sift through too many of them for my liking.

Chapter Fifteen

A hard knock on the door makes me start, and brings Cleo straight up on his pallet, wide-awake. I manage to clap a hand over his mouth before he cries out, but it is a near thing. Wide, blue eyes stare at me wildly, and then he relaxes, remembering his fortunate change of circumstances. I hold the fingers of my other hand to my lips and pad silently to the door, listening for a moment through the thick wood panels. It is I who almost shriek when a sharp knock sounds next to my ear. Rapping upon it in return gets Tupelo's voice.

"It is only I, Mista. Let me in."

Cautiously, I open the door, and it is just Tupe. Where Nikka is I do not know, but Tupe slips inside with a speed that makes a lie of his size. His face has that look, the long-suffering, worried look.

"What is it, Tupe?"

"Her ladyship is here."

"What?"

"Dai. Lord Gregori's wife. She is here. Downstairs with Nikka."

"Saint Bazeeb! How did she hear so quickly?"

"That's what I would like to know. She wants to see him. I think perhaps you need to go and talk to her."

"Me? Why?"

"Because you are his accounts manager and scribe. If anyone should know what his last wishes are, and can write them up later as proof, it is you. Now go. I will watch over Cleo and our Master."

"Oh for the love of..." He is correct, much as I hate to admit it. So I go, feeling extraordinarily put upon.

I have never met Gregori's wife. She lives in the city, not here at Kallista, and she never ventures out to the estate. It would seem from the telling that the only woman who does live at Kallista is Marina, and that my master is a woman hater. Neither is true. While Kallista is a man's home, there are women aplenty. His wife simply chooses not to tacitly approve his lifestyle by living with it, which I suppose is understandable. Not, as I hear, that she does not have her own stable of nubile youths at her disposal, as well as several lovers at court.

Still, it should be noted that while women are not uncommon at Kallista, most of them are hard-working, sturdy types, and a court lady is something of a novelty.

Nikka has taken her to the formal receiving room, a room that terrified me as a boy, and is hardly less intimidating now, with its high ceilings and gilt mirrors and cold white stone floors. I imagine that was deliberate, if somewhat ineffective, for the Lady spends much of her time at the Prince's Palace, and therefore has seen much more grand spaces than this.

The Lady is ensconced on the settee, gloved hands folded primly in her lap, back ramrod straight. The staring is impossible to avoid, as I have never seen such a display of cleavage as her décolletage affords me. Luckily, she cannot see me, although I can tell from Nikka's posture that he has. Giving me a moment to pull myself together, and also to observe her, Nikka offers her a drink.

Brittle. She looks hard and brittle under all of her paint. Older than I thought as well; she must be older than Gregori. Her elaborate, heavy dress with its enormous side rolls and split top-skirt in stiff ice blue brocade would be better suited to meet the prince than to come here, and I wonder if she was using the same tactics as Nikkolaa, trying to impress us with her grandeur. Somehow it just makes her pathetic. She is dressed for battle, and if that is what she expects, that is what she shall get.

Clearing my throat, I step into her line of vision. "Madame. I am Mistral, the estate scribe. I understand you wish to speak with me."

"Nee'at. I wish to see my husband's body. Immediately, if you please." The accent intimidates me more than her fine feathers ever could, for it is cultured and educated, each word precise, and makes me feel my backwards upbringing keenly.

"I do not please, my Lady, and neither did my Lord. He left strict instructions in his final wishes that you not attend his vigil."

Face crinkling as though she smells something rotten, she glares at me. "And who are you but one of his filthy whores? To tell me that I cannot see for myself that the bastard is dead. You little tramp."

Nikka draws a breath to reply, and she turns on him. "Really Nikka, I thought you had learned better in your time at Kazareen than to ally yourself with someone like this. Please, my dear, let me see him."

"I am afraid, Galina, that I do not care for your tone. Nor for the words you used. Mistral is only doing his job, and if he says that Lord Gregori did not wish you to see him upon his death I must stand by his wishes."

"You owe him nothing! He cast you out."

"Which makes me less the whore, I take it."

The last vestige of polite respect is gone from Nikka's voice and his face is like stone. I cannot remember seeing him this way before, well, at least not before the last few tumultuous days, and it is all I can do not to let my mouth drop open and stare at him. If it is possible, the Lady goes even more pale under her heavy powder and her breathing starts to falter behind her tight laces.

"How dare you! You haven't Gregori to protect you now, you little peasant upstart. I am cousin to the prince. I can have you put down like a wild dog."

"You know so little about me. I am the son of a Duke, Lady. And I am now head of this house, as my Lord wished. If Mista says you shall not see him, you shall not."

"I must know for sure!" Her voice rings out loud in the sudden silence, and I stare at her, feeling the blood drain from my face. Nikka comes to me and puts a hand on my shoulder in what looks like a gesture of solidarity, but is instead an effort to keep me from swaying.

"That was his wish," I force out between stiff lips. "Now I understand why."

In the space between one breath and the next, she softens, her expression somewhere between pleading and speculative. "Please. I am sorry. I am simply distraught. Word travels quickly, and I heard the news from three separate people, none of whom inhabited my husband's household. You must forgive me if I am bitter about that. My cousin, the prince, pressed me into this errand, as he wishes to see me remarried as quickly as possible, for political reasons, of course."

"Of course." When did Nikka master the art of polite innuendo? "I assure you, Lady, he is dead. You may go to the prince and tell him so. You may also inform him that the culprit is to be executed three days hence, after the vigil is finished."

"That is your final word, Nikka?"

"No," I break in. "It was Gregori's final word."

She shrugs delicately. "Insolent pups. Very well. Nikka, if you would be so kind." Holding out a hand, she waits for Nikka to help her up and out, and I sit abruptly, knees giving way. Could she have something to do with this? She certainly has reason. Nikka leads her out, and their steps and forced smiles remind me of the formal dance of fencing.

When Nikka comes back I am sunk deeply in thought, and his hand on my shoulder scares me half unto death.

"Saint Stefeen! Must you do that?"

"I apologize. Are you all right?"

"Do you think it was she?"

He looks at me for a long moment, then shakes his head. "I think she has the reason, but not the means, if you get me. I favor the prince as more likely."

"I thought he and Gregori were friends?"

"No one has friends at court. Is there anything you would like from your rooms before we go back to the tower?"

He is back to the solicitous, kind Nikka that I know, and the transformation leaves me confused. "Dai. Clothes. And my saint's medallion. I should have it if I am on vigil."

"Of course."

We stop at Gregori's chambers as well as mine, and retrieve clothes for Nikka, who is much the same height. That works as an excuse, and road, so that we can get Gregori clean and dressed, at least in his dressing gown to make him more comfortable. Truly, Nikka needs fresh clothes as well, so it serves a double purpose. Thinking about Nikka's manner with the lady, and even earlier, through these last days puts a curious tension in my chest, and once

again it leads me to wonder. Not to doubt him, for he has had ample opportunity to finish the job should he wish to. But I do wonder about his life in Kazareen.

Back at the tower Tupe lets us in and we inform him of what happened. Gregori does not wake, and neither does Cleo, so I find that now is the perfect time.

"I think, Nikka, that there are things you are not telling us. And I think that now would be the perfect time for you to do so."

My mind reels from the telling that Nikka gave me, and in this quiet moment I wish to set it all to parchment before I forget some small detail that is central to the story. I would like to think that Nikka is relieved, unburdened if you will, by being able to tell his tale to me, and to Tupe. Perhaps he feels less alone, now.

hapter Sixteen

When Nikka told the Lady Galina that he was the son of a Duke it came as something of a shock to me. I thought that his upbringing was much like Cleo's. Not mine, for I am somewhat unique. Petty squires are where most of Gregori's boys come from, or middle class merchants. There is some amusement for me in the fact that we are from opposite ends of the spectrum, and also that as the son of a Duke, Nikka outranks Gregori, who is an Earl.

Surprising also, is how far removed from Kazareen Nikka's homeland is. He speaks our language like a native, thanks no doubt to the staunch master Illya, but he is from the south and west in a land much different from ours. His father, the Duke, had traveled to Kazareen on a diplomatic mission to the Prince, and he had died there, leaving Nikka quite stranded.

The young Nikkolaa was very much to Gregori's liking, and he took him in for training, as the boy had no close family to return to. Not long after, Nikka began spending time with Gregori, well on his way to favorite status already. All of this is extraordinary enough, if dry in the telling. What comes next is even more astonishing to me.

"You're a what?" This from Tupelo, who spoke loudly enough that we feared he would wake the others.

"I am a spy, Tupe. For Gregori. He has grown increasingly unpopular in Kazareen, and I have become his eyes and ears there. Those of us at the art academy are quite popular at soirees and such, and I am always there to hear the gossip. If I am not, there is always some jilted lover who wishes to tell me their secrets in the bedchamber."

I confess, I was simply aghast. "But you are an artist," I blurted and he smiled gently at me.

"Yes, I am. But I am also this. Please try to understand Mistral, once you are in Gregori's service you never truly leave."

"But Nikka. A spy!"

"I learned from one of the best, did I not?"

"Enough, all of you." The voice was Gregori's, and we turned to see him half sitting up, propped on one elbow. "Mistral, come here to me."

Reeling from the information I was still trying to understand, I went. When he held out his hand I took it, and he ran his fingers over mine as he talked. Such a little thing, but it gave me joy, for his fine movement skills were coming back, and his voice was so much stronger as well.

"I have a duty," he told me, "to the Prince's father. I assist him in any way I can, by gathering information throughout Kazareen and on its borders. I chose Nikkolaa to help me with that. Do you see?"

"I understand what you say, my Lord, but not why you do it. What has the prince's father to do with it?"

"Suffice to say the he'd rather his son were not on the throne. You need not know more, Mistral. It can only lead to danger for you. Will you trust me?"

"Dai. Of course. I just... I thought I knew Nikka. Now I feel as if I do not."

Nikka's hands closed over my shoulders, warm and strong. "I am the same, Mista. So is our Lord. There are things you do not know about us, just as there are things you keep from us."

"Do I?" Sadly, I do keep things from them, and I knew I could not truly rebut the statement, which was not an accusation, just a reminder.

"Dai." The answer was as gentle as the statement, and I let it go.

"Your Lady wife was here, my Lord."

"So I heard. I have been awake a goodly time. Give me a kiss Mistral, and then go and wake Cleo. We must make a plan."

"No."

We both turned to look at Nikkolaa, and he shook his head, resolute even under the weight of Gregori's stare. "Cleo must rest and so must you and there are things Tupe and I must do first. Let us out, Mista, and we will gather together later to discuss our next move."

With a kiss on my Lord's lips, I got up to lock the door behind Tupe and Nikka as they left. This interminable waiting wears upon me; I am not the most patient of men. Thankfully I have some drive to note this whole situation down, because it affords me some distraction. The even sound of Cleo's breath wars with Gregori's, just off time enough to make me uneasy in the hearing of it, like a duet sung slightly out of sync.

Chapter Seventeen

Nikka is a spy. So is Gregori, which makes his assassination much more understandable. Court intrigue is reason enough, but to know that he is involved in a plot to overthrow the prince, or so I take it, is something altogether different. It does make me wonder how many other boys Gregori has molded in his image, and why I was not trained in such things. Cleo I can understand. His face reveals his every thought. Perhaps my Lord finds me too tenderhearted. One way or the other, I am suddenly very grateful to simply manage accounts and warm my Lord's bed on occasion.

Next to me Cleo stirs, moaning, and I stroke his hair, baby fine curls slipping through my fingers. His dreams are troubled these days, and I have a sudden pang of wistfulness, because nothing will ever be the same.

"Mista? You're sad."

"I did not realize you were awake."

"I had a dream. It was good to wake from it and find you here."

"Oh, kedvesem. I am glad I am able to be here. Leaving you alone the way I did was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course, silly. I already have. Just as I will forgive you all for using me as bait." The smile is very much like his old carefree, mischievous one, and I am much relieved.

"Thank you Cleo, love."

With a sigh, he sits up and crawls over to me, squirming into my lap and holding me tight.

"I think I could forgive you anything, Mista," he says, tilting his head back and searching for a kiss. I give it to him, plunging my tongue into his mouth aggressively, suddenly hungry for him.

"Missed you, duska."

"Oh! Mista. Missed you too." Hot skin against me as he slips his arms up around my neck, kissing me back. Those sweet kisses, so unlike Gregori's, or Nikka's, that let me take charge, let me open his mouth with mine and simply devour. Irresistible. His cheeks call to my lips, then his throat, and I feel his life pulse under my mouth. Little noises lure me back to his mouth, and I kiss him roughly, feeling his lips swell beneath mine, felling his fine-grained skin under my fingers.

Soon he straddles me, a leg on either side of mine, rubbing himself against me urgently as we kiss. I push him away, kissing the pout from his lips and slip his sleep shirt off over his head, peeling off my light tunic and trous as well. A soft touch on my prick makes me moan, and I push him back on the silky furs, needing to feel his skin against the length of my body, wanting him so badly I ache. My sweet Cleo.

Under me he spreads his legs and cants his hips up, panting and squirming. "Mista. Please. Be inside me."

There is nothing I would like better, and when I hold my fingers to his lips he smiles, licking and sucking on them, wetting them thoroughly. My hips move in time with his mouth, and I fear it will end before we begin, so I pull away and push my fingers inside him instead. Right into the center of him, where my prick longs to be, and the sight of it is enough to make my belly twist. He takes me in easily, with perfect trust, and I use my own saliva on my free hand to slick my cock, because I can wait no longer.

Slipping into him is coming home. I missed him so, was so afraid for him, afraid I would never feel this again. He wraps himself around me, all arms and legs and love and begs me to move, to love him hard and fast and rough, like he likes it. He begs me to let him feel it, and who am I to deny him, or me? The rhythm is rough, staccato, my hips smacking his bottom with each thrust, and the heat and tight of him will be my undoing someday. How could someone not love him? How can I blame Gregori for adoring him?

Cheeks flushed, eyes shining, he pulls me down for a kiss, arching up into me, and I feel his body flex and contract around me. As tight as a vise, and hot, so hot, and the smell of him fills my nose and my head to make me dizzy. Soon, very soon after I go stiff and tremble above him, pouring into him, and he gives me the happiest sounds, and cradles me with his body when my arms falter and I fall upon him.

"Love you, Mistral."

"And I you, dushka. I love you. I was so frightened."

He soothes me, he, who was imprisoned and accused, the one who is still to be sorely used as bait for a murderer. Both awed and amazed at him, I let him hold me, let the strain of it all leech away.

"Beautiful. Both of you."

We both start violently, then laugh as we soothe the places we knocked together. Gently disengaging, I roll so I may see Gregori, who is looking at us with a searing intensity.

"Come, my boys. Come here. Rest with me awhile."

Oh. Yes. Cleo must feel the same, for he scrambles over me, knocking me winding, and runs to the bed, crawling in beside Gregori. I laugh and follow more slowly, curling up with Cleo between us, letting the warmth and comfort lull me, vaguely wishing that Nikka was there to share it with us. Lord Gregori manages to put an arm up and over Cleo's side, tangling a hand in my hair, and I am more content than I have been in a score of days.

As if he knows what I am thinking, Gregori pets me lightly. "It is not over yet, Mistral. We must finish this."

"And then what, my Lord?" Cleo asks, softly, as if fearful of the answer.

"Then we will go from there," Gregori replies. "And who knows where that may take us?"

Who knows indeed? Though I feel as though all I have done in the last day is sleep, my eyes are heavy and full of grit, and I shut them, hoping to drift off. My body is profoundly relaxed, but my mind refuses to be still, and I think of the thousand things that may go wrong, and of the arrogance inherent in assuming the man who planned the crime will wish to return to the scene thereof. I can only hope that Nikka and Tupe are right, and that the so-called execution of Cleo will bring about some indication. Otherwise, I fear for all of us, and for my sanity should I almost lose any of them again.

I dream that night of my father. He stares at me sorrowfully and tells me, "If I knew how he would treat you, I would never have sold you to him."

A bag of gold so full as to be bottomless opens then, and rains down over my father, burying him until I can no longer hear his screams, and I do nothing, thinking that if it were Gregori under there I would be fighting tooth and nail. I awake, heart pounding and breath coming short, sitting bolt upright in the bed.

