



Praise for the writing of Sharon Maria Bidwell

The Swithin Chronicles 1: Uly's Comet

Uly's Comet is one of those rare books that succeeds on multiple levels: Not only is it an exciting tale of adventure, complete with dangerous magic and political intrigue, but it is also a powerful and multifaceted romance, chronicling the journey from resistance to acceptance of a passion not to be denied. A fantastic page-turner. I can't wait for the next book in the Swithin Chronicles!

-- Jeanne Laws, author of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (Loose Id)

With a touch of magic in the air, Swithin is a land where sexuality is equal and open. A place where a prince can see past the grime of a street thief to the man underneath, and together they can finally find ease from the bittersweet loneliness that hounds them both. Uly and Markis' story is wonderfully poignant and a cast of strong characters shows us there are many types of love essential for our well being.

-- Anne Douglas, author of *The McCabes 1: Persuading Jo* (Loose Id)

Sharon Maria Bidwell has created a splendid new world and an equally wonderful and fascinating story. *Uly's Comet* is an entertaining tale with a great cast of characters! Reading it was truly a nice way to start my weekend. I look forward to more of The Swithin Chronicles.

-- J. L. Langley, author of *The Broken H* (Loose Id)

A wonderfully created world that is rich in emotions, power, and the discovery of what it means to let go in love. From the moment you meet Uly and Markis, you learn what it means to do the right thing and when doing the right thing is no longer as right as loving those who unconditionally love you. A fantastic tale and I can't wait to read more about this world.

-- Cynnara Tregarth, author of *Djinn Delight* (Loose Id)

THE SWITHIN CHRONICLES 1: ULY'S COMET

Sharon Maria Bidwell

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Warning

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage, homoerotic sex, some violence).

The Swithin Chronicles 1: Uly's Comet

Sharon Maria Bidwell

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Dedication

To the love of my life, always.

To Stuart, without whom I might not have been so brave.

And to everyone who had imagination and belief.

Prologue

Yourn cometary do portend the end
Of war and a sweet prince's death
For nations to lament, resolves
In answer to destruction's call; love's
Submission foreshadows personal descent.

-- Swithin Prophecy

Cometary: of or pertaining to a comet or comets; like a comet.

In the abyss ...

The abyss gleamed golden. Black, certainly, but golden. Sometimes the gold was so pale it looked white, but that was the ice. At times, he was made of ice, a sculpture. The liquid burned like alcohol going down his throat, though it did not burn down to his stomach. It expanded to sting and then chilled his skin, freezing in the depth and darkness of space. Sometimes the experience felt hot, like the heat of desire. Most times the cold won out. Opening his mouth, it entered, catching like a sweet taste, making him shiver as it slipped down his throat.

He explored his body, caressing, seeking out erotic areas, and discovering places that aroused him that he had never even thought of. He ignored his cock. It cried out for attention, and that made it all the better to wait.

His breathing had quickened. A hand pressed against his chest, and it did not belong to him. He opened his mouth, not knowing what he wanted to say until the plea lay on his lips. *Kiss me, lick me ...* He wanted the hand on his chest to brush over his nipples. He bit back the supplication.

The ice replied to his silent plea, though, and he lost his breath as they hardened. Moisture formed at the tip of his cock, but the ice pressed against him, along the length of his spine, and chased the small heat away. His mouth opened, his tongue yearning but useless; nothing filled his mouth but relentless cold. This coldness could be good, light, stroking him; it could also be vicious. His tongue ran over his lips with need. Strange, a woman usually yearned to fill her mouth. Men licked. This time a clit or a cock was equally enticing. He just *wanted*.

The ice mocked, sent shivers down his spine, bowing it, threatening to take him to the brink of orgasm. He bit back the moan, uncertain if it would be a cry of pain or pleasure. He did not want to beg.

Fingers of ice wrapped into his hair and tugged hard, making the cold recede and bringing another kind of pain; it cleared his mind a little. The heat on his thighs told him he had urinated even though he had tried to resist it, had hardly felt it. He had not come down, though. The desire worsened, long, slow throbs escalating into ache as he hardened. He wanted, needed to squeeze and ease the ache, but he couldn't. He tugged to free his wrists, but they remained imprisoned. He chose to drift away from his bonds, even though the pulsating, twitching, begging, attention-seeking part of his anatomy followed him.

Here he could stroke himself with the ice. At times when he could control the level of cold or heat, it could be pleasurable. He could even let it enter him in other intimate places. The desire spread, and he parted his legs, let it have its way with him. He slid in the golden rift, spiralled in the abyss, drawing the sparkling stars along in his wake. Moving like this, it washed over him, faster and faster, his heart increasing in rhythm. The wetness spread, and he threw back his head as his balls tightened. The ache throbbed at the base in a way he understood. His face and body contorted in a soaking, clenching spasm. *He screamed his release ...*

Chapter One

Markis watched the day's light fade. Night breezes sprang up as only to be expected, stirring the leaves and bringing with them the rich, almost warm scent of the night magnoli. The strange trait of the tree dictated that the blooms only gave off their fragrance when the sun withdrew. This was the best time to enjoy the scent, when the wind kicked up and blew, carrying the heady fragrance with it.

Markis closed his eyes and tried to ease the tightness in his jaw. Ryanac would curse him coming out here alone, but he needed to get out of the palace, if only for a short while. Of course, Ryanac would argue many magnoli trees thrived within the palace gardens, but Markis sought solitude as well as the scent.

He had collapsed on an unoccupied bench under the largest tree, and here in open parkland, he sought some semblance of inner peace and tranquillity. Doing so, he delved further into himself, closing down from the world, except for his sense of smell. Gradually, his heartbeat slowed. With mental effort, he pushed the tension through his body and ordered it to leave.

Cursing silently, he bemoaned the fact he had to remain alert to attack. More than the breeze caused the shifting of gravel and the rustle of leaves. Keeping his eyes closed, Markis rose a little from his meditative state and cast his senses outwards. The noise that had spoken of stealth now accompanied soft, suppressed giggles and a few whispers.

Markis almost groaned. A small group of shadd caused the noises. The Swithin referred to all children as shadd -- 'happy-go-lucky' -- though it made no sense to Markis. How could you compare a nobleman's child to a street urchin? None of the street children were carefree, happy, or lucky.

Little hope they would tire of their game, though it was no game to him. He could feel sympathy, but was not in the mood for it. Right now, they were nothing more than an

annoyance. Still, normally he would have just thrown them a few coins. Charity was no long-term resolution, but he had other things more pressing. If he had his way, in a few years poverty would be outdated. This time, however, he had no trouble sensing their intent and felt in no mood for compassion. Letting his shoulders slump in a relaxed fashion, Markis waited to see what they had planned. The group had fallen silent, and he could imagine the pointing of fingers and hand gestures giving silent commands.

One of the shadd was talented, almost a perfect thief. If not so attuned, he might have remained unaware of its proximity. Certainly, he heard not one footstep. Its companions must have made all the noise. Not until the child had its hand on his purse did Markis move. He grasped the slender wrist and twisted at the same time as he turned in the seat and looked back towards the would-be thief.

Even as he turned his head, the pickpocket let out a yelp. The cry sounded high with pain, but the voice seemed older than he had expected, and he gazed up into the boy's wide eyes with less surprise than he might have done. He had briefly contemplated breaking the wrist, but then believing it a child, intended only to frighten it. Now the temptation of breaking bone overwhelmed him once more. This was no shadd, as he had believed, though as he glanced back at the others trailing him, he saw the rest were all far younger than the one he had captured.

They hesitated, glanced at each other, shifted in panic. The thief, meanwhile, tried to tug free. When he quickly realised he could not do so, he barked out a single order: "Go!" It took only a second or two for the others to obey. Swiftly, they scampered away, disappearing into the foliage.

The pickpocket stopped struggling even as Markis rose to his feet. Though the bench stood between them, he had more purchase and greater strength. The wrist he held was also thin, nearly emaciated. The clothes were too large for the frame that wore them and were poor and ragged -- a street urchin, indeed.

Taking a step back meant he tugged the other forward so that the thief had to bend over the back of the bench. It hardly stretched his imagination to believe he heard the bone in the wrist creak under the force of his grip, even as he heard the boy draw in a hissing breath.

"There you are." A dark, sardonic, somewhat irritated-sounding voice broke into the silent tableau. "I should have known to look here first on such a night." Ryanac stepped into the clearing and stopped almost immediately. He blinked at the scenario played out before him and said nothing. Markis did not expect him to. Although Ryanac might let his irritation show plainly at times, it was not his place to order Markis about or ask questions. That didn't mean he never made what he insisted were only 'suggestions', but he would not even do that in front of an audience. Markis had to make a decision, however.

"Take this pickpocket into custody." The inadequate muscles in the slim arm tensed even as he said it.

"A shadd? You're ..." Ryanac hesitated and then finished with, "You're certain?" Although not his place to question, Ryanac did a good job as a conscience at times.

"He's no shadd."

"Not by our standards, but by his own."

Markis grinned. "Yes, the Simeon take great care of their young, don't they?" The arm in his grip stiffened, even though the gesture must have hurt. The not-so-young shadd had understood the insult. As an overspill of his race's ancient language, titles and designations all began with the letter 'S'. On occasion, they also referred to some objects and things precious like children. Equally, they were good words for swearing. Markis was from the Swithin, meaning 'strong'. Some years ago, they had conquered this race and many had given them the subjugated nickname of Simeon, which meant 'little hyena', so naming the weaker race a pack of scavengers.

"Take him," Markis ordered. Only then did the boy panic. Taken by surprise, Markis barely managed to hold on as Ryanac ran across the grass towards them. Leaning over the boy's back, Ryanac looped his arms under the captive's armpits and linked his hands behind the boy's head, pushing his head down. Despite the threat of a broken neck, still he struggled, kicking up grass. Amazingly, the boy -- young man, Markis silently corrected -- would stand at least as tall as Ryanac's shoulder. Small, breathy, panicked moans escaped the captive.

"They'll do worse than hang him, and he knows," Ryanac said, glancing to his face. His gaze was hard and bright with something close to anger. Moonlight flashed on the silver streaks in his otherwise dark hair. Markis frowned, confused. Then the connection between the shadd's panic and Ryanac's apparent resentment filtered through to him.

"I said take him into your custody. Not hand him over to the prison."

At once, the brightness faded from Ryanac's eyes, and the shadd ceased to struggle so frantically. Though he still resisted, it seemed as though he now calculated whether a broken neck was worth the risk to be free.

Ryanac's tone when next he spoke sounded full of apology. "I thought you meant ..."

"I know what you thought. Take me more literally in future. If I want someone taken to a Simeon prison, I will say so." Though they had abolished most of these so-called prisons and supplanted the pitiful justice system, a couple of these establishments remained. Change took time.

"Fair enough." Ryanac looked up at him from where he crouched over the struggling body. "As pleasant as this is, how long do you want me to stand here like this?"

Markis narrowed his eyes in a quiet though not serious scold. Ryanac had varied tastes when it came to lovers, as did most of the Swithin. The body in his arms continued to wriggle, and Markis ignored Ryanac's facetious comment in fear the Simeon shadd truly would get away.

Still keeping a hold of the wrist, Markis stepped up onto and over the bench. It had grown almost full dark now, and though he doubted there were any would-be rescuers out there, this was no place to linger while they had their hands full. Reaching behind him, he pulled a set of hostage cuffs from under his coat. Ryanac raised an eyebrow.

"I thought only I carried those. What do you need them for?"

Markis allowed a small smile to touch his lips as he fastened one circlet around the Simeon's right wrist. "You never know when they will come in handy," he said. He then fastened the middle loop to Ryanac's left wrist. Exchanging a nod, Markis then stepped back and Ryanac let go at the same time. The captive spun, trying futilely to jerk free. Having expected the move, Ryanac pulled the young man forward so that he fell to his knees. At once, both he and Markis moved in. Between them, they quickly attached the third remaining cuff to the thief's other arm. This way they held the captive with both hands behind his back on a short leash attached to the guard. The third cuff adjusted in size and could be used to attach the captive to anything it would fit around. Ideally, Markis would have preferred to attach it to a securing belt -- a harness designed to fit around the waist, constructed of sturdy leather and metal. Then Ryanac's arms would have both been free. No matter: Markis was handy with a sword, and Ryanac's right hand lay close to his blade as always. Any threat would come from without. The shadd was secure. Only a Swithin noble knew how to open the cuffs. Still the Simeon tried his utmost, flinging himself from side to side, almost pulling Ryanac off his feet solely because such behaviour took the men by surprise.

"Stop struggling. You cannot get free," Markis said through gritted teeth. His tension had returned. He wanted to take it out on someone, and if the thief continued like this, he had the perfect candidate. "Stop it!" he said in such a hard voice, the captive obeyed. On his knees, he became still, only the rise and fall of his chest displaying his ragged breathing. Ryanac, crouched behind him, glanced up at Markis. Again they exchanged a nod, and then as Ryanac stood, Markis helped him drag their captive to his feet.

Though difficult to make out features in the dim light, it was easy to see the younger man had his eyes shut tight. "What is your name?" When the boy refused to answer, Markis ignored Ryanac's irritated look and asked again, this time emphasising his question with the point of a dagger under the captive's chin. "I will not ask a third time."

"U-Uly," the detainee managed to stammer.

"How old are you?" Again, he pressed the point of the blade. Not once did the Simeon open his eyes, but he managed to speak, though he tilted his head back a little to escape the tip of the knife as he did. Some might have considered that gesture foolish, but no doubt the thief knew if he was going to have his throat slit, he could do nothing about it.

"I'm twenty-one, almost twenty-two."

So, not a shadd by Swithin standards, then, though a child as far as the Simeon were concerned. Markis managed to contain his tut of disgust, but Ryanac had clearly seen it on

his face. Indeed, he clearly shared Markis's dismay. No wonder they had been such an easily conquered race. They did everything so slowly; their machinery, and even their lives, existed in the dark ages. Here stood one of their own, a young man of almost twenty-two, starved and reduced to thieving. If a life on the street did not dictate his true age, Markis could not imagine what would.

* * * * *

Uly walked in front of the guard, his head bowed in shame. He could not believe they had captured him like this, so easily. He had told the others to go, but still it pained him no one had come forward to help him -- not that he had expected them to -- not even little Hebe, or Tig. They, Adley, and Jene, would be all right without him, or at least he told himself so anyway. It wasn't as if they hung around much. He helped them out now and then, when he could, but they were as suspicious of his charity as that given by any of the adults. Lately, pickings were so few he had been tempted to ask them to help *him*. He wouldn't, couldn't, do that, of course. They would not have done so even if he had asked, and he never once blamed them for not offering.

Maybe this life was easier for the young. They didn't remember another way of life, and though Uly had been only nine when the Swithin had taken over the province, he remembered a time when his life had had some comfort in it, even if work was hard. *Simpleton!* If he weren't so scared, he might have laughed. Only self-deluding fools contemplated such thoughts.

Biting back the tears, Uly wanted to blame the Swithin for all of it -- the current state of his life and the way his people behaved -- but he couldn't. There was no way he could have failed to hear the exchange between the two men, and the greatest pain came from knowing they spoke the truth. The Simeon, as most called them now -- a play on words, their original title being Simmie -- did not take great care with their children. The young worked as soon as they had the ability to walk and carry a bucket. Uly had the same life he had been born to when his parents sold him as a baby and his adoptive family had died -- the woman in childbirth trying for a child of their own the doctors had warned her not to have, and the man from illness, probably too much drink. Many would be living the same life they led now even if there had been no invasion, yet would consider him a child until his twenty-fifth birthday. How ridiculous was that?

Uly liked to believe himself many things now besides a thief, but he was a *good* thief. He could not believe the other children had talked him into stealing from the stranger. Uly had known he was in trouble the moment he had set eyes on the man, but he had let his pride intercede. The dark brown and black garb the mysterious man wore looked military. Taking their dare, Uly had wanted to prove he could steal from such a man. Even then, he could not believe the man had known of his presence. Even when the hard, firm grip settled about his fragile wrist, he had denied his capture in his mind.

There was no denying it now. The guard kept him moving with small shoves if he stalled. The man he had tried to rob strode with purpose at his side. Uly walked with his head down, his dirty-blond tendrils hiding his face, and could only hope no one who knew him witnessed his disgrace. This time of night, those who could afford it were stuffing their faces in taverns and eating-houses. Those too poor to indulge stood to attention at the entrances to beg, or out the back to fight and squabble over scraps and discarded slops. At least he could be grateful for that mercy, even if it were small. The streets were not as busy as they might be. He blinked, hoping he would not dislodge his tears, but they spilled over to run down his face despite his wishes. He couldn't believe he still had it in him to cry after all these years. Maybe he deserved this for being so weak.

He wanted to close his eyes and did so for a moment, but the uneven ground forced him to open them again. He heard someone laugh and narrowed his gaze, not wishing to see who made merry over his plight. Besides, it sounded too like the familiar rattling laugh of one of his race. Perhaps this Swithin noble was right. Maybe the term Simeon was more accurate than insult.

"Halt." The guard's voice sounded surprisingly soft behind him. He could see cobbles, and then after a carriage passed, the guard told him, "Forward," and they set off again. Directed to the left, flagstone paving appeared under his feet.

Risking a glance up, Uly saw they marched alongside the great palace wall. He almost balked. The man he had tried to rob was definitely a noble; not only the cuffs proved it. Worse still, Uly had tried to steal from a palace nobleman. He had feared death and worse at the hands of the prison warders. Now he no longer felt certain he didn't face a worse fate. He swallowed reflexively at the idea of torture and, for the first time in his life, learned how fear truly tasted. Rather interesting, it tasted both sweet and sour and felt white and cold. It spread outwards from inside his chest, slowly engulfing his entire body. His limbs became weak. He staggered.

"Easy." The guard's soft voice should have soothed, but now Uly heard it as a muted threat. He had to consider whether he would have preferred a broken neck and wished he had struggled harder; too late for that now, unfortunately. A great iron gate swung inwards, and the man pushed Uly into the inner sanctum of the palace walls.

Expecting to be handed over immediately, Uly was surprised when the guard guided him along the inner path, through a gate, down another path, under an arch to yet another path, and at the end, yet another gate. With his head down, he was only aware of the shifting colour of the flagstones, some almost white, some grey, some a pale beige, and some with a slight pink hue, as they progressed. Low borders and hedges also marked their passage, but he barely paid them attention. The time was dusk and lanterns lit the pathways. The last path brought them to an entrance. Uly saw the flood of light from the building.

Frowning, Uly almost tripped up the step leading under the arched portico. Lifting his eyes, he had seen the walls were beige and the roof lined with terracotta tiles. He had expected a more military abode.

Although the night was far from cold, inside the temperature felt several degrees warmer, and as it seeped into his chilled bones through his thin flesh, Uly could not help but shiver. He sensed more than saw the man who had captured him turn his head. Certain the two men exchanged looks, Uly kept his gaze down, preferring not to see their disgusted expressions. It would be obvious what such nobles would think of his kind.

Still expecting them to hand him over, he was further surprised when directed along a corridor to a small internal staircase. They must have entered by a small back door rather than a grand entrance. Maybe these nobles were of a lesser rank, but they were still nobler than he could ever hope to be. Uly kept his head bowed and flinched whenever anyone passed them, be it another noble or a servant. He struggled to hide his amazement when no one stopped to question his presence or to ask where the two men were taking him.

Another corridor and another set of stairs took them higher still into the palace. Then the man ahead opened a stout, dark wooden door, which took them into the palace proper.

For the first time, Uly fully raised his head. He did this only for a moment, and he quickly looked back down, more in fright than anything. He had never imagined the grandeur inside the great castle. The landing they had emerged onto extended over a vast hall. Tall columns supported and bisected the stone railing, and they flared out into arches at the top. This balcony continued both left and right above the hall below. Suits of armour, displays of weaponry, and tapestries lined the walls. From what little he could see of the floor below as his captors marched him along the balcony, it appeared to be made of marble.

They traversed yet more corridors, stairs, and doors, until finally the two men who had captured him parted company. The man he had tried to rob turned towards them and spoke. "Get him cleaned. Then he can come up to the suite."

The guard behind him must have nodded in agreement. The other man turned away and walked down the corridor towards the left. The guard directed Uly towards the right.

Pushing him into a room at the end, the guard kicked the door closed. "Mattie," he called, and a moment later, a small plump woman hurried through the door at the far side. "We need hot water. Bring a night sidon."

"Yes, Silas," Mattie replied, curtsying.

The guard sighed. "How many times must I ask you to call me Ryanac?"

"Once more, as always, Silas," Mattie retorted and, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, turned on her heel and left the room.

A loud noise at his back made Uly jump. Ryanac had slipped the bolt into place. A key turned in the lock. He sensed movement, and a moment later, the guard's third cuff fell to strike the lower edge of his butt. Glancing up through strands of dirty hair, Uly watched

Ryanac move across the room. The room had two doors, the one they had come through and the one on the far side of the room. Looking back, Uly could see no key in the lock. The guard, Ryanac, had probably slipped it into a pocket. Looking across the room, Uly doubted he would even make it that far, let alone through the door. Even if he did, his hands remained fastened behind his back, and it would be difficult enough with his hands free to escape the castle.

Taking a quick glance around the room, he saw the only window set high into the stone wall -- three vaulted, arched windows, with the middle one higher than the two on either side, with leaded tracings. Beneath this, there stood the heavy, solid desk to which Ryanac had wandered and sat on the corner. The large man wore military garb, all hard leather and assorted buckles and belts, all muted and tarnished. Even Uly knew that to flash a bright spot of silver could mean the difference between life and death. The face was rugged, scarred slightly on one cheek, with bronzed skin and long salt-and-pepper hair, the silver in streaks rather than sprinkled. Despite the silver in the hair, Uly didn't believe the man particularly old. He seemed to be staring at nothing, but Uly had no doubt if he moved, the guard would be upon him in an instant. To his right there stood a porcelain tub and screen at the side. Faucets jutted from the wall out over the tub. A small fireplace, at present unlit, and two chairs were the only other things in the room. Peculiar, this room, as if forgotten with no real purpose. He and the room had this in common.

Mattie came through the opposite door, carrying towels and some kind of linen garment folded on top of the pile. She set these to one side, then turned to the tub. Turning two metal levers, she tested the water as it began to flow from the faucets. The tub filled up quickly. Glancing at him, her gaze then shifted to Ryanac. "I think you will need to fill it up again. You should have hosed him down in the yard." She left the room, but not before Uly had seen Ryanac send a knowing smirk in her direction. She closed the door behind her.

Getting up off the desk, the guard approached him. "I assume you know how to wash yourself. Or have you forgotten?"

Biting back his retort, Uly nodded.

"You have forgotten, or you remember soap and water?"

Between gritted teeth, Uly forced out, "I remember."

The guard grunted. "Good. Wash. Dress in the night shift. No acting up, now. It would be a waste of both our time. Wash, and you can eat. Fight, and you will lose and be lucky if you only spend one night in prison despite what he said."

Uly gave a short nod, but he need not have bothered. Ryanac already moved to unfasten the cuffs. Bringing his hands forward, Uly rubbed at each wrist. The guard had moved back, but he stood watching. Uly, who had moved his hands to unbutton his shirt, now hesitated and glanced up. Smirking, the guard let his gaze wander up and down the length of him. Uly shuddered, unable to disguise his feelings, not because the guard watched, but because of what he no doubt saw. Even his nails were ragged, though he had tried to

keep them as neat as he could by biting them. Moving to the side, the guard pulled the screen between them, though it kept Uly from either door. Looking around, Uly saw nothing he could use as a weapon on his side of the room.

"Make sure you use the brush. Scrub those nails, hands and feet. And wash your hair. Do as Mattie said. Empty the tub when you are done and fill it up again, then repeat the process. You stink."

Slowly, Uly stripped. Naked, he reached out to test the water. It warmed his fingertips, but he flinched back upon catching sight of his reflection. Closing his eyes, he stepped gingerly into the water. The luxurious heat engulfed him. Sighing, he almost lay back and closed his eyes. He thought better of it. Reaching for the small brush, he began to scrub not only at his nails, but also at his skin. No doubt, these men saw him as the excrement he resembled. Whatever they meant to do with him, he would face it looking better.

By the time he had finished, the water resembled a muddy puddle. He had seen Mattie do something in the bottom of the tub, so he fumbled about until he found the stopper. Pulling it out, he stood while the water drained away. Though the room had a good temperature, losing the heat of the water soon made him shiver. Using the same brush and soap, he quickly scrubbed the scum away from the sides so that when he ran the water again, it would be clean. He sat in the water as it filled the tub so that he bore it even hotter. This time, he took some seconds to enjoy the luxury before he scrubbed every part of him again.

"Are you done?"

"Almost." Uly dipped down into the water and gave his hair a final rinse. Then he crawled and pulled himself up out of the tub with reluctance. The towels were soft, and he patted and dried off, trying not to wince at the feel of prominent bones. The fine beige linen shift had a v-shaped opening at the neck, and long sleeves. Uly quickly slipped it over his head. Though the shift hung long, it would give easy access to his body. Pushing the idea aside, Uly ran his fingers through his hair, smoothing it back, trying to ignore the tangles. Whatever they had in mind, he had been through a lot already in this life. It did not mean life had no more surprises, but it did mean none of them would truly shock him.

Stepping out from behind the screen, he turned his head towards Ryanac. The other man gazed at nothing, as though elsewhere with his thoughts, but quickly raised his head. A fleeting look passed through his eyes. Uly could not make out the man's mind, but some of it might have been surprise.

"What ... What should I do with my clothes, sir?"

"Silas, not sir," Ryanac said, though Uly frowned, not understanding. "Leave them where they are. Come with me."

Uly glanced to the cuffs Ryanac had slipped over his belt. They were small, slender-looking things. Incredible, then, that they felt so heavy when on. He hesitated as Ryanac took the key from his pocket, unlocked the door and drew back the bolt. Ryanac turned to him. "Do you *want* to wear the cuffs?" he bellowed.

The shout scared Uly more than anything else had this night. “N-no, si-- Silas,” he said.

“Then behave, and I won’t have to use them.” Ryanac held the door open, and Uly stepped forward, passing under the man’s arm out into the corridor.

Chapter Two

The hour grew late. Mewling, sycophantic, mealy-mouthed, skinny, rich men's daughters were the last thing he wanted to deal with at this time of night, but Farmun had cornered him just as he was about to enter his private quarters.

Dropping into a deep curtsy, the lordling and his daughters had begged his immediate attendance on a matter most urgent. Biting back a sneer, Markis had turned to them.

"Your problem is one for open council."

"Please, Shavar. Grant a troubled man your wisdom and save him from a sleepless night."

"My patience is not the most tolerant at the best of times. At this time of night, it is far from benign. Are you certain this is what you and your daughters wish to risk?"

The man dithered, unsure now, but dark circles encompassed his eyes. The two daughters alternately simpered in his direction and glared back at their father.

"Very well," Markis said, "but do not expect to find me at my most lenient." Turning away from the stairs that would take him to his quarters, he quickly set off down the hall towards the council chambers. In truth, Farmun should have kept the problem for closed court. Open court was when Shavar or other members of the council dealt with problems of the people, both Simeon and Swithin alike. Closed court sat for Swithin only, and then it depended on the matter and title of the lord in question. These rules applied to each district occupied by the Swithin, whether Shavar was present or not. Entering the chamber, Markis did not even bother to take the chair. Concentrating on pulling off his gloves, he said simply, "State your case," having heard it once already. However, they had to state it within the council walls, or his decision did not legally stand.

"Like I said, Shavar, my daughters argue over the right to own the horse."

"Was it not a gift for both of them?"

"From their uncle. Indeed, Shavar."

"Then they should share it."

The girls let out a small wail of protest and quickly succumbed to tears. "This they cannot seem to do." Farmun's voice sounded heavy with apology, but Markis detested the man's lack of strength. "They cannot seem to agree on a time when one should ride him."

Markis, having removed his gloves, looked up at the two girls. "And what do you have to say?" he asked, addressing one of them directly and taking her by surprise. Her eyes opened wide, and she flushed. Her long brown hair hung in a braid down her back and resembled a tail. A jewel-studded band of gold encircled her forehead. Her gown had long, flaring sleeves that hung down to the ground, the same length as her skirt. The dress itself was a sugary shade of pink, cut low at the neckline to reveal the ample bosom, and it drew the eye to the cleft between her breasts. Catching him looking, the young woman turned up the corners of her mouth into a small, inviting smile and fluttered her eyelashes. She *actually* fluttered her eyelashes.

"I would gladly share, Shavar." She said his title with a small curtsy, tilting forward so he could look down her cleavage more fully. "If my sister was only more reasonable."

From the corner of his eye, he saw the other, less endowed sister bristle in anger. In contrast, her dress was blue with a high split in the skirt to show off her legs. She looked akin to a child trying to compete with her older sister, and he had no wish to end up in the middle of their competition. Before she could open her mouth, he turned on his heel and rushed up the stairs to the throne. Spinning, he let himself fall back into the seat as he turned to face them.

"It is the judgment of Shavar that unless these two women, the daughters of Farmun the third, can come to some private mutual arrangement regarding the sharing of the horse, then thoroughbred or not, the animal shall be killed."

All three in attendance gasped. The court notary -- always one present -- jotted this down even as Markis spoke, without so much as a protest or even a sound.

"The animal shall then be served that night as their main meal and each day thereafter, until the meat is consumed."

One woman let out a small cry. The other made a sound as though she would vomit.

"In this way they will share equal portions of the animal, and the argument will be resolved. I, Markis Shavar, so say." He glanced at the notary who finished the document, pressed a seal to it, and struck a gavel declaring the announcement in force. Markis rose from the throne and made his way swiftly down the stairs. He spoke to them as he passed and left the room.

"I suggest you two ladies come to some amicable arrangement quickly, or else develop a liking for horsemeat and a lot of it in a short time. Note, I said until the meat is consumed. I

do not care if it is brimming with maggots. If you bother this court with something so trivial again, I will show you what the poor in this region have to live on."

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Returning to his suite, Markis quickly changed out of his clothes. He gave orders that had servants scurrying to and fro. He wanted a bath himself, and he wanted the room at the end of the hall made ready for an occupant. Just minutes after he had emerged from his bath, Ryanac knocked and then entered the room, his silence a question.

Markis, dressed in a royal-blue robe embroidered with gold, gave a sharp nod and accompanied him.

"I'm glad one of us is comfortable," Ryanac muttered.

Markis shot him a glance. "You're on duty, remember."

"My shift ended an hour ago. It would have ended sooner if you hadn't gone gallivanting out of the castle walls."

Markis gazed at Ryanac from the corner of his eye. "You're my personal guard. You don't get to have shifts. You're on duty when I say."

Ryanac sighed. "And that is most of the time."

"You took our stray to the dining room?" They were heading there now. Ryanac nodded.

"Though don't blame me if he has eaten the table and half the chairs while we have kept him waiting."

"Did you leave a heavy guard on him?"

"Just one man." Markis raised an enquiring eye. Ryanac smirked. "Believe me, he knows it would be no easy escape from here, and besides, the moment he smelt dinner, he wasn't going anywhere. The boy knew I knew it, too."

"Young man."

"Only by our standards."

"Let's not get into this again."

Ryanac shrugged. "I'm just saying."

"Saying what?"

The other man hesitated and then shook his head. "Nothing. I agree with you. He is a young man."

"My friend, sometimes I think you just delight in annoying me. At twenty-two, this ... this ..."

"Uly," Ryanac provided.

“Uly is a young man. For the sake of the comet, at twenty-eight I became chief justice and court supreme. I was born to be a prince and ruling before this one was out of diapers. You don’t believe this nonsense where they dictate their offspring to be children until they are twenty-five. That would mean you were only just a man by the time you had fought in two conflicts. So just what are you saying?”

“I’m saying ...” Ryanac hesitated. “I’m saying, go easy.”

“What in the world do you think I’m going to do to him?”

Approaching the door to the dining room, Ryanac turned his gaze in Markis’s direction. “I don’t know and neither do you. That’s the point. Why, by the comet, did you bring him here?”

Markis slowed his pace. The dark oak door loomed. His robe whispered across the floor as he walked. “I don’t know. He annoyed me.”

“I know. And you need to watch your temper.”

Markis gritted his teeth and glared at the guard who also happened to be a friend.

“I’m just saying, knowing you as I do, you might do something in haste you will regret later.”

Markis grunted. “I’m not about to kill him, and it’s your habit to screw around with other men.”

Ryanac grinned. “Maybe it should become your habit, too. I’m just saying not this one, not tonight.”

Pulling back his lips to expose his teeth, Markis reached out and opened the door to the dining room before Ryanac could do it for him. The gesture was an insult. “You know I have no such intention, and you’re just being disgusting,” Markis muttered, but Ryanac only laughed.

The dining table dominated the room. Constructed of a wood so dark as to be almost black, it could sit thirty-six guests. The richly panelled walls were lighter than the table and were draped with tapestries all in various tones of red. They consisted of patterns rather than pictures. Together with the glow of the fire, the room felt stiflingly warm.

The thief looked up as they came in. Markis almost gasped aloud. At least the young man had seen sense and decided to obey their commands, and at least he was clean, but that was precisely what Markis found so startling. He cast his mind back to how he had last seen Uly, the brown-encrusted feet to the ragged hem of the trousers, up the length of Uly’s legs, to the equally torn hem of the shirt. The sleeves barely covering Uly’s forearms had been ragged. Holes, small tears, and frayed edges abounded. Uly’s nails were as ragged as his clothes. His hair, which Markis now saw was pale blond, had looked a dirty piss colour, though it still hung at shoulder-length and uneven. At least hanging dirty and unclean, it had covered most of his face and so hid those haunted eyes. The hair pushed back, those eyes gazed at him now and then shifted quickly away. The young man stood hunched, and it did

not take the light of the fire shining through the night shift making it semi-transparent for Markis to see the body had a starved appearance.

Markis advanced into the room. He waved a hand casually at a chair on the other side. "Sit," he ordered.

Moving awkwardly, with short, sharp jerks, Uly took hold of the chair and struggled to pull it out from the table. The furniture was heavy, and he clearly lacked strength. Markis quickly chased away a twinge of pity. This young man had tried to rob him, and here Markis would give him food for his troubles and a good night's sleep in a warm, soft bed. It did not seem like much of a bargain from Markis's viewpoint.

Turning to the dishes set out on the side, Markis began to fill his plate. Ryanac dismissed the other guard and helped himself to food, too. Markis took up a second plate and, frowning, began to select things the boy might find easiest to consume. Turning, he went back to the table and slid a plate of beef stew and a bread roll across the table. The meat would be tender with good vegetables and with plenty of gravy that he could mop up and use to soften the bread.

"Start with that, and don't eat it too quickly. You'll bring it back up if you do."

The luminous grey eyes opened wide, and Uly hesitated, but then he quickly took hold of the spoon and pulled the plate towards him.

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The two men sat on the other side of the table talking about court politics in a way that Uly failed to understand and did not care about. He might have been able to understand it if he felt inclined to pay attention, but didn't see the point. He looked up once when Markis said something about a horse and Ryanac laughed. Looking back down at his plate, Uly didn't think it was horsemeat. He'd had horsemeat, and it didn't taste the same. Besides, this was tender. He had gulped the first two mouthfuls and would have gulped the third, but the men were watching him, and also, the second spoonful had lodged in his throat. Though he desired the food, the man had spoken right. If he ate at this speed, he would bring it up again, or it would lie like a weight in his stomach. He slowed down.

The man pushed a glass towards him filled with cool, clear water. Again, Uly almost gulped it down, but taking too big a swallow hurt his throat, and he eased off. Then the man gave him another glass of water and a small glass of wine. Expecting sour vinegar, Uly almost sputtered in surprise when the taste proved lush and warming. He would have liked to describe the taste more fully, but had no way to compare. Still, he relished each sip.

After they had sat there awhile, the two men talking and Uly drifting towards sleep, a sound made him open his eyes, and he found a second, smaller helping of stew placed in front of him. Without hesitation, he ate, not once looking at the two men in the room. If they had poisoned the food, he felt no pain yet, and he could think of worse ways to die.

Wiping the last of the gravy from the plate with the last piece of bread, Uly then finished the water and set the glass aside. Glancing up, he blinked, surprised to find the guard, Ryanac, had left. He had not noticed him leave. The other man sat dressed in a heavy-looking robe decorated with glittering gold threads. For all Uly knew, the threads were real gold.

"Come with me," the man said, rising from his seat. Uly hurried to obey, trying to push the chair back into place. "Leave it," the man said, with a soft quality to his voice.

Uly almost had to run to catch up. Out in the corridor, he followed, unsure how or where he should walk, so he kept a couple of places back and to the side. This way the man could see him from the corner of his eye. He didn't want him to think he was sneaking up on him or doing anything he should not be doing. He took the time as they walked to study the other man's face, shifting his gaze back and forth to the man's features and then ahead so that it lessened the chance of being caught staring.

Earlier, there had not been much opportunity to take in the strange man's appearance. Besides, Uly had had other things on his mind, like what his immediate future held in store and whether anything would happen to his skin. There seemed to be no immediate danger, however, so now Uly took the time to contemplate what kind of man had captured him.

Earlier, all he had noticed was the cold glitter of those dark brown eyes. The mouth had set in a hard, determined line. During dinner, Uly had seen warmth in the man's eyes as he conversed with the guard. He was not only a guard, then. Ryanac was this man's friend. They had talked, but they had also joked and laughed. That had amazed him most of all, to hear and see this man laugh. Still, he had only taken the most cautious of glances, afraid, tired, and overwhelmed by the meal. Now he watched those brown eyes, as they moved with alertness and appraisal even as they walked.

The eyebrows were a little heavy and perhaps detracted from his handsomeness, but to Uly's mind, they only drew attention to how bright and alert those eyes shone out from an otherwise benign-looking face. Having confronted men with disguised malignancy, Uly always looked to the eyes first and then to the mouth, as they often revealed the essence of a man.

The hair hung long, as was the way with most Swithin, male or female. In colour, the tresses were a rich chestnut brown. He stood tall, but then Uly was far from short. Still, Uly walked hunched from habit. No street urchin wanted others to notice them, but if he were to stand, he would reach the man's shoulder easily, perhaps be only half a head shorter. The man was large, but Ryanac was a little taller and definitely larger. It should not have concerned him, but he had to wonder over this man's age. At twenty-two, the Swithin judged him a man. That was fine by him. He often felt old enough for others to call him a man, but at other times, he still felt like a boy. Walking beside such a man as this -- one who exuded such confidence -- made him feel undeniably young in wisdom, though not in age.

They turned into another corridor, where two guards stood in attendance. They made no indication they even saw the two of them approach and might as well have been statues. Then as they passed through the open doorway, one of the guards finally moved to close it behind them. Looking ahead, Uly saw jewel-encrusted steps leading into another room. Beyond, he caught a glimpse of indescribable opulence before they were moving to the right, to the far end of yet another corridor. Uly followed the man into another room.

This room had a window similar in design to the room in which he had bathed. Likewise, some sort of desk stood beneath, but here all comparisons ended. A dark, thick rug covered the stone floor. A four-poster bed stood in the centre of the right-hand wall, opposite the window. The mattress rose up thick from the base. The covers had the appearance of weight and warmth; the pillows were plump. At present, someone had tied back the curtains, but the occupant could drop them to keep out the cold. Either side of the bed there stood a side table, one bare, the other holding a small jug of drinking water and a glass.

This room also had a fireplace, but it remained unlit. A chair stood beside the fireplace, and behind this, a bookcase stood against the wall. To Uly's disappointment, the shelves were empty. A small round table occupied the very middle of the room. On either side, there stood a chair similar but simpler in design to those in the dining room. The man came to stand behind the table and turned his attention to Uly. Standing there confused, Uly first frowned and then seeing that the man patiently waited, he dropped his gaze to the table and chairs. On the left-hand chair there lay a pile of neatly folded garments. They were clean and finely made apparel. On the right-hand chair were Uly's clothes. Dirty and as full of holes as when he had arrived in them, still someone had neatly folded them.

Uly frowned a silent question at the man. Glancing away, the man reached into a pocket of his robe. In equal silence, he removed an apple and placed it on the table. Reaching into another pocket, he pulled out a bright coin and placed this on the table next to the apple.

"Sleep this night in that bed. For tonight, this will be your room, and no one will enter to disturb you. For tonight, you have no say. You have eaten, you are tired, and you will rest. Tomorrow you have a choice. In the morning you have a decision to face."

The man turned his head in a slight nod towards the clean clothes. "You can choose to put these on and join me for breakfast and see what the day holds." He tilted his head to the dirty clothes. "Or you can take the coin and apple, dress in your own clothes, and leave here. No one will stop you if they see you in these filthy garments. If, however, they see you in the clean clothes, you must stay the entire day. By my order, the guards will bar you from leaving until nightfall. Do I make myself clear?"

The situation was so peculiar and the concept so strange that Uly hesitated. Why would the man make such a bargain with him? Seeing the flare of impatience light up the

man's eyes, he nodded, then said, "Yes," but he didn't know how to finish the sentence, what to call this man.

"Shavar. Yes, Shavar."

Uly echoed the man's response, but he had already turned and walked out of the room. Closing the doors behind him, he didn't even look back. Uly stood still for several moments in the silent room, waiting to see if anything else would happen. When it didn't, he moved to blow out the light and then quickly ran to the bed.

Chapter Three

Uly stretched as he opened his eyes. Though he saw the room, it took a few moments for him to comprehend. Sitting up, the loss of the covers and their comforting warmth made him flinch. The sweet dream receded. For whatever reason, the strange man had granted him forgiveness for the attempted theft and given him a reprieve from his everyday life. On the other hand, had he?

Slipping out of the bed, Uly padded across the room. He stared at the two contrasting piles of clothes, the coin, and the apple. If he put on the dirty clothes and tried to leave, perhaps he would discover it had all been a trick and they would arrest him. Then perhaps he should choose the good clothes and go to breakfast. The mere thought of breakfast made his stomach grumble, despite the fact he had had a good meal last night. Reaching out, he snatched up the apple, but it sat with the coin, and perhaps the man only meant him to have it if he left. He put it back. Biting at his lower lip, he then ran his tongue over his teeth and winced. He had not cleaned them last night. A street urchin he might be, but juberly leaves were free for the picking and chewing them cleaned the teeth better than any brush. He liked clean teeth.

He dithered whether to go or stay. Either way, a growing discomfort pained his belly. He had a function to perform, and he did not think anyone would take kindly to him pissing against the wall in this room. A door beckoned on the other side. He had noticed it last night, but not investigated. Moving towards it now, he saw it stood slightly ajar. Tentatively, he pushed it open and peered inside. The room contained a bath. Wandering in, he ran his fingers over the delicate raised patterns in the tiles. A small porcelain bowl sat under two levers, and as he turned them, water flowed. He glanced at the tub, knowing it would work the same. If he were to put on the fine clothes, he should wash first. *If* he were going to put on the fine clothes ... but he was not about to do that. One more strange porcelain pedestal stood in the room. Moving towards it, at first Uly frowned. Then laughing, he grinned at his

own stupidity. This was a rich house. The palace had toilets. Taking care of business, he then washed his hands at the sink. Drying them on one of the fluffy towels, he cried out in delight. Beside the sink sat a bowl of juberry leaves. He popped two in his mouth, chewed furiously, then rinsed and spat.

Uly paused with a hand on one of the levers. Why had they not simply brought him straight to this bathroom last night? The answer to that came painfully sharp. He had been so filthy the one who had told him to call him Shavar hadn't wanted this room dirty. He hadn't wanted Uly's filthy feet tramping about the palace. Uly closed his eyes. For some unknown reason, the strange man had so far treated him with relative kindness. Why he had given him such a difficult choice escaped him. True, last night he had not considered it a difficult choice, but this morning he saw just how hard it was. He could leave. He could stay. Either way, he had no idea what would happen to him. If he stayed, he might at least get breakfast. Uly's stomach growled in response.

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He had washed and put on the fine clothes. Then he had almost taken them off again. Though simple and loose, they felt so peculiar on his body that it seemed criminal, made him something worse than a thief. He had found a brush in the bathroom and had tried to tug it through his hair. He managed what he could and ignored the tangles he could not remove. Barefoot, he walked to the door.

The corridor was empty. Biting at his lip, he hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Finally, he stepped out and walked slowly back the way they had come last night. At the far end of the hallway, he came to the doors of the opulent suite. They stood open. Looking around, he saw no one about and ascended the three small steps to the door. Peering in, his gaze drifted over the high windows, the gaping arches with wide-open shutters to the fresh morning air and daylight, and the rich satin and brocade cushions that adorned the low-lying couches. The walls were highly decorated, and the partitions of the room consisted largely of panels of elaborate fretwork.

"Snoop," a familiar voice said, and a single push shoved Uly into the room. He let out a yelp, flailing his arms to stop from falling. Turning, Ryanac's sardonic grin greeted him.

"Don't be cruel." This was the other man's voice. Emerging from another part of the room, he approached Uly. "So," he said. "You decided to stay for today."

"Who's the cruel one?"

Ryanac's voice sounded teasing, and the two men exchanged a glance, but Uly failed to understand them. He had no idea what was going on here, what game they played between them, if it was even a game.

"If you think it so funny, you can take care of him for today."

The grin faded from Ryanac's face. "I'm meant to look out for you."

"I have council and ..." Here the man hesitated, seeming strangely uncertain. "... other things to attend to. Half the guards and other council members will surround me. I can spare you. Take him. Teach him a thing or two. Feed him, and for the sake of the comet, get his hair trimmed."

"Nails, too," Ryanac said while looking Uly up and down, but the other man had moved off. With a jerk of his head, indicating Uly should follow, Ryanac turned from the room and walked off. Dithering only for a second, Uly ran after him.

"My name," the guard began, "is Ryanac, as you've probably deduced. My designation is Silas. Therefore, I am Silas to the likes of you. You will use it as a title in the way you would call your father sir, or --" And here he smirked. "-- a distinguished man of your race Lord or Master. If it interests you, the term means forest-dweller. It means I am a man of the natural world, despite the fact I live in a palace. I am a good woodsman, an excellent guide, and savage as an animal if you get on my wrong side. I am captain of the guard and answer only to that man back there."

Uly, who had been alternatively walking and running to keep up, came to a halt. Almost as though he had expected it, Ryanac stopped and looked back at him. He took a couple of paces towards him, and it was all Uly could do not to back up. He suspected if he did, that Ryanac would just keep advancing.

Ryanac Silas, captain of the guard. That meant the man back there ...

"That man --" Ryanac lifted his head a little, indicating the passage they had just left. "- is Markis Shavar. Markis is his name. Shavar is his designation. He is Shavar, the Comet."

Uly gulped. The lump in his throat bobbed, and the other man saw it. The glint in the eye was one of amusement and something else, though Uly could only be fooling himself to think it compassion. When the man had said to call him Shavar, he hadn't made the connection, not until Ryanac had said he was captain and served only him. Shavar, the Comet. Lord prince regent of the Imperial Army, second only to the Swithin king himself.

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Ryanac imparted a little knowledge concerning the Swithin language. A night sidon was a garment worn to bed, unless one preferred to sleep naked. The guard had said this with a smile on his lips and a teasing glint in his eye. Uly looked away quickly. A man wore a sidon. They called a female's garment a night sidony. A shadd, the term they had used when they captured him, meant happy-go-lucky, a child, but Ryanac had insisted, lifting Uly's chin and forcing him to look at him, that Uly was no shadd. The Swithin used the word as a term of respect, for they viewed their children as precious, but that was not why it was inaccurate. Uly was a young man, not a boy, and none of the Swithin would respect him if he thought any different.