"Ooph."

Cleo curls up around his belly, where I planted my elbow, and looks at me accusingly. The light from the fire is just enough to make out his expression, and I grimace apologetically before slipping out of bed to stoke the embers at the hearth. Once there I immediately stumble over Nikka, who is stretched out on Cleo's pallet of furs and pillows, and his hand shoots out to steady me as I stagger.

"Clumsy Mista." His words are soft, almost inaudible, and teasing. Kicking him lightly with my free foot I kneel down between he and the fire. Stoking it takes little time, and as I sit back on my heels he moves to sit behind me, an arm around my waist.

"So... What now, Nikka?"

He chuckles. "I admit, Mista, it is hard to know what to do. I am at something of a loss without Gregori's planning skills. Soon, I hope he will be able to help us."

I cannot help but stare at him. "Nikka, you underestimate yourself. You have, quite frankly, amazed me these last days with your strength and cunning. You can do it without his help if need be."

"Certainly I can, but I do not wish to." He shakes his head, looking at me keenly. "I think you understand that, Mista. Surely you know that you could run this household if need be. In fact, to a certain extent, you do. But what we do, we do for him. That is the context we were brought up in. That is what we are."

"He's right you know." Cleo's long fingers slide into my hair as he joins us at the fire, and he settles down beside me. "We will all do what we must, the best way we can, because our commitment to him demands it. Do not think less of yourself than you do of Nikka, or I, Mistral. You do as much, if not more, as anyone else to keep this house as it is. Especially when Lord Gregori is away. You're very strong, my love."

I never knew he felt that way about me. Nikka nods along with what he is saying, and I am simply amazed, as well as secretly delighted. While it is no fault of theirs, I have always felt like the untalented one, the one with nothing to offer but my body. Perhaps they are right, and there is more to me than I think.

Nikka stirs, and unfolds himself from his position behind me. "I should go and check in with Tupelo, and get us some food. Let me out, Mistral. I will be back soon."

Accompanying him to the door, I open the locks, but before I can pull open the door he tilts my chin up for a light kiss. "Never underestimate what you are to all of us, Mista. Never."

With that he opens the door just enough to slip out, and he is gone. Slowly and carefully putting the locks back to rights, I consider what he said, and how I feel about it. What am I to them, then? I do not know. So many things I thought I knew, and I did not. So many lies and deceptions. For a moment I had the urge to follow Nikka out the door and escape, run to Kazareen, or beyond, and leave all of my responsibility behind, along with all of the hurt and disillusionment.

"You are angry at them."

The statement is softly voiced, but jolting nonetheless. I return to Cleo's side, settling against him with a sigh. "I think so, yes. Not that I have any right to be, but I feel as if I should have known. Nikka says that many of Gregori's favorites have been trained to do what he does. I wonder if that is not why I was chosen. What a disappointment I must be, if that is the case."

"Then I must be one, as well." His laughter is light, and completely without mockery. "I could never keep such a secret, let alone play the part that Nikka does. The very thought of dealing with the Prince makes my stomach turn. Beautiful, but worthless. That is what Master Illya said of me once."

"Master Illya is a blow hard."

He laughs again, and squeezes me tight. "My point is that Gregori must be pleased to have you. Someone that he knows will be here to keep his house to rights. That is one less thing he must worry about."

"But Marina keeps his house. Cook keeps the kitchen. Illya cares for the boys and Tupe commands the guard. What do I do?"

"You keep the accounts. You tell cook when we may order food. You tell Illya how much he can have to clothe and provide for the boys. You tell Marina who is coming and what they need. That is all secondary to who you are, though. That is what makes you so special, Mista. How you think of others before yourself. How Gregori knows he may depend upon you to be here, whenever he needs you. You do everything."

"Perhaps."

Kissing me on the chin, he sighs. "What may I do to convince you? Here. Think about this. Do you remember the first time we made love? Without Gregori, I mean."

How could I not? Gregori had just left, his first extended trip away after taking Cleo as his favorite. Poor Cleo had begged and pleaded to go, and at the time I had thought Gregori impossibly cruel for not taking him. Now I realize that the trip must have been dangerous, or at the least, politically motivated, and so Gregori could not take a boy of six and ten along.

Chapter Eighteen

The only person that Cleo was comfortable with besides Gregori was me, and it was I that he came to. Crying, distraught, he came to my rooms and asked if he could sleep with me, as he could not sleep alone any longer. Honestly, I felt terribly guilty, for such a thing had never occurred to me, and Gregori had bid me to take care of the boy in his absence. I was and am a rather solitary creature, so while I was sharing Gregori's bed and he was off the estate without me I missed him, specifically, but never really missed having a warm body, any warm body, in bed with me. Ironically, it has been Cleo that has made me appreciate that, and miss it when it is gone.

At any rate, I let him in, and let him curl up next to me in my bed, and let him kiss me. His kisses were full of fear, and desperate, as if he needed some sort of assurance, and I was happy to give it to him, for it had been far too long for me. His skin was warm and silky along my body, and his long legs tangled with mine, and we kissed for a long, long while, letting it build between us. At first, I admit, I felt a strange sort of guilt, for while Cleo and I had been in the same bed together many times, it had never been without Gregori; everything we did was for his benefit.

This, though, was for Cleo. For his comfort, his joy, and it felt taboo. Illicit. Which, perversely, added to the excitement of it for me. I very much doubt that Cleo had any such thoughts. He was simply an addict who was missing his object of affection, and so, like a snow poppy eater turning to liquor when he cannot get his drug of choice, Cleo turned to me.

I believe I mentioned once before that I was already half in love with Cleo before he took my place in Gregori's life. That night I think I fell the rest of the way. Cleo was so generous in his pleasure, so innocently joyous, that it solidified my adoration for him into something enduring rather than fleeting. He touched me like he would touch the fine violin Gregori had gifted him with. Care, even reverence, was in his fingers as they played over me. So open, so accepting of my touches as well.

My kisses bruised his mouth, and his lips became swollen and dark, and his eyes were deep, rich blue in their passion. His skin, so pale, bore a deep flush, and his breathing was harsh, filled with little sounds that made me burn. That night I learned more about him than I had learned in nearly three years, and everything was new and different.

I learned that while touching and licking his ears left him indifferent, a firm bite to his neck would make him squirm. His nipples were sensitive. So much so that licking and sucking the soft little peaks of flesh made him wail, made him spend himself, much to my surprise and his dismay. I only laughed, and reminded him that he was young, and at the first touch of my hand his cock began to firm and grow once more.

His belly was ticklish no matter how firm the touch, but his feet were not. His legs were stronger than they looked, and covered in downy blonde hair that ticked my nose when I kissed them. Between his legs his cock jutted proudly once again, slender and long and flushed a deep crimson. The taste of him, as I licked him clean, was salt and spice, deep and peppery. When I put my mouth on him I thought he would shoot again, he shuddered and moaned so, and I pinched lightly at the base of his cock to keep him from doing so. I wanted to be inside him.

So eager for me was he that he spread his legs wide and took my spit damp fingers easily into his body, even as tight as he was. Oh, so tight and hot, and waiting for me, and I slicked myself as best I could and slipped into him, feeling him close around me and knowing myself to be lost. Draping his long legs over my shoulders, I bent him almost double reaching for a kiss, and he moaned and his hips rolled up to meet mine and he kissed me back as hard as he could. It was no wonder that Gregori loved having Cleo in his bed. So responsive, so loving.

His bottom was hot against my hips, and I could feel his curls against me, his cock hot between us. I thrust into him again and again, letting him hear and feel my pleasure as best I could, though he was far more vocal than I. He begged, he whimpered, he met every thrust with complete abandon, and it went on far longer than I thought I could hold, I think because neither of us wanted it to end.

One last kiss and a hard bite to the side of his neck were all that Cleo could endure, and he spent himself so thoroughly that his eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp. But not before his body spasmed tightly, so tight, around my throbbing prick and pulled my own climax from me, starting at the base of my skull and working its way through my body to shoot out of me and into him.

He slept there in my bed that night, and every night until Gregori's return, and when our Lord came home, he asked that I be allowed to join them for the homecoming. Gregori was surprised, perhaps, and amused, but not angry, as I had feared. And he said yes. Which was how I came to return to Gregori's bed after being banished from it, a feat that up until then was unheard of.

Chapter Nineteen

The memories make my cheeks heat, and Cleo laughs at me. "That is not why I reminded you, Mista, but I am glad you remember it fondly. What I meant by bringing it up is that I knew I could count upon you. I knew I could come to you, and you would not send me away. Even as close as you and Nikka were, you could not have gone to him in the same situation."

"Perhaps not," I begin, and he cuts me off.

"Stubborn Mista. Tell me, whom does Tupelo go to when he needs to complain about his back? Who does Sergey go to when the other boys are cruel to him? When he is scared of the dark, or missing his mother? That is your strength, Mistral." He puts a hand to my chest. "That is your strength, Mista. Your heart, that has room for all. Your love that you give so unreservedly."

Once again my face feels hot, and I would like to blame it on the fire, but I cannot. "You make me sound like some sort of saint."

He giggles. "Hardly that, Mista. They were all warriors. No, you are an angel."

Now it is my turn to laugh. "I think not, Cleo. Not with the things you and I do together."

Giggling harder, he leans over and kisses me before uncurling from his spot and going to check on Gregori. "Do you think he will get his strength back soon? He sleeps so much. It is not like him at all."

"We have all been sleeping more. Which is not entirely unusual for the Dark. The poison was strong, Cleo. Very strong. Only time will tell what lasting effects it will have."

"The two of you could wake the dead," Gregori says, opening his eyes. "Light the lamps, Mistral. Cleo, help me sit up. It is time I tried to get out of this bed."

We look at each other, and I shrug. He will only badger us until we do what he asks. "Dai, my Lord."

The lamps brighten the room considerably and it makes my eyes sting. Cleo supports our Lord as he sits, then piles pillows behind his back. With no surprise I note that he is out of breath and sweating by the time it is all accomplished.

Grimacing, he gestures for us to sit on the bed with him. "Perhaps I will have to save walking for next time. Now, Cleo," he continues, "tell me about your confinement. Is there anything there that might shed light upon what has happened?"

Oh, now it is so easy to see what Nikka meant by having Gregori's mind at work upon the problem at hand. None of us thought of that; no one thought to ask if Cleo might have seen or heard aught to assist us.

The haunted look that appears on Cleo's face makes me want to reach out to him, but it is gone almost as quickly as it appeared. "I do not know if anything is significant, but I will tell you what I can."

Putting a hand on Cleo's, Gregori nods. "I know this will be hard, little one, but tell us all."

"Shall I start with that night?"

"Dai." I smile at him teasingly. "I would like to hear why you were not there to protect Gregori."

"Because I was unconscious. While readying myself to go and assist my Lord with Steffan's... training, I noticed that I was out of the sweet oil you prefer, my Lord." Here he blushes furiously, and I cannot help but chuckle, knowing what that oil is for. "While I was in the storeroom, someone crept up on me and hit me over the head. Very, very hard."

Gregori's face darkens ominously. "And you have no idea who?"

"I did not at the time. I suppose now it must have been Steffan."

"A safe assumption," I approve, but Gregori shakes his head.

"Hardly. Steffan was at my side the whole of the day. I was... well, I was trying to make up for a certain lack in my attentions to him."

There is silence while Cleo and I absorb that, and once again the knocking at the door makes us jump. All but Gregori, who must have heard something in the hall. I go to the door.

"Who is it?"

"Nikka. Let me in. I have news."

Hurriedly I open up and let him in, and he slips in, going immediately to Gregori's side.

"My Lord. Thank goodness you are awake. I have just heard from Jeam, in Kazareen. He says your lady wife has convinced the head of the Prince's peacekeeping force to come out and investigate the happenings here."

"Dushtinka." Gregori spits out a vicious curse. "That is all we need."

"Cannot Tupelo deal with it?" Cleo asks. "He once commanded the guard."

"When the old Prince was in power, yes. The men that work for his son want nothing to do with Tupe." Gregori's hands are restless, picking a loose thread here, a piece of lint there.

"We will have to find some way of deflecting the man."

"Do you think the Prince has aught to do with this, my Lord? He certainly wants to marry off your lady wife."

The smile he gives us is most unpleasant. "You have met my wife. Can you not blame him? He does not want the burden of her upkeep. I think it is not unlikely that he would try to kill me. What I think also, though, is that he would not have the balls to try to kill me in my own home. Nor the wherewithal. When will he arrive?"

"With any luck, not until tomorrow. The messenger Jeam sent says there is a snowstorm blowing up out there."

"Good." He is silent for a moment, thoughtful. "Then sit with us, and hear Cleo's story. I think we may have some vital piece of information here."

Nikka looks at us, one to another, then nods sharply and sits. "What have I missed?"

"Only that someone attacked Cleo in the storeroom while Steffan was with me in my rooms. Left him unconscious from a blow to the head. Dai, dushka?"

"Dai. When I woke, I was sick to my stomach, and dizzy, and I went to the garderobe to void my dinner. When I was returning to my room, I could see the household was in an uproar, and finally it was Angellika, the upstairs maid that set up the cry that she had found me, screaming her head off. Oh it made my head pound I can tell you."

"So they were already looking for you as the killer?" Gregori asks, and I nod.

"Yes. This I can attest to, for I was one of the first people to receive the news. They immediately assumed it was Cleo, for both you and Steffan were injured. They thought he was the one with the most reason."

"I gave them reason enough, I suppose," Cleo says. "I made no secret of the fact that I disapproved."

"Dai. But I wonder..." Gregori looks at me. "No one suspected you at all, Mista?"

Both Nikka and Cleo leap to my defense.

"He could never..."

"Mista would not..."

Holding up my hands, I laugh at them, their support warming the coldest corners of me.

"Thank you both, but he has a point. Still waters run deep, as they say. I had as much reason, if not more to do it, if we are looking at passion as a motive. It is obvious that I love not only Lord Gregori but Cleo as well. Indeed, I had more reason to hate Steffan than anyone."

Awareness dawns on Nikka's face, even as Cleo's creases with confusion. "Of course! Which means that someone in the house must have put the bug in the guards' ear that it was Cleo who did it."

"Giving more credence to the idea that it is someone in the house who did this. You can imagine why I am not only worried about the Prince's head man coming here for Cleo's safety."

"Dai."

The silence is heavy with our thoughts. I cannot imagine who would do it and why. The newest boy, Sergey, is not yet old enough to understand what is happening to him, what the pattern is, so it could not be him. I cannot think of anyone who was close to Steffan, among the adults or boys, either one. Of course, I found him generally unpleasant, and so would not know for certain.

"Continue your story, Cleo."

Cleo starts, looking at Gregori with wide eyes. "Yes, My Lord. Luckily, it was Tupe who found me first, and took me into custody. It was only then that I knew what had happened, and..." he blushes, "I am afraid I went quite mad for a moment. Tupe had to restrain me. I demanded to see you, my Lord, and to be with you, and barring that, I cried for Mista, because I knew he would help me. The rest of the guard were there by then, and some of them wanted to take me to Kazareen to the prison, immediately."

He shudders, and I pat his shoulder awkwardly. How horrible that would have been for him. Gregori squeezes his hand, and Nikka makes encouraging noises.

"Thank Saint Cyrillus for Tupe. He convinced them that I would not last long enough in a Kazareen prison to make trial, and while the idea seemed to excite some of them, enough of them agreed with Tupe that they took me to the room that I was held in until I came here. That was the last news I heard until Mista was able to come see me, a day or more before you woke, my Lord."

"No one came to see you?"

"No. Just Tupe and Mista."

"Damnation."

Nikka nods. "Dai. So what should we do, my Lord? The plan that Tupe and I worked out to use Cleo as bait may not work if the killer is here, within the house. And if he was motivated not only by killing you, but by ridding himself of Cleo, which seems the assumption you are working from."

"But we cannot dismiss entirely the idea that it was politically motivated and that Cleo was simply a good bet as a the one to blame." I am trying to be reasonable, but I want the culprit to be from outside of our house. Many of us do not get along from time to time, but we have always had loyalty to our own. To know that covenant might be breached is frightening as well as frustrating.