The idea of anyone respecting him for anything made Uly frown, but he feared to ask any questions. Besides, by then he had eaten everything put in front of him, was halfway through breakfast, and distracted. Though fearing to eat such a good meal despite not knowing if it would be his last, he simply could not resist it. He feared it because later he would probably feel even hungrier when back on the streets and having to go without. The toasted bread had a satisfying crunch even with melted cheese applied to it. The slices of meat, which Ryanac said they called bacon, were salty and equally crisp. The sausages arrived flavoured inside their skins with strong herbs. The eggs emerged from their shells hard, yet soft in the centre. The dark drink, which Uly sniffed at suspiciously and soon discovered he had a taste for, had a slightly bitter flavour. He asked his first question, and Ryanac, laughing, told him they called it coffee.

“What did you peasants eat and drink before we came here?” Uly flinched. The big man’s eyes gleamed intently. “No offence intended, but don’t tell me life here has been any worse for our presence. In ten years, you have a sewer network. The new houses have toilets and bathrooms. There are roads. We have regular supplies such as this --” He indicated the mug he drank from. “-- coffee. You have more variety and richer goods.”

“For those who can afford them,” Uly muttered without intending to and before he could stop himself.

Rather than chastise him for rudeness, the big man ruminated. “True. We made your people work their land, and for that, many of them hate us. We made even those with money pick up a shovel, and for that, they detest us. They should have picked up a blade when they had the chance, then.”

The Swithin army was large. Few had fought them. They had had no chance, but Uly didn’t say so. Besides, the man made a twisted sort of point.

“You know what I’m saying,” Ryanac Silas said, staring straight at him. “I see that you do. I am sorry for what your people have done to you, but none of it was our doing.”

Silence existed between them for a moment. “Go ahead and say it,” Ryanac prompted. “Go ahead and say we haven’t done anything to stop it either.” He stood. “Well, it’s true. We have let the Simeon have their way, left them to live their lives as they choose. All we have done is make them work each day. How they raise their children has been their own doing. Should we stop it? Probably. Maybe in time, we will. For now, we’ve had other things on our mind.”

Ryanac set down his mug, walked to the nearest end of the table, and came around to the other side. Pulling out the chair while Uly still sat on it -- they were back in the dining room and Uly had struggled into the chair as much as he had the previous night -- Ryanac leaned over the back of it and looked down at him. Tilting his head back, Uly saw those eyes watching him and looked away immediately. He could still feel them though, boring into the top of his skull.

"I know you don't fully understand or appreciate what I'm saying. It's called politics, and believe me, it's a game played by adults and which only foolish men believe they can win. Our Shavar is better at it than most and fairer than many know."

Fair? Uly didn't know about fair. Was it fair to give a street urchin a taste of the good life for a day, only to take it away again?

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"Keep still!" The woman who dug under his nails with what felt like a pair of shears turned her agitated face up to stare at him.

"Maybe if you didn't draw blood, he wouldn't flinch so." Ryanac had placed him in the care of two women and a man who gasped in horror at the state of his hair and nails. They had washed his hair, coated it in oil, rinsed, washed it again, finally removed the tangles, and cut it. Having lost two inches, it now hung just below the level of his chin. The nails were another matter. It appeared the girl wanted to trim them back to the skin. He pulled his hand free so often that eventually he had even argued with her.

"I've got to cut them shorter than is right to get them level!" Her exasperated reply to Ryanac's comment hardly seemed respectful for the captain of the guard.

The girl attending his feet smiled. "His toenails were so long, I've had no such problems. I've done them perfectly."

"Yes, well, he probably couldn't reach to bite his toenails."

Uly flushed. The woman wasn't far from the truth. Eventually you had to try to cut them with a knife, but the trick was to allow them to grow long enough so you didn't cut your toes. The trouble with that was the nails had hardened. The second woman had soaked his feet for so long the skin had wrinkled, but she had taken them from the bowl, patted them dry, and gently and gradually removed so many layers of skin his feet no longer felt familiar. She had also treated his nails with something to soften them before she used clippers to cut them, so it hadn't hurt ... much.

Ryanac marched across the room and grabbed his left arm. He inspected the hand. "Do the best with them you can. File them off at angles if you have to. Don't make him bleed for the sake of vanity."

"Angles!" The woman sounded horrified.

"Shavar wants him neat and clean, not picturesque. Now, as for something picturesque ..." He moved around the fairer woman attending Uly's fingernails to the woman who had taken care of his feet. She stood up and now backed away, a mischievous grin on her face. To Uly's shock, she pulled at the laces at her breast and the dress gaped. He was further surprised when Ryanac's hands latched onto her waist and dragged her against him. "Afternoon, Petra," he growled.

Uly started. Afternoon? Yes, he supposed it was. It certainly felt as though he had been here for hours.

Ryanac's right hand roamed down to Petra's leg, running up and down her thigh. Even though her skirt separated his touch from her leg, she seemed to like it. She jerked in his grasp as though a shock had run through her. In reply, Ryanac's grin met hers. Then he moved in closer, his lips pressing against hers with a hard force. Still, they exchanged a closed kiss, and Uly had seen worse. Hell, he had done worse! What had taken him by surprise was how open Ryanac and Petra were about it. Clearly, they were fucking in their spare time.

"Do you have to do that here?" The other woman sounded bored. Ryanac laughed. "Jealous?"

The woman, who had thankfully eased up on his nails and now filed them carefully, opened her mouth as though to protest and then shrugged. "Maybe a little bit."

"There's enough for two," Ryanac teased. Petra slapped at him.

"And I've told you, if it's a threesome, I want two men."

To Uly's utter amazement, Ryanac's grin broadened. "That can be arranged." This time when Ryanac pulled Petra to him, his tongue stabbed into her mouth. Petra stiffened, hesitated, but her behaviour was all show. She struggled, giving him little slaps, and then, when he continued to ignore them, her hands clasped his shoulders and she returned the kiss. He saw their tongues touch and entwine. To his dismay, an answering stab of desire spread through him.

Dragging his eyes away, Uly sought to understand his feelings. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen things, done things, but the sight of their evident affection had lit him up like a lantern. Witnessing the fury of the kiss had set his skin tingling. His whole body felt alive with a sensation he had never experienced before. To the girl filing his nails, this must have been normal. Her face was blank, almost bored, as though she had seen it all before. Maybe she had.

Trying not to look, still Uly's gaze drifted back to the two lovers. Somehow, Petra had eased open Ryanac's uniform, and Uly caught a glimpse of a hard masculine body. Ryanac's tan seemed to cover the expanse of his chest, which had a fine smattering of dark hair. Petra reached out and ran her hands over his chest, her fingers brushing his nipples.

Ryanac mimicked her movements, his fingers slipping into the gap of her top and pulling the cloth apart. As he did so, he slipped his hands down her sides to her breasts, lifting them free of the dress so they pushed almost lewdly through her blouse. Uly did not see it that way for long, though. Nothing about Petra as she threw back her head looked lewd or disgusting. She looked beautiful. Roughly, Ryanac wrapped her braid in his hand and tugged back her head. He took possession of her mouth first and then trailed his tongue and teeth down her neck. Pressing his tongue into the hollow of her throat had Petra moaning and writhing against him. Trying to imagine what that felt like, Uly pictured running his

tongue over that creamy skin, and the taste of it, or how it would feel to be Petra and have that hard, slippery heat pressed into his throat. He became aware he bit his lip so hard it might swell, if not bleed.

The woman at his feet moved on to another finger, working away with her file. How could she ignore them like this? Ryanac now cupped one of those breasts, swiping a thumb over the nipple. Even as Uly watched, it hardened. As Petra whimpered, he saw she had opened her legs, even pulled up her skirt a little. She tried to press herself against Ryanac's leg. Ryanac's chuckle filled the room.

"Bastard," Petra spat, but Ryanac ignored her complaint and continued to caress her breasts. He dipped his head and took her nipple into his mouth. He had to be running his tongue over it. Petra responded by lacing her hands through his hair and pressing them together all the tighter.

"All done." The file stopped moving, and Uly looked down, blinking in surprise. The woman stood and gathered up the vicious-looking implements she had used. "I'm going to get me some air."

Ryanac, letting Petra kiss his neck and chest, his hands wandering carelessly over her breasts, glanced back towards them. "You should get some air, too," he told Uly. "You can go look at the horses next door." Clearly, this was an order to leave. Luckily, the clothes he wore were loose and the other two were too distracted to watch him walk awkwardly to the door.

Outside, the light burned his eyes -- too bright, the air too chill. His testicles tried to crawl up into his body from sheer need. Stumbling towards the barn next door, Uly slipped inside. Apart from three horses, there was no one else present. One of the horses belonged to Ryanac. The large man had ridden him down here with Uly walking at the side. They were in the lower part of the palace where the real work occurred. There were barns and stables here, workshops, supplies and merchants, even people to do your hair and nails, as Uly had discovered, much to his chagrin. He questioned why Shavar cared about the state of a street urchin's nails, but maybe it was as Ryanac said. Maybe Shavar just wanted him clean at the dinner table. That made him wonder how much longer he could hang around cadging meals without paying a price for them. Whatever game Markis Shavar played with him, no doubt it would all come to a stumbling halt with him chucked out on his ear in a day or so.

Closing his eyes, Uly swallowed and tried to calm his breathing. That was when he heard Ryanac's muffled but unmistakable voice. Opening his eyes, Uly glanced to the right and edged further into the stable. As Ryanac's horse grumbled, he became aware that he had heard the horses while he was inside the other building. Ryanac and Petra were just next door. Easing forward, he dipped his head and saw what he longed for, a spark of light shining in the midst of the dark wall. Putting his eye to it, he looked through a crack into the next room, just in time to hear Ryanac say, "I want me some pussy."

"Only after I get to touch some cock."

Uly had heard women say worse things, but it did not sound callous or sordid the way Petra said it. She made it sound delightful. From here, he could watch them from the other side, their left, and he saw Petra's hands move down to trace the outline of Ryanac's groin. Uly swallowed, his throat suddenly too dry. Ryanac's hand had closed over hers, and he moved it in a hard, firm glide over the bulge. It took only a moment before Uly noticed Ryanac's fingers were also busy. With Petra's help, he unfastened his pants. His cock sprang free and Ryanac sighed as it did, almost as though it were a relief in itself. To Uly's surprise, his own flesh had started to rise. It wasn't as though he had never had a hard-on, but in truth, he had only enjoyed it as a solitary pleasure. He couldn't say he had ever experienced uncomplicated enjoyment when it came to sharing his body with others. Even when he had witnessed others fuck, the act was often quick, even rough and crude. Not like this, with both participants enjoying it. This spoke to things inside him he hadn't known existed.

As Petra's hand started to move up and down the swollen shaft, Ryanac threw back his head, his eyes tightly closed. The look on his face became almost one of pain, which surprised Uly. Even knowing what sensations his own hand was capable of producing, he had never experienced such emotion. The intensity of the moment inscribed every line on Ryanac's face. To see the big man lost in pleasure would pull at anyone's desire. Ryanac opened his eyes and gazed down just as Petra ran her thumb over the head of that twitching cock, then raised it to her mouth. She sucked her thumb while looking Ryanac in the eye with a saucy expression on her face.

In reply, Ryanac lifted her, and dumped her on the workbench. Petra protested with a small squeal. "I'll get splinters in me arse," she complained.

"Consider it a little pain to spice the pleasure." Again, Petra slapped at him, but as a smile broke over her face, this was clearly all part of the game. Her expression quickly changed.

Casting his gaze downwards, Uly struggled to see just what Ryanac did, but the angle obstructed his view. From their gestures and Petra's quiet moans, he guessed Ryanac had slipped at least one finger inside her. Uly had only been with a girl in the full sense once, but he had touched a few. He licked his lips as he recalled plunging his fingers into that slippery tunnel. He imagined the other man's fingers slipping in and out of that warm heat and longed for it to be his fingers. An image of both their hands working her rose up in his mind, and a small sound escaped through his nose as he bit back the cry on his lips. Uly wanted to touch himself, and that surprised as well as alarmed him. He had long given up on sex other than as a means to an end. This level of longing frightened him. He had never wanted to feel this way again. Leaning away from the wall, he closed his eyes a moment. He should not be spying on Ryanac and the girl like this, but the compulsion throbbed within him so strongly. He had simply never seen two people look as beautiful as this.

Giving in, Uly glued his eye to the crack in the wall, just in time to see Ryanac crouch in front of her. His hands pushed Petra's legs so wide apart, Uly caught a glimpse of glistening folds and a crown of soft, dark hair to match the colour on her head, and then

Ryanac's head dipped in. Petra's cries became so loud, the horses in the stable behind him whinnied. Uly checked over his shoulder to make sure he was still alone. He had no doubt Ryanac flicked his tongue over those soft folds, seeking her hard clit. When Uly swallowed this time, it actually hurt his throat. Ryanac's left hand pushed one of Petra's legs back, possibly to allow him to breathe, while his right hand snaked down between his legs. Uly's mouth fell open at the idea of the big man stroking his own cock.

To Uly's amazement, Petra suddenly started to push Ryanac away from her. She said something, but he could not catch what. Ryanac stood, his lips smeared with her juices, but Petra kissed him anyway. Even as their tongues stabbed into each other's mouth, Ryanac speared up into her body. Rather than sit still, as Uly had seen many a woman do, Petra began to rock her hips, even in such an awkward position. Ryanac chuckled and looped his hands under her legs to help her.

"What about those splinters?"

"Fuck the splinters," Petra's breathy reply rasped from her throat. "I'll make you suck them out."

"Fuck ..." Ryanac muttered, but it did not appear to have anything to do with what Petra had said. He grimaced now, almost as though he stood in the grip of some pain. In response, Petra looped her legs around his hips. A look of evil delight came into her eyes. She rocked her hips, tugged on him with her legs, made his hips rock in time with her needs. "Bitch!" Ryanac managed to gasp. He sounded half angry and half something else. At once his body tensed, his eyes glazed and then closed. He gritted his teeth and shuddered. As he did, Petra tilted herself forward, almost off the edge of the table. She made a couple more movements with her hips, rubbing against him. She used her hands to clutch at him and pull him close. Though her cries sounded muffled, Uly frowned at the idea she might be crying.

He stayed there for a moment, watching their breathing ease, their bodies calm. To his further surprise, Ryanac held the woman with something he could only describe as tenderness. He stroked her hair, kissed her face, and embraced her. Suddenly feeling ashamed to be spying, Uly wanted to give the lovers their privacy. A little late to grant them that, maybe, but he would leave them alone to recover.

Sliding down the wall to the floor, Uly sat with his head in his hands. He should not have watched, but sex had never looked that way from what he had seen of it or from what he knew of it personally. How in the world was he supposed to return to the life he knew after what he had seen and what it had made him feel?

* * * * *

The heat bore him down. Only vaguely aware of his body, still he wanted to shuck his clothes. He had finally refused to stand naked for these lessons. Maybe one of Ryanac's remarks that the 'old codgers', as he referred to them, just enjoyed seeing a younger man

naked had made him keep his clothes on. Not that he cared about nudity; it was the principle. He was Shavar.

Too damn hot. Humid, sticky heat. Sweat covered him, dripped from his neck to run under his clothes, but it did not seem to want to stop. It wanted to run under his skin. He in turn wanted to run hands over his skin to ease the pain, but as always, they had tied them. They claimed to do this for his safety, but it rather seemed as though it might be for theirs. Either that, or they wanted to stop him from touching himself when he became lost in the sensation. As now ...

He wanted to run his hands around his neck and then over his chest, trace his nipples. As though the power heard him, it responded. It went where his hands could not go. Breath caught in his throat, and then he relaxed into it, waiting to see what it would do.

His nipples hardened as though someone had pinched them. The power shimmered like a soft tongue, sweeping down to his navel. It stroked through the hair on his stomach, but then rounded out to cover his thighs, as though it would deny him what he wanted. Maybe it knew not to touch him too soon. It stroked inside his thigh and made him frown. It stroked him just as he liked. Why should that puzzle him? This was *his* power.

He hardened, thickened, wept mellifluously under the soft tissue. His breathing increased, and so did the heat. Sweat stung his eyes, though he had closed them.

I am blind. Even as the thought crossed his mind, he had to accept the possibility. Balls, erection, and stomach lurched in need. Fire tore into his belly. If the fire drove down to his balls, he would writhe in agony.

Think of something else ... The only thing that sprang to mind was long and thick, glistening. Tears ran hot down his face. His eyes would cook in his head if he did not send this heat somewhere. Blood boiled; bubbles formed where they would kill.

"Use your hands," a voice said, and he laughed, not knowing if it was now or inside his head as a memory. The first time he had used his hands to direct the power, he had suffered mild burns. Now he knew where the scars on the king's hands came from. He, Markis, had got off lightly. No one in centuries had tried directing their power through their eyes, a lesson learned the hard way.

Use his hands. He would if he could, but not the way they wanted. He would wrap it around his shaft and spread the heat down and up.

His body tightened. If he came in a session, it would not be the first time, but it never satisfied. It made the longing worse, long and empty, so he denied it. The refusal made the heat worsen, but he didn't care. The air he breathed seared his throat, cooked his lungs, suffocated. This time his scream was silent.

* * * * *

Back in the main palace, Uly walked with Ryanac as before, a sort of hop, skip, and jump, to keep up. Seeing his plight, Ryanac finally eased up. He whistled softly, good-naturedly. No wonder; the man had apparently expelled a great deal of tension.

"I'm surprised you were embarrassed." This was the first allusion the guard had made to the encounter.

Uly's face grew warm. "I wasn't ..." he began and then fell silent.

"You don't have to be struck dumb. No one has cut out your tongue."

Somehow, Uly expected a 'yet' on the end of the sentence and experienced a strange kind of disbelief and wonder when it didn't come. Maybe the man would feel differently if he knew Uly had seen more than the commencement of his seduction and spied on him.

"You must have seen things, on the street."

The question sounded innocent enough, but Uly was no fool. Ryanac was searching, didn't even seem especially worried if he knew it. Uly turned his head a little, tilted it to the side, and glanced up at him. To his horror, Ryanac mimicked him, only his gaze looked downwards to Uly's face. The guard's lips pulled back in a small grin. It wasn't exactly intimidating, but neither was it forgiving. He looked away. He wasn't going to answer.

"What are you afraid of, Uly?"

Yeah, as if he would really tell anyone what he feared most. On the end of that thought, his face tightened. What was he afraid of? He had lived in a perpetual state of fear for so long that he no longer knew the answer. When you were busy scavenging your next meal, worrying about someone kicking you in the head or ribs became secondary. He feared pain, at least to a logical and reasonable extent. That didn't jump immediately to mind, though. Hunger was just another pain, and he bore that well.

The pace had slowed, and Ryanac stared at him. He clearly expected an answer to this question, if no other. "I fear not knowing what's going to happen next, Silas."

The small smile lingered. "We fear the unknown. It's what scares us the most. It's honest and wise. I believe it's the basis of all fear, but what if we should turn away from something out of fear alone? If we allow our fear to rule us, what if it begins to dominate our lives, our decisions? What if you turn aside and miss out on something good in the process?"

Uly stared resolutely at the floor, though he could feel the other man's gaze like heat against his face. For some reason, the guard wanted to draw him into a conversation that Uly wanted no part of. He had learned from an early age that his opinion counted for nothing. To express a personal idea often ended in the kind of pain he longed to avoid. He squirmed, hating that the other man could see it. The points Ryanac had addressed tugged at his mind, and he didn't want them to. He had long since learned to turn his intellect to the simple matter of survival. Everything else was safer to block out and deny. Survival in this instance, though, could mean having to answer.

"I don't see the ..." He stopped talking, afraid now of what he had been going to say.

“Finish the sentence. You may speak freely without reprimand.”

He had no reason to believe him, but saw no choice. “I don’t see the point in the question. If you turn aside from something and miss something good, chances are you’ll never know about it. That’s like asking what if you’d never been born. If you weren’t born, you wouldn’t know anything, so whether you would have chosen your life is irrelevant. You weren’t given a choice.”

He missed a step when he realised he had said more than he meant to. Ryanac snorted as though dismissing the argument, but Uly didn’t believe he was that unobservant or indifferent. He wasn’t that type of man and wouldn’t hold the position he did if he was.

“Do you fear me?”

The sudden question startled him anew. “Yes,” he answered, before he had time to consider whether he should. He added, “Silas,” almost as an afterthought.

“Wise, but why? Do you think I mean you harm?”

Uly knew when someone would be unrelenting, and he could see implacability in Ryanac’s dark eyes. “I don’t know you well enough to know. It’s best to be cautious, Silas.”

Ryanac laughed as though he meant it. “And if you fear the unknown, you must be wondering how this day will pan out. If I could tell you and take the fear away, what would that do for you?”

Uly gave a small shake of his head. In truth, whatever the man said, he wouldn’t trust it. Ryanac reached out with one hand as though he would touch him, and Uly jumped back, then swallowed, aware he shouldn’t have reacted as he had. The man’s hand dropped to his side.

“I don’t hurt people unless they force me to it or deserve it. Not even if I’m ordered.”

Uly frowned. He had some sense of Ryanac telling him something beyond the words, but he didn’t understand it. No wonder many considered the Swithin people a peculiar race.

“Congratulations,” Ryanac said. Uly’s frown increased. “You managed to distract me from my original comment. Of course, no one does that for long. You seemed upset and dismayed by my affection for Petra. You must have seen things down on the street. I can’t help wondering why you found it distasteful.”

He swallowed. Distasteful wasn’t the right word for it. “People don’t undress in front of others like that.”

“Like hell. I know what goes on in the alleys, especially down by the docks.” Those dark brown eyes looked down at him once more. “What you saw was mild. Don’t tell me that’s something else to add to your so long list of fears.”

If the big man mocked him, Uly failed to grasp exactly how. “I don’t understand.” He meant the comment, but he also meant many other things he didn’t know how to express.

The large man paused and regarded him. “I know,” he said, and the warm, softly spoken words seemed to hold a weight of meaning in them. They stood at yet another

doorway, but he didn't open it immediately. "I understand fear better than most. The very nature of it. I don't expect you to understand that, but think on it."

"You have power." Uly didn't mean to speak and couldn't understand why Ryanac drew him to speech. He was usually more cautious and wiser than this. He also hadn't intended to sound so flippant.

"I have power over some, and others have power over me. By others, I mean Shavar. The rest can go to the hounds, largely. I choose who I follow. In the past, others saw it as one of my many failings. However, if you believe a man with power, even a brave man, never feels fear, then you are not only foolish. You are stupid."

He didn't like Ryanac calling him stupid. He didn't know why, but it grated. He shouldn't care what anyone here thought of him. That truly was stupid. Again, some of what the guard said escaped him. He couldn't see Ryanac as having many failings. However, if any truth existed in it, he could determine one thing. Ryanac believed Markis a man worthy of his attention, worth following. Even if he couldn't trust the guard's word alone, Ryanac seemed too independent and somehow removed to make such decisions lightly.

"It's been a long day," Ryanac said. As they passed a window, Uly looked out and then started in surprise. It grew dark. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry," Ryanac added, and only then did Uly realise he had not had a meal since breakfast. He had enjoyed two good meals in two days, and he was unaccustomed to it. Still, the idea he might have another one ... He could almost smell the stew.

Markis Shavar already sat in the dining room, though he stabbed at his plate almost savagely. "Will you look at this," he demanded, pushing a parchment towards Ryanac, who gave the sideboard of food a plaintive glance before sitting down to read.