"We must work within both assumptions, dai."

Gregori is tiring, I can tell. So can Nikka. "You must rest, my Lord. What can we do in the meantime to help?"

"I want you to talk to the boys, Nikka. See if they know anything about Steffan. If he had any special friends among the boys or the adults. I fear I let myself ignore him far too long. And I want Tupe to talk to Illya, and the other teaching Masters. Ask them the same things. If they know of anything that might help us regarding Steffan's habits. Also, Tupe should talk among the guards, see who it was that first suggested Cleo as the guilty party."

Nikka looks relieved to have Gregori take charge once more, and I shake my head at him. He does not give himself enough credit. The only reason he had not thought of these things yet is because he has been so long away from Kallista.

"And I, my Lord? What am I to do?" I ask.

Smiling at me, Gregori takes my hand. "I know you chafe for some action, Mista, but you are standing vigil for me. The only time you should be seen out of this room is under special circumstances, as when my Lady wife arrived. You may do me the favor of making lists, however, of people Tupe and Nikka talk to, and of whatever information they come up with."

I smile wryly and squeeze his hand. "That, my Lord, I can do."

Once I have recorded all of the information we exchange, I admit I take some time to continue with my story. I feel helpless, stuck here with Gregori and Cleo, both recovering from terrible ordeals. I have no such excuse for inaction. Yet I am grateful that I do not need to be out and about as well, for I fear my ability to dissemble would be sorely tested.

My chest is tight and my belly is queasy, as they have been since Cleo's revelation about why he was not with Gregori when the attack happened. Saints, I wish this were over. There is a deep need in me to see this house safe once again.

Chapter Twenty

A distraction is clearly in order. Perhaps I will continue the tale of my history. Once Gregori had me that first time, when I was ten and six, I was the newly declared favorite. That status accorded me my own rooms, a bedchamber and dressing room, with a tiny sitting area as well. It also gave me unlimited access to Gregori's bed. No longer was I the one to go, leaving Nikka behind. Now, Nikka was the one to leave, and as a few months passed, he was less and less with us, until I rarely saw him.

Two full rotations of dark and light I had Gregori to myself. That was a glorious time, full of joy for me. When he was at home Gregori spent much of his time with me, both in his bed and out, and to be the focus of that man's full regard is something to treasure. How I loved him, then. Not that I love him any less now. Rather my love for him has changed, had become more mature, and been tempered by his love, and mine, for another.

He taught me to ride, during the light, on his enormous horses, helped me to hone my fencing skills, and drubbed me thoroughly at chess more often than not. We read together, and discussed what we read, and slowly but surely I took Nikkolaa's place with the accounts, and we spent time with that as well. Gregori was ever charming, attentive and loving.

There are some uncharitable people, and also some of the rejected favorites, who say what Gregori does is unkind, indeed cruel. I have heard Kallista called his whore farm. That does not do it justice. It also implies a certain level of service that is not required. Never once has Gregori asked me to service someone, up to and including himself. Had I been averse to his advances when they first began, I would still have been educated and given a place in the

household. If perhaps some people felt coerced by him, then they were greedy, grasping types in the first place.

Those people are wrong about him. Terribly wrong. Gregori is very giving, though he says that love is a weakness and that he refuses to care too much about any one person. I think perhaps he needs to look at his own image of himself. Perhaps we all do if what Nikka and Cleo say about me is true.

I cannot seem to stay upon the subject. The year I turned ten and eight Gregori brought up Cleo. I was devastated. Things changed so dramatically, but in retrospect, I wonder if it wasn't for the better. Perhaps I would have become nothing but an impossibly spoiled idiot had he kept me on beyond when he did. I had often felt a twinge for Nikka during my own training, but once Cleo came to be with us I understood him completely. And missed him as well.

That year Nikka went to the academy in Kazareen. Loneliness was my constant companion for the first time in a long while. Oh, certainly I was training Cleo, but more and more often I was dismissed to my own devices and I did not care for that turn of events at all.

Toward the end of that year, when Cleo was nearly ten and six, Master Illya gave me his speech, and made me realize that I had a right to fight for my place. I am so glad that I did, for it was just before my birthday of ten and nine when Cleo had his birthday and I sat at the foot of that big bed on the bench Gregori keeps there and watched Gregori love Cleo for the first time.

How achingly familiar it was. We all dined together, and then Gregori went off to prepare himself while I took Cleo off for his preparations. I remember the exact feel of the excitement and fear that filled him. He practically vibrated with excitement. He could hardly hold still while I cleaned him inside and out, knowing what was expected of me from having had Nikka do it to me. The ritual of it took my mind off what would happen, and when Cleo became so excited he could no longer bear it I took him in my hands and stroked until he spent, soothing his fear that he had done something wrong, just as Nikka did for me.

Experiencing a strong sense that all of this had been done before, many times, I led Cleo to the big bedchamber where Gregori awaited him. The Lord was there, in his dressing robe, which was a rich claret color this time, rather than the gold he wore with me. A tiny difference which simply served to emphasize the much larger difference. That when Gregori held out his hand it was Cleo who went forward to meet him.

Other differences were soon apparent. There was no need to gentling and wooing. Cleo was much less modest than I, much more direct. Rather than have to shed his robe and slip into bed so as not to scare Cleo with his endowments, Gregori simply let Cleo pull his robe down over his shoulders and off. Cleo was enthralled, not afraid, at the sight of Gregori's nude form. He used his hands to trace every muscle, every flat curve, every shallow dip. He was like a snow funnel, all movement and sound, delighted noises falling from his lips like a song.

They stood beside the bed while Cleo explored, limned in firelight, and they were so beautiful together that tears filled my eyes. Cleo was so pale, so slender and boyish, while Gregori was darker, taller, harder. Their cocks touched as they kissed, and Cleo reached for Gregori's hard, curving to his stomach, and that was when they went to the bed.

As with me, Gregori tried to put Cleo on his hands and knees, but Cleo flatly refused, rolling onto his back and putting a hand to Gregori's face, stroking the cheek that I knew would be soft from recent shaving. "I want to see you," he said, and Gregori moaned, and kissed him as if he would devour him whole. Their mouths met, and I could hear the wet noise as their tongues met. Their scent, the sight of them, aroused me almost unbearably.

Spreading his legs wide, Cleo held himself open for Gregori, and my Lord could no more resist that invitation than anyone. He settled himself between Cleo's legs and placed the head of his cock at the tight entrance and slid home, slowly and inexorably. Oh, the sound Cleo made when Gregori entered him. That sweet voice soared, and Gregori moaned a bass counterpart. I knew how tight Cleo was, had just had my fingers inside him, slicking him with sweet oil. I knew what Gregori's thick shaft felt like, as it had been inside me just so, many times. I was in agony of jealousy and lust and love.

They moved together like they were made for one another, Cleo's longer body much better suited to Gregori than my stunted one. I catalogued my faults even as I noted Cleo's beauty, I admit. I came up sorely lacking. Soon Cleo's legs were over Gregori's shoulders, and Gregori was thrusting with single-minded intensity. The room smelled of sweat and sex and smoke from the hearth, and I wanted it to end, and never to end.

Never had Cleo seemed so beautiful, and yet so different than his usual self. His eyes were closed, his face tense and flushed, alternately biting his lips and crying out, body moving in time with Gregori's, pliant and open. Gregori murmured things to him, lovely words, my words. Had Nikka thought that very thing, I wondered, when Gregori said them to me?

The pattern of Gregori's thrusts grew stronger and stronger and suddenly he reared back and pulled Cleo to a new angle, and thrust forward again. Cleo screamed aloud, his whole body arching and rolling, and I knew Gregori had found that place inside Cleo that would make him crazed, would make him go off in an instant. One more thrust, one more scream, and the scent of Cleo's completion filled the chamber. Gregori shook and moaned and snapped his hips once, twice, once more. And then he was arriving as well, hard and fast, the muscles in his back standing out sharply as he went still, filling Cleo with his seed.

I think I must have cried for an hour that night, sitting there on that cold, hard bench. I sobbed, for I knew I had lost something profound. Nothing in my experience with Gregori could match what had happened that that night, and I knew myself well and truly replaced.

Cleo slipped into sleep almost immediately, and I sat, rocking back and forth with my arms around me until Gregori raised up on one elbow to look at me. How manfully I strove to stifle my tears, and how ridiculous I must have seemed. When I could finally speak my voice was raw with the force of my distress. "Shall I go now, my Lord?"

His face creased in a frown, and he held out his hand to me. "Nee'at. Of course not, Mista. Come, sleep with us."

I crept onto the bed, surreptitiously drying my face on the sheets. I curled up on the opposite side from Cleo, smelling them together, feeling the sticky residue of Cleo's seed on Gregori's chest. "Shall I clean you. my Lord?"

"We will all bathe together later, Mista," he answered, stroking my hair. "Sleep now."

I slept, knowing that my life had experienced a change as deep and enduring as the spring thaw.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tupe and Nikka should be back from their forays into the house soon. I carefully close my book to keep it from smearing, and look critically at my quill. It wants sharpening. I pull the knife out of Gregori's writing box and give it a new point. Preparing new sheets of parchment takes only moments more, and then there is nothing for it but to sit and listen to the soft, even breathing of two of the men I love.

Dozing myself, I lean against the wall and let my back rest. I often wonder what my life would have been like had I stayed in my tiny village, and each time I allow my mind upon that path I reach the conclusion that no matter what, my life is better. If nothing else ever comes of my life with Gregori, he gave me the gift of words, and I love him for that, if nothing else.

The sound of a heavy hand hitting the door panels wakes me, and I realize it is a sound I am coming to dread. Rising stiffly, for the floor is cold, I limp over and listen. Nothing.

"Who is it?" I ask, just loudly enough to be heard.

There is silence on the other side for long moments, broken only by what sounds to be nervous shuffling. Then I hear a voice that is completely unexpected.

"It is Illya, Mistral. Let me in. I wish to pay my last respects."

So surprised am I that I take a step back from the door before I realize what I am doing. "I am sorry, Master Illya, but I am on vigil. You know I cannot let you in."

He snorts loudly, a sound I recognize from countless encounters with him, and it makes me smile. "You let Nikka in easily enough."

"Nikka is the inheritor, Master. You know that. He is also my chosen assistant in the vigil. I should not even be talking to you. You should go now."

He bangs the door with his fist, making me jump. "Do not give me orders, you pup. I knew Gregori when you were nothing but a twinkle in your father's eye. Now let me in."

"Nee'at. I cannot."

"I can get the keys from Marina."

Laughing, I look over to make sure that neither Cleo nor Gregori are going to make an inconvenient noise, and they are both awake, and looking at me intently. "I would like to see you try to get those keys from her, Illya. You know I cannot let you in during vigil. There will be a service at the end of the third day, before the pyre. As is traditional. You can pay your respects then."

There's a loud harrumph from the other side of the door, and another thump, then silence. I wait, not wanting to trust that he has left, and I see Gregori motion Cleo to silence when he opens his mouth. Before long I hear voices again as the guard that Tupe assigned us comes back from wherever he was, and asks Illya to leave. Only then do I return to Gregori's side.

There is a look I have not seen before on Gregori's face. I think the closest thing to it would be bemusement.

"What is it, my Lord?"

"I am not sure I like the idea of my pyre, Mista. That gave me quite a jolt."

"No, my Lord," Cleo says. "It is not something we like the idea of either."

He laughs. "Illya certainly seemed to want to make certain I was dead."

Looking at him, I see his expression change to something more rueful. "You think it odd that he would come to pay his respects?"

"That man has never paid me any respect. He only stays because of his wife, and because he has a position of some power here."

Cleo and I exchange a surprised glance. "His wife?" we say, in tandem.

"Yes. Catrina. The head cook. Did you not know that? Of course you did not, else why would you ask? She is his wife of many years." Another fact to file away in my lists. I have no idea how or why that may be significant, but one never knows.

"Would you like some wine, my Lord?"

"Dai. So would Cleo, I think."

Cleo nods at me, smiling, and I make myself useful, pouring each of them a goblet. They drink, and chat, and I begin noting down the new information on the parchment I mean to give Nikka. A thought occurs to me, and I give it voice.

"Who else among your household doesn't particularly like you, my Lord? I vow, I had not one idea that Illya was not happy here."

"My sweet Mista. This is why you are not at court, yes? There are many people here who would not mind seeing me dead."

My mind reels at that. Gregori provides well for all of us. Why should anyone resent him? "Perhaps we could make a list my Lord, in order of those you think hold the most against you."

"A very good idea, dushka."

Perhaps he is only humoring me, but he does help me to make my list, and though it is not terribly long, it is longer than I would have expected.

"Cleo, mayhap you should make one as well."

Cleo's face crumples. "Steffan was the only one who had reason to dislike me. I think."

"Sergey," Gregori notes. "Anatole. The voice master, Master Guyan. Shall I go on?"

Looking at Cleo's quivering lip, I shake my head. "Perhaps later, my Lord. I think I see your point." Poor Cleo, with his soft heart.

Not long after that, Nikka returns, and we are able to tell him about Illya. He takes time to mull it over before he speaks, but I know him well enough to know that he finds it suspicious. "How strange. He is usually so aware of tradition and circumstance. He knows better."

"Dai," Gregori agrees. "So I think we need to watch out for him." He sighs. "As well as nearly twenty other people. I talked to Sergey today, and Evin. A few of the other boys as well. Shall I tell you what I learned?"

"Dai. Please."

Nikka pours himself a brandy, then joins us at the big bed that our entire world seems to have shrunk to. "Sergey is scared half to death."

I cannot help but smile. "He is of nervous temperament, Nikkolaa. Of course he is."

"That's not what I mean, Mista. I tell you he was terrified. He wants you, Mista. How on Saint Sorba's head did you manage to get him, Gregori? He's only a baby."

A faint grimace bends Gregori's mouth. "He is two and ten. I did not bring him home, Nikkolaa. He is fostered to me by Count Loenovvaa."

"Oh. Well, he did not know me, naturally, except by reputation. He cried for you, my Lord, and staunchly defended Cleo when I asked what he thought of him being your attacker."

"He's a love." Cleo is very fond of Sergey, which is why I had to bite my tongue when Gregori said he might want to hurt either of them. Bite it I did, but only because my Lord was making a point.

"Did you ask him why he was so afraid?"

I think I offend him with the question. "Of course I did, Mista. Not that he would tell me. He was worried about what would happen to him now that Gregori was dead." He looked apologetically at Gregori, who simply nodded. "And that was all. He told me how lonely he was and so on. But honestly, I got the impression that the other boys, or someone else, were telling him tales about what would happen to him now."

Poor Sergey. A sweet, shy boy who is much bullied by the other boys, I make it a point to try to spend time with him during the day. No wonder he is lonely and afraid. "Did you reassure him that you were the one to make such decisions now?"

"Yes. He was much relieved."

"What of the other boys?" Gregori sounds not so much impatient as concerned.

"They are all uneasy. Which is to be expected. I vow, my Lord, someone has been carrying tales. When questioned closely they will not tell me who, but the rumors have to have started somewhere."

Cleo frowns. "What rumors? I mean, I understand that they will all be worried about what will happen. You sound, though, as though they have concrete ideas."

Nikka nods, looking solemnly at Gregori. "They do. And if they all had a different idea I could see it simply being a case of several overactive imaginations. To a single one, almost, they believe that they will be sold off, though, and frankly if something had happened to Gregori during my tenure here I would never have thought of that."

"Nor I," I agree. "So someone must have planted the seed of that idea."

"Exactly. Just as someone set Cleo up. The same someone, I have no doubt."

We are all silent for a moment, letting the implications of that sink in. Which is when we hear it, a woman's scream, a tiny echo of it, more from the shuttered window than the door. I am on my feet in an instant, as are Cleo and Nikka. Even Gregori is galvanized by it, and pushes himself to sit at the side of the bed. Nikka throws us all a warning glance.

"Don't be stupid. Mista, let me out. I'll go, and as soon as I know something, you will. Stay here, and stay out of sight."

I open the big door for him and Nikka slips out, pulling it closed behind him so I can lock it tightly. The silence is uneasy between we three that are left, and the waiting is even worse than it had previously been. Who knows how many turns of the glass we wait, but Cleo is pacing, and Gregori is cursing, low and steady under his voice by the time Nikka returns.

The soft knock on the door is like a shot from a canon, and we all jump. It is amazing to me how quickly one gets used to a reduced space, and how intrusive it seems when someone invades it.

"Who comes?"

"Nikka." He sounds weary, and looks worse when I open the door. He is pale, almost gray, and there is blood on his tunic.

"What is it?" Gregori demands. "What has happened?"

"It's Tupelo. Someone attacked him. He is not hurt as badly as he could have been, and Marina seems to feel he will be fine, but he was hit over the head, very hard, and beaten badly after that."

A glance at Gregori shows his face hard and cold with rage. His voice, when he speaks, is frighteningly calm. "He has no idea who did it?"

"I do not know, my Lord. He woke only briefly, and was able to speak, but he drifted off again. Marina will send a runner for me when he wakes sufficiently to tell me what he remembers."

"Dushtinka!"

"Dai."

Cleo looks as though he might fall over, so I go to him and put an arm around him. Forcing the words out through stiff lips, he adds his opinion. "In a way this is good, dai? This means your inquiries have frightened someone. They have become careless."

"Yes. But the opposite of that is that it will be impossible to blame this attack on you Cleo. It will take credence from the idea of you being the killer, and I fear it will make you expendable."

I hug Cleo tightly. "Still, if they go looking for him in the room he is supposed to be they will not find him. He is safer here with us than he was down in that prison of a room they had him in."

"Dai. But we must still be very careful. All of our plans are in flux right now, as the killer seems to be changing his own."

Looking closely at Nikka, Gregori growls, a frustrated, angry sound. "You must be careful as well, Nikka. You are the only link we have right now to what happens in the house. We need you healthy and on your feet. Watch your back."

"Dai." Nikka looks obscurely pleased by the admonition. "I will do my best, my Lord."

"Then you shall succeed, for your best has always been more than good enough."

The color that comes to Nikka's cheeks is endearing, and once more reminds me that while Nikka has not been with us for some time, he is still a former favorite. Perhaps still more than a little in love with Gregori himself.

"So now what?" Cleo asks, snuggling into my side.

"So now we wait. Again."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Dark in Kazareen seems endless. Always it has been so to me. The days are just the same as the nights, and only the turning of the glass, or the hours on the Lord's water clock tell us which is which. Sometimes it seems as though one lives the same day over and over, as the weather is ever cold and dreary, and there is no change in the quality of light to make any one-day stand out.

These last days have been even more repetitive, and naturally, more nerve wracking. I am stuck in one room, with no way of knowing what goes on outside. Our one ally, Tupe, is fallen. Nikka must make his forays into the house with much deliberation, as he could be harmed were he not careful. It makes him snappish.

The Lord's mood becomes more and more foul. He spends much time sleeping, but with Nikka's help he has walked some, and he moves about as much as he can on his own, bending and stretching his arms and legs. He says when the time comes he wants to be able to face his would be assassin standing on his own two feet.

Cleo is never short tempered, really, but he does get more and more childlike when he is tired and frightened as he is now, and is given to frequent bouts of immature display.

I feel as though I must take it upon myself to soothe, to play mediator between them all, and it leaves my nerves strained to the point where I feel they may snap. I worry for them all, just as I worry for Tupe and Marina and little Sergey. The only outlet I possess is this, my writing, and even this becomes tedious when the others sleep and the lamps are turned down.

Cleo and Gregori sleep again. I feel as though I have said that a hundred hundred times these last days, but it is true, and so I say it. Nikka sits by the fire, poring over the notes I have made on what has transpired so far. Or he is until he makes a sound of utter frustration and throws it aside.

"We have nothing."

"We have Illya. Perhaps he is connected."

"Perhaps, but it makes no sense. I know he and Gregori disagree on things, but he has a place here. A good one. Why would he jeopardize that?"

"I do not know, Nikka. You should rest for awhile."

"Sweet, Mista." He turns a sad smile on me. "How ugly this must be to you."

"People that I love hurting is always ugly. Let me brush your hair?"

"Oh. Oh yes."

My brush is in the pack I brought with me and I retrieve it, settling behind him on the pallet before the fire. His hair smells of spice and costly citrus. I have ever loved his hair, as I might have said before. Long, black, heavy and silky, it entices my fingers to curl into it. Just as when I washed his hair for him last, I massage his scalp first, then take up my brush and stroke it through the heavy, coal colored strands until he relaxes. This is dear and familiar, and easier than sitting in rapidly cooling bathwater to wash, so I can linger upon the job. Beautiful Nikka.

"You still need a trim."

"And when, I ask, have I had time?" There is a smile in his voice, and I feel better for having made him happy.

"Shall I do it now?"

"No. Just keep doing that."

So I do, thinking back once more to the time, seemingly so long ago, when Nikka and Gregori were in the bed together and Gregori spread himself across the sheets and asked Nikka to use his hair on him. The look on his face was pure bliss as Nikka took up a heavy lock and stroked it over his cheeks, his eyes, his lips. A shorter tail was used to tease his throat, Nikka making the ends into a stiff little brush to abrade the tender skin there. The whole, thick fall of it he used on Gregori's chest, pushing his fingers through it to pinch and pull Gregori's nipples, making him groan, making my belly hurt.

Never again have I seen such a sight as Nikka with his hair fanned out on Gregori's belly while he licked and sucked that heavy cock. Dark black, almost blue, against pale skin, like a rich, expensive fur. Glossy, shiny, how I longed to touch it but I had not yet been invited into the play, and so I stayed where I was.

The noise Gregori made when Nikka moved back and wrapped a fistful of hair around Gregori's cock almost made me come. A deep, tearing sound from deep in his chest, one that went on and on as Nikka bent to bite deeply into the flesh of Gregori's thigh. I could not look away. Pumping steadily, Nikka worked that thick shaft, licking and sucking at whatever skin he had access to, making Gregori mad with lust. And when he moved his other hands to wrap Gregori's heavy sacs in the long strands, Gregori cried out, and spent himself in a great, shuddering burst. His seed fell into Nikka's hair and looked like a garland of pearls.

The memory excites me, and he must hear the changed tenor of my breathing, for Nikka turns his head to look at me over his shoulder, catching the brush and pulling up a tangle. "Mista? What are you thinking?"

"Do you remember the time that Gregori had you love him using your hair?" The blush that creeps up his neck is plainly visible to me, and I move his hair aside to kiss the skin there. "You do."

"Dai. Of course I do. Did you like that, Mista, when you watched us?"

"I painted half the room with my seed I think." I laugh, feeling my own face heat. "Dai. I liked it. Very much. I cannot even see your hair unbound since then without being aroused."

"Really?" He turns around to face me, shuffling his long legs so that one is on either side of me. One of his hands finds my hardness and strokes through my breeches. "What have we here? The idea truly does excite you."

"Have I ever lied about that?"

"No. Would you like that, Mista? My hair on you? On your chest, your thighs? Your prick?"

"Dai. Oh yes."

They say that tension of all sorts may somehow transmute into sexual energy, and I think that is the case here. This is not about comfort, as with before. This is about the itch under my skin that comes from forced inaction. The need between us is explosive, and Nikka kisses me hard enough to split my lips, pushing me back to the floor and tearing at my clothes. His fingers are hard and urgent, and soon I am nude, stretched before him in a position so reminiscent of my recent memory of he and Gregori that my cock jumps, and I feel drops of moisture seep from the tip.

Nikka gives a smile, at once intimate and predatory, and leans down to lick them up. Then he kisses me again, deep and hard, tongue moving in a most suggestive way. His hair falls around us, and without even realizing it I have a double handful of it, rubbing it over my chest and belly. The fall of it creates a secret world for us, enclosing us together, and his kisses steal my breath.

When he pulls back I am dizzy with his taste and scent, and I watch him disrobe with a heated stare. He is the one to take up his hair this time, to rub it over his own nipples, the

hard peaks of flesh showing through the curls and I moan, wanting to feel it on my own skin.

Whatever I want, he knows, and he gives it to me. He is all around me, his skin hot against mine, his hair cool by comparison. He rubs against me, trapping it between us, on my chest, my neck. Oh, so wonderful. Finally he pulls back enough to reach below my waist and wrap great hands full of the stuff around my cock, and the sensation is almost unbearable. Slippery ticklish, and the pressure of his hand combined with it make gooseflesh raise all over my body; my cock throbs.

"Nikka. Please."

"Please what? What do you want, Mista?"

I do not know. I want him inside me. I want to be inside him. I want exactly what he is doing for a long, long while. Thrashing, moaning, I cannot seem to answer him. Once again, he knows what I need, for he pulls, leaving me bereft, but so sensitized I am almost in pain. The he wets his fingers, and pushes them between his legs, into his body.

"In me, Mista. Now."

"Dai." The word is practically a growl, and some part of me is amazed to hear it come from me, but my need for him is such that I can ignore it. I am up and on him almost before he can move, pushing him down on his back, pulling his legs around me, resting them on my thighs. Now it is my fingers on his lips, opening his mouth, and he sucks them in, wetting them thoroughly. "Now?"

He nods, letting my wet fingers slip from his mouth, and I slick myself as best as I may before lining my prick up with the entrance of his body. I cannot be gentle, and it would seem he does not want me to be, wrapping his legs about me and pulling at me, body grasping me tightly and holding me in a sweet, hot vise.

We come together with a violence born of desperation, of frustration, and there is little tenderness to what we do. But I know that there is love, and I trust Nikka with my life. Roughly, bruising the pale skin of his thighs, I lift him, changing the angle of my thrusts until I am pounding against that tiny spot that make him gasp and cry. He is unutterably beautiful like this, eyes dark and wild, muscles jumping under his skin, whole body shaking for me.

His cock stands between, hard and red, moisture forming at the tip, and I put my hand about it, pulling in time with my thrusts, making him arch, making his buttocks tighten around me until I feel I might scream with it. Neither he nor I can last much longer. My arms shake with the strain of holding him open, and his thighs tremble from the stretched position, and my sweat falls upon him, so hot as to burn him surely.

When his expression turns agonized I know he is so close as to be hurting, and I pump his cock with my fist. He holds in his cries, but I can see them working the muscles of his throat. His seed spills into my hand, burning hot, and his body clamps down on me, milking my own release from me, forcing me to give up my seed to the tight grip of him. The feeling is like nothing I can remember.

"Love you, Mista," he tells me, as I collapse against him, and I nod against his chest.

"Dai. I love you as well. Will you stay? When this is all over? With us?"

"I do not know, Mista. It all depends upon Gregori, and what he chooses to do. I would like to. Time enough, I think, for me to come home."

"Dai. You belong here with us. We need you."

"But you have Cleo, and Gregori."

I stroke his cheek with my hand, sighing. "But we are incomplete without you. Or at least I am. Does that make me selfish and greedy?"

"Nee'at, dushka. It makes you entirely too easy to love."

When the sweat from our exertions dries on my body, I am assailed by guilt. Tupelo lies injured, Gregori's would be assassin is still at large, and here I am indulging my flesh. Stiffening, I try to pull away from Nikka, but he puts a hand on my back, holding me down.

"Shhh. None of that Mista. How can anyone deny us this? We have had too much these last days. Especially you, unable to leave this place, but not needing the recovery time as Cleo and Gregori do. Besides that, we need to talk. The third day of vigil is coming to an end. What do you want to do now?"

"Bathe?" His chest rumbles under my ear with his laughter. "We should talk with Gregori about that, Nikka. He should have a say, and so should Cleo."

"Very well. I still need to talk to you however, for in the excitement over Tupelo, I forgot to tell you the rest of what I discovered, such as it is."

"Dai."

"You may tell all of us now that you have us awake."

My cheeks go hot immediately, but Gregori only sounds coolly amused. When I raise my head to look at him, he and Cleo both smile back at me from where they are curled about one another in the bed. Nikka, bless him, is not at all embarrassed, and smacks me lightly on the bottom to get me moving.

"Dai. I think that is a good idea. Go and get your notes, Mista, and some clothes and we will talk."

Dressed, notes and quill in hand, I go to sit beside Cleo, and he gives me a quick kiss. His love humbles me at times, because I can tell he has accepted the way in which I care for Nikka. How I love him for his generous heart.

"Tell us what else you found, Nikka."

"Well, I am not certain that anything will be of use. As I said before, Sergey is frightened. So are many of the other boys. I spoke to who knows how many, from the pages to the chimney boys. None of them were terribly friendly with Steffan. Several of them told me that Anatole tried to be, but was rebuffed mostly."

We are all unsurprised by that, in the main. Anatole was brought to Kallista by Gregori for the same reason as the rest of us, to be certain, but he showed a marked uneasiness at Gregori's most casual touch, a deep and abiding fear or disgust for men touching other men, if you will. So he is being given an education, and Gregori is looking for an apprenticeship for him in the city. That he has yet to find one makes Anatole extremely bitter. He also hates Cleo, mainly for his music, which Anatole aspires to, but does not have the talent for. It does not surprise me that he would try to ingratiate himself with the one he knew would take Cleo's place.

"So he had no one at all that he spent time with?" Poor Cleo sounds very sad for Steffan, which is as endearing as it is amusing.

"Aside from Gregori? Not really. Although Anatole was sure to mention he thought Steffan spent far too much time with the servants. You know how conscious he is of his position, and how that would sting him."

Oh, so true. Almost as conscious of his status as Illya, Anatole would sneer at someone who found more friends among the serving classes. Still, I note it down, and it makes a thought occur to me.

"My Lord? You say that Sergey is fostered to you, and I know that Nikka, Cleo and I all come from far off places. Where did you find Steffan?"

He stares at me for a moment. "In Kazareen. He was an orphan."

"Oh. Well, perhaps that is why he felt more comfortable among the serving people."

"Doubtless you are right. What else, Nikka?"

"Sadly, nothing more. A few other boys could remember seeing Steffan belowstairs if asked, but that is all."

Heaving a sigh, Gregori pulls himself to a sitting position. He looks much stronger, and I am pleased. Very serious, he looks at us all in turn. "Nikka is right, though. Today is the last day of the vigil. Or to be more precise, this past night was. What with Tupelo being injured and Marina caring for him, we might have some extra time, as she will be the one everyone expects to help ready me for the pyre. We will not be able to hold them off long, however. I am open to suggestions as to what we must do now."

Cleo's face screws up in deep thought, and I fight a smile. Nikka catches my eye and winks, then sobers. "I think we need Tupe. He might be able to tell us who hit him, and that would be a good thing. We also need any information he might have gotten from the guards. Without that we have less than half of the story."

"I also think we need to keep an eye on Illya," I say. "I know it seems as though I am latching on to him as the only hope we have, but I find his behavior in coming up here extremely suspicious."

As if brought to us by our very thoughts, the runner arrives outside our door at that very moment to tell us that Tupelo is awake, and Marina thinks he will be able to speak to Nikkolaa. Thank the saints. Nikka hastens to go to him, leaving us with an admonishment to do nothing until he returns. I can feel my face twist at his words. As if we have a choice.

A few moments are spent in quiet discussion with Cleo, regarding Nikka.

"You love him."

"Of course. I love you as well, in a very different way. Just as I love Gregori."

"You want him to stay."

Searching Cleo's face very carefully, I see no trace of ugliness or resentment. I press a quick kiss to his lips. "I adore you, kedvesem. Dai. I want him to stay. Things will be very different here, I think, and we will need our friends. Now, go and keep our Lord warm. I must write these things that Nikka told us."

Transcribing Nikka's discussions with the pages and servants takes little time, honestly, but I want time to think. Things will never be the same. I know it, and I reel with the knowledge. Somehow I do not think Cleo realizes that. Certainly Gregori does, but he has always been reticent about his thoughts on things. No doubt he is working along some sort of plan, but I have not the first idea what it might be. Never before have I thought myself resistant to change, but the scope of what must change here, surely, leaves me breathless. My life can be broken into two parts. The time before Gregori, and the time after. I wonder what I will call the next stage.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I cannot help but feel sorry for young Steffan, having no friends among the household save the servants. It never occurred to me, frankly, because I never got to know the boy. I had reason to resent him, as I knew he would be the next, and so, while not hostile to him, I was not friendly. Cleo was unfailingly polite to him while they worked upon his training, but he never got to know Steffan well either. Of course, if Steffan knew he was to be Cleo's downfall, perhaps it was best for him not to get to know him, so he could hurt him without guilt. I wish I could look back and see a pattern in his behavior that led me to what has happened. So far I do not see it.