"Help yourself," Ryanac said to Uly, and when Markis didn't refute the order, Uly walked over to the enticing platters.

He scooped out mashed potatoes and chicken swimming in warm, buttery juices. Feeling it only wise, he took vegetables -- not that he didn't like vegetables, but so starved of these delights, the other richer foods called to him first. Taking a bread roll, he walked carefully to the table where they had laid his familiar place opposite the two men already. Uly frowned; this was the third time he had sat here, and it already felt familiar. Tears welled up and threatened when he turned his mind to the long night ahead. If Shavar allowed him to keep it, what would Hebe think of the coin and how he had obtained it? He rather felt he had paid the price of the coin for the privilege to stay here another day. He could not complain, though -- he had eaten more than the coin would have bought.

By the time he had finished the plate, Ryanac had his meal, and the two men ate and argued all through dinner. Ryanac filled him a second plate and slid it across the table, and shortly after Uly had cleaned it, Markis got up and brought another dish, sliding it across to him. Puzzled, Uly pressed a spoon into the brown, fluffy, cake-like substance. When he finally took up a spoonful, he found it far lighter and fluffier than any cake he had ever

tasted. In the centre, a rich, dark sauce poured out. This was strange. He had never had something sweet with a meal.

"It's chocolate," Ryanac muttered, and then the two men went back to talking as though he wasn't there. Having no idea what chocolate was, still he liked it. He finished the bowl, licked the spoon clean, barely restrained himself from licking the dish, and glanced across longingly at the sideboard.

"You'll be sick," he heard Markis say, and he gazed across at the other man in amazement. Ryanac was just getting up and left the room chuckling. Markis rose to his feet and clicked his fingers. Uly followed.

Once more, they returned to the room where Uly had slept the previous night. Once more, Markis stood on the other side of the small round table with the clothes folded on the chairs. Fresh, clean clothes neatly lay on the left chair, and Uly's dirty street garments on the right. From his pocket, Markis brought forth an apple, and taking the day-old one, he replaced it with the fresh. Then he added a second coin to the first.

"Your choice," Markis said, and with that, he left the room.

Chapter Four

Outside the door to Shavar's suite, Ryanac stood waiting. "You're evil," he said as Markis approached. Markis only raised an enquiring eye. Ryanac looked away, lounging against the wall. "I'm honest about being evil. How long do you think he will play your silly little game?"

"Oh, another day or two. Then he will get scared and hightail it out of here."

"And if he doesn't?" Ryanac met Markis's gaze. Markis's lips and facial muscles wanted to twitch under the other man's scrutiny. He disguised it by pulling a face.

"It really hadn't occurred to me he wouldn't."

"So what is the point?"

Stepping up to the door of his private suite, Markis glanced back. "Does there have to be one? I'm a prince. I get bored."

"And stressed."

Markis reached out and traced the elegant fretwork. "We both know violence is brewing."

"None of us need another war, but you know that's not what I'm referring to."

Markis almost sighed, almost made an exasperated noise. He choked it back down. Despite what Uly and his race believed, given another few years the Swithin's presence would change things for the better. No, they had not wiped out poverty yet, but certain living conditions needed improvement first. Then they could work on ignorance. Lack of knowledge could be as big a killer as poverty, most of the time. He longed to return to his homeland -- the palace here was a strange combination of Swithin style built on Simmie ruins -- but the posting served more than one purpose. He might be a prince, but he still went where duty dictated. As for what Ryanac referred to, stress was part of his duty, part of being Shavar. He could do nothing to avoid it.

"I take it you don't want to talk about how the lesson went today."

"No. No, I don't." He waited to see if Ryanac would argue, but the big man just glanced away and fell silent. When the guard next spoke, thankfully he changed the subject.

"He spied on me and Petra today."

Markis looked up sharply. "What?" Quickly, Ryanac told him what had happened. "You knew he would."

A smile played around Ryanac's lips. "Of course."

"And I'm supposed to be the one that's evil?"

"I didn't plan it. He didn't have to spy." Ryanac shrugged. "Petra and I started to make out, and I couldn't help it. I saw the look in his eye, and it was my undoing. For the rest of the day, wherever we went, whatever I had to do, he just trailed along. He acted as if he'd been stunned. He was shocked to find the hour so late when we returned."

"Don't try to tell me a street urchin is innocent."

Ryanac shook his head. "It's more than that. He's not innocent of sex, but I think he is innocent of love." Markis let out a snort. "Ignorant of love or even affection, then, if you prefer such an explanation. He doesn't want to talk about his past, but push him and things slip."

Irritated and reluctant, Markis had to agree. "I don't suppose any of these street brats know what love is. It makes you glad to be born Swithin."

"Have you noticed his teeth?"

Markis grimaced. "He's not a horse to be examined."

"No, but seriously, have you noticed?"

Markis could only shake his head.

"They are clean."

He was Shavar and a prince. Something told him he shouldn't be this dim. He just looked at Ryanac, blinking. The roll of eyes wasn't entirely unexpected.

"He's a street brat. Juberry leaves are free for the picking and a great find. Even the Swithin appreciate them, but why would a street brat care for clean teeth? Have you seen what passes for well-groomed around here?"

"He cares for his appearance." He almost made it a question, but stopped in time. Ryanac nodded.

"It makes him stand out from most."

Maybe it did, but what was he supposed to do about it? Why would Ryanac point out something like that? They had matters of politics to discuss, but he felt tired. "Are you coming in, or do you want to talk tomorrow?" A look of indecision swept over Ryanac's face. The eyes were calculating. "Shavar could take offence being looked at that way."

"I don't mean it as an insult."

"I know exactly how you mean it." Markis tried to keep a hard edge to his voice, but failed miserably. He and Ryanac were simply too good as friends; their irritation with each other never lasted long. "I'm sorry. I'm in no mood to oblige," he said.

"You never are, and you're on edge. We both are. Which is precisely why I am not coming in tonight. What we have to discuss can wait until morning."

It had become their habit to share a tot of Swithin brandy before retiring, even if they had nothing to talk over, and Ryanac had just refused to do either. Markis frowned. "I admit I am tired, and I cannot speak for you, but why do you say I'm on edge?"

The other man's lips twitched into a smile. "Never mind, my sundip one."

Enlightened? Why call him enlightened with a trace of sarcasm behind it? "What are you talking about?"

Ryanac pushed off from the wall and moved a little away. "Markis, you may be safiyah to me, but you can be rather dense at times."

Safiyah -- best friend. Markis took the compliment and acknowledged it with the mere hint of a nod, but he remained puzzled. Ryanac raised a hand in his direction. "We'll talk about it another time," he said. Tired, Markis allowed his friend to leave. Yes, for tonight, he would let him go, but they would certainly talk later.

* * * * *

He couldn't sleep. That was the frustrating thing about these sessions. Either they zonked him out, which in the beginning had been for days -- thank the comet that was over with -- or they made him sick, or kept him awake. Sometimes they made him sick *and* kept him awake. Tonight belonged to the sole providence of insomnia.

Turning his head, he recalled speaking to Uly earlier. That led to thoughts of Uly alone in his bed, and that led to a flight of fancy involving images of him stroking himself to release. Markis swallowed and turned his head away from the sight of the empty space beside him. His bed was large, plenty of space for Uly in it. There was plenty of space for three, maybe a tight squeeze for four.

From where had that thought come? Ryanac would make a joke of it. He doubted the man went more than a night without whacking off at the very least and not many nights did he have to resort to self-manipulation. The only time Ryanac set sex aside was when duty called. At least he could rely on him in that. The head housekeeper, Mattie, might tease Ryanac about the state of his sheets most mornings, but the man could set sex aside in answer to duty.

If Uly stayed here for long, would the maid have to clean stained sheets from his bed? What would she think if she did? There were no stains to clean from Shavar's sheets other than sweat, and wasn't that a pitiful thought. No one would dare to say something to Shavar either way, but they all knew of his celibate state.

He closed his eyes and pictured Uly naked in the bed, spread for him. The look in the eyes shone with innocence and maybe a little fear. All lies! Uly was no innocent; a street brat had to know what men did, and Markis had no reason to think the young man had not tried such things himself. That was the thing about the Simeon. They said one thing and did another when you turned your back. Sometimes they did things to those who were unwilling.

The idea that someone might have once forced Uly had never entered his head. He allowed the idea to run through his mind and then dismissed it. Uly's eyes were haunted, but didn't have *that* kind of look. The young man might have been coerced, desperate, but not held down and ... Silently, Markis promised whatever happened, he would never coerce, never blackmail or threaten. He would never take someone by force anyway, but one could withdraw love as a form of blackmail, and he would not. *Love?* Now that was a peculiar notion. His face tightened in a frown.

Jumping in surprise, he became aware his hand had been stroking his cock and it had risen to the occasion. Not yet fully erect, he hesitated. He should stop now. It seemed pointless when he couldn't bring it to fruition, but he could not deny the sensation was pleasant.

Closing his eyes, in his mind the thumb he slid across the tip of his cock became a tongue, hot and wet, travelling. Visions of women, some past lovers, some women he had only shared a smile with, warm, wet, welcoming, filled his mind. By the comet!

Markis let go of his cock as a throb passed through it and rolled onto his side. Bringing his legs up, he lay in an almost fetal position. It was not until he tasted the mild tang of salt that he realised he sucked his thumb.

Chapter Five

Opening his eyes, Uly fought off the intoxicating call of sleep. His head felt groggy, and he was not as rested as he had expected. He had not slept as well last night as he had all week. The reason was obvious. He so feared what he was about to do this morning, he had hardly slept. Slipping out of bed, he shivered. The days were growing shorter; the nights long; soon winter would start to nibble at bare toes and feet. Uly quickly went into the bathroom. He wanted to wash, but only used the toilet instead. He took two juberry leaves and chewed, spat them out, and rinsed his teeth. Pausing, he drank the clean water, just in case he never tasted it again.

Going back into the main room, he dressed in his dirty street clothes. He took the apple and the coins, which were now a small pile, counting eleven. He had been here over a week, and he had to do what he had in mind before he grew too afraid. He knelt down and fished out the small linen sack he had stolen earlier in the week and stuffed the good clothes into it. Then he left the room and went out into the corridor.

As quietly and quickly as he could, he moved down the hall. The hour was early. Although life continued within these walls all through the day and night, the hour was so early at least three-quarters of the castle slept. He held his breath as he moved by Shavar's suite, almost as though he believed Markis had ears like a hawk and would catch him leaving.

Instead of heading for the main gate, he crept along to the back wall of the palace. By the side of one of the towers -- this one with a large onion-shaped protrusion at the top, rather like the head of a man's erection -- he leaned out over the wall and, seeing the ground at a dizzying distance beneath, dropped the sack. Having weighted it with a rock, it fell straight and true. This corner of the palace had shrubs growing along the base. The sack disappeared into the foliage with only a slight rustle, which at this distance no one would take notice of even if someone heard. Not hesitating, he retraced his steps and headed to the

main gate. Markis had said that if he left in his ragged clothes, the guards, who now knew him on sight, had orders to let him leave. He planned to put that to the test.

Outside, he quickly skirted the castle walls until the right avenue presented itself to let him move swiftly into the city. Within moments, he was lost to the guards within its dark depths.

* * * * *

“Hebe, it’s me.”

The four children had been making their way out the back even though Uly had called out. The oldest girl turned to face him. No doubt, the others waited by the back entrance to the old shack. Due to fire damage last summer, it now sat crooked. Maybe in time someone would pull it down, but blackened and bent, no one was interested in it except the children who now called it home. They had let Uly spend the odd night here, if he could pay for the privilege.

“Uly, is that really you?” Jene, the second, younger girl edged back into the room. The two boys, Adley and Tig, flanked her.

“Get back.” Hebe sounded annoyed, but Jene ignored her. The small girl launched herself across the room into Uly’s arms.

“I thought we would never see you again. I thought they would murder you.”

“Why didn’t they?” Hebe did not look impressed. Her eyes moved up and down as she took in his appearance. “Look at you.”

Uly frowned, not understanding. He wore his street clothes. Hebe walked towards him. “You said you were giving up whoring.”

He blinked. “I haven’t ... I didn’t.” What did she mean?

Hebe reached out and grabbed his wrist. “You might be dressed like us, but your hair has been cut. It’s clean.”

Uly would not have called it clean. He had wiped mud on his face and over the other exposed parts of his skin. He had also run his muddy fingers through his hair, trying to blend in. To passers-by who didn’t notice him, maybe he did, but obviously not to his friends.

“Your nails are trimmed.”

Fair enough. He could not hide that.

“And there is flesh on your bone.”

He glanced down at the wrist she held and blinked again, amazed to see that she spoke the truth. He had put on weight. Hebe let go of him. “What are you doing here, Uly? What do you want?”

“I came ... to give you this.” He dropped the pile of coins into her hand. Hebe examined the money, while Adley whistled between his teeth.

"How did you get this?" Hebe asked.

"Who cares," Tig spoke up. Uly had always liked Tig.

"I care. He said ..."

"Don't get so high and mighty," Tig said. "You had nothing to say with that guy's cock in your mouth the other night."

Hebe fetched him a whack up side the head with the back of her hand. "That bought us food for two days, and he was a decent, clean man I liked the look of." Hebe was a well-developed woman by Swithin standards. She had done things to feed the younger ones she would never allow them to do. It seemed rather hypocritical of her to be having a go at Uly, though.

"So what's the dif?" Tig demanded, not paying any attention to her slap. He had received worse hits. The heat of Hebe's anger faded.

"Nothing, I guess. It would just have been nice for one of us to stick to our word."

"Hebe," Uly called her name and waited until she looked at him. "I didn't do anything to get this money. He just leaves it lying around."

"So you stole it."

"No. Not ... exactly. So what if I had? I'm a thief, remember. He said I could take it and go. So I did."

"You could have stayed?" Uly nodded. "More fool you, then." Hebe glanced away, then looked back into his eyes. "It's not that we're not grateful, but I don't know who that man was. All I know is, we saw him and a guard drag you away. You could bring a lot of trouble down on our heads."

Uly shook his head, denying this, but he understood their fear.

"So what you gonna do now? Stay here? Go back out on the streets?"

Again, Uly shook his head, though he paused first. "I'm going back." Hebe raised one eye. The others looked down at the floor, radiating disappointment mingled with resignation.

"Well, good luck, but there is no point in sneaking out to do this for us. You cannot help in the long term. We will survive, and he might not take kindly next time."

Next time. Uly swallowed his fear. In truth, Markis might not take too kindly to his sneaking out even this once. Uly was no fool. Markis had told him if he left, he left for good. He had not been able to help it, though. He had to come back to do this. Despite what Markis might do to him, and though the betrayal of taking the coins burned him, he had needed to give them to Hebe. His conscience had dictated. Now, it was time to return, and what had he risked it all for? To face Hebe's displeasure, that's what. He didn't know what he had expected. He didn't expect them to kiss his feet in gratitude, but a little thanks wouldn't have gone amiss. He'd risked everything, only to be insulted. It was his own fault; he should have known better. When would he learn?

As on so many occasions recently, tears threatened, but he would not let them fall. Hebe saw him as weak. She always had. Tears would only confirm her suspicions. Only the others looked up to him, and even in that, he was a fool for seeking their approval. When would he accept that you could only rely on yourself in this world? It was small recompense that the younger ones would get to eat for at least a month. So, they would starve later rather than sooner. Laughter threatened to bubble up and break loose. He still didn't know why the prince allowed him to hang around, but he had risked the comfort of the palace for next to nothing. If he stayed on the streets now, he couldn't even pretend Hebe and the others were friends, for Hebe would make sure they stayed clear of him. She might snatch a few coins if he offered them, but she would avoid him from here on. His compassion may have burned more than one bridge. Moisture tasting of suppressed tears flooded his throat like bile.

As dark fell, Uly made his way to the area beneath the tower where the shrubs grew. He had decided hiding his good clothes here was better than to risk losing them in the city. He had chosen the place not only because of the covering foliage, but also because of the distinctive shape. Even in the dark, it had the appearance of a large dick standing up against the night sky, easy to locate. Sometimes size and shape counted. Hiding in the bushes, Uly quickly slipped the good clothes over his dirty ones. He wanted to exchange them, but if Markis cast him out, he feared Shavar might keep the good garments and toss him out naked on the street. Though he could not go about in the good clothes, if he managed to keep them he could mess them up nicely and easily. He had no idea why he was worrying about clothes when he should be worrying about keeping his skin. Still, he needed the good clothes to get back in.

With the linen bag, he wiped furiously at his skin, scraping the mud off his face as best he could and smoothing back his hair. With luck, in the dark no one would take much notice. Just a few days ago, he would not have been able to do this, but Ryanac had gone out with him twice and sent him back alone via the small back gate through which they had first taken him. The guards there knew him better than those who guarded the main gates did. With any luck, they would think he returned from another chore.

When they failed to acknowledge him, he breathed a sigh that so far his plan had worked. Swallowing down his fear, Uly moved into the castle, taking the corridors and stairs, which would lead to the balcony over the main hall. Although the palace layout had initially bewildered him, Uly was a street urchin. He had quickly learned the twists and turns as easily as he had memorised the maze of the city streets.

Moving rapidly, but keeping enough restraint not to break out into a run, Uly moved deeper into the castle. Thankfully, most of the nobles ignored him, probably taking him for a servant. His clothes were fine, but not too fine. He could only hope they didn't notice his bare feet; the slippers Petra had given him after cleaning his feet he had left in his room.

Dear comet! He would have laughed to think he had taken to using the Swithin phrase so quickly if he did not have to face the moment he had feared all day. How was he going to explain what he had done? He could not hide that the apple and coins were missing. The

apple was the only thing he had eaten all day, and his stomach hurt now. Thoughts of the time and how soon he would be sitting down to dinner if he hadn't run off, let alone the breakfast and lunch he might have had, assailed him. Markis might lynch him for the theft of those coins. He might be able to lie and explain his absence -- Markis had allowed him to explore the castle when he'd had nothing else to do -- and he might be able to steal a replacement apple, but he could not hide the loss of the coins.

First things first, he had to get back to his room unnoticed.

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From across the way, Markis watched as Ryanac emerged from an arched doorway. Standing under a lantern and at this distance, he could see the man easily. Their gaze met. Ryanac gave a single simple nod. So, Uly had returned.

Turning on his heel, Markis hurried into the castle. The boy had to try for his room, and Markis hurried to the perfect place to intercept him. When Uly failed to show up for breakfast, Ryanac had sat there clearly trying not to smirk. He had even referred to how the young man's behaviour was exactly how Markis had predicted. Why, then, did it aggrieve him so?

Alas, Markis had not been able to explain it, but Uly had been here over a week. Somehow, Markis had grown used to him. Though they had hardly said more than a few words to each other, he had watched the young man. He had taken a strange kind of delight in watching Uly taste new foods, in seeing some weight mold itself to his frame, in watching Uly's bright eyes take in new and wondrous sights. Daily, it also gave him a curious satisfaction to see the young man had stayed yet another night and intended to stay another day. The loss of him at breakfast this morning had struck like pain from a sudden wound, and Markis was in no mood to be forgiving about it.

He stopped two corridors from his private suite at a junction forming an H. At the bisecting corridor, he gazed across to the other junction. The soft glow of lanterns sent up a golden, rosy hue of light against the pale walls. That light should have calmed him, but Markis gritted his teeth. Although he held his office with a healthy dose of skepticism and ridicule, poking fun even at himself in Ryanac's presence, still he was Shavar, and no one dared to defy him. What was the young man thinking? Markis had given him two choices, not a third one. Although he hated to admit it, he had hoped for Uly's return, and that indulgence irritated him further still. He was exasperated with Uly as well as himself, and neither boded well for the urchin.

A flash of pale gold caught his eye. Lost in thought, he had almost missed the young man passing. Even though he had clearly tried to make it dirty, the light falling on a clean patch of pale yellow hair had given Uly away. Uly, however, started like a frightened animal even before Markis let loose the growl from his throat. Snarling, he gave chase even as Uly hesitated and then ran.

He did not get far. Markis had no idea where the young man thought he would go. Quite possibly, Uly had no idea himself. In any case, before Uly reached the end of the corridor, Markis was upon him. He grabbed the younger man by the throat and slammed him back into the wall. The wall was constructed of stone. It had no give, so the only thing to shake was Uly. He grunted, let out a kind of groan. In his anger, Markis barely heard him. To his horror, a familiar white and golden rage seeped through him. Even as he became aware of it and tried to control it, he lost. The horror slipped away, and in its place, a pleasurable and gratifying wrath filled him. With sheer strength, he lifted the younger man up until his feet left the floor. Markis tightened his grip as Uly's hands fluttered aimlessly. The whites of the brat's eyes appeared. Still, Markis choked him.

Only when his arm started to tire did Markis ease up, but rather than let go, he slipped the rope he had brought with him around the street urchin's neck. In a white-hot fury, he looped the other end over the open stone arch of the nearest doorway. Even as Uly struggled for breath and began to recover, Markis gave the rope a yank. Letting out a small, pain-filled cry, the younger man had no way to resist. Markis hauled him up to the tips of his toes and then stared him in the eye, letting his weight keep the rope taut.

* * * * *

Uly could barely figure out what had happened. He had seen Markis at the other end of the corridor and known by the look in those dark eyes he could run or die. The next thing he had felt, apart from his fear in the midst of flight, were fingers tightening around his throat. Markis had lifted him, thrown him against the wall, and then while he was dazed, those fingers had tightened about his throat and started to choke him. Being a street brat, Uly had tried to remember how to fight, but it had escaped him. Darkness had crept in around the edges of his vision, seeming to give the pressure on his throat more focus. Eventually, that too started to fade.

Then cool air had rushed in and he had been able to breathe, but even as he gasped, something had tightened around his throat once again -- not only that, it had pulled him a few inches to the right. He now stood under the doorway, staring into Shavar's glittering dark eyes. It took him a moment to realise the man's weight held on to and hung on the other end of a rope. The rough hemp formed a loop around his neck. Stepping back, Markis let the rope play out while keeping it tight. The cord was long enough for him to tie it to any of the display items lining the hallway, but for now, he kept a grip on it. The way it wrapped around his hand reminded Uly of Petra's braid wrapped in Ryanac's grip.

He couldn't help it; tears leaked from his eyes. He tried to say please, to beg for release. He didn't want to, but if it would save him, he would do it. The rope rasped his neck from the outside and brought pain flaring in his throat from within, preventing him from speaking.

"What did you think you were doing?" Markis asked of him. He sounded so calm and reasonable, that alone was frightening. "I gave you two choices. There was no third. You ran. You should have stayed away. I never wanted to see you in those rags again."

Uly's clothes gaped now from the scuffle. No doubt, Markis could see the dirty street beggar's clothes beneath. "Per--" Uly managed. Markis came closer, while keeping the rope tight, but letting up a little so Uly could breathe and speak. "Please." More tears leaked out and trailed down each side of his face. There had to be a way he could talk himself out of this. He'd talked his way out of worse situations. "You said ..."

"I said what?" Markis tilted his head first one way and then the other as though studying him.

"You said you wouldn't kill me."

Shavar's eyes narrowed as though he tried to recall when he might have said such a thing.

"You did say that. Several days ago at breakfast." Ryanac's voice came from off to the side. Uly had vaguely heard approaching footsteps, but he'd had things that were more pressing on his mind. With luck, Ryanac would be the calming voice of wisdom and reason.

"That I did. I never said I wouldn't hurt him, though."

Somehow, Ryanac's voice still managed to convey humour, but he had edged forward, and Uly could see the man's eyes were bright and clear. He stared at Markis, not Uly.

"Semantics. Pity you couldn't have used such light-footedness in council yesterday."

Markis bared his teeth and growled, his eyes moving towards Ryanac without looking directly at him. Uly had enough sense to know that something besides his escapade today had upset Shavar, the Comet. "I am not about to dance with people who want to bargain with slaves."

"Yet you would hang a young man for pissing you off."

Uly barely heard the words. He had closed his eyes, feeling a growing pressure behind them as the rope tightened around his neck. He struggled on the tips of his toes, maintaining barely enough sense to reach up and grasp the rope that encircled his throat. Still, he acknowledged the possibility he would truly die here. He had heard it could take a long time to hang like this, if you were not dropped on the rope and your neck didn't break. He begged the comet he had heard wrong.

"Yet you would hang a young man for pissing you off."

At Ryanac's words, Markis glanced at Uly. Without realising, he had tightened his grip on the rope and leaned his weight on it. Another inch, and Uly would dangle. Utter shock and fear lanced through him, driving the rage away. Dear comet, what was he doing! Ryanac saw the horror, Markis could tell, as his best friend and captain of the guard moved across him. Even as Markis let go of the rope with a yell, leaping back as though it were a snake,

Ryanac caught Uly in his arms. With soothing sounds and gestures, he lowered the younger man to the floor and eased the rope from his throat.

Rope? He had only brought the rope to tie Uly's hands, to scare him, not to hang him! It took some moments before Markis could speak. "When he has come to his senses, bring him to the library." Ryanac looked up, and there existed a question in his eyes. Although Ryanac had no right to question, as always he was a good conscience. Markis did nothing to hide the pain and apology in his eyes for what he had done. Now he had to try to make it up to Uly.

Chapter Six

The time that Ryanac held him seemed to last forever and then end all too soon. He clung to that firm masculine body as a safe harbour and dug in his nails the first time Ryanac tried to ease back. The guard stiffened, then relented. The big man began to rock him gently. Unable to speak through his bruised throat, he could only bury his head against the man's chest, snuffle into the warmth of his neck. Ryanac's hands moved, slid up his back and then stroked the back of his head.

"Shh, Samir. Hush." Neither Markis nor Ryanac had called him that before. It sounded like a title, just as Markis was Shavar and Ryanac was Silas, but it could not have held such importance. "What were you thinking?" Ryanac's voice held a tone similar to pain. "Where in the world did you go running off to like that? Don't you know by now you could have just stayed? What did you think all the lessons were for?"

Lessons? Uly cast his mind back over the last week, the times people had groomed him, times when Ryanac had talked about the Swithin way of life, the etiquette he had been shown at table. Then Ryanac had shown him how to curry a horse and sent him on those errands. Yes, they could have been lessons of some sort. He could see that now. Why, though, would Shavar want him to have lessons? He naturally inclined towards suspicion, but if there was some treachery in 'lessons', he was in too much pain to consider it. He wanted to speak, but couldn't. All he could do was press a hand to his throat, but Ryanac got the message. His grip tightened and he lowered his head against Uly's. Nothing suggestive existed in the movement. Right now, Ryanac offered only comfort. Still, Uly tensed. He didn't know if Ryanac was serious when he had mentioned a threesome with Petra, but he had heard things about Swithin taking lovers of either sex freely. If Ryanac wanted him that way, he could think of worse situations, and it would certainly be better than a life on the streets, but what if Shavar didn't like it? Until he worked out why he was here, he was

powerless. Even then, the decision probably wouldn't be his. Pity, for the man even smelled nice. The scent was difficult to define, a blend of warmth and musk. He breathed it in.

"Uly," Ryanac pushed him back a little. His voice held disapproval and something darker in it. "Don't think to manipulate me."

Uly shook his head, dismayed because he'd been thinking precisely that. He couldn't be that transparent. How had Ryanac known?

"Don't lie to me either."

Uly shook his head again, wanting to speak, unable to explain he didn't lie ... entirely.

"It's not that I'm not flattered," Ryanac added, perhaps taking pity, "but I am not the main focus of your future. You do not have to use guile to obtain my trust or protection. In fact, if you do use such cunning and I find out about it, you'll see the inhuman side of me. I once mentioned that I detest devious men. I detest them most when they play me against Shavar."

Shouldn't the captain of the guard be devious? He wanted to be flippant, but as was often the case, Ryanac's words held hidden meanings. That was a kind of deviousness in itself. Still, Uly sensed he meant the kind of devious where a supposed friend buried a blade between your shoulders while you weren't looking. Once again, Ryanac displayed his devotion to Markis the Comet. He accepted the warning.

"Come on," Ryanac finally said. His voice sounded decided; the time had come to move. "You can stand now, and you don't want to keep Shavar waiting." He helped Uly to his feet. Incredibly, no servants had come across them, or perhaps they had chosen to stay away. He glanced into Ryanac's eyes with some fear. Right now, Uly wished he had never returned here. He just wanted to leave. The guard seemed to see it in his eyes. "Don't fear him." The large hand touched Uly's throat with unexpected tenderness. "Markis never meant to hurt you. It's not you he is angry with. It's not even his anger. If you only knew ..."

Ryanac's voice trailed away. "Try to forgive him. There is violence brewing."

This was not the first time Uly had heard that. Still, it proved difficult to be generous with his throat hurting. He fell into step beside Ryanac only because the man slid his arm around Uly's shoulders and guided him. He could not escape the strong arm, and part of him didn't want to. For all he knew, Ryanac might be the only person in the world even remotely on his side.

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Ryanac knocked on the door and then poked his head into the room. Stepping inside, he left Uly waiting without. Markis paced, aware it made him appear distraught, yet he couldn't keep still. Dark circles hollowed out his eyes -- he had seen so by looking in the mirror. He hated Ryanac seeing him like this. He gave the appearance of a man with an addiction.

"You have to learn to control this."

"You think I don't know that!" Markis spat.

"You are to be king. This power is part of that responsibility. You will hurt those you love before you ever get a chance to use it, if you do not heed what the council tries to teach you."

"The council are fools."

"True, but it does not mean they do not have things they can teach. You know my views. Learn what you can from them and temper that with your instincts. Then use the power as you will. You are running out of time." Ryanac sighed, the sound seeming incongruous with the big man in this setting. He would be the first to say he sighed most during sex.

Markis closed his eyes for a brief moment. When he opened them again, Markis saw the friend he had always relied on staring back at him, unhappy.

"I've seen you like this and worse. Stop hiding it from me. Stop fearing to care for those who would love you. Just stop it, all of it. I know you couldn't help what happened out there, but how can either of us explain that to him. Just tell him!"

Markis shook his head. "I can't."

"Why?"

How could he explain that he felt stupidly embarrassed? His friend would laugh at him, and he would deserve it. He felt like a victim, too embarrassed to tell the world he hurt. "I can't." The explanation was so inadequate, he winced as he said it. His friend's exasperation came as no surprise.

"I know you don't want Uly to fear you. I know that as certainly as you need to breathe. Stop pushing those who would help you aside.

"Yes," Ryanac continued as Markis turned an enquiring eye to him. "Yes, Uly would help you, too, if you let him, if only by sharing your time. I know you care for him, so don't even try to deny it. You are going to be king, so *be* king. Being king is not just about giving orders or controlling the power within. It's about knowing when to swallow your pride and ask for help. It's about letting yourself feel, not hiding from your emotions. You are capable of all these things. You, Markis Shavar, are the most powerful man alive, but if you do not let someone into your heart and accept that, in so doing, they might hurt you or you might hurt them, you won't need to lose control. The power will destroy you from within."

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The two men exchanged some words, and then the large man emerged and held the door open. He gave a slight nod of his head, indicating Uly should enter. Hesitating only slightly, he took courage from Ryanac's wink and went into the library.

Uly had never been in this room. The wood panelling shone from many years of polishing. The reddish-brown colour gleamed under the soft candlelight and glowed under the light of the flames in the hearth. Surely dangerous to have a fire in here, but the chairs on either side of the fireplace looked beckoning and cosy. It would be the perfect place to read in the midst of winter. A large desk dominated the far side of the room, and shelves lined the walls upon which rows and rows of books sat. Glancing up as much as his pained neck would allow, Uly saw a ladder would take you to another level with yet more books.

Markis stood staring into the fire. He never once looked at Uly while he spoke. "I didn't mean to do what I did, but understand if there had been witnesses, I might have done it anyway. It is the only way a master can rule at times." Turning, Markis moved away. "I gave you two choices and you decided to try for a third, so I will up the stakes. First, I want you to tell me where you went today and why."

Licking his lips, Uly tried to speak. His voice came out as a squeak, and glancing up at Markis, he saw the man waited and would give him no mercy. No matter how it hurt, Shavar waited for him to talk. Closing his eyes, gritting his teeth against the pain, Uly rasped out that he had taken the coins and why. By the time he finished, tears leaked once more from his eyes. Not thinking, Uly wiped the back of his sleeve across his nose.

Markis stood silent, unmoving. "You should have asked," he finally said. "You should have asked me for the money on their behalf. I would probably have given it to you and then some, but I admit you had no way to know and probably doubt the truth of it now. Still, now I give you a last option. Two choices." Markis turned and stared at him. Those dark eyes looked sad, warm, and unyielding, all at once. If only he could fathom what the man was thinking. "No more games. No more nightly alternatives. Decide now. Go or stay."

Frowning, Uly opened his mouth to say he didn't understand, but then winced and pressed a hand to his throat.

"If you go, go as you are. I warn you, if you should see me in the street, with my guards or alone, you would do best to avoid me. I'm angry with you, and that will not dissipate with you turning tail and running like a coward."

Uly couldn't help it. Hearing Markis call him a coward, he straightened up and glared at the man, Shavar or not.

"If you stay, then you stay for good. No more running away. No," Markis added. "I'm not making you a slave. A slave is one unwilling to stay. If you stay, I want it to be your decision. However, should you ever leave, then the stars forbid I should ever set eyes on you again. If you stay, I will teach you, give you an education. I will see that you learn to read these books."

"I can read, a little." It hurt to talk and his voice sounded rough, but Uly hated Markis thinking him entirely ignorant. The other man raised an eyebrow. His gaze also hardened. Perhaps it had been unwise to comment.

"If you stay, then burn your clothes now. The good ones that have come into contact with those filthy things you have on underneath and the scummy garments I found you in." Markis tilted his head towards the fire.

Burn his clothes? Now?

"Your choice," Markis bolstered his statement. "Stay or go."

Stay or go. Uly licked at his lips. They were so dry. He could see a pitcher of water sitting on the desk, and he wanted to ask Markis for a drink. Maybe Shavar would even give him one, but it would probably hurt to swallow. On the other hand, after the initial pain, it might ease his throat. Stay or go. He glanced up into Markis's eyes, but they told him nothing of the other man's thoughts or feelings. It could be a trick, but he couldn't think what. Markis hadn't said he would come to harm, but then, he hadn't said he wouldn't. Still, he had promised to educate him. Uly very much wanted to read the books.

"No reprimands," Markis said as though reading his mind. "Stay or go."

Stay or go. Where did he have to go? Hating to admit it, it didn't make his options any less limited. Even Hebe and the others were suspicious of him -- they always had been, even more so now -- and though he cared about them, he could hardly call them friends. They had caused the trouble that brought him here and what had happened earlier, the very reason his throat felt so raw now, had brought that viciously home to him. He was alone in this world. Even Ryanac's help, if he chose to give it, was by its very nature limited. Stay or go. Looking into Markis's eyes, he saw time running out, and his options were ludicrous. Like it or not, Markis and Ryanac offered a strange kind of companionship.

What are you afraid of? Ryanac's words returned to haunt him. He had said he feared not knowing what was to happen next, or the unknown, as the guard had put it. If asked the same question now, he would have something to add. He feared the thing he suffered every day, the thing that existed as a constant background to the ever-present hunger. He feared loneliness. Maybe he simply grew tired of it, but it amounted to the same thing. It nagged at him. In the few days he'd spent here, he'd forgotten to feel lonely. Go or stay? No matter what price he had to pay, the decision was moot. Slowly, he moved towards the fire.

Possibly seeing his intent, Markis moved closer to the desk as though keeping a respectful distance. Uly shuddered as the heat of the fire seeped into him. He had not realised how cold he felt. Weakness also ran through him, and he had to make a conscious effort to stand. His stomach complained with hunger. He tugged off the tunic and threw it on the flames. Then he pulled off the linen pants, and as soon as the tunic had caught, he added them to the fire. That left him standing in his grubby clothes.

Pulling his ragged shirt over his head, Uly stood there staring down. Strangely, he found it difficult to burn the filthy garment. The linen had caught well. It disintegrated before his eyes. He told himself he waited for the other clothes to burn a little more before adding his old garb, but it was a self-serving lie. The dirty clothes were a costume. They were

part of what he had been for so long it was as if he waited to throw a part of himself into the flames.

"Let them go, Uly," Markis said in a surprisingly soft and gentle voice. He obeyed in a sharp, jerky motion. The flames hissed as though they burnt something covered in grease and then snatched the shirt from him. Only then did he realise he stood half dressed in front of Shavar and would soon be completely naked.

The heat from the fire spread over his chest, leaving his back cooler. Strange to contemplate standing entirely naked in front of another, for that he had never done, except maybe as an infant in front of his parents when they bathed him. No one had ever wanted to see him naked. No one had ever been willing to.

Of course, he'd had the appearance of a dead person only a short while ago. He was still thin. Not enough time had passed for him to look anything else, but as Hebe had said, he had more meat on his bones now. Markis waited and time stretched out. Slipping a hand into a back pocket, he fished out a piece of card and placed it on the mantel. He could not hide it from Markis and could only hope the man would let him keep it. Reaching for the button at his waist, Uly unfastened the trousers. He pushed them down to his ankles and quickly stepped out of them, going to his knees as he did so. Crouched before the fire, he fed them to the flames.

Naked, feeling vulnerable, Uly closed his eyes. Markis moved about the room. He heard the chink of crystal, a drawer open and close, and then felt the other man come down onto the rug at his side.

"Drink," Markis whispered, and opening his eyes, Uly took the glass Shavar offered. The water was so cool as to be almost iced. It hurt to swallow, but eased his burning throat. Setting the half-finished glass aside, he let his gaze wander to the left. Markis had taken the lid off a small jar and dipped his fingers into a greenish ointment. Gently, he transferred the ointment to Uly's throat, pressing only as much as necessary to spread the treatment.

"I am sorrier about this than you know or would believe."

That was at least partly true. Uly wanted to believe him, but it was difficult to forgive someone who had almost hanged you in a fit of pique. Even as he had the thought, Markis dipped his head and closed his eyes. He had never seen a look like that on another man's face. It seemed too honest. Uly looked away, uncomfortable with it.

"I have never done anything like that before," Markis confessed. "I ... have things to face and they are not easy." Opening his eyes, Markis frowned as though noticing for the first time that Uly knelt naked. His gaze wandered over Uly's body, flickering left and right, almost as though they examined him, but other than that, Uly could not make out what existed in the man's eyes. Not lust. He would have said not even sexual interest, except for the way Markis's eyes narrowed. When finally Markis's gaze met his, Markis spoke so quietly, Uly had to strain to listen. Even then he wasn't sure he had heard right.

A moment of silence followed the strange statement, and then Shavar's gaze flickered to the mantel. "What is on the card?"

"A drawing of my mother. My ... adoptive mother." His voice emerged barely more than a whisper, but it didn't hurt so much to talk now. A whisper he could manage.

"I want to hear about her sometime. I want to hear about your past."

Unsure he wanted to talk of such things, at least now was not the time to think of it. Why would a man like Markis want to hear of his past? The idea of it warmed him, but a cold fear rushed in to chase the feeling back. He couldn't afford to believe anything this man said. The only reason a man like Markis would want to know of his past would be to use it against him. His survival instinct told him this, but his mind said it made no logical sense. Markis could do what he liked with him. Surely, such an important man had no time for such games.

"You're dirty," Markis said suddenly. "Go to your room. Get washed. Here." Markis stood, and picking up a throw from the back of a chair, he tossed it in Uly's direction. Uly quickly wrapped it around himself. "There'll be no more coins. No apples," Markis told him. He turned to face him as Uly staggered to his feet. "There'll be breakfast. No dinner, not tonight." Anger sparked in Markis Shavar's eyes. "Going hungry will make you remember what you almost lost."

Somehow, his tone implied something more than food. If Uly could believe something such as an honest person existed ... No. He couldn't afford to do that. He couldn't. He *wouldn't*. Dear Comet, save him from his helpless, hopeful heart. Would he never learn?

Turning, Uly reached out for the drawing. "Leave it," Markis snapped. Uly was aware his eyes had gone wide as he looked across, silently pleading. He saw no mercy in those dark eyes and let his hand drop away empty.

Out in the corridor, Uly sagged against the wall for a brief moment. Exhaustion and the fright of the last few hours almost drove him to his knees, but Uly had faced worse things. As he made his way quickly and quietly to his room, puzzlement took over. He couldn't have heard right, but the more he considered it the more he was certain he had heard the Shavar confess to being afraid.

Chapter Seven

The golden light changed to white. The glare seared his eyes. Closing his eyes did no good. He couldn't see the world around him, only where the comet had taken him. He looked around, though, couldn't help searching for the blackness of space. The gold had turned pale before, almost white with the ice, but never like this. He feared blindness.

Think of something else. Sometimes that helped. He tried and almost bit back a cry when a vague vision of Uly's face appeared amidst the white. He tried to push it aside and then, curious, he went with it. Those luminous grey eyes held his attention as they always did. Uly's pale blond-white hair had taken on a golden hue of late. It seemed to sit around his head like a halo. Alas, the thought of a golden light brought him back to his circumstances. Sweat broke out on his face, and he lost that brief moment of peace. He grunted in pain.

"Markis." He recognised the voice and leaned towards it. The straps around his wrists held him in place, but still those in the room had to see where he strained. He didn't care. Let them think what they would. Let them talk behind his back, squabble over whether it was appropriate for Ryanac to call him by his given name.

Stop pushing those who would help you aside. Damn Ryanac. Things he said had a way of sticking in your head. He forced out his name, speaking low, hoping none but his friend would hear him. "Ryanac, help me."

He could feel the other man crouched at his side, but he couldn't see him.

"The session's not over."

"It is now." Ryanac stood. Markis, aware of the movement, but blind to the world, felt oddly bereft.

"You do not say when the session ends. We do!"

"Really." Ryanac's voice sounded lazy. "Since when?"

Markis almost smiled. He would have laughed if he could. The comet bless Ryanac for being such a good friend. On the other hand, maybe the comet had blessed Markis in sending such a good friend to stand by his side.

Only when he felt those large strong hands on him did he know the seers had bowed out once again. He feared a time when they might refuse, but they had already tried complaining to the king, and he had done nothing. Markis was unsure why, but maybe it was simply a matter of kinship, not of blood, but of understanding.

* * * * *

Time had passed as time does. Uly had woken the morning after he had burned his street clothes thinking he had made the wrong decision. He should have scarpered when he had the chance. Why put his trust in a man who had such a volatile temper? Then again, he had experienced or seen worse on the street, and he had never seen any evidence of it before. Ryanac certainly believed it justified, but he had to question what could justify any man losing his disposition like that. Awash in doubts and fears, Uly had wanted to bury his head under the covers and stay in bed. Finally, he had risen and seen that although there were indeed no coins and no apple on the little round table, something else adorned the surface. Markis had framed the drawing.

Some might have thought it a wise, calculating move, and Uly ruminated over this in the days to come, for nothing, no other gesture, could have secured his final decision to stay. Just what the decision entailed, he could not know or say. He could guess, and he did, but the only choices were increasingly hazy and unrealistic as time went on. As far as Uly could see, there was only one logical reason Markis could want him to stay, or possibly two. Uly's life could become one of servitude. In that, he had no qualms. A servant took regular meals and had a roof over his or her head. Unlike many of his race, he never feared hard work, and it carried none of the risk of stealing. The other choice was more of what Hebe had hinted at. Uly balked at being a whore of any kind, but he had succumbed when desperate. Though thankfully the occasions were perhaps unbelievably few, they had been remarkably unpleasant. Still, better a rich man's whore than a whore on the street. He'd certainly found it easy to consider Ryanac in that light, so he had less trouble when he looked at Markis. Although he liked Ryanac well enough, Markis had the edge in attractiveness. The thought of lying with such a man left him far from feeling ill. Why, though, would a nobleman bother to educate a servant or a whore?

The lessons were the most perplexing thing of all, and they were undoubtedly lessons now. Uly could read well for one of his ilk, but in three months he had advanced through what Markis referred to as three stages of books. These 'stages' were something to do with reading levels judging the pupil's ability. Markis had told him by the end of the week he would advance to the fourth and that level was only one stage away from what most nobles achieved. Uly had no doubt that he had impressed Markis. Shavar did little to disguise it.

What amazed Uly was how he felt such pleasure in pleasing the man. He frowned, uncomfortable with the realisation. Still, a horse neighed, a duck quacked, and a pig snorted. He could feel as uncomfortable with it as he liked, but he could not deny it. Trying to tell himself he stayed for the comforts of palace life and for the lessons only was what Ryanac would call a self-serving lie.

Uly had not only studied reading in the last few weeks. The etiquette lessons had continued, and he had learned much about the Swithin way of life, their clothes, their general day-to-day habits, and their culture. With dismay, he had to admit he liked it. For the first time, Uly could see how backward and self-destructive the Simeon way of life could be. Worse, he had freely adopted the term Simeon because he could see if the Swithin had not intervened, in a few short years, their whole society would have succumbed to uncontrollable poverty and disease. Many still considered the Swithin their masters and the Simeon their slaves. In truth, the Swithin dictated only in areas of need. Yes, they grew richer absorbing vanquished communities into their own and in the mining of local minerals and other commodities, but the so-called slavery actually proved to be jobs -- work for which people were paid. Uly felt embarrassed for his race.

As he progressed, other lessons began. An old man with a long grey beard had shown him something called a telescope. He had the most unpronounceable name, so most called the old man Stargazer, and he taught something called astronomy. Even more astounding than seeing the stars in the sky were more than just lights, was discovering that Ryanac would be one of his teachers. So far, the man had only put a rapier in his hands and proceeded to swipe it away with his own blade and a seeming flick of the wrist, but Ryanac had promised to teach him how to fight properly. At least the surprise and subsequent delight had taken the sting out of his whip-lashed hand.

So, though Uly had chores, they were more in the way of payment for the lessons. He still slept in a noble's quarters not far from Markis's suite, like a concubine, and ate his meals with either Markis or Ryanac, though usually both. Seldom did he eat alone and only then on a couple of occasions when the dining room had been in 'official' use. Only Ryanac's dark, penetrating gaze and the clear warning in them had kept him away. The concept of politics, and in particular Swithin politics, still escaped him, but Uly also found it interesting, for this was clearly the dominating topic of their life. At times, Markis looked most troubled after a meeting of the council, and Uly wanted to know why.

So, he was not quite a servant, but so far not a whore. Alarming, the question grated on Uly's nerves more than most. He threw his attention into his lessons because he wanted to learn and because he wanted to please, even if he faced that with increasing dismay, but more and more as a distraction. At first, he had told himself he wanted to please to assure his continued stay here. The one thing Uly feared now was returning to a life on the streets. He had viewed it differently when he had known no other existence, but to return now ... he would rather face death. As time passed, however, Uly had to admit he took most pleasure simply from pleasing Markis. A strange kind of sickness tinged the delight. He didn't want to

feel the need to please anyone. Ryanac had been right. He was stupid. Still, how did one live without affection? He had believed it possible, had known no other way of life, but now ... Now he had seen how the Swithin lived. He had seen them laugh together, hug, clasp hands, touch freely. As well as offering friendship, the Swithin certainly took lovers of either sex. Uly had heard the rumours, but to see the evidence of this when increasingly new areas of the castle were open to him and his errands grew, had still shocked him.