He was ever sullen, and withdrawn, but I put that down to his unique situation. He had not just one, but two former favorites with whom to contend. Quiet, not given to studies, and seemingly indifferent to the baubles and toys that the other boys so loved, he was a difficult young man.

Stifling a sigh, I try to think of other things. Going round and round about things I cannot change or solve will only cloud my mind. Better, perhaps to think of how Cleo was when I first met him. Pure and bright and so sweetly innocent. Scared, yes, but not paralyzed with it, not willing to let it keep him from his place here. So loving and open, despite his less than perfect life before he came here, and so eager to learn pleasure from Gregori, and from me.

Very tactile, my Cleo, he communicates as much with his fingers as he does his lovely voice. Perhaps that was why Steffan was so averse to Gregori's touch. Oh, not Cleo being tactile. Only growing up in an orphanage. He must have been starved for touch. Also, most orphans in Kazareen were raised under the aegis of Saint Ivore, the most strict and moral saint.

Which perhaps explained a great deal, but still did not give me any clues as to whom he might collude with.

Whoever he was in league with had to be strong enough to take Tupelo down with one blow, and angry enough to beat him while he was down. Illya would be both, but for the life of me I cannot think of why. None of us can, so despite my suspicion of him, it remains unfounded. None of the boys that I can think of, up to and including Anatole, would have the nerve. Most of them fear or respect Tupe too much. The guards I do not know well, but I do know that Tupe chooses them in the main for their loyalty to him, and most of them would not be able to dissemble well enough to do such a thing.

All of which leaves me with the servants, of who Steffan seemed most fond. Who among them would be invested in seeing Gregori fall, and Cleo as well. Rubbing my temples with my fingers helps not at all, except to smear ink all over. As little as I know about Steffan, I know less about the servants. Marina is more like a mother to me, not a servant. There is Cook, who was always kind, if stolid, and I know a few of the upstairs maids, though not well. There must be a hundred servants at Kallista, and I know perhaps five. Disheartening, certainly.

The other masters have no reason to do it, save wanting Steffan for themselves, and as cold as he was I can hardly see that. Most of them would not resort to brute violence on Tupelo either, save perhaps the fencing master, and he would simply run him through.

During my musings I have been scribbling on my parchment, and I look down to see a perfect little likeness of Steffan's face. My talent is not in art, as Nikka's is, but I am proficient enough, and I sigh down at my work. "I wish you could tell us, Steffan. Why?"

Distraction comes in the form of Nikka returning from Tupe's rooms, face tight and hard.

"The news is not good," he says, without preface. At Gregori's look he hastens to add, "Tupe will be fine. But he does not know who attacked him. He saw no one."

Gregori lets loose with a string of words so filthy that we all blink at him. Laughing at our collective expressions, he shakes his head. "I am sorry, my lads, but this is gravely bad news. I had so hoped he could give us something to work with."

Comforting him the only way he knows, Cleo curls into Gregori's side, wrapping warm arms around him and holding tight. In a gesture so tender it brings tears to my eyes, Gregori strokes his hair back from his face and smiles.

"Perhaps Nikka should tell us what Tupe did remember. Did he talk to the guards?"

"Dai. He said he talked most of them, and as far as they can remember it was Jarl who accused Cleo."

A surprised sound comes from Cleo. "But Jarl likes me!"

"Shush, dushka. Did he speak with Jarl?" Gregori pets Cleo's back, soothing him in turn.

"He did." Nikka looks sour. "Jarl says he is not certain why he thought that might be the case, but when he got the call to Gregori's aid, he wondered aloud if Cleo was in the room at the time. By the time Steffan's body was taken away and Gregori was abed, it was agreed that Cleo should be apprehended. Apparently that is when Tupe took over, and took Cleo into his custody, more for protection than anything else."

Mulling that over, I tap my quill against my writing box. "Where was he?"

"Who?"

"Jarl. When he was called to action. Where was he?"

Eyes narrowing, staring at me intently, Gregori asks, "You have an idea?"

"Not really. I simply think it might be beneficial to know."

His look tells me he does not believe me, as does Nikka's. Cleo simply looks confused.

"Tupe did not know. Perhaps I can ask him."

"Or perhaps I can."

Both Gregori and Nikka look as though they wish to disagree, but I hold up my hand, surprised when they remain quiet. "It is time for me to venture belowstairs and get all of the items I need for the end of the vigil. If I do not, people will become more suspicious than they are already. I can stop and speak to Illya, too, apologize to him for not letting him in. Perhaps I may glean something from him that Tupe could not. He has always liked me."

All three of them exclaim at that, loudly negative. Steeling myself, I meet the eyes of each of them, projecting an unshakeable facade. "I must. If you insist I will not see Illya, but I must still go and make the requests for herbs and linens."

"I'll go with you."

"Nee'at." I glare at Nikka. "I know you are supposed to be the head of the household after Gregori's passing, but I am the one who is supposed to do the vigil. It is sacred. How will it look if I allow you to help? I understand your concern, and I thank you for it, but I can do this myself!"

"Come here, Mistral." Setting aside my writing tools with a sigh, I go to Gregori, taking the hand he holds out for me.

"I know we can trust you to do whatever must be done, my Mista. We simply do not wish to see harm come to you. Look at what has happened to Tupelo."

Bringing his hand to my face, I kiss his palm. Any evidence that he gives me of how much he cares makes my heart glad. Still, I know what I must do.

"I shall be careful. I promise."

"Very well." This time it is he who holds up a hand, forestalling Nikka's vehement protest. "He has a point, Nikkolaa. But you will be careful, Mista. Take no chances. I am not so weak that I cannot paddle your ass."

A tiny laugh escapes me. "Promise?" They all laugh at that as well, easing some of the room's tension. "I shall be back very soon. Nikka, the door."

"A kiss, Mista," he says, brushing my lips with his. "For luck."

"Ahstanka, Nikka." The traditional thank you sounds too stiff, so I kiss him back, and then I am out. The guard nods solemnly at me, and I acknowledge him just as formally. Down the stairs and out into the house, and I confess my heart is pounding. Not only because of the fear of being harmed, but because after the short time I have been secluded with Gregori the house seems impossibly large and imposing. I am reminded that while I have always had the run of the house, I have managed to stick to a very small section of it.

My first stop is at the kitchens, where all of the herbs are stored, medicinal as well as those for cooking. The sculleries look at me with eyes wide and fearful, and my stomach knots tightly. This feeling of exposure, and of duplicity, does not sit well with me. Cook is there, which is a relief, for she is familiar, broad, and placid and bland as butter. "So, he's really dead, is he?"

My pale face and wide eyes are no act, as her words come as such a shock. I remember myself in time to stammer an answer. "Dai. He is. I want. Please, may I have the herbs for vigil's end?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

She takes up her chatelaine and takes me to the cold room, where her spice chest resides. "You will need calmunet, and crimson leaf. The rituals call for minksglove and snowroot as well. Do you have a kettle and a bowl?"

"No. I mean, yes I have a kettle. But not the bowl."

She hands me all of the items I need, her only commentary a list of things I need to do. Finally she looks at me, very seriously. "You need to ask Nikkolaa something."

The way she says Nikka's name leaves me in no doubt as to what she thinks of him as the new head of the house. The disdainful sniff she ended with gave her away of nothing else.

"Certainly I can ask."

"Many of us would like to know if there will be a ceremony for poor Steffan, as well. He was... kind to us."

"Oh. Of course." It only now occurs to me that most of the house is unaware that Steffan is actually the killer. "Poor Steffan. I have been so distraught. I never thought. I will ask him."

"Thank you. There. That is all you will need."

"Thank you." Before she can ask any further uncomfortable questions I take the crate she filled for me and go. I must see the linen master before I make my way upstairs again.

The laundry maids give me the same wide berth as the scullery girls did, but Master Volenz is much less reticent. "Mista! Lad. How are you holding up?"

"As well as I can, Master." Master Volenz is small and wiry, with startlingly developed arms and shoulders. He is also completely blind from the harsh lye and other minerals used at the laundry, but he can tell any of a hundred people by their footsteps and their breathing. "I need the linens for..." I let my voice break, "for Lord Gregori's funeral shroud. Can you have someone fetch them for me?"

His lined face crinkles with sympathy. "Is the vigil over already? Well of course it is, or you would not be out and about. Terrible thing. Terrible. And what's to happen to us, I ask you? Now that he's gone?"

"Nikkolaa is taking over the house, Master."

"Nikka, you say? Good lad, that. Solid. Well. Hmm." Off he goes to get the linens, I presume, still talking to himself. Cleo always says the chemicals affect more than his eyesight, and while unkind, I think perhaps he is right. Still, the man has always been kind, and more and more I appreciate that.

"Master?" I call out. "Can you do me a favor, as well? Can you ready some linens for Steffan? In my grief over Gregori I have quite forgotten him, but he will need to have a ceremony as well."

"Dai. Of course. I will ready that for you to have sent later. You will wish Gregori's now, though, and I did that with my own hands these last few days. A good man, Gregori. He will be missed."

"Yes." He hands me the required linens, and I know I must escape before I give the whole game away. "Thank you, Master. Saints protect you."

"And you, lad. Be careful."

Before I can ask him what he means by that he is gone, back into the back room, disappearing into the steam. Thoughtful, I stare after him for a moment, then make my way back up to the main part of the house. I need to stop by the study for some more parchment, and a new bottle of ink. The house is quiet. Too quiet, as if people are avoiding me. In some ways that is a relief, and yet it heightens my nervousness, making me jumpy.

"Mista!" Master Illya's booming voice sounds, and I start so that I almost drop my armload of supplies.

"Master." Inclining my head politely I back off a pace so he is not so close. "I wish to apologize to you."

"Really? For what, Mista?"

"For my rudeness. You understand, of course, why I could not let you in?"

"Of course." He eyes my things speculatively. "So it is time to start all that, is it?"

"Dai. By the end of this day the body should be ready for the communal mourning. Nikkolaa will make the announcement." I cannot help but watch him closely, but he simply looks blank. Perhaps if I try another tack. "Do you know where they are keeping Steffan's body?"

It is his turn to draw away, in what looks like surprise. "How should I know?"

"You are the Master of Pages. He falls under your care. I am sorry once again, Master Illya. I thought you would know. It has come to my attention that he has had no vigil, and no funeral preparations."

"Ah." Studying me for a moment, he nods sharply. "He is in one of the snow rooms. To keep him from stinking."

"You know which one?"

"Dai."

"Then I will have Nikka contact you. I spoke to Master Volenz about the linens, and to cook about the herbs."

"Very well. Would you like help with that, lad?"

He sounds utterly sincere, but there is a look in his eyes that I dislike. There is no doubt in my mind that Nikka would laugh and tell me that is because I am looking for it, and quite possibly he would be right. Still, I feel no need to take a chance.

"No thank you, Illya. I can manage. I shall have Nikka come and speak to you."

"You're a good lad, Mista. Do not let Nikka take on with you the way Gregori did. You have a chance to escape that life."

Before I can think of anything to answer that cryptic comment, he leaves me, going down the hall that leads to the master's offices. I can only stare after him, thoughts moving rapidly though my head. Shaking myself from my musing I make my way back up to the tower rooms, knowing that on my first foray out into the house Nikka and Gregori and Cleo will worry about me.

Nikka answers my knock on the door immediately, looking relieved. "Thank goodness. You had no trouble?"

"Nee'at. Nothing."

"Good." Wrinkling his nose at me armful of funerary supplies, Nikka helps me carry them to the press against one wall and stow them away. "No one approached you?"

"Illya did, but only to ask if I needed help. Nikka, has no one approached you about a funeral for Steffan?"

"No. No one. Why?"

"I was in the kitchen getting herbs, and cook asked me. I had master Volenz make up more linens. Do you not find it strange?"

Before he can answer, Gregori does. "I find that it reinforces our idea that whoever was in league with Steffan is here in the house. They must fear that if they come forward they will be found out."

"Perhaps."

Cleo looks at me closely. He may not have a head for puzzles, but he knows my moods well.
"What is it, Mista?"

"Nothing. Only that all of the servants seemed afraid to come near me. Even the ones I know. Except for the masters, like Volenz, who seemed much relieved that you were taking over the household, Nikka."

Nikka grins. "I should think he would be horrified, as many times as I muddied his sheets during the light. Still, it is good to know. What else?"

They will not stop until I have it out. "Illya. He told me... he said that I should not let you drag me into the same position as Gregori has, Nikka. He says I have a chance at freedom, like I am a slave."

"Hypocrite." Gregori sounds coldly angry. "Such a hypocrite he is."

"I told him that we would be ready for the public services this evening." Shrugging, I look to Gregori for approval. "I did not know what else to say."

"You did well, Mista. We must move forward."

"I told them all, also, that you would come and talk to them about Steffan, Nikka. Perhaps you could do that while I stay here, ostensibly to prepare Gregori. The word will be out by now, and mayhap people will come and talk to you about it without fear of reprisal."

"Good idea." He gives me a soft kiss. "You got more parchment? Good. Keep noting it all down. Somehow a pattern must emerge somewhere."

"Dai. Your turn to promise not to do something silly."

"I promise."

He slips out, and I watch him go with worried eyes. Cleo puts a hand on my arm and smiles, and I hug him tightly for a moment. "You are a love, Cleo."

"You make it easy to be so. We worried for you."

One last squeeze and I let him go. "How are we to have the ceremony, my Lord? People will be expecting it. And it must look as though it is you in that shroud."

"I know, love. Cleo and I think we have a plan on that. And it will give this bundle of energy something to do." He smiles fondly at Cleo. "You write. We shall conspire. Dai?"

Relieved, I smile back. "Dai."

Chapter Twenty-Four

There is nothing more for it but I write down the events of the day while they speak in low voices. Frankly, I am glad to be out of the discussion. I am a coward that way sometimes, preferring for the hard choices to be made elsewhere. Only half of my attention is needed for my notes, and I confess the idea that just passed makes me think about Illya's comment about freedom.

Only recently have I come to realize that Illya profoundly disapproves of Gregori's practices. Somehow it never seemed so to me, even when he encouraged me to break out of the mold set for me and take charge of my place in Gregori's life. I simply thought that Illya favored me. Now I begin to see that he does not approve of the entire system.

Way back when I was a boy, right after Gregori bought me from my father, I remember the idea of slavery lingering in my mind. I had not the word for it then, but I knew that people bought other people and made them work, perhaps treated them harshly. That youthful definition of slavery is still the one in my mind, and I do not equate it at all with Gregori.

Slaves are not educated. They are not encouraged in their artistic talents. They are coerced into things against their will. Never have I seen such behavior from Gregori. Naturally, some people will think what he does is wrong, just as some people feel loving men is wrong, or being a spy is wrong, but I hardly think so myself.

I wonder if that is how Steffan felt. Like a slave. Like someone who had so little choice in their life that they had to resort to killing someone. Or perhaps that was what made him such an easy target, such a soft ear to bend, to convince him to do so. Either way it makes me

sad that anyone would misunderstand Gregori so badly. Look at the life he took me away from, the abusive home he rescued Cleo from. Even Steffan, taking him from an orphanage to a life that must be better.

My notes are completed, and I look up to see Cleo kissing Gregori intimately. For the first time in a long while, I feel like an interloper. An outsider. There is a pang in my chest, not of jealousy, but of sorrow. For I know that Gregori favors Cleo above all others, and while Cleo loves me, he loves Gregori more. Much, much more. It is not a comfortable feeling, one that takes me back years to when Cleo first came up, and together with my worry for our tenuous situation, makes me miserably unhappy.

Things will change. This is something I never believed would happen 'ere now, as Kallista seemed as constant as the change from light to dark and back. Now it is inevitable, and I feel like my whole life is in flux. I am seeing things in new ways, none of them comforting. Less than ideal, the whole situation. Perhaps Illya does have a point after all, but not in the way he supposes. More that I should make myself see the advantages of having new opportunities. I am free to embrace change, rather than fear it, and while I may mourn what I lose, I should celebrate what I gain.

Which does not mitigate the fear one tiny bit.

Sighing, I turn back to my notes to read through them, sifting them for anything that might tie all of the loose threads together. There must be something. Some crucial bit of information that I possess that I do not see. Perhaps something so obvious as to be hidden in plain sight. One way or another, if it is there I will find it. Questions and change we have in abundance, but we are quickly running out of time.

"Mistral! Open the door!" It is Marina, who at full volume has been compared to Saint Bertida, leading her troops into battle. I am moving to the door before I even realize I was dozing, and I can see that Gregori and Cleo are similarly affected.

When I open the door she pushes it wider, and I catch it before anyone outside might see in. A cry of dismay escapes me as she slips inside, because Nikka is with her, leaning heavily on her shoulder. The blood on his face and in his hair tell a grim story.

"Nikka! Saints. What has happened?"

"Help me get him over to the fire. Do you still have fresh water? Good. Cleo, get some and heat it. I'll need that packet of herbs I've been using for Gregori's tea. Don't just sit there. Gregori, give one of those blankets. The boy is in shock."

We all scramble to do her bidding, I making sure the door is bolted securely first. My stomach hurts at the sight of Nikka with blood on him, and my hands shake as I help lower him to the pallet by the fire. He groans as he settles heavily on the furs, and his skin is gray and clammy. As soon as he is still he begins to heave, and I grab a basin and shove it at him just in time. My poor Nikka. He must have taken quite a blow to be this sick. Cleo busies himself with the water, and Gregori is there on shaky legs, wrapping a soft blanket about Nikka's shoulders.

The herbs are steeped in the water Cleo prepared, and Marina helps Nikka drink it down. For a moment I fear that it will all come back up again, from the way his body shakes, but he calms then, laying back and resting himself. His breathing slows, and he relaxes, squeezing his eyes closed for a moment before looking at me.

"What happened, Nikka?" The sponge Marina hands me is warm, and just damp, and I begin to clean the blood from his forehead and cheeks. "What do you remember?"

"I am not certain, Mista." His voice is a croak, and I gesture for Cleo to get something for him to drink that does not have harsh herbs in it. After some cool water slides down his throat he is better able to talk. "I spoke to cook, and to Volenz, and I was on my way to Illya's office. Came upon me so fast that I had no time to see, they just hit me. Then all I could see was black. I heard footsteps running away, and Marina's voice. I was going to see Tupe first, I remember that now. I must have been just outside?"

"Dai. I heard you hit the floor, Nikka. Someone is getting very bold. I did not see who it was, though. Only you, when I opened the door."

"Inmashin!" Marina stares at me, surprised, but I do not apologize for the curse. "We must stop this. We must."

"Mista," Nikka's voice is stronger, color returning to his cheeks thanks to Marina's herbs.

"Nee'at! First Gregori. Then they effectively take Cleo away as well, by having him accused. Then Tupelo, and now you! I will not stand for it any longer. This is insane. People I love are being hurt and I will not... I must act. Can you not all see how whoever this is has taken our lives away?"

"Dai. I can see it." The words are serious and quiet, and all eyes go to Gregori. "We are leaving. Tonight. All of us. We will go, and everyone will think I am dead, and that will be that."

The room spins, and Cleo and Marina both reach for me, but I shake them off. "That is your solution? To run away? To take us all from everything that has ever been our and let someone drive you from your home?"

"There is more to it than that, Mista."

"Then by all means, tell me, My Lord, so that I may understand. Because from you I do not understand cowardice. I do not understand running."

"You give me too much credit."

"Apparently. But how can I not? You have been my whole life!"

Tears stream down my face, hot and stinging salt. Cleo tries to take my hand, and I whirl on him. "This was your great plan? This was what you conspired about? How could you?"

"Mista," he is crying as well, flinching back from me. I have never shouted at him before, never so much as raised my voice, but this plan is insanity.

"Mista, listen. If the whole of Kazareen thinks me dead I no longer have to serve the prince. I am free. Free to pursue a life I have always wished. Free to love whom I wish without worrying about my reputation. My wife can remarry, and I will no longer be burdened with her, and we may all go wherever we like, and escape this cold, dark place."

Free. Just like Illya said. I look at Nikka. "Nikkolaa? Will you go?"

He looks back at me, and I see the same anguish reflected in his eyes that I know must be in mine. "I... I do not know. Dizzy, Mista. So dizzy."

"All of you need to be quiet and let him rest. You may argue later."

Immediately contrite, I move away. Gregori reaches for me but I turn aside from him, taking up my notes and going to the nearest lamp. He comes to me and kneels down before me, closing a hand over mine to stop my quill. "Mista, please. Try to understand."

"I understand that you want another life, my Lord. I am just not sure I can make myself be a part of it."

"Oh, Mista. Please. What is so wrong? What can you not understand?"

"That my whole life is gone? That everything is crumbling. You will no longer need me. Neither will Cleo. And Nikka... I only just realized how I have missed him, and now I am not even sure if I will have time to be with him. You will see, I hope, why it hard for me to take in right away."

Kissing me on the forehead, he squeezes my shoulders as he stands. "I hope you will be able to take it in soon, my Mista. I want you with us."

As if by some unspoken agreement, it's Cleo's turn. He comes to me next, hands on my face.
"Mista. Please. I love you."

"I know."

He stares without speaking for long moments. "You love Nikka."

"Of course I do."

"Nee'at. I mean you are in love with him and you have only just realized it. Now you feel disloyal."

"No." Looking up at him, I can see no malice in his face, only deep concern. "I feel bereft. I feel as though you and Gregori have decided my future. Dai, I am confused about my feelings for Nikka, because I thought I was content. I want to be sure I am not fancying myself in love with him just to have something of my own."

The kiss he gives me is soft, and sweet, and somehow forgiving. "I trust you to figure it out, Mista. You are the smartest man I know."

"Thank you, kedvesem."

"I love you." One more kiss and he leaves me to myself. Murmurs come from the big bed, and I know he and Gregori are talking things over. Marina is tending Nikka, and I want to simply sit and cry. How much of that have I done recently? Too much, far too much and I must pull myself together. I must think.

Chapter Twenty-Five

My notes are crumpled in one hand, and I smooth them out. For the first time it occurs to me to look not only at them, but at my journal as well. There might be something there that I felt too personal to share. Something that, when combined with the rest, makes sense of what is senseless. The only true suspect I have is Illya, and even that is mostly my instinct blended with the knowledge that he disapproves of Gregori. If I am to accuse him I must find something more damning than my suppositions.

I do not want it to be Illya. He is a good man, or at least he has always been so to me. Gruff, but kind. Helpful to me, when I needed help desperately. He gave me hope when I had none.

But he also had access to Steffan during all these years. He could have turned the house against Cleo. He was the one who came to the tower, trying to see Gregori. There is something I continue to miss, and it eats at me like a poem you know by heart but cannot think of the first stanza to recite it. As I listen to the sound of Cleo and Gregori making love on the bed behind me, I hope that I may find the words for it soon.

Nikka moans and shifts restlessly on his pallet, and I move over to check on him. His eyes, when they open, are unfocussed and tired. "Mista?"

"Dai. Oh, Nikka. It looks like it hurts so."

"Not so bad, now, with Marina's tonic. Mista. I have been thinking."

"About what?"

"If Gregori decides to go, now, tonight. Let us go with him. We can go as far as he will take us, start over somewhere, together."

My surprise is such that I am silent so long he begins to become uncomfortable. Shifting again, going pale as his head moves in an instinctive shake, he grimaces.

"I am sorry, Mista. I was precipitous. It is only that... I have missed you more than I ever knew I had. Being with you again makes me see that. Think about it for me? Go with Gregori if he goes? Give us time to get to know one another again."

"Oh, Nikka. That sounds... dai. I can do that, but I admit that I am frightened."

He reaches out for me, taking my hand. His hand is warm and solid, his grip weaker than I would like. "I was terrified when I left Kallista, you know."

"Really? You seemed so eager to go."

Chuckling, he brings my hand to his mouth to kiss it lightly. "I was furiously jealous, Mista. Both of you and for you. Cleo was taking over both Gregori's heart and yours and I could not bear it. So I asked Gregori for my first assignment. I did not want to leave. Frankly, it scared me half to death."

"Yet you went." I trace his lips with my thumb, loving the feel of his skin, but careful not to press against him and move his head.

"Dai. And I learned that I could do more than I ever thought I could. Kallista is a good home, Mista, but there is a wide world out there waiting for us. Let us see it together?"

Now it is my turn to bring his hand to my mouth to kiss his fingers. "Dai. I will go with you, Nikka. I love you."

The smile he gives me is brighter than the first day of the Light. "And I you, Mista."

Now I know I must disappoint him. "But not until we catch the one who did this, Nikka. There is something I am missing. There must be. And I feel I cannot leave Kallista under such a threat of danger. Not only is it cowardly, but it shirks our responsibilities. I understand why Gregori wishes to remain 'dead'. But it is still our duty to see the people here safe."

Regarding me steadily, he does the same as I, and ignores the sounds of Cleo and Gregori. Let them have their happiness and comfort, just as I have had these last few days with Nikka and Cleo both. "You have an idea," he says.

"I have told you before, the only likely one is Illya, much as I hate to accuse him."

"Yet you have nothing solid against him."

"No."

"Let us look at this logically then. What would give us proof?"

Miserably, I shake my head. "That is what I do not know."

"That is because you are too emotional." Once before I heard that cold, calculating tone to his voice and now, as then, I am able to see why Gregori chose him to be a spy. "What one thing would make his guilt obvious? There must be something."

We sit in silence, both of us lost in thought, and my eyes fall upon the goblet Marina used to administer Nikka's medicine. Surely the expression on my face is comical, as my surprise and chagrin show through. I think I must squeeze his hand too tightly, for he exclaims.

"Mista! What? What is it?"

"The poison, Nikka, on the dagger. Where would he get something like that?"

His own face goes blank with shock. "One of two places. From Marina... but no... That would be impossible. Or from..."

"The kitchens. From Cook. Her spice cabinet, which he would have access to by way of her keys."

"Nee'at, Mista. Surely Illya could not. Much as he might disagree with Gregori he could never hurt one of us. Neither Steffan, nor Cleo. he takes his responsibility very seriously as Master of Pages."

"Perhaps so much so that he felt he had to end our slavery? That is what he called it, Nikka. I do not wish to believe it, either. But I cannot let the chance go without looking into it. I must go to the kitchen and ask Cook about her potions. Ask her to see if any are missing."

My hand creaks as he clutches it. "Mista, no. It is too dangerous."

Shaking him off regretfully, I pull away. "I must, duska. Do you not see? If it is Illya... think of what would happen if we snuck out and left. He would take over the house, and no one would be safe. I must know."

"Go then, but be careful."

"I will." Rising, I go to the big bed, where Cleo and Gregori rest in a tangle of limbs. "Cleo. Let me out. I need to go to the kitchens."

Sleepy blue eyes turn to me, and he yawns hugely, crawling from the bed, naked as the day he was born. I try to ignore his lean, solid frame. There is no time for such distraction. He simply smiles at me, and goes to the door. Before I can leave, he kisses me lightly, and I taste my Lord on his lips. "Please be careful, Mista. None of us could bear to lose you."

Tears prickle behind my eyes, and I give him a quick embrace. "Dai. I will be back soon, I promise. You should gather some things together now, Cleo. Just in case."

"Dai." He nods solemnly, and I am out the door and trotting down the tower stairs, eager to speak to cook and perhaps end this once and for all.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The house is as a tomb, so quiet as to be disturbing. My footsteps echo hollowly in the great hall. I realize that night has fallen without one person inquiring about the public ceremony. As if the house is under some sort of unspoken arrest, there is no one about.

Without incident, indeed without seeing a single face, I make my way to the kitchens. The sight there has me blinking, staring in amazement. The whole of the house is in the kitchen. Well, perhaps not the whole house but the hustle and bustle there is more than a little startling compared to the unnatural silence everywhere else.

"Mistral! What is the matter, lad? Herbs not working for you? Do not mind the crowd. There will have to be a feast for the ceremony." Cook, with her good-natured blankness, comes to me, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I...", stop stammering you fool, I think. "I need more minksglove. I am so sorry, but I spilled some."

She sniffs. "Right enough, lad. 'Tis hard work you have to do. Come on then."

Now would be a fine time to broach the subject of the missing poisons with her, as we are alone in the spice room. My hands are damp, and my chest tight. "I spoke to Nikka about Steffan," I blurt. "He is planning a ceremony for him. Do you know anyone who would like to sit vigil?"

Her hands pause in their work of measuring out the minksglove, then continue, but they shake as scoops small spoonsful into a waxed parchment, and I fear she might cry. "I would like to, Mista. He was a good lad."

"Was he? I never truly got to know him."

"Nee'at. You did not, did you? Simply assumed he could not be good enough for your precious Gregori. He was better than the lot of you. Not unnatural in his ways like the rest. Like that Cleo! A girl with balls, I say. Prancing little catamite."

The change in her demeanor leaves me standing there with my hand out for the herb, and with my mouth agape. As if the ground has shifted beneath my feet, I see her from a completely different angle. It is not an attractive silhouette.

"I... I should go. Get back to my preparations."

"Oh, dai." She advances on me, and I retreat. She seems suddenly seems much larger than she was, and I realize she is a good-sized woman. Never before has she seemed threatening, but she does now. "Get back to your dead Lord and your live lover, Nikkolaa." She spits the name out as if it is foul. "The prodigal, returning from whoring himself to all of court for Gregori. I suppose he does deserve something for bending over like he has all these years, but I vow he will be just as bad as that whoreson who just died. Saints be praised that Gregori did not recover. Bastard. If he had lived while Steffan died..."

"You. You provided Steffan with the poison." My back hits the wall just as she reaches for a large chopping knife. The mad glint that appears in her eyes puts pure, cold fear into the pit of my belly.

"I had to, do you not see? That was to be the night, with Gregori asking for dinner in his rooms, and with Cleo ordering the sweet oil. There was no way I could let Steffan be shamed that way. Never."

A thousand questions run through my mind, all a-jumble, and all I can think to do is defend Gregori. "All he had to do was to say no."

"Gregori was a depraved monster who did not deserve to live." She lunges at me then, knife flashing toward my belly, and I barely sidle out of the way, feeling the breeze of it stir my tunic. If I let myself, I will stand here and try to convince myself that this is all a bad dream, and I will end up skewered for my trouble. The fencing master always told me to move, then think, so I do. Taking advantage of her bulk and my speed, I duck around and under the next blow, running like an ice antelope for the safety of the rest of the house.

I burst into the kitchen and not one person looks at me. In fact they all back away, disappearing into the pantry or the cold rooms, assuring me that I will receive no help from them. What have we done to you? I think. All of you? What is my sin that you will not help me now? My chest heaves as I run, up and up into the house, for I fear I will be safe only with Marina and Tupelo's guards, or back at the tower with Cleo to help me fight should need be.

But no. I cannot lead her back to the tower. Gregori and Nikka are weak, injured. And Tupe, with his beaten body. I will not jeopardize him either.

Which leaves me the teaching masters. Master Kalin, perhaps. The sword master. He was Gregori's lover once. Surely he cannot be involved in this insanity. Looking behind me I see no pursuit. She is not following me. I allow myself to stop, to bend and put my hands on my knees and catch my breath. What insanity is this? I put a hand to my side, trying to calm the stitch there, and begin to walk. Dai. The master's quarters. Kalin will help me.

Before I can take more than a half a step a servant's door opens not three paces behind me and Cook is there. My heart skitters. How could I have forgotten the servants' passages? Damnation. Once again I am running, as quickly as my legs can carry me, skidding on the polished floor as I round corners. The last corner I take at full speed, knowing I am nearing Kalin's door, and I do not even see the dark shape that appears in front of me until I smack into it, bouncing off a broad chest and staggering back.

"Mistral! Watch where you're going lad! You could have killed us both."