Coming across two of the grooms in a most satisfying clinch, his first instinct had been to look away, the guilt of watching all too familiar, a bittersweet reminder of spying on Ryanac and Petra. The look in the fairer, shorter man's eyes had stopped him. The gentle smile, the soft neigh of the horses, and the soft sighs called to him, and by then it was too late to make his presence known. Uly had ducked down out of sight.

The day had been bleak, with grey skies, cold winds, and the odd smattering of rain. The boys had finished their chores, and Uly had not expected to see them again. He had lingered because the stable was warm and he liked working with the horses. Both Ryanac's and Markis's mounts now recognised him, probably encouraged by the chunks of apple he brought.

Though surprised the two boys had returned so late in the day, the knowing smile on the short man's face had amazed Uly more. The other with the darker sandy hair watched intently, the eyes hard and unyielding with an emotion Uly could not put a name to, but which sparked a response from somewhere deep inside.

Boys. No. He had to stop thinking that way. Though younger than he, they were no more boys than he was. They were young men.

The short man ran his hands through his hair, sweeping the fingers through it and pushing it back, then drawing his fingers down and around his neck. He had his back now to Uly, so Uly could see only the other man's face, but still he could tell they stared at each other. Both were slim, though lean from work. Uly had seen the shorter one give a gentle smile before he turned away, while the other's expression remained hard, almost uninviting. It soon became obvious he waited for his friend to undress. Lifting his shirt up over his head, the shorter man pulled it off without unfastening it. They wore common work shirts -- the same Uly wore to the stables for practical purposes -- and they had one advantage in that they were easy to remove. The shirt lay on the floor, and the way the man moved his hands over his chest suggested he stroked his nipples. That head tilted to one side, and Uly could almost imagine the questioning look and amusement on the young face.

With a slightly irritated look Uly didn't understand, the one with darker hair stripped out of his shirt, but took the time and care to unbutton it. His attitude was one of arrogance, and the casual grace of the other man made them an incongruous match. Knowing he should look away, this very oddity made Uly watch. He wanted not only to see what they would do, but also to understand their relationship.

As though receiving some signal, the arrogant one took the forefinger of his right hand into his mouth and then withdrew it. Uly could not be sure, but believed he had touched it with his tongue and wet the tip. He let it linger on his lip a moment before withdrawing it completely. It should have been impossible, but the look in his eye grew harder still.

Meanwhile the shorter man undid his breeches and slid them down. Stepping out of them, he left them where they lay and then took a step forward, now naked. His backside and legs were slightly paler than the rest of his skin, for they were only just into the spring season and it was too cold to go about even partially dressed. Such thoughts were fleeting. Though he couldn't see, Uly could tell by the movements of the hand that the man facing away stroked his cock. The other's gaze now slowly lowered and watched. The lips parted, and for the first time, the one with darker hair became uneasy, uncertain even, or perhaps his expression defined some other emotion.

Feeling an answering response, Uly pressed his own hands to his groin, but he made the gesture more to suppress the sensation. He had no time for sex, yet the Swithin took such delight in the act. The shiver that ran through the short man and the moan that escaped him had Uly closing his eyes, sweat breaking out on his forehead. The man now stood in front of his lover. His knowing hand unfastened the other man's breeches. They had turned a little to the side, and from this angle, Uly could see how he gave the other little knowing glances. The darker one's eyes never wavered. They stared at the other's face intently. As the second pair of breeches came unfastened, the shorter man moved in to kiss, but as their lips touched, he pulled back. A look akin to pain and hate suffused the arrogant one's eyes. The other just grinned.

Instead of kissing, he lowered his head and moved slowly down his lover's chest with his lips and tongue. Reaching into the breeches, he pulled out a slim but long and already hard cock. Going to his knees, he kissed the hard stomach, then the thighs. Tension spread throughout the man standing, as though he could not bear this, yet when he finally opened his mouth, it was to draw in a hissing breath. Uly did not have to see to know that as the short man began to jerk his friend's rigid member, he also took it in his mouth and sucked.

It lasted only a minute. The taller of the two cursed and dragged the kneeling man up to him, finally taking the kiss. Uly heard the fairer short man laugh, even as the other man dragged him up against him, shoved his tongue into his mouth and reached down to squeeze the pale backside. The arrogance had disappeared and been replaced with something like desperation. Though the slightly taller of the two dragged the fairer one against him, rocked their hips so their cocks had to be rubbing, and drew on the other's lips, Uly had no doubt as to who remained in control. Though he didn't fully understand it, he *felt* it. Finally, as the sounds they were making increased, Uly managed to slip out.

Making his way back to the upper part of the castle, he'd had plenty of time to think. The arrogance had to be something of a show, no doubt. The two young men wanted each other equally. Perhaps they were even full-time lovers, even monogamous. His race did such things, but never talked about it. Nevertheless, whores, male and female, serviced men. None

of his people were what you would call rich, and the women, though many had a liking for sex, did not waste coin on it. Neither did they need to. Women enticed men easily, for what man would not oblige?

The men paid, and the women of the house cursed their frittering away good coin on alcohol or sex, and though some men or women were lovers of their own sex, even lived together as couples, no one ever spoke of it aloud. Uly had recently learned that the Swithin had no such qualms and no need for whores. They had lovers, plain and simple. If one wanted sex with someone, one asked. A refusal was received with good grace. Refusals, though, were seldom an issue. A Swithin marriage could be open or monogamous. They respected either desire, and couples discussed this before they wed. If unmarried, then there were few reasons to refuse. Most of the Swithin people were a handsome race. Uly had to contemplate that if they interbred with some of the Simeon people, what a few years of that would do to the Swithin. Maybe the Swithin had done themselves a disservice. Strangely, he had said this to Ryanac and the big man had laughed.

"I doubt it will be an issue," Ryanac had said. "We have a taste for good breeding stock. Pairings will be carefully chosen, and for a few years such marriages will need approval."

Much to Uly's amazement, the subject of children never arose. Swithin women did not have a child without the father's full support. It was not even an issue. To accuse a Swithin man or woman of not caring for their children was as good as accusing them of murder -- a murder they were likely to commit in retribution. To question their children's care was a most grievous insult.

He now contemplated all this. Still, all the things he had learned did nothing to solve his dilemma. If Markis didn't want him for a servant and he didn't want him for a whore, why was he here? The only reason Uly feared sex was if Markis urged him to go with anyone he wanted entertained. It still didn't explain the education. If they had had such things, would nobles, even Swithin nobles, truly care if their whores could read or write?

The truth pained him greater than these imaginings. Markis simply didn't want him that way. Considering his experiences with men, Uly sought relief and only managed to feel rejection. Wrapping his arms around himself in a hug, he pretended the hug came from Markis. Despite everything, he liked the man's hands on him, though he hardly ever touched him. The only consolation was that Markis took no lovers as far as Uly could tell. Ryanac was undoubtedly the more affectionate of the two, even in his dealings with Uly. Though bigger and rougher around the edges and in manner, Ryanac would react to a sexual encounter. He was likely to throw an arm around someone's shoulder, male or female, and the more likely to smile, though he smiled when happy or displeased. Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish the two gestures, and Uly preferred a slap on the back, which showed Ryanac's contentment. Markis went to bed alone as far as Uly had seen, and no man or woman warmed his sheets. No one touched Markis except Ryanac, and Markis seldom touched anyone. Clearly, although great affection existed between the two men, it went beyond sex. They certainly weren't physical in their love. If Shavar wasn't interested in Uly or anyone

else, possibly he wasn't interested in sex. But somehow, Uly could not bring himself to believe that. Such a vibrant man had to understand passion.

Lost in such thoughts, Uly only became aware of the late hour as he left his room and saw his master up ahead. Silly, really, to think of Markis as master, but he ruled not only the castle, but this domain, second in the country only to the king who administered almost half of the natural world.

All deliberation left his head as he saw Markis slump at the door to his suite. Ryanac at once lifted him into his arms, giving Uly a glance as he did, and then carried the Swithin prince inside. Uly hesitated, mouth agape and then ran down the corridor and into Shavar's private suite. He fully expected Ryanac to shout at him and order him out, but if that was the worst thing to happen, he would stand it. Still he swallowed before he could bring himself to speak.

"What happened?"

Ryanac had placed Markis on the bed, and now he looked up with a dark, considering look. "If you're going to stay, you might as well be helpful. Fetch clean water, some fresh towels and cloths."

Uly shot one look at the seemingly unconscious man on the bed and hurried to obey.

"Is that blood?" He felt like an idiot the moment he asked.

"What else do you think it could be?"

"Sorry." He had long dropped the 'Silas', but the apology felt like it should have the title tagged onto it. "Why's he bleeding?"

Small runnels, trickles of blood, seemed to seep from Markis's skin, almost as though he sweated blood instead of perspiration.

The large man drew in a breath. "It used to be his skin would split. Believe me, this is an improvement. Still, it's been awhile since this happened."

Uly frowned. It made no sense. He had no idea where the courage came from, but his voice hardened. "That doesn't explain why."

Ryanac looked up in what could have been anger or surprise. Uly couldn't tell which. The big man's large hands went back to work wiping blood from Markis's skin. At least, where he wiped, most of the blood stopped seeping. Some of it reappeared, though. While Uly had fetched water and cloths, Ryanac had stripped him. Most of the seepage seemed isolated to his arms only. Ryanac had covered the rest of the prince, tucking the cover around him, laying his arms on top with towels underneath them to collect the fluid. The sight of Markis undressed yet hidden from view brought a strange sensation of dissatisfaction with it. Heat rose to his face.

"Well?" he demanded of Ryanac, alarmed and dismayed by his own audacity. It further dismayed him to realise he desperately wanted to know why this man lay on the bed bleeding. Of course, if something happened to him, it meant Uly's own situation would

change. His concern was perfectly understandable. The guard barked out a soft, incredulous-sounding laugh, though he also sounded weary. He handed Uly one of the cloths.

"Keep wiping," he said. "Eventually it will cause all the bleeding to stop."

He gave a small flinch of surprise, but took the flannel. Dipping it into the bucket of water, he wrung it out and then went to work on Markis' left arm while Ryanac worked on the right.

"Do you understand why he's called Shavar, the Comet?"

Uly shook his head. "I thought it was to do with power, position."

"No, well, we didn't exactly have to push the point where your race was concerned." He sighed. "I don't know how to explain it to you, and I shouldn't even be telling you this much. He doesn't want me to."

Uly's face tightened in a frown. So, the man did have something to hide. He shouldn't have been surprised, but the pain of that spiked through him. He swallowed it down, biting on his bottom lip as he did. Ryanac must have read something in his expression.

"He's not hiding things from you. Not the way you might think, anyway. He's a private person. He doesn't get much time for privacy, so those moments when he can be simply a man are precious to him."

He could only think Ryanac meant the responsibility of being a prince. Uly would like to have sympathised, but when one lived on the streets it was difficult to be sympathetic to the rich who bemoaned their lot in life. Still, he could understand how such a man might cherish certain things. He nodded to show he understood.

"He doesn't have to be anything but what he is, not with you."

That implied he meant something to the prince. A nobleman such as Markis couldn't care for a street brat. Could ... he? Uly looked down at the man lying next to where he knelt on the bed. The skin had taken on a pale, lifeless tone. His chest barely moved when he breathed. If it weren't for Ryanac's calm attitude, he would have searched for a heartbeat. The urge to do so made his hands shake. He breathed in deeply to ease the sudden panic.

He couldn't care for this man. He couldn't afford to. He didn't look powerful, though. He didn't look like he could harm anyone, not lying there like that. He looked lost, and that tugged at something inside Uly. Markis's eyelids flickered almost as though he might be dreaming. At least that showed he lived, but the way his brow pulled down gave cause to believe the vision unpleasant. He wanted to reach out and smooth that brow.

"Markis comes from a lineage of men who have great power at their fingertips. How and why isn't important. What's important is that his lessons are hard and sometimes brutal. He suffers things I cannot even begin to imagine, and believe me when I say I've had my share of suffering."

Ryanac had said something similar to him after the incident where Markis had almost strangled him. He didn't understand it then, and although he didn't grasp it all now, he

couldn't deny the evidence of blood trickling across otherwise unblemished skin. If this man bled in one way, maybe he bled in others. He grimaced and could only hope Ryanac would take it as distaste for the blood. To think that Markis was truly a prince among men was all very nice and drew a lovely picture, but life had taught him different. Just because his emotions ran high at times, didn't mean he could trust others had the same trait. Even if they did, he was a street brat, nothing. He might sleep in a good bed, share meals with these men, take lessons, and wear fine linen, but he was alone and lost as always. The time had long since passed when he should have accepted that.

"What the matter, Uly?"

Only when he heard Ryanac's voice did he realise he had stopped wiping Markis's skin and given the other man reason to study him. Most of the blood had stopped seeping. He wiped once again at the couple of trickles that remained. He swallowed yet again. Alas, for some reason, that set tears free to prick at the back of his eyes.

"These lessons, what are they for? What are you all trying to do to him?" He whispered, certain Ryanac would refuse to answer. He saw the indecision war in the other man's face.

"Not I. I would have none of it. Sometimes the power rends him. Sometimes I believe it is the demands they make of him while he learns."

He still didn't understand this power that Ryanac spoke of, but it was the other part of the answer that caught his attention. "Demands?"

"Rules he has to live by. Yes, my surly street brat, even a prince has to live by rules. Let's just say pleasure has been a thing long denied him."

"Denied?"

Ryanac sighed once again. Uly had never heard the man sigh so much in one sitting. He threw the cloth in the bucket. "I think he's stopped bleeding. You can stop."

He stood up and took the bucket with him. "Have you ever played at cards?"

Uly shook his head.

"Then I will ask for some food to be brought, and I will teach you a game we Swithin play. If you would indulge me, I'd ask for your company while I keep vigil over him."

He didn't have to say whom he meant. Uly nodded. Ryanac paused.

"What you just asked, it's not an omission. It's not something we speak of -- foolishly, in my opinion, when we're so open about everything else. People are often foolish over things they find distasteful, and the Swithin can be just as guilty of that. I would tell you, but he's not awake for me to ask his permission. I will not go against his wishes. Let's just say pleasure is not a thing some here see as necessary. They see it as a distraction, something that will interfere with his duties."

"That's crazy."

Ryanac snorted. "Finally, something we agree on. As to where you stand in all this, you will have to seek a little faith when I tell you it has nothing and everything to do with his feelings for you."

"Feelings?" Uly looked down at the benevolent face and longed to trust what his eyes told him.

"If you ask me another question throwing my own words back at me, I will scream." Ryanac cracked a smile in his direction, but it looked as though it required effort. A sound came from another part of the room. Someone had entered the suite, and Ryanac turned away, carrying the bucket with him.

Uly sat with his mouth agape. Ryanac had just left him beside the prince while the man lay incapacitated. That displayed a level of trust Uly had never dreamed of, not giving or receiving. He might have thought Ryanac acted foolishly because he was tired, but he knew better. Ryanac was never so distracted or tired that he would let something like that pass unless he meant to. He turned his gaze back to the bed, looked at Markis's slightly parted lips, and the wonderment of what it would be like to press his lips to the prince's nearly overwhelmed him. He had to bite his lips and clench his hands into fists to rebuff the sudden urge. Feelings only ever got him into trouble, betrayed him. He couldn't give into them. He almost flung himself from the bed and hurried through the warren of screens into the other part of the room.

Mattie stood in the doorway. She had taken the bucket from Ryanac's hands. "I'll get the food sent up," she said, "though why you want to let that boy stay is beyond me."

"It's not your concern, is it though?" The words might have implied an insult or put the woman in her place if they hadn't sounded so weary.

"I don't even know why that brat stays, anyway," she added as though she hadn't heard the warning.

"A dog stays with a master who kicks him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Uly couldn't help it. A sudden cold rage welled up inside him.

Ryanac spun on his heel to stare at him. "You going to let that brat talk to you like that?" Mattie just had to put her coin in.

"I'm no brat!" Uly spat at her. He turned his gaze instantly back to Ryanac.

"Leave," Ryanac said gently. For a moment, the order confused him, and then he realised the guard meant Mattie. The woman's jaw practically dropped. "Out!" Ryanac said more forcefully, sparing her a glance that had her moving. He turned back to Uly and advanced across the room. Firelight seemed to dance in his eyes. The weariness had receded. "I meant a dog prefers the master who kicks him rather than the stranger who might be kind or prove to be worse."

"I'm no dog, and Markis doesn't ... he doesn't kick me." It sounded silly, even impudent, but he meant it.

"Doesn't he?" The guard tilted his head as though emphasising the point.

Uly frowned. What did Ryanac mean? "He ..." He searched for a way to express it. "He's been nothing but kind."

"The rope around your neck was kind? I don't recall you feeling like that at the time."

"You ... You said to forgive him. From what you've told me and what I've seen tonight ..." He didn't get to finish.

"Are you prepared to believe me?" Ryanac's voice broke in across his thoughts. He stepped closer, forcing Uly to back up. One of the screens bumped him, and he clutched at it. Ryanac spoke slowly and deliberately "Are you prepared to trust something I told you? Are you willing to trust something, *someone* in your life?"

Uly shook his head a little too frantically. "No. It doesn't get me anywhere."

"No. It gets you hurt. The alternative, though, gets you lonely." He stepped closer and leaned into him. "Before I met you, I would have said Markis was the loneliest man I knew, but then, you see, he has me. Who do you have?"

Uly dipped his head. "Don't do this." He meant to sound forceful, but it came out small, defenceless. Ryanac hooked a finger under his chin, but Uly defied him, wrenching his head to one side.

"Do what? Admit Markis kicks you, and I'll let it go."

"No."

"Say you're his dog."

"No."

"Say you would put up with anything to stay in the palace."

"That's not true."

"Then leave. Markis said you could go. Get out. Go back to the street."

Uly shook his head. His throat had tightened painfully. It felt as though he might stop breathing. His gaze wandered. He didn't know what to look at. Ryanac's dark garb filled his vision.

"I've been treated worse than a dog in these parts." They clearly spoke of the way his race treated their animals, not the Swithin. A Swithin dog had a good life compared to the homeless of the city. "You don't know what you're talking about. Leave me alone."

"Admit Markis kicks you, and I'll leave you be."

"He doesn't."

The voice changed, became conciliatory. "Come now. He's a prince. You're a street brat. You're unloved and unworthy. Isn't that right?"

"Don't."

"You're not fit to have anyone care about you, so he can't possibly care what happens to you. If he doesn't care, you must be his dog. He must be kicking you, even if you can't see it."

"No!" Uly shook his head even more frantically. His hair whipped Ryanac's tunic. He tried to step to the side, but Ryanac beat him to it. He was stuck between the frame and the man. He lifted his hands to push him away, but it was a futile effort, wasted. His vision blurred. When Ryanac hooked a finger under his chin, this time he could do nothing about it. His head lifted. The peculiar taste of tears and snot ran down his throat.

"He kicks you, Uly."

"No!" Uly screamed into Ryanac's face. "Let go of me." He was crying; his voice emerged as a childlike wail.

"He kicks you."

"No, he doesn't. He's not like that." The protest left him in a flood. "He's not. He wouldn't. How can you stand there and say that?" This time when Uly pushed, Ryanac backed up. "You say you're his friend. Then how can you think that of him? How dare you say these things when he's unconscious and can't defend himself? Why would you do that? You're the liar, the cheat, the one who isn't worthy. You say you're his friend, and it's all fake. You're like every other sodding two-faced liar I've ever met on the fucking street!"

The rant left him as quickly as it had come. He put his hands against his face, and they were cold against his heated cheeks. He couldn't believe he had said those things. The captain would kill him. He stared in wide-eyed horror at the man who would probably end his life in the next few minutes and couldn't think of a way to save himself. Everything he had learned on the street deserted him. It took him a moment to realise that Ryanac just stood there, grinning.

"Why, Uly, I didn't know you cared."

The heat rushed through him. With it came relief. He wasn't going to die, but he had to be blushing.

"Fear of the unknown, remember."

The guard had once more directed him exactly where he wanted. He was two-faced all right, but not in any way Uly had ever encountered previously. "You said you didn't like devious men," he whispered.

"And you know in what way I meant it. It's the intention behind it that counts."

As Ryanac moved by him to go check on the prince, Uly asked, "Do you manipulate Shavar like this?"

Ryanac turned his head towards him. His eyes twinkled and danced with an inner light. "All the time, but only when he needs it."

Chapter Eight

No matter how one's situation had changed in life, there were nights when sleep remained elusive. Uly lay in bed wondering if Shavar slept peacefully or if he suffered a sleepless night. Just a couple of days ago, he could have believed that the rich had nothing but peaceful nights and pleasant dreams. Now, he was not so sure.

He gave up. When you couldn't sleep, trying sometimes made it worse. Finding a safe place to rest one's head out on the street was difficult enough. Strange, then, that at times when he couldn't risk falling asleep, it had been difficult to keep his eyes open. Other times when he was safe, he sometimes struggled to sleep. He had learnt all this the hard way and had to wonder now if this was a throwback to what his life had been. Did he struggle to sleep because he was safe or because he feared he might yet lose that safety? Then again, it could be just one of those inexplicable things.

Uly pushed back the cover and slipped out of bed. Barefoot, he padded to the door and tugged it open. He glanced out into a silent hallway. Usually, the area had dim lighting, but the moon shone so bright this night and the hour was so late that it was almost early. A hush had descended that spoke of slumber. It seemed criminal to be out of bed.

Stepping out, Uly left the door at his back slightly open. He turned his head to the left. He had explored that way previously and discovered a couple of rooms much as the one he occupied -- rooms for guests, presumably, or people close to the prince. The idea that he occupied the room that lay some distance yet was the closest room to the prince always caused him to frown, yet made him want to smile.

He turned towards the prince's suite now, pivoting on his right foot and keeping close to the wall. Even from a distance, he could see the tall doors to the suite, shut at present. Small flashes of red, blue, and green caught his eye and drew his gaze to the jewel-encrusted steps. Not all were gems, as he had first believed. Small pieces of tile created part of the

pattern. Still the stones set into the step caught any stray light, to sparkle and twinkle like stars.

Turning his head, Uly looked to the large arched window set high into the wall of the corridor that led to the main doors of the wing. Two sentries guarded them night and day. Uly stared at the doors at the other end of this corridor only for a second and then turned his gaze back to the moon that shone whitely against a grey and black sky. The angle sent the light in a beam to the step of Shavar's suite as though lighting the way. The white walls suddenly seemed a strange contrast to the opulence and bright colours of the suite beyond the elaborate carved doors. Uly turned his sight back to the door and swallowed. He dared not wake Markis, and not just because of who he was. If the prince slept peacefully, he had no wish to disturb him. Two nights ago, he had wiped seeping blood from the prince's skin. The man needed rest, and Uly wished him peace.

Staring ahead, past the door, Uly tugged on his lower lip with his teeth. He had never been that way. It only stretched a short distance before the corridor curved, blocking the view of what lay beyond. Curiosity was a dangerous thing, and yet Uly had taken several steps forward before he realised it. Glancing over his shoulder, he dithered before walking ahead.

A few rooms on the left side were apparently for storage. Oddly, though locked, each had a small square cut into them so that one could look in. Shelves lined the walls, containing linens and other things, all presumably intended for the prince's suite. A small window at the back of each room allowed light to filter in so that he could easily check out the contents of the rooms. A servant could easily locate the right storage area, and no one would be able to hide inside the small space. The angle allowed light to filter dimly into the hallway as well. It provided enough light for Uly to see where he walked.

He was looking into the last of these rooms when a sound caught his attention. Turning sharply, he gazed down the corridor where it now snaked to the left. He saw and heard nothing more, but Uly bit lightly at his lip and immediately considered returning to bed. He almost cursed aloud when curiosity won out. A dozen steps took him around the curve to the last door where the corridor ended. Walking forward, Uly hovered on the other side of the door and gently pressed his ear to the wood. He almost stumbled back when he heard a soft sound within. Surprised at his own audacity, he pressed his fingers against the door. It swung inwards easily, noiselessly. The gap was small, yet pale light made it stand out, causing the surrounding walls to appear even darker and the passage gloomy.