I have a crazy urge to laugh. Hysteria, I am sure. For who should I run into in my flight but the husband of the very woman I am fleeing: Illya.

The crucial moment I spend deciding whether Illya is in on it with his wife gives me no time to ask, for she catches up with me, pulling me back and away from Illya, knife at my throat. In that next moment, I know he has no idea what is happening, for the look on his face is pure shock.

"Catrina. What is this? What is going on?"

"Go back to your office, Illya. Think no more about it."

The crooning, motherly tone of voice makes my skin crawl. It makes Illya wide eyed as well. That and the knife, from which he looks to me, then Cook and back again. I can feel the metal, cold against my neck, on the verge of cutting into my skin, and I try very hard not to move.

"Think about what? Tell me what you are doing."

"I am ridding us of one more of Gregori's monsters."

Pleading with him silently for help, I go very still, as she is pressing harder with the knife. Blood trickles down my neck from my throat, just a tiny line. Her hand shakes, the tremors rocking against my shoulder, and I fear I might just faint from holding my breath.

"Us? Monsters? What are you talking about, Cat? Please, you are hurting the boy."

"Dai. I want to. I want to hurt him like he hurt Steffan."

He recoils, and I can see the baffled expression deepen. "He did nothing to Steffan. That was Cleo. You have the wrong boy. Please, Cat. Stop this. Do not do this."

She is backing away from him now, shaking her head, her cheek pressing against mine for an instant. "I must. You should be proud. The slavery is stopping. There will be no more. Gregori is gone, and Nikka will be too. The boys will be free, like my Steffan should have been."

His face turns thunderous and my heart races. Oh, saints, not now, Illya, I think. Now is not the time to lose that famous temper. Too bad he cannot read my mind, for he waves his arms in a gesture of utter frustration, and shouts at her. "What is your obsession with that boy? I do not understand it Catrina. Listen to yourself, calling him my Steffan. How does that make you any better than Gregori? It's unnatural. By damn, woman, have you gone insane?"

A tiny, freezing cold pain blooms at my neck, as Cook pushes me away and the knife opens a shallow wound on my throat. I stumble and fall to the floor between them, still too close to Cook for my liking, and she puts out a foot and shoves me down as I try to scramble away.

"You stay there, boy, or I swear I will skewer you like a staked goat."

That stops me where I am, ribs aching from her kick. Illya is still staring at her, his face a study of confused anger. His eyes cut to me every so often, though, and I know he is thinking about how to end this without shedding anymore of my blood, just as I am.

Her attention is trained on him. "You do not understand my obsession. Well, of course not. How could you?" The words are ugly, spat at him in a voice full of hatred, and I vow, Illya simply crumples.

"Catya, please. Help me understand."

"Why? You never cared to even look at the boy."

"I was jealous of him. I thought... well, I thought you fancied him."

Her laughter makes my skin crawl. "Fancied him. No. I fancied you, at his age, true enough. And he looked enough like you. Not a bit of me in him, you would think."

The blood drains from Illya's face, and I think he might fall to his knees he sways so. I think he catches her meaning long before I do, but when I do it leaves me gasping. Illya is reeling under the weight of her implication as well, and his voice is dry and hoarse when he speaks.

"Nee'at. Catya, you are wrong. That is crazy. We had one child. He died at birth. You know this."

"No! We had one child, and I sent him away to Kazareen with my sister. Away from this place. If the child had been a girl it would have been safe. But no boy was safe from that monster. None. My sister was to keep him until I came for him, but she took the sickness, do you remember, and they took him to the orphanage. I asked her to make sure he never came back here. Never!"

Illya seems to fold in on himself. "You lie. You must lie. Why would you do that to me? To our son! No!" The last comes out as a roar and he launches himself at her, struggling for the knife. She fights him, spitting curses and epithets, and I am almost trampled in their wake. My throat is on fire, and I am cold, my hands shaking. I must move, I know, but I am transfixed by the terrible battle going on in front of me.

Her madness seems to give her strength, because she throws Illya off, reaching for me once more. "I'll kill him. He killed my son. My only babe."

"Nee'at." I scramble, finally making myself move. "If anyone killed him it was you, turning his mind the way you did, handing him a poisoned knife. You killed him as surely as the knife that Gregori turned on him. Then you blamed Cleo. It was you who put the idea into Jarl's head. You know it was."

"Of course it was. The little slut. Who cares about him?" She dives for me again, and Illya grabs her by the hair, pulling her back and away, finding a grip on her wrist, squeezing tightly. She does not let go, only fights harder, as if possessed.

"Stop it, you madwoman. Steffan was not your son. He was not my son. My son died years ago. Stop this. Now."

"No!" She is sobbing, struggling furiously, the knife flashing crazily in the light from the torches along the wall. "Steffan was mine. My boy. And yours. How can you choose this insult to the saints over him?"

She breaks away again, screaming, and rushes at me, knife held high. I have just enough time to see Illya stagger back, holding his side, before her face goes blank and slack, and she falls forward onto me, a dead weight driving every bit of breath from my lungs.

I stay there, stunned, for long moments, feeling warm, viscous liquid seeping into my tunic, before she is pulled away. One look at her tells me she is dead, sightless eyes staring at the ceiling, blood pooling about her still form. I retch, turning away, turning right into Nikka's arms. Nikka, who is pale and shaking, the wound on his head open again. He holds Gregori's sword in his hand.

"Mista. Your throat."

I put a hand to my neck, feeling the shallow graze there. "It is a scratch, Nikka." My voice shakes as badly as Nikka's hands. "Illya? Is he all right? He is innocent, Nikka, we must help..."

"Shh. I know, kedvesem. I heard. Stay here, dai?"

I nod, and he goes to check on Illya, who has slid down against the wall opposite. He is injured, but not gravely, I can tell, for he grabs Nikka's tunic in a strong hand. "Is she..."

"I am sorry," Nikka answers. "She is dead, Illya. I had to."

"I know, lad. I know." He begins to cry, great, gasping sobs, and I want to go to him, I try to, but when I stand my legs will not hold me, and I crumple to the floor, hearing and seeing nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When I wake, Marina is tying off a bandage on my throat, and Nikka is there beside me.

"You came for me? How did you know?"

He smiles, a rueful twist of the lips that is dear and familiar. "I did not. You had been gone so long, and I had this nagging feeling that you were in danger. I feared that you would try to speak to Illya, or Jarl, and I was worried that either of them." He laughs. "The one place I thought you safe was in the kitchen. She really believed that Steffan was her son."

"Dai. She did. How is Illya?"

"Tired. Heartsick and grieving. He feels responsible I think."

"What? How?"

"He fears he poisoned her mind, slowly over the years. Ridiculous, of course."

"Yes. Her mind was obviously bent by the loss of her child."

"Dai. And when Steffan came she saw something in him that made her think that he was her long dead son. Which was why she spent so much time with him. It makes me wonder how much of Steffan's distaste for life here was based on her teachings."

I shake my head. "And as an orphan I imagine he would want desperately to believe she was his mother."

"Dai."

I look about. Only Tupe and Marina are with us. "Well, at least this means Gregori will not have to leave. We can let everyone will know he is alive, and all will be well."

Shaking his head, he looks at me almost sorrowfully. "He hates the work he does for the Prince's father, Mista. He will be leaving. Soon. And I will go with him. It is safe now, for you to stay. I am sure he will deed the house to you."

"You will go with him?" Even to my own ears I sound like a child. "But why?"

"Because I no longer wish to be a spy, Mista. I have family in the south, somewhere. Perhaps I can find a home with them. Somewhere there is no Dark. I pray you will come with me, but if you do not I will understand."

"I want to be with you, Nikka."

His smile is blinding. "Then we will make do somehow, love. But first we must tell the others what has happened. And make plans to leave."

Gregori is shocked at the look of us when we return to the tower, and even more shocked at the tale we have to tell. Cleo rushes to my side, and fusses over me, which I admit warms my heart. Once Nikka and I are settled, we tell them what has transpired, and Gregori shakes his head in disbelief.

"All this time. All these years she blamed me for the loss of her son."

"So it would seem, my Lord."

"Well. Truth be told, I am glad it was not Illya."

"So is my name cleared then?" Cleo is impatient, and who can blame him?

"Dai." I smile at him. "Tupelo has enlisted Jarl to spread the word, since he is so good at it. He was in the kitchen when he was called to the scene of the attack, by the way, so it stands to reason that Cook is the one who planted the idea in mind. He is most contrite, Cleo, and asks to see you as soon as you are able."

"He was only doing his job."

Ever generous, our Cleo. I would be furious. I was, in fact, on his behalf, causing Jarl much embarrassment and remorse.

"You have not told them I am still alive?"

Nikka and I share a look, and he shakes his head. "Nee'at, my Lord. That is your decision to make. As far as they know, you are dead. They are being told that due to the circumstances, since we must have the magistrate out to collect Cook's body and hear the testimony that will clear Cleo of all wrongdoing, your funeral will not be public. There will be a feast later on, but your pyre will be attended only by Mista, Cleo and myself. Tonight."

"And who will you be burning?"

"An empty box."

Nodding, he is silent for some time, thinking about his options. "As soon as that is over, and Cleo is free to move about the house, I want you all to start gathering whatever you want to take with you. Is Tupelo well enough to be up and giving orders?"

"No. Well, he would like to be, but Marina says no."

"Illya, then. Nikka, tell him you wish to leave as soon as the magistrate is done, and that you want to take Mista and Cleo with you. He knows how to provision for a trip. Tell him you are leaving Kazareen for the south, where your roots are."

"Dai. I was thinking, my Lord..."

"What?"

I slip my hand into Nikka's, giving him silent encouragement. A grateful look is my thanks. "I would like to deed the house to Illya. So that he may make it a training school for boys, one that he will approve of."

The surprise is evident, but that Gregori does not automatically veto the idea means he thinks it has merit. "You think he can do this without instilling too rigid a moral code? Without teaching intolerance?"

"Dai. I think he will feel he has much to atone for. And he is a good teacher, despite his personal ideas."

"Very well." Gregori takes Nikka's hand on it. "And you, Mistral. Have you decided? Are you coming with us?"

This time it is Nikka who squeezes my hand, and with him by my side the answer is easy. "Dai. I am coming with you. For Nikka's sake." Cleo's face falls, and he looks at me with a sad, liquid gaze. Reaching out my free hand to him, I smile. "I love you, dushka, but you have Gregori. I still wish to be with you, but my heart is with Nikka. Do you see?"

"Dai." He gives me a bright smile and a tight hug. "As long as you do not leave us I am happy."

He is. I can see it in his eyes. Such a love, our Cleo.

They bring the coffin to us late in the day, setting outside the door for Nikka and I to bring inside. We fill it full of whatever we can find, all of it wrapped in the linens Master Volenz gave me so it does not shift and clank. By that time, Nikka and I are rested, and between he and I and Cleo, along with our faithful guard, Liaz, who has watched the door for us all this

time, and surely knows the truth, we carry it down through the house, a solemn and quiet procession.

The servants, Masters and pages are all lined up along the great hall, watching in varying degrees of sorrow as we make our way through. Seregy is sobbing openly, and I feel a pang for him, making a note in my mind to ask Gregori if he may come with us. He is not one who would flourish under Illya's tutelage, but would instead benefit from Cleo's kindness and Gregori's patience.

We proceed to the pyre, which has stood for who knows how long as a stone slab on which place the casket, and a large pile of limbs and twigs, gathered during the light for just such happenings. The ground is too frozen during the Dark for burials, so cremation is the truly the most efficient way of disposing of bodies. A superstitious thrill goes through me at the thought that Gregori could have truly died, and I say a saint's prayer to ward it off.

We tend the fire well into the night, Cleo nodding off against my shoulder. No one has come to bother us, and I feel this bodes well, not ill. Our wishes are being respected. No doubt there are a hundred people with a thousand questions, and for the main those will go unanswered.

"Steffan will need a funeral," I tell Nikka. "Do you think Illya will do it?"

"Dai. He will. He is a good man, for all of his faults." I feel his lips on the top of my head, giving me a light kiss. "Are you still frightened?"

"Of course. But less so now that I know we are leaving the house without the threat of danger. That was cowardly, I thought."

He chuckles, his breath stirring my hair. "You must understand, Mista. Gregori is at heart an opportunist. He sees this chance to break away from this life that give him little joy, and why shouldn't he take it? I do understand your view, though. I too am relieved that we were able to ferret out the killer before leaving. Mostly I am glad you are safe and well."

The cold is seeping in through my fur-lined cloak, and I curl closer to his warmth, drawing Cleo almost to my lap. "I am glad we all are, Nikka. So glad."

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, Nikka wakes me. The fire is nothing but sullen embers. The cold has stiffened me, and I creak and pop as I stretch. Shaking Cleo gently wakes him as well, and he gives me a sleepy smile and a cold-lipped kiss. "Is it over?"

"Almost, yes. We must clear the ashes, make sure there is no trace of our deception."

Nikka is right, and we work for almost a full turn of the glass, clearing the slab of all foreign matter. By then we are exhausted, and stagger back to the house to sleep and bathe and eat. The tower room is empty when we return, which panics Cleo, and I am well to my way there when Nikka shushes us both. "I am sure Marina moved him. There are passages we do not even know about in these walls. My guess is your chambers, Mista, as they are the largest."

He is right, naturally, which can be a very annoying trait, but I think that is only because I am so tired. Bathwater awaits us, as does a sleeping Gregori, gloriously nude beneath the furs. He is too pale, and too thin, but I know he will be well. And that is what matters the most.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I vow, we sleep for the better part of a day. It is Marina that wakes us, with a huge tray of food, and the happy news that Tupelo is up and about. For the first time since this all began I can savor my food, so long as I do not think too hard about the necessity of promoting Ania to head Cook. Still, nothing tastes like ash and dust anymore, which is a case of unrelenting improvement.

We meet with Tupelo first. I think he is very sad to see us go, but his family and home is in Kallista and Kazareen, as is Marina's, and he refuses Gregori's offer to go with us. I leave Nikka and Gregori with Tupe, discussing strategies for our departure, and take Cleo with me to go and find Sergey.

The boy is in the dormitory, alone, curled on his little bed. Tears tracks mark his cheeks, and I ache for him. Out of all of the boys he is the one with the most to lose should things change drastically, and I imagine he is terrified.

"Sergey?"

He pops up off his bed, eyes wide and scared, body on the defensive. The he sees who it is, and he sags, tears welling up. "Mista. Please do not make me go home to my father. Please. I will be in disgrace, and he does not want me, and..."

"Shhh. Hush, Sergey." It is Cleo who steps forward to put his arms around Sergey's shaking body, holding him gently. "We will not send you back. We are leaving Kallista, Sergey.

Nikka and Mista and I. We want you to come with us, to the south, where Nikka has family. You belong with us, little one."

He hiccoughs, swiping his nose on his sleeve. "L...leaving? Why?"

"There is nothing here for us now, sweet. We leave as soon as the magistrate is done with us. But you mustn't tell anyone. Will you come?"

"Dai." He looks both determined and frightened. "I will come with you."

"Good. I will leave Cleo with you, to help you decide what to pack. All will be well, Sergey." He gives me a grateful look, and I hurry to return to Nikka. I want to be with him when he speaks with Illya.

The news stuns Illya, and he stares at us both dumbly. The shift of Nikka's weight from one foot to another is minute, but I can tell how nervous he is. Finally, Illya seems to shake off his stupor, and he snorts, the sound so reminiscent of countless lectures I have taken from him that it makes me smile.

"You must be joking, Nikka."

"I am not. Gregori deeded the house to me, and I want to deed it to you. I have every confidence that you will do what is right with it."

"How can you? After what has happened?"

Nikka claps Illya on the shoulder. "I can only trust that what has occurred will make you more vigilant about your attitudes, Illya. You are the man for the job."

"I do not know what to say."

I step forward, smiling up at him encouragingly. "A very wise man one told me to fight for my place in the world I wanted to live in. To make myself a place that no one could take away. Say yes, Illya."

I vow, I fear he will cry. His eyes crinkle at the corners and his mouth works, and he pulls me into a tight embrace, kissing both of my cheeks in turn. "If I did truly have a son," he says, "I would want him to be like you, Mista. I will do it, and saints go with you on your journey to your new life."