Everything in Uly cried for him to turn tail and go back to bed. His body wasn't listening. With a surprisingly steady hand, he pushed the door open enough so he could slip in.

Beyond, the walls went forward straight for a few paces and then the right hand wall gave way to the same elaborate fretwork as adorned Shavar's suite. For a moment, Uly grew confused and wondered if he had happened upon another entrance into the prince's rooms.

When he glanced around the corner of the wall the idea remained. He drew back, almost bumping into the wall and giving his presence away. The room was in many ways identical to the prince's though on a lesser scale. A bed dominated the centre of the room, and the sudden belief that this room had a connection to Shavar's suite almost made Uly's knees buckle. It made sense that Shavar's personal guard would stay close by. It seemed likely another door provided a connection. The guard would not be happy having to dash through the corridor to get to Shavar in an emergency. This was where Ryanac slept -- only the big man wasn't sleeping right now.

He should leave. He had to get out of here. If Ryanac of all people caught him ... What would he do? None of the frightening images that ran through Uly's mind quite rang true. The big man might be angry, but there was a good chance he could be just as amused as annoyed. It could be difficult to tell with Ryanac, and things had changed between them the other night. He wasn't sure how, but there existed a subtle difference in their relationship now.

Uly closed his eyes, better to see the vision that seemed imprinted on his sight. Ryanac naked, lying in the centre of that bed, his legs splayed, the soft candlelight catching the droplets of water that adhered to his skin and dark smatterings of hair at his chest and groin, making them sparkle and gleam had been the last thing he expected to see. The man must have just washed and lain down on the bed without drying first. Uly might have wondered what the man was doing bathing at such an hour, but knowing Ryanac, he could be waking early or just going to bed. The man never seemed to be off duty.

Opening his eyes now, Uly turned automatically, dragged by invisible strings. Crouching down, Uly set his eyes to an area of fretwork that allowed him the best view.

Ryanac's head was back and he had his eyes closed. His jaw hung slack. The rest of his body, by comparison, looked tight and thick. His hands roamed almost carelessly, fingertips and nails lightly playing over his skin, finally lingering at his nipples. Uly felt an answering response, became very aware of his chest, of those small nubs of hardening flesh. His friend Hebe had once said that men shouldn't play with their nipples, that they were not as sensitive as a woman's, but watching Ryanac like this, one would hardly have thought so. It seemed as though Ryanac enjoyed playing with them. He gave his flesh a soft pull until it stiffened, the nipples standing out rosy even against Ryanac's olive skin.

As one hand remained to play lightly over his nipples, his other journeyed down the strong central line of his stomach to his already impressive cock. Uly gave a soft gasp, immediately grateful that the sound of Ryanac's breathing surely masked it. He nibbled at his lip to prevent another sound leaving his mouth and flinched a little when he bit too hard. He had believed Ryanac stiff until the hand gripped that dormant creature that lay against the pit of his belly. The way it moved in his hand told Uly that it wasn't fully hard yet. Giving his cock a friendly stroke, Ryanac moved his hand further down to play lightly over his sac. The eggs within seemed to move loosely in the skin, but even as Uly watched, the slackness crawled and tightened. Ryanac squeezed his own flesh softly and a smile grew on his lips.

Uly frowned. Why was the big man alone here like this? Surely, he had Petra or plenty of other females to call to his room. Did Ryanac take male lovers? Uly didn't know. If the contented look on his face was anything to go by, maybe the guard liked this form of pleasuring. Yet to Uly this was a completely new experience. It had never been this way for him. He had never seen another person take pleasure like this. There was something slow and languid about Ryanac's movements, something that flared up in an emotion Uly could only describe as envy. Those fingers now moved, investigating each ball separately, even balancing them as though testing the weight.

The man's left hand had finally worked its way down over his skin, stroking, examining as though it had a free mind and will. Ryanac carefully palmed his testicles from his right hand to his left and turned his head to the side as he did. A soft sigh left his lips.

Uly took an extra-deep breath and became aware of a spicy scent. Fragrant and warm, he tried to seek its location and then looked to the candles that burned around the room. Most were white, but some were a rich brown, much the same colour as Markis's glorious hair. He was sure these were the origin of the scent.

With an uncertain surprise, Uly contemplated the small smile that had come to his lips. He even reached up and pressed the tip of a finger lightly against his mouth as though he couldn't quite believe it existed. His throat had dried while he watched, and he wouldn't have been surprised to find it painful to swallow. In contrast, other parts of him felt pliant and lush.

He watched that already firm column of flesh harden and grow under Ryanac's stroking. It stiffened, grew straight, lurched into the air, jutting a little away from the large man's stomach. It failed to point upright as though its sheer size and weight held it in check. No wonder Petra had shuddered and cried, though her tears hardly seemed to come from pain or fear. Ryanac continued to stroke his cock as it strained towards his hand as though it were a beast apart, some creature that sought his affection. One hand stroked. The other caressed and squeezed lower things. Suddenly Ryanac flipped over. To Uly it felt as though his heart had stopped in his chest and then fluttered to catch up with the missed beat. For a moment, he had believed Ryanac had opened his eyes. Even if he did, he shouldn't have seen Uly from where he crouched behind the gleaming circle of candlelight.

Even as Ryanac began to thrust against the bed, Uly tore his eyes away and let his gaze wander around the room. The candles were indeed set in such a way to highlight the bed. Uly tried to picture Ryanac with Petra here, the woman lying naked under the soft glimmer, and found he could bring forth the vision all too easily. This was Ryanac's private space. Uly was the invader, yet he couldn't make himself leave. An ache at his groin brought tears to his eyes just as Ryanac's breathing increased to a point where a grunt tore from his lips. The large man rubbed his cock into the bed, circled his hips, grinding into the sheet. The few droplets that stood out on his skin either were the last of the water or newly formed sweat. The black and silver hair hung loose, flowing over his back, hanging in long, straight lines either side of his face to slither over the satin cover like small snakes. Although Uly could see

one side of Ryanac's face and the way the muscles strained in his right arm, the main view he had was of the man from the back. Muscles either side of his spine rippled, his buttocks tightened and clenched.

By the time Ryanac flipped over once more onto his back, Uly expected him to take his cock in his hand in a steady, controlled rhythm that would bring him quickly to climax. He did no such thing. Resisting the impulse clearly took willpower. Ryanac writhed and gasped, moving his hands out to either side of him as though afraid to even touch a part of his body by accident. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, crying out once when his cock jerked and strained, pulling his hips forward with the force of his need.

Uly swallowed, and he was right -- it hurt to do so. A few moments passed in which Uly considered slipping a hand between his legs. He also considered moving. Where he crouched, his legs had started to grow numb. He did neither, letting the small pain ease him back from the other need.

Need. Uly had never contemplated the meaning of the word before. When he wanted to come, he had sought quick release. Any intimate moments he had shared with another had proved so disappointing and the quick release of his hand far from rewarding, that in time he had given up both. Besides, when one was hungry there was little room to think about sex. This long, slow seemingly self-torture session was altogether new to him. On some level, he didn't understand it. Something deep inside of him understood very well. He just couldn't quite grasp it.

Ryanac's hands now moved in a rhythm designed to draw his body to release. Uly glanced towards the door and thought about slipping away. He lingered, heat rising to his face when he realised he wanted to see Ryanac finish. He had seen others have sex, but only due to circumstances. He'd never gone out of his way to watch someone else until he had begun this strange phase of his life within the castle.

As he watched, he gaped to see Ryanac gather some of the glistening fluid that had leaked from the tip and take it to his lips. Ryanac licked at his fingers so hard Uly could hear his tongue lap. The next lot of fluid that Ryanac gathered, he used to circle his hidden rosette. Although he had an obstructed view, Uly could tell where Ryanac reached. The guard had bent his knees and braced his feet against the bed. With his legs open, his hand reaching down below his balls, and the fingers making circular motions, there was only one place his hand could tease.

Uly had never done that to himself. That area of the body meant pain, although on some level, he knew it didn't have to, and he was curious and hopeful enough to want to understand that kind of pleasure.

The movements had changed. The hand pressed inwards, eventually to pull out, then press in again. Ryanac tossed his head from one side to the other in a gesture of wild abandon that Uly had never expected to see. Even when joking, there seemed something controlled about the man. Similarly, with Petra he had maintained that control until the last moment,

and then, small gasps hadn't left his lips so quickly until they became one long rasping sound. One hand stroking his cock, the other moving in and out of him, and his breathing ragged, brought the rest of the large man's body along in its wake. Small muscles twitched; larger ones jerked. His breathing finally hitched. From the waist down, his body bucked.

Uly wasn't quite sure when he realised that Ryanac neared his release. There was just suddenly something in the air that he could only call a sensation akin to a vibration, and a smell, like the musk of desire. He had to wonder how he knew what those things were, and yet watching Ryanac had expanded a part of his being he hadn't known existed. He had always known there was more to sex than a brief connection between two people, and he had known it meant more than a coin, but he had never had evidence of those long-suppressed emotions before.

Ryanac's whole body tensed, tightened, drew down. His eyes shut tight, as though he wanted no distractions from whatever was going on inside. Uly had to wonder what fantasies the big man envisioned to build on his desire. He tried to picture the same look on Markis's face. Did Shavar ever touch himself? Ryanac had spoken of pleasure denied, but surely he didn't mean pleasure in all its forms? Thinking of Markis made Uly fold his arms about himself in a hug. The gesture brought little relief. Relief was a thing of which he had only a mild concept. Relief, *release* ...

The muscles in Ryanac's stomach stood out in sharp definition. His lips pulled back over gritted teeth. He drew in air as though he had forgotten he needed to breathe, and he came. Thick white ropes spilled out coating his hand, splashing his stomach, arcing out to stain the bed. Parts of that body appeared to soften. Other parts jerked with an almost violent reaction, and still Ryanac milked his cock until all that was left of the force of his orgasm was a few drops caught in the candlelight making the swollen purple glands shine against the backdrop of his darker skin.

Something inside Uly said that he should be disgusted, but he wasn't. The sight was simply too beautiful for him to feel disgust. He could feel shame for spying, but not for what he had seen. Still, he had to leave. He had to get out of here before Ryanac returned to his senses, yet even as he had the thought, Ryanac stroked his cock in an almost lazy rhythm. The movement had the mechanics of someone stroking a much-loved pet. The guard took a deep breath and opened his eyes as he did. His hair lay around and over his face, across his chest, and even his stomach in disarray. The sight made Uly's breath catch anew. Though Ryanac's eyes were open, his gaze looked unfocused. The large man gazed up at the ceiling with an almost blank look on his face. Uly didn't know what drew his eye. Slowly, as though something tugged on his neck, he turned his head.

A large mirror adorned the ceiling. In its surface, the whole of the room reflected at a crazy angle, and a brief unpleasant wave of vertigo made Uly clutch at the panel where he hid. Even as he did, he saw the movement clearly in the mirror overhead. Ryanac didn't move, and he didn't turn his gaze towards the door. Instead, his eyes flickered to the corner of the mirror over Uly's hiding place. This Uly saw in the reflection. For a second, it was

almost as though their eyes met in the mirror above. Had Ryanac spotted him? Could he see him from this angle? Had he known he was there all along?

As quietly as he could and as fast as his numb legs would allow, Uly scrambled for the door. The sound of Ryanac's laugh filled the corridor and sent him scurrying back to his room.

Chapter Nine

Secreted in the library, a book lay forgotten in Uly's lap. He had dozed. Markis Shavar and Ryanac Silas had been gone for the day, having ridden out late the night before on some obligation of the council. After lessons and chores, Uly had sought solace in the comfort of the library in Markis's favourite chair by the fire. He had fully intended to leave before now, or at least not be discovered seated in Shavar's chair.

Pressing back into the upholstery, almost as though he could become part of the pattern and disappear, Uly watched Markis stride across the floor to the great desk. He hadn't seen much of him since the night of the bleeding. The prince had been too busy, preoccupied. That night had come back to Uly's mind many times. He could call the memory up instantly, and he had run it through his mind so often looking for artifice. Ryanac loved Markis. The idea of that strangely pained him, yet he was also aware that it was a love on some level beyond his understanding. Whatever Ryanac felt for Markis went beyond the physical, beyond something most couples shared unless, perhaps, they spent a lifetime together. He didn't understand it, felt something like envy because of it. That was odd in itself. He had only ever felt envious over a meal or a warm, dry spot to sleep in before he came here. What good was love when it didn't put food in your stomach?

Yet thinking back to that night, the image that came to mind was of Ryanac unfastening Markis's braid with such care, Ryanac giving Markis's face little glances, Ryanac wiping a cool, wet cloth against the heated brow. Then of him finally falling asleep, only to jerk awake and hurry to check on his prince as though he had failed in his duty. He had brushed out Markis's hair, and when he saw Uly watching, he had asked if he wanted to help. Uly had got to touch that long hair, run it through his fingers, run a comb through it -- but his fingers mostly -- and Ryanac had to see what he was doing, but had not said a word. Now it felt as though he had taken liberties. It would be easy to say that he wondered why he had taken simple pleasure in the quiet evening, and that it bewildered him, but the

answer screamed in his mind. Markis was undeniably attractive, and true, Uly had wondered what sex would be like with someone who cared even a little bit, but things had changed. Since the incident with the blood, Uly had watched Markis go about his day-to-day duties, taken note of how hard and unforgiving he could be, how caring and wise when it was called for. In truth, he was in trouble -- a different kind of trouble than he'd ever been in on the streets. Uly not only felt some desire for the man, he liked him. Maybe he more than liked him.

He'd never considered desire for someone of the same sex. How and why people did such things were secondary to needs more related to survival, yet like so many other things, that had also changed. Watching Ryanac enjoy the pleasure he could give his own body had heightened the attraction Uly had felt toward Markis, for some reason. An attraction he had felt for some time. True, it also embarrassed him. Ryanac's knowing smile had brought heat to his face and made him hurry away on a number of excuses over the last few days, but he sensed no malice behind the teasing. If he had doubted whether Ryanac knew of his spying the other night, he was now certain of it. It made him wonder if Ryanac had known he watched him with Petra. It seemed little to nothing happened without the big man's knowledge.

Fear of the unknown, fear of fear itself -- Ryanac had warned him about that long ago. Ryanac. Always Ryanac -- a big man who took care of his friend with a delicate touch he shouldn't possess. Ryanac, who had a casual way of touching, the thoughtful little things he did, like taking Petra flowers in passing, and the smile they brought to her face even if he had picked them from the riverbank. All this was so far from the life Uly had led until the night he saw a man sitting under a tree who looked like he could lose the weight of his purse. That had given Uly much to think on in the last few weeks. Even Uly knew he had been unusually silent since that night, but no one seemed to have noticed. Perhaps he was as invisible at the palace as he had been out in the streets, after all. Now the prince had arrived, and Uly went unnoticed in the chair.

Even in the dim light, Uly could see the pensive look in Markis's eyes. The shoulders sagged, and for a moment, Uly believed the man would lean on or even slump over the desk. Instead, he breathed in, closed his eyes and pressed a thumb right between them. Trying at least to ease out of the seat onto the floor unseen, Uly dropped the book.

He hadn't a chance even to go after it; Markis whirled on him, his gaze narrowing. "Little thief," he murmured a second later, and Uly wasn't sure if it were an accusation or simply recognition. Markis lowered his gaze to the book now on the floor, and Uly scrambled out of the seat to retrieve it. He started bowing as he did, an apology on his lips. At the same time, his heart raced in fear, it also raced with something close to excitement. This was the first time he had been alone with Markis in weeks.

His eyes flickering to the vacated seat, Markis sighed and walked towards it. He dropped inelegantly into the chair, telling Uly to fetch him brandy. Uly put the book down on the desk respectfully and hurried around to the other side where the brandy decanter

stood. He had learned how to pour a measure, and after hesitating only for a moment, he did it twice, pouring Markis a double quantity. Rushing as fast as he dared with the glass balanced on a small tray, he handed it over and watched Markis look at the measure with a wry grin. Those dark eyes flickered up to meet his gaze, and heat infused his face.

"Unlace me," Markis said. Considering he had expected a reprimand for sitting in Markis's seat, Uly was very pleased to oblige. He at once went to his knees and began to unfasten the cross-gartering on Markis's lower leg. Though Swithin men wore breeches, when riding they wore high boots to the knees. Hose made of linen lay over the trousers up to the knee, fastened with a crisscross of laces to the shin. Considering the lateness of the hour and that his boots would need shining at the end of a long day and ride, Markis had already removed his boots and left them with a servant, and had probably walked through the halls without footwear. As Uly worked, Markis closed his eyes and sipped Swithin brandy. By the time Uly had finished with his task, his throat had dried and his heart pounded in a peculiar rhythm. Strangely, the tension began to ease in the other man. Perhaps Swithin brandy was just that good.

Markis opened his eyes and handed him the now empty glass. "Another double measure," he said, and Uly hurried to the chore. "And bring the book you were reading."

While Uly poured the alcohol, Markis stood up and loosened the baldric, which after many hours felt like a weight trying to crush his ribcage. He almost groaned with relief as he dropped it in the other chair. He continued, deftly and hurriedly removing his clothes until he wore only his breeches and tunic. Barefoot and able to breathe, Markis settled onto the floor, leaning his back against his favourite chair. Uly had completed his task and returned to him and now stood there waiting. Markis beckoned the young man to join him down on the floor. Uly did, kneeling to the left side. Markis took the brandy and, after a sip, set it aside. He then took the book and flipped through it.

"I cannot believe how far you've advanced," Markis said. He spoke only to break the awkward silence, but the magnitude of his words suffused Uly's complexion with a furious red. The young man liked the praise, and that disturbed Markis. No one had to tell him this was the first time for many weeks that they had been alone together. He had purposely avoided just this very situation, partly from contrition. He might well have killed this street urchin if not for Ryanac, and nothing he could say could make amends.

Street urchin no longer; he had to stop thinking of Uly that way. The young man at his side said nothing, waited patiently, but his hands spread wide on his thighs as he knelt, and the tension increased in him until Markis could almost taste it. He fought the idea the tension was due to fear. Everything he had done with Uly was unfair. Dragging him out of the only life he had ever known, playing a childish game with his feelings, just because he had tried to steal from a rich man because of hunger. Markis shook his head. How could he ever make up for any of it?

“Here. Come to this side, closer to the fire, and read to me.” He spoke gruffly and told Uly to read so that he would hear something besides his own thoughts. Uly hesitated only a second and then scrambled across the rug and settled down on Markis’s right. He sat cross-legged and placed the book in his lap. With only the occasional stutter, he began to read. Markis watched the young man’s face. Those pale, innocent-looking eyes moved back and forth. The lips opened and compressed as he talked. As Uly turned a page, a strand of blond hair fell forward and he brushed it back without pause.

Markis closed his eyes, sipped brandy, and listened. He recalled Uly’s first attempt at reading, the almost physical pain of hearing it, despite the fact he had been impressed even then. The comet had granted a miracle that the young man could read at all. Over the weeks, Markis had watched Uly’s confidence grow, could hear it in his voice, not just with reading, but also with other things. The only time Uly stumbled was when he, Shavar, came near. Markis opened his eyes and stared into the fire. Uly’s voice became a steady pleasant drone in the background as he let his thoughts drift. He had avoided being alone with Uly because he wanted to repent and he wanted to prove to Uly that he had nothing to fear. If he could alter what had happened and put the hateful rope around his own neck and place the other end of it in Uly’s hand, he would have done so.

The sound of Uly stuttering brought him back to the present. “Show me,” Markis whispered, setting the glass aside. Uly tipped the book towards him. “Constellation,” Markis told him, pronouncing the word. “A constellation is a grouping of stars. Ask Stargazer to explain it to you in your next lesson. Tell him I said so.”

A frown appeared on Uly’s face. “Why, then, is it in a book of Swithin culture?”

Markis hesitated to answer. He chose to reply with a question instead. “Why do you pick such a boring book to read at this time of night? There are volumes here purely for entertainment. I never see you with any of them.”

Uly tugged at his bottom lip with his teeth, a habit of his. “I have glanced at some of them, but I thought you would prefer me to study.”

“I certainly want you to, but not all the time. Carry on until the end of the page, though.” Uly did as Markis asked. Markis, leaning forward, checked as he proceeded. The second time the strand of hair escaped, Uly was on the last paragraph, and without thinking, Markis reached out to tuck it back. His fingers pushed the strand of hair behind Uly’s ear and then traced the line of it down to his neck. It had grown over the weeks, and though not nearly as long as Swithin hair, it brushed Uly’s shoulders.

To Markis’s amazement, he realised the room had fallen silent. Uly had stopped reading. When he looked to Uly’s face to see why, he saw the young man’s eyes were closed. He at once chose to believe Uly recoiled in horror, but then noted the lack of tension in the young man. Curious, he trailed his fingers to the back of the neck. The body softened, the head tilted back just a little, then turned a little to the left, leaning into his embrace.

Following a wild impulse, Markis tugged Uly into his arms, and much to his surprise, Uly flowed into the embrace as though he were suddenly boneless.

Dipping a thumb into the brandy, Markis used the liquid to moisten those rosy lips, and the tongue snaked out to lick the alcohol from them. Leaning forward, Markis brought his face down over the other's face, his gaze sweeping over those alluring features. Uly had meat on his bones now, a young man's fleshy yet firm body, with the muscle toned. The inflamed appearance of the skin had calmed with good food, and Uly's complexion now had the creamy glow of youth.

Feeling no resistance, Markis eased Uly back and lay down beside him. Uly lay slack, not in fear, but almost in some type of blissful state. Markis touched his lips to the pale cheek and whispered them over the skin to the mouth. They shared breath, but still Markis hesitated to bestow a kiss. That Uly would allow it, even desired it, Markis was almost certain. What he argued against most was the question of why he desired it himself. He also had good reason to question Uly's seeming assent. Certainly, the young man had been present when a couple of visiting nobles had joked over his presence. Possibly Uly believed he had to comply as payment. If others questioned why Markis kept him here, Uly had to have asked himself the same question. Then again, the young man could have another motive. In Uly, Markis liked to surmise, he had rescued a thoroughbred from use as offal, but he had his doubts. Uly was a street urchin, a thief. The cunning could steal many things, including hearts.

"How many men have you been with?" Markis asked.

Uly froze. He had drifted in a haze of warmth and closeness -- just feeling Markis hold him, knowing his lips hovered so close over his, expecting the kiss, waiting for it to happen. It had been like nothing he had previously known. Now the coldness seeped in. The perfect contentment vanished as though it had been a lie. Deceived by a cruel universe, Markis's question jerked him back into his skin. He was nothing more than a street brat. The cold spread out through his limbs, stiffened his joints, making intimate parts shrivel in comparison. Black shadows carried on fluttering wings rushed in from the corners of the room and hampered his sight. Panicked, he beat at them and tried to roll away. As Markis tightened his grip, Uly lashed out. His fist struck he knew not where, but made no impression. Purely in reaction, he snapped, his teeth coming together with a loud clack so hard it hurt. The shock put an end to the struggle. In horror, Uly opened his eyes wide and stared into that dark gaze. He saw it darken further, as though the light had drawn out of the eyes until they bled with night.

"You ungrateful street brat. Bite me, would you?" With that, Markis rose and lifted Uly with him. Pulled to his feet, Uly stood gasping. He struggled, but the man's muscle consisted of iron. He stumbled back, and then Markis flung him away so that he rolled to the other side of the desk. Coming to his feet, he was in time to see Markis open a hidden door. It had

a seamless line and had previously merged with the bookcases so that he hadn't known it existed. With a shove, Markis pushed him through it into darkness.