"Saints go with you, as well, Illya. May you find purpose and happiness in your life."

It is good to know that is settled. Now all that is left is the magistrate and the leaving.

The visit with the magistrate takes no time at all. There are enough people who will stand for Cook's guilt and Cleo's innocence that all that the man must do is haul Cook's body away. Nikka and I attend to it, leaving Illya to his grief. We make arrangements as well to have a vigil and funeral for Steffan, who was only a child when Cook took him into her web of madness, and is therefore to be pitied.

I am terrified, I confess. We are ready to go, and I have never been so frightened in my life. Gregori is up and about, still not as strong as he would like, but gaining everyday. Cleo sees it as a giant adventure, and is bouncing with anticipation, happy to be on his way to a whole new world. And Nikka, he simply smiles at me, a smile so full of love and desire that I want to kiss him whenever I see it. He is simply happy that we are all alive and well, and together.

hapter Twenty-Nine

We leave in the night, not that it matters so in the Dark, but there is less chance of us being seen. Two large sleds that may be converted into wagons, and a half dozen riding horses, are all it takes for us, and what few belongings we carry. Pack animals with our food and tents trail behind us. Sergey does indeed accompany us, as does Liaz, our guard from the horrible time of vigil. He came to us after the magistrate left, and told us he wished to serve his Lord, still, letting us know that he knew, and approved of our actions.

The hardest part is saying goodbye to Illya, Marina and Tupe, who have been constants in my life since I was a lad of two and ten. Tearful embraces and kind words are shared, and I know that I shall never see any of them again, and it pains me. Still, I promise them letters, and that much, at least, I can do.

The wild joy with which Sergey greets Gregori almost makes up for it. How can I blame him, really, when Gregori is the one solid figure in his life? He is so happy that he looks as though he will faint. Gregori embraces him warmly, kissing his cold cheeks, and stroking his hair.

"I am glad you came with us, little one."

"You did not send me back to my father." Sergey's voice is full of wonder, and Gregori smiles.

"I made you a promise, did I not?"

"I thought you were dead. I am so glad you are not."

That night, Sergey sleeps in the furs with Gregori and Cleo, warm and safe, happier than I have ever seen him.

We travel for days before the leading edge of the dark breaks, and we can see light in the sky. Sergey has never seen light such as that during the winter months, and the sight of sunlight on the snow makes him gasp with delight. Truth be told, I have never been this far south, myself, even on my travels with Gregori as a youngster, and I am quite taken with it as well.

Seeing our wide-eyed appreciation, Gregori calls for a midday meal break and lets us out to play in the snow. How long has it been since I have been so carefree, I wonder. Perhaps never, as my childhood was not given to play. I roll Cleo over and over in the snow, laughing as his eyelashes go from blonde to white with the powdery stuff, and for the first time since leaving Kallista, my chest loosens and I feel as though I have made the right choice.

That night, after we have eaten a fine meal that Nikka makes for us, and after Sergey has a small glass of brandy that sends him straight into dreams, Liaz carries him away to the smaller tent, leaving the rest of us in privacy. Somehow I feel that all of this has been planned without my knowledge, and when Gregori smiles and holds out a hand to me, it seems confirmed.

"Come, Mista. There is something I wish to discuss with you."

I go to him, like I have a hundred times before, placing my hand in his larger one, sitting next to him and waiting for his word. Reaching out, he strokes my hair, traces my cheek with his fingers, a soft, gentle touch.

"Nikka has come to me with a request, Mista."

Not what I expect to hear, certainly, and I look at Nikka questioningly. He will not meet my eyes, and his hands will not be still, picking at the furs, his tunics, lacing together over and over.

"What sort of a request?"

"He has asked me to release you from your obligation to me."

I sway, shock making me dizzy. "My Lord? I do not understand."

He pulls me to him quickly, soothing with his hands and voice. "I do not mean to have you leave us, Mista. And neither does Nikka. He simply wishes to me to formally release you from your obligation, the one that your father placed on you when he took money from me for your company. So that you are free to pursue a true commitment with Nikka."

Now instead of rushing away from my face, the blood rushes to it, and I feel hectic color in my cheeks. "Nikka? Is this true?"

He still will not meet my eyes. "I love you, Mista. I want to be with you. I will understand if you do not wish the same."

"Will you? What of Nikka, my Lord? Will you have to release him from your service as well?"

"No. His obligation, yes. From my service? No. I hope that you will both stay with me, and with Cleo, and make your home with us. But I will declare you both free, and grant my blessing if that is what you wish. I can think of no one more suited to you than he."

Gently, I break away from his embrace, gifting him with a smile, which he returns. It is Nikka I turn to, taking his hands to still them, forcing him to look at me by tilting his chin up the way he has done mine a hundred times in a gesture learned from the man who shaped us both. "Is that what you wish, Nikka? For us to be together? Openly? As committed lovers?"

"Dai." His eyes are dark with need, his voice rough with emotion. "I want that more than anything, Mistral."

"Then I say yes, kedvesem. I love you."

The sound he makes before his mouth meets mine is pure joy, and I hear Cleo's happy exclamation through the ringing in my ears. The force of the kiss bends me back over Nikka's arm, crushing our hips together, forcing my up on my toes for balance. His hands on me feel right, his lips and tongue are hot and slick and wonderful.

He kisses me until I cannot breathe, until I feel I will melt, until I feel the world is surely spinning too fast. His kiss holds a fierce sort of joy, and I feel loved, and safe, and joyful in my own right. The kiss goes on and on, changing angles, stopping for a quick breath before returning to something deep and powerful.

There are other hands there as well, stripping the clothing from my body. Cleo's long, strong fingers, Gregori's calloused palms. Other lips find mine, Gregori turning my face up to his, kissing me hard and deep, hand curled into my hair to hold me in place. Cleo kisses Nikka the same way, moaning into it, and there is no jealousy in this, as if suddenly we have mapped out where we all belong, and there is comfort in it, and peace.

The kiss turns again, from Gregori to Cleo, and his mouth is sweeter, lighter, more playful. The sounds he makes vibrates through me, as if he sings for us. His hands find my hips and pull me to him, and Gregori finds Nikka's lips with his. Their kiss is a battle for dominance, but a bloodless one, and we all tumble to the furs, a jumble of pale skin and tangled limbs, touching and kissing and rubbing.

My hands find Nikka's skin, instinctively knowing the shape and feel of him, sliding across his ribs to hipbones, as Gregori's clever fingers find my nipples and tug, and Cleo rubs against my leg while reaching for Gregori's long, thick cock. There is no rhyme or reason to it, this is no carefully orchestrated scene. This is simply loving.

A hand on my cock makes me arch and moan, pushing into the touch, feeling my balls draw up. Someone, Cleo, I think, slides down to take it in his mouth, wet and heat closing around

me and pulling until I spend myself mindlessly, crying out into Nikka's mouth, which has found mine again.

Pliant, relaxed, I feel myself turned, Nikka beneath me, prick like a brand against my thigh. My buttocks are spread, and cool, slick fingers probe between them before Gregori slides into me, thick and hard and hot enough to burn. Cleo slides into the kiss that Nikka and I share, tongue licking at my lips, hands warm on my belly, on Gregori's back and I am opened, spread wide, filled with Gregori's strength.

Below me, Nikka looks up with eyes so dark they are black, framing my face with his hands, kissing both Cleo and I, whispering how much he loves me. Cleo cries out, splashing my side with his hot seed, falling away from us to catch his breath, and Gregori simply pounds into me, pushing me against Nikka, grinding us together.

When he finally spends it is a veritable storm, biting down hard into my shoulder, screaming his triumph, and I feel him deep in my guts. He collapses against me, breathing as though he has run a race, then pulls out as gently as possible. Nikka is still hard against me, still hot and ready, as I am against him. Our kisses are still frantic, still bruising, and I want to simply swallow him whole.

Hands on my hips move me up and back, arranging me on Nikka's body, and Gregori's breath is hot against my shoulder as he pushes me down on Nikka's cock, a long, slow glide that leaves me gasping. "Take him, dushka," he says. "Claim this as your own." And I do, hands flat on Nikka's chest for leverage, hips pushing down and down, taking that long prick inside my body. Gregori holds me in place, and Cleo's hand closes around my cock, and we are all together in this, both Gregori and Cleo blessing us with their approval, filling us with their love.

Nikka is close, so close, his whole body quivering as he thrusts up into me, and I am close as well, my prick throbbing in Cleo's hand, my skin rising with goose bumps, and I am begging -- soft pleas to Nikka, love words, curses, please, anything. Dai. Gregori grasps my hips and pushes me down, pushes Nikka farther into me than anyone has gone, and I scream with the pleasure of it, arching back into the cradle of Gregori's body, spilling hot seed into Cleo's

hand. Nikka follows closely, unable to withstand the unbearably tight clasp of my body around him, and he shouts his pleasure in the syllables of my name.

When it is over we sleep together, and for the first time I feel as though I am not fighting for my place in Gregori's bed. I am there as an equal, with something of my own to hold on to.

A Afterword

Spring Planting, Monarchy of Reine, 1552
Levrign, Estate of Count Nikkolaa Severin

More than a year has passed since that time, when my life was turned thoroughly upside down by a plot to kill my Lord, and by the return of the man to whom I would tie my life. I look back upon it now with a sort of fond disbelief, wondering how such fools as we survived such an event as that.

We traveled steadily south, never stopping in one place for long, and always avoiding the cities. It was as if Gregori was looking for a place he had never been in all of his travels, somewhere that no one would know his name. We were all happy enough to go where he lead, not so much out of habit as of the joy in being together. And truth be told, none of the rest of us had any place else we desired to be.

Our first spring was late, as we were still far north, but the sight of a high mountain meadow filled with delicate wildflowers was well worth the snow and ice we encountered taking what Liaz called the long way about. Our first summer came to us cool and comfortable, in the hills about a place called Siezs. There was a lake there, deep and crystal clear, with a waterfall that fed it constantly with freezing cold water from mountain streams. Never have I tasted anything so pure.

By fall we were in Alman, a place with great groves of hardwood trees. Cleo and Sergey both delighted in those trees, for their leaves turned brilliant shades of orange and yellow and red,

and they would sweep them in great piles, and jump into them, laughing and rolling. It was in Alman that we picked up two enormous deerhound puppies, saved from drowning by an owner who could not feed the whole pack any longer.

We wintered there as well, and while it was cold, and there was snow, there was no Dark. All of us were amazed at that, and were forced to reevaluate the way we lived, as there were more hours to the day, it seemed.

By spring it became apparent that Gregori had no final destination in mind, and also that Nikka was longing to settle somewhere. In a way, I had to agree with him. Much as I loved exploring the wonders of the world beyond Kazareen, I wanted a home. Someplace to call ours.

Nikka took Gregori aside one night in the early spring, talking quietly while Cleo and Sergey worked on writing lessons I set out for them. They called me over once they had reached a consensus, which they usually do, and it never ceases to amuse me. The decision was to go to Nikka's family estate in the monarchy state of Reine. Having no idea where Reine might be, I simply smiled, and nodded, and went back to my book, a gift from Gregori bought on our last trip into a town of any size.

Reine was to the south. It took us a few months of travel to reach it, but it was one of the loveliest places I had ever seen. Large enough that it stretched from mountains to coast, it was temperate in the summer, and full of colorful wonders in the way of plants and birds. The capitol city we avoided, as we had no intention of introducing ourselves at court, and turned instead to the southern border, where Reine comes together with a Duchy called Kion.

Nikka had some memory of his childhood home, a villa-estate called Levrign, being near the border with Kion, and Gregori was ecstatic. The large painting in his bedchamber at Kazareen had represented Kion, a place the artist swore had rivers of milk and honey, and where the sun shone bright each and every day. The reality was far more simple, but just as lovely, and Nikka's memories served him well, for Levrign was just where he thought it would be.

It was also abandoned. Subtle investigation proved that when the Count, Nikka's father obviously, had gone missing on a trip to the North, the family moved on, back to Nikka's mother's land, across the sea. While I could see it saddened Nikka that he would not find his family, he was happy enough to let Gregori buy Levrign for him, and to make our home there.

Home. How can I describe the feeling of having a home? Of having a house that we created from a decomposing wreck, making it livable again. Gregori and Cleo took to the work as well as Nikka and I did, and Sergey found that he loved working with his hands. Before long, the tenant farmers that had once worked Levrign's land returned, and it soon became apparent that Nikkolaa was the very spirit and image of his father, as many of the older people recognized him as his father's son.

That, perhaps, is the most unfortunate thing that has happened to us since we left Kazareen. When the word spread that the Count's son was once again at Levrign, the aristos came, curious and cruel. Not all of them were bad, but many of them were just the sort of people Nikka and Gregori had worked so hard to leave behind, and it was a difficult time.

Still, once they learned that Nikka had no interest in currying favor, they left us well enough alone, save for one lady, a dowager Duchess from Kion, not Reine, who became a good friend to us all. She mothers Sergey relentlessly, and Cleo as well, and tells Nikka how much he reminds her of some of her own male relatives.

Gregori seems younger, as a carefree life suits him well. Cleo is as loving and generous as ever, and I have no doubt that when Sergey comes of age he will be invited into their bed. He and Cleo are too close for it not to happen. Sergey has grown into a young man, confident and sure, overseeing much of the work that goes on at the estate. He will be a force to be reckoned with as he becomes a man.

Nikka. Well, Nikka continually amazes me. He wears the mantle of responsibility well, and without resentment, happy to have such a place to call his own. The smallest details engage him, and he is pleased to call himself a farmer rather than a spy. His art has flourished in our

time in Levrign, and his paintings hang in various places about the house, making me smile every time I see them.

My favorite is a portrait he did of me immediately after we settled here. Not long ago, one would never find me contemplating a portrait of myself with pleasure, but this one I cannot help but enjoy. It was done of me, in the overgrown gardens behind the house, head down over my journal, furiously recording the things that had happened, trying to note them all down before I forgot. The reason I like it so is that the love Nikka bears for me, the love that we were only beginning to explore, shines through so clearly that I cannot help but see it in every brushstroke.

Which leads to me. I perhaps of all of us, have changed most profoundly in the time since we left Kazareen. I react more appropriately to change, I feel as though I belong, and I have my Nikka, who I love more than I ever thought possible. And who loves me the same way. I can finally believe I am deserving of such a thing.

He comes to me now, my lover, sliding a hand along my shoulders, around my neck and under my chin to tilt my face up in a movement as ingrained in us as the feel of snow beneath our boots or furs under our bodies. He kisses me, and I can taste his smile.

"You look happy," he says, "tell me what you are thinking?"

"I was thinking about you. Is something wrong?"

"No. Well, at least I hope not. We have received a summons, though I am sure the grand lady who dictated it would call it an invitation."

"A summons... surely not the Queen?"

"Dai. Apparently she wants to see the heir to Levrign for herself."

I burst out laughing. "We have been invited to court!"

He frowns at me, expression dampening. "I fail to see what is so amusing, Mista."

"Our luck, Nikka. That is what is so amusing. Our luck. When do we leave?"

"A week hence."

"Do Cleo and Gregori travel with us?"

"Naturally. Her Majesty is sending one of her nobles for us, along with an escort comprised of member of the horse guard. For our safety."

Once again I am consumed with the need to laugh. And now I can see Nikka fighting not to laugh along with me. "It is not funny, Mista."

"But of course it is! And just as well, too," I say, nodding decisively. "We cannot have you losing your hard won skulking skills."

He roars, diving at me and knocking me off my stool, ink pot flying off to stain the floorboards a deep black. I am laughing so hard I cannot breathe, and he adds to it by tickling me unmercifully. "You, sir Mistral, are not amusing."

"I amuse myself, and that is all I need do. Come, dushka, it cannot be as bad as all that. She will not ruin our happiness."

Laughter flees, and he looks at me, gravely serious. "Are you happy, Mista? Truly happy here with me?"

"Dai." I lean up, pressing a fervent kiss to his lips. "I prayed for the Saints to deliver me when I thought Gregori was dying. And they did. They brought me you. No matter what manner of monarch this Queen may be, or what means someone may use to pull us into court intrigue, we will be together, and between us all, we can do anything."

End