The next few minutes would remain a blur in Uly's memory as Markis shoved and kicked him further into the darkness, shouting obscenities and curses. Only when they came out into dim light provided by burning torches in a circular room did Uly get another chance to look at Markis and the blood his bite had drawn. Somehow, his teeth had connected and cut just under the lip on the left side. Even as he stared, fresh blood seeped. He, Uly, street urchin and thief, had bitten Shavar of the Swithin. It warranted his death. In horror, he opened his mouth to beg forgiveness, but once more Markis gripped him by the throat and jerked him towards a dark area in the centre of the floor. His feet dragged over stone, and only when he became aware of the snarling commotion beneath did Uly recognise the darkness as an opening, the wide circular mouth of a pit.

As he became aware of the not-so-empty aperture beneath, Markis pushed him out over it. Even as he wished Markis to ease the pressure on his neck, his struggles ceased. His grip became that of someone holding on rather than pushing the arm away. *Please please please, don't do this. Don't let go.*

Everything in Markis told him to open his hand and drop Uly into the pit. Every fibre of his being screamed it was the right thing to do. He was Shavar, the Comet. Lord prince regent of the Imperial Army, second only to the Swithin king himself. Dropping the young man for such an indiscretion was exactly what the Swithin king would do, and Markis would be king one day, maybe even one day soon.

The hard white cold of ice lanced through him. His blood turned to dust in its wake, moved sluggishly, slowing down his brain, his thought processes. Something familiar gathered, something he could only describe as a dirty snowball growing in size within him, and he realised the nucleus had begun back in the library without him even knowing. The moment Uly had bitten him, these crystals had come into being. Even as the fear speared him, the diameter and density increased. The pull on his mind weighed darkly, contaminated. The pull amplified, physically dragging at his limbs, even tugging down his head as though a hand pressed him forward. If he didn't stop this, take control of it, the power would pull inwards and then expand. Either that, or the gravitational effect would crush him, even if it did come from within. The change began, where the inward pull would alter direction and expand outward into a golden halo. He was tired, and if he allowed that to happen, he did not think he could control it. He had to stop it before it expanded and make it recede by sheer will, or he had to get rid of what had irritated him to achieve the same effect. That would be the simpler, easier option, and he *was* tempted.

Something stilled his hand. Not only did he not want to drop Uly and condemn him to such a terrible death, the mere thought of such a death sickened him. The hounds' very existence sickened him. They were not even hounds. They were not dogs at all, despite the

sounds of barking, growling, and snarling coming from the pit indicating otherwise. They were some peculiar crossbreed, a little 'experiment' by a crazed predecessor. They walked on their hind feet and the knuckles of their front paws. They were teeth and claws on long, lean limbs, covered with matted hair out of which mad yellow eyes stared. They would rip a man to shreds and consume the flesh. Only eight of them existed. Five males were down in the pit. They kept the three females separate so that they could breed others but keep their numbers in check. Soon it would be time for another breeding session. The youngest of these creatures was two years old -- an adult in their life span -- and they needed to increase, or so the council said. If Markis had his way, he would slaughter the lot of them, and he wasn't sure he didn't mean the hounds and the council both.

Even as he accepted his anger as the rage of the comet, he thrust it away. The weight diminished. As Shavar became Markis the man again, Uly's grip went slack. Looking to the young man, Markis pressed the back of his left hand against his stinging lip where Uly had bit him.

Ryanac had asked Uly a few weeks ago to forgive Markis. Then there had been something to forgive. If Shavar decided a street brat's fate for biting him was to die, then no power in the world would argue. Uly could see Hebe smirking and her look of 'I told you' in his mind. Perhaps it didn't seem right, but no one said the way of the world was fair. For biting a man of his own race in such a way, they would have beaten Uly to just this side of death, largely because no one would have cared to stop it. To bite a Swithin noble and to bite such a powerful and important man as this, Uly expected worse than death. Still, even as he watched, he saw Markis's expression change. To his astonishment, as Markis pressed the back of his left hand to his bleeding lip, a tear spilled from the man's left eye to leave a glistening trail down the side of his face. Uly had already relaxed his grip. He held on enough not to slip by accident, but if Markis released him, he would fall into the pit, into the midst of whatever snapping, snarling creatures lived down there.

Even as Uly accepted his fate and willingly placed it into Markis's hands, the other man let out a cry and dragged him back from the pit. The hard, warm, and merciful arms took him into their circle of safety.

Chapter Ten

Markis's suite seemed endless, rooms bleeding into one another in a riot of contrasting colours. The walls, as he had previously seen, were not walls as such, but partitions. Shavar did not need walls for privacy. No one entered without his express consent. Not if they knew what was good for them. Now, Uly stood in front of another fireplace, watching while Markis attended to his lip. The gash was surprisingly deep, and Markis had cursed once and then looked across almost with an apologetic expression on his face when Uly flinched.

"It's nothing," Markis said, but that was a lie. That injury could have changed so many things. It still might, and Uly fought down his need for flight. His lip trembled partly from fear and partly because of what he had done.

"I am so very sorry," he finally said. The water in the basin had turned pink. Markis dried his hands and gazed into the mirror. His expression was difficult to interpret.

"I'm not going to punish you for it."

"That's not the only reason I am sorry." He only spoke his mind, but he needed Markis to believe him.

Turning his head, Markis pushed the basin aside. He moved forward to sit amongst the cushions where Uly knelt. Keeping pressure against his mouth with a clean cloth, Markis regarded him. "What made you do it?"

"I thought ..." Uly hesitated. What had he thought? "I tried to get away and you wouldn't let go of me. I panicked."

"By rights, if I choose not to let you up, you should not refuse." Uly lowered his gaze in quiet acknowledgement. "But, Uly, such is not the case here. You have a choice." Blinking in surprise, Uly looked up. "I am giving you a choice. I gave it to you the day I told you to choose if you left or remained."

"But you are Shavar. All answer to you, obey you." He feared to question, but needed to understand.

Markis snorted. "I wish. If you sat in on the council gatherings, then you would see how often they question my decisions. I do not mean you can do as you like and break our laws, and if I ask a reasonable request of you, then I do expect to have it carried out. As far as ownership of your body goes, you have free will and free choice." Markis paused, his gaze sliding away. "If you wish to leave, I shall never stop you, whether it is ten days from now or ten years. All I declare is that if you go, I don't wish to see you back. I have reasons, which I don't wish to discuss. Suffice it to say I have taken you in from the streets. If you repay me one day by leaving, then I never want to set eyes on you again. Still, as things stand, I offer you a good life without personal conditions." That dark gaze flickered back to Uly's face. "Uly, you can say no. To me, to anyone.

"Besides," Markis continued, "I wasn't trying to force you to do anything. I asked you a question, and you went berserk. I was trying to hold you still to get some sense out of you. I don't know if you realise, but you were talking garbage."

Uly frowned. "I didn't know I said anything at all."

"I couldn't make sense of it. Just the odd word. What frightened you so?"

Uly wanted to answer, but he couldn't. He honestly hadn't known he had panicked to such an extent, and he could not remember anything he had said.

"Bad memories?" Markis asked.

Black shadows of his past might be more accurate, but it was a good guess on Markis's part. Uly nodded, grateful when the prince let it go at that. If he truly could hope for a new life here, then there were things he would rather leave behind him, out on the streets.

* * * * *

"It's stopped bleeding. Stop looking so concerned." More than an hour had passed. Ryanac must have eaten alone. Markis had ordered servings brought to his suite and left at the door. Uly had fetched the food, and having eaten and consumed some Swithin brandy, both of them had dozed. He had told Uly he had the choice to go or stay tonight, and much to Markis's relief, Uly remained.

The bed was a short walk across the room, but moving was just too much of a bother for Markis. The cushions were just as comfortable, and he liked this position, lying straight, his body protected and embraced by the satin-covered pads, Uly in the crook of his shoulder, the young man's head resting against his chest. It amused him that Uly glanced up occasionally, as though surprised to find he was here. Every time, his dismayed gaze lingered on the blood-encrusted gash scabbing over below Markis's lip. He moved his mouth to the side and felt the irritating pull of the scab.

He ran his fingers through Uly's hair to soothe him. Though Uly had quickly calmed down and shown more resilience than Markis had previously credited him with, some tension remained. Tightening his grasp just a little, Markis laced his fingers through the blond hair, cradling the back of Uly's head. Lightly, so Uly would hardly be aware of it, he gradually tilted the young man's head as he stroked, until he could place a kiss on the unlined forehead. Uly's response was immediate and incredible. The body once more melted into his embrace. Uly sighed, his lips parting slightly and his limbs weakening in reply. Between the parted lips, he caught a glimpse of Uly's teeth. Ryanac had been right. They were so very clean. The thought of a street brat with clean teeth brought a smile to his face. Markis trailed his lips to Uly's brow, then the bridge of the nose, then down to the tip. From one eye to the other, he kissed the closed lids, the tickle of eyelashes brushing against his mouth.

He continued, trailing his lips down the side of the face to the chin, shifting slightly so he could slide down and bring Uly's face more in line with his. Their bodies had a good fit and so did their lips. Markis touched his lips so lightly to that ingenuous mouth, he could hardly call it a kiss. It was a whisper, a mere brush of lips. Still, Uly dissolved into it. His face grew slack. Staring down at him, Markis frowned in puzzlement. He didn't want to break whatever spell he had weaved -- Uly looked adrift -- but he had to know. He kept his voice light and soft, his arms holding but not grasping, their bodies only lightly pressed together when he asked, "What is it with you?"

The gentleness left the younger face. A crease appeared as a cruel line in that otherwise unmarked brow, furrowing it. Markis hated the expression and wanted the other one back. He rather wished he hadn't spoken now.

Tension invaded the body, slow but insidious. Markis forced himself to relax his grip rather than hold on. His calm attitude clearly was the correct choice as he watched Uly wage a war in his expression. Finally, in a small anguished voice, Uly said, "I've never been kissed."

His first impulse was to laugh in disbelief. Even as the urge seized him, Uly tightened his grip. The two hands fisted, clutching at the loose tunic Markis wore. Pain crushed the younger man's expression into one of torment. At once Markis understood and understood why his much earlier question had caused Uly to react so aggressively. He nodded. "Whores aren't for kissing," he said, no more force to his voice, but Uly let out a small cry of suffering. "Well, fuck that." He purposely used one of the Simeon's curse words, though many Swithin used them now, especially Ryanac.

Standing, he dragged Uly to his feet in one swift motion. Taking hold of Uly's hand, Markis pulled him towards the bed. There was a little resistance, but not much. Looking stunned, Uly just stood there. Markis pulled the young man into his arms, running his hands up to cup the shoulders. Lowering his head, their lips touched, only this time it was more than a caress.

At first, those lips pressed in a hard, unmoving embrace. Then as Uly gasped in response, the kiss changed. Markis's lips opened with a suppressed kind of violence. A hot tongue stabbed into his mouth and latched onto his, seeking, teasing his to join in a dance. The pull on his mouth flashed down the length of his body straight to his cock, even as Markis drew him onto the bed. Instinct told him this was desire, though he had never experienced it like this. Instant concupiscence. The past and bad experiences flashed through his head, but he denied them. Even if it hurt, he wanted this with this man. Still, it had to be different. It had never felt like this. *He* had never felt like this. This was what poets said made the world revolve, and it certainly made his head spin. This drove brave men and women to their knees, made the most dominant beg and even weep if it went unanswered. Right now, Markis answered the call even as he brought it forth.

His lips pressed harder, yet Uly sensed a certain amount of control, like passion held in check. At once, as their bodies pressed in something akin to urgency, the kiss became tentative. Afraid Markis would stop, Uly arched against him. The gesture wasn't planned, more instinctual. Still, Markis began to pull back. A strange kind of grief lanced through him. Tears stung his closed eyes, brought an ache to his face. He tilted his head, parted his lips, and Markis's mouth danced with his one more time, but the man had changed his mind; Uly could tell.

Noooooo. It would be no use to say the word aloud, and yet a whimper escaped him. Markis drew him back into his arms; a slightly rough thumb brushed the space between his eyes. "Hush, Uly. Sshh. I can't. At least, not tonight." The arm came down around his shoulders and pulled his head into the space between Markis's shoulder and neck. Uly laced his fingers tightly into the tunic so his fingers could just touch a hint of bare skin at Markis's neck. He didn't understand what the other man meant. He just wanted more, but if this was all he could have, he would have to be content. Silently weeping, sometime later in Markis's bed, Uly finally fell asleep.

Chapter Eleven

When Uly opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was a dagger. Blinking in surprise and disoriented, it took a while for his sight and mind to focus and adjust. His gaze wandered while the events of last night filtered slowly back into his mind. The dark panelling, rich brocade drapes, satin pillows, and silk sheets of every hue provided a riot of colour. He still lay in Markis's bed. Turning his head to the right revealed that Markis still shared the bed, though he had moved aside. Markis had changed and now wore a night sidon -- the male night shift. Looking down, Uly did not have to lift the cover to know he lay naked. Markis must have undressed him while he slept and covered him up. Swithin brandy was strong stuff to one not used to drinking it; he had felt none of it.

Across the room, Uly could see the grey light filtering into the distant part of the suite. The hour was early, and he didn't want to wake Markis. He dared not move and hesitated to breathe. Finding he could not return to sleep, his gaze fell once more on the dagger. It lay on a small wooden table beside the bed. The table's colour was so dark as to be almost black -- like the table in the dining room -- and upon this, a pitcher of water stood with a glass. The dagger was the only other item.

Reaching out, Uly lifted the dagger, startled by its weight. The grip was so lavishly decorated it sparkled even in the dim light. Uly frowned. It seemed wrong somehow, for something that could kill to look so attractive. Turning it, a stray beam of light struck the blade and glinted, flashing into his eye almost painfully. He had thought the handle the only thing capable of shining but the honed blade was so fine it had an evil glitter. Contemplating why Markis would keep such a thing so close to his bed, he rolled onto his back and jumped so hard he almost dropped it. As his gaze shifted across the ceiling and to the right side, he had become aware of Markis's equally glittering eyes. Shavar had turned towards him without Uly feeling him shift in the bed. He jerked reflexively, and Markis's hand reached out and gripped his fingers that held the knife. Carefully, Markis removed it into his

safekeeping. Shaking, Uly opened his mouth to apologise. If Markis believed he had intended to murder him in his bed, there would be no saving his skin this time. Shavar surely read his mind.

"Relax. I don't believe you intended to stab me. You did, however, nearly take the end of my nose."

Uly flinched. Had it really been so close? Taking hold of the knife firmly, Markis stabbed it into the headboard. It stuck with a *thunk* and hung there horizontally, as though mocking. "What made you pick it up?"

"It's pretty," Uly said. It was certainly that.

"It's old. The handle is ivory, made before we stopped taking such things from the natural world. The inlay is gold. The gems are real." Uly looked at it again. Rubies and sapphires were the dominant jewels. "It could set you up for a number of years, if someone didn't steal it from you or kill you for it."

His gaze lowering to Shavar's face, Uly protested. "I wasn't going to steal it."

Amusement lined Markis Shavar's face. His fingers reached out and brushed at the frown on Uly's forehead. "Why not? You are my little thief, are you not?"

Those words ignited a strange response in Uly, akin to a ripple of pleasure and fear combined, but then Markis's stroking fingers distracted him.

"A whore is not made for kissing or spending the night with."

The pain of that statement jabbed through him. The hands still stroked his brow, his hair, and his face, even his neck. He frowned slightly, not understanding. It was as though Markis said it in wonder, amazed to find Uly here in his bed. "Yet here you are," he said, this time quieter, almost whispering the words as though he hadn't intended to say them. "Tell me, my little thief, how many men have you been with?"

Confused, Uly instinctively clutched at the covers. He wanted to pull them up over him. Covered to his chest, the sheet hid even his nipples, but he wanted to drag the cover up to his neck, even over his head. Markis lay on them -- while Uly had slept in the bed, Shavar had spent the night on top -- and he couldn't pull the sheets free. Why Markis persisted on asking these questions pained him, but Markis was Shavar, and even if he had been otherwise, he was a man of noble birth. Uly had no right to refuse to answer.

Where Markis's voice had gained strength, Uly's lost it. "Three," he managed to whisper, lowering his gaze. He glanced back sharply as Markis jolted. At once, he saw disbelief mask the other man's face.

"Only three?" Markis said this as though speaking to himself, but still it made Uly look away. Someone like Markis had no reason to believe him. He wanted to run from the bed, from the suite, but he was naked, and Markis had not dismissed him besides. "Did you ever like the men you went with?"

This question came as a complete wonder. Uly hesitated to answer, but found the reply on his lips. "Sometimes," he admitted. "I liked the look of two of them. I ..." Words failed him and he had to swallow. He had tried to find someone he liked at least. The first time wasn't like that. He had believed that if he at least liked the look of the man, it would be different. "I tried to like them, but it always ended the same way, in disappointment. They ... They never saw me. They never noticed."

Still stroking his forehead, Markis made a quiet shushing sound. Leaning forward, he placed a kiss on Uly's forehead right between his eyes. "Let it go, Uly. Let it all slip away." To Uly, the kiss, more than the words, was the sweetest gift he had ever received.

* * * * *

"To have the boy alone in your room is unwise." Markis paused. He was on his way to talk to his friend about Uly, among other things, and to have the old fool most called Stargazer stop him -- no, *step in front of him* -- in the corridor was too close to an insult for him to bear considering his mood. He didn't even grace the man with a reply. Stargazer had been too ready with the lash more than once. Since Ryanac had arrived a few years ago, the old man had watched him with carefully hooded eyes. He didn't like a mere guard usurping his authority, having the ear of Shavar. In some ways, Markis couldn't blame him, but all he knew was that nothing the old man had ever said or done had ever helped him. Since Uly had arrived, the old man had tried his patience, and he would have preferred Uly had nothing to do with this man out of any of his teachers and advisors. Regrettably, he was the only one who had any true talent when it came to his nickname of stargazing. Now he stood so close that if he accidentally touched him, Markis just might punish him for it -- something he would never have even thought of doing once, no matter what the law dictated. If Stargazer touched him right now, he might well feed him to the creatures in the pit.

"The boy should not spend time in your room."

The old man's eyes were turning white with age and cataracts. Alas, his sight was not the only area where he was going blind. Markis turned to step by him, and the man placed himself in his path once more. Markis looked down at him. Though they were of similar height, time had bent Stargazer's spine. Markis didn't say a word. He just looked at him. He watched the old man's lips tighten, then tremble -- rage, judging by what he could see in the rest of the man's face -- and finally he stepped aside.

"Never step into my way again," Markis told him, as he moved on by. "Next time, I won't stop walking."

* * * * *

"So," Ryanac barely hid the smirk on his lips. "The Azu flats. Tell me again why we are meeting on such a nondescript scrap of land."

Sometimes, Markis wondered this himself. "They say it is neutral territory."

"Neutral, though their land. Neutral until one race tries to annihilate the other. Then it will be up for grabs, if anyone wants it."

Markis stared out at the landscape surrounding the castle. In time, it had changed. Due to the Swithin, they were building homes along the river. Most of the Simeon would have a roof over their heads before another winter arrived, and yet they still resented the Swithin invasion. Still, an invasion was an invasion when you got right down to it. He had come out here seething when he had wanted to feel calm. He needed to discuss the impending campaign and had wanted to seek advice regarding Uly. Seeing the look on his face, Ryanac had raised an inquiring eye, and Markis had told him of the encounter with Stargazer. He had also ordered the hounds destroyed, though the council wouldn't like it. Angry, he had come too close to using them a second time. As his blood cooled, his friend's presence had soothed him. Now, Markis sighed. "Do we really have the right to dictate?"

Ryanac's head jerked upright. "What's brought this on?"

Markis shook his head, leaning over the parapet, staring down into the city below. The line of the river snaked away into the distance towards the hills. His voice emerged quietly, his words measured and slow. "When tests proved I was strong, perhaps even stronger than my father, he was so proud he wept. Even though duty meant we would see little of each other, he said he knew my heart and I was the best chance for peace in my generation. He showed the first signs of illness while I still attended basic classes."

Ryanac watched silently. Though they knew each other well, almost better than most brothers did, Markis had not spoken of his family before -- not since they had left their homeland for separate academies. He was Shavar, and family was something you set aside. The entire population of the Swithin and any that you assimilated into the race became your family, and it became your duty to take care of them.

"I remember the look in his eyes. The long, dreamy, far-off look that told me he believed what he said. In that moment, I wanted to believe it, too. I wanted to make him proud of me. The trouble was, no one truly realised the cost, and he and I have very different views. In truth, he doesn't know my heart at all. He never did. I have no intention of following what he wants blindly. I'm as good as king in all but name, and that only because I do not have full control of the power yet. Once I do, maybe even before I do, I will rule as I see fit, not as my father would like to dictate." He turned his head towards Ryanac and met the other man's gaze. "Yet I wonder what will happen if I cannot do what I may need to?"

The larger man reached out a hand and gripped Markis's forearm. A touch from any other man upon the Shavar without invitation would have been seen as an insult and punishable by death. Between the two of them, the touch was what it was. It spoke of their undying affection and friendship.

"You want my advice?" Ryanac said. "Put it from your mind. There is no use worrying if the river ahead has a bridge or not before you come to it."

Despite everything, Markis had to laugh. Besides, he had something else he wanted to talk about, and that would definitely set his other troubles aside. "I have something I want to ask you," he said even more quietly. Ryanac's smirk grew, and his absorbing gaze studied him a moment before shifting. The guard moved his hand aside and leaned on the parapet alongside. The line of their bodies almost pressing together on Markis's right and Ryanac's left felt like a warm contrivance, a private conspiracy. Markis stood silent for a moment, allowing the moment to linger, savouring Ryanac's closeness and their mutual trust. "I need your advice," he finally admitted.

"Let me guess. Would it concern Uly?"

Markis closed his eyes briefly. "I suppose you think I deserve this."

"My teasing, definitely. The pain and uncertainty, no."

"Let's start with my question. I want to understand him, but I don't." He went on to fill Ryanac in on what had happened, how Uly said he had only been with three men, his reaction when Markis had kissed him, and Uly's cryptic statement that he had tried to enjoy it but the men had never seen him. "I don't understand what he meant."

For a moment, Ryanac only stared out at the city. "Put yourself in his place. Remember his appearance when we first set eyes on him. Of the fact that he has only been with three men I've no doubt." Markis's head shot upward, but Ryanac only laughed at his expression. "Uly doesn't take well to being a whore for a rich man or a poor one. I doubt he has had much experience with women either."

"It seems so odd for one of his age to be so innocent."

"Could one call it innocence, though? He has seen the dark side to life without its pleasures. He is innocent of the delight of sex and hungry for it. That and love. Uly responds to affection. He tries not to, but he cannot help himself. From what you told me, he melts when you are most gentle."

Markis frowned, not even bothering to hide his emotions.

"Surprised I'm so perceptive?" Ryanac's tone sounded a little mocking, but warranted.

"Yes. No. Finish what you were saying."

"We are Swithin. We have a different view of love and sex. It is freely given; we freely take it. We have no need to pay for it. I've seen it though." Ryanac's eyes took on darkness as of a storm.

"So have I."

Ryanac shook his head. "No. You haven't. It's not your fault. You haven't had time. You've not been shielded from the world, or rather, you haven't shielded yourself from it, but you have other burdens on your shoulders. I've drunk with men down by the docks, in taverns, sat in whorehouses that had both men and women on offer, and I don't mean just here."

Markis swallowed. He had always considered himself open-minded, and he trusted Ryanac's judgment. He chose to believe him, even if it meant he would hear things he didn't wish to hear. Ryanac watched him and grinned as though satisfied by something in Markis's expression.

"I've seen a handsome lord entice a whore as though he or she were the most beautiful thing he ever saw. Then I have seen him take them laughing, stripping them naked over a rough splintered table. I have seen a woman passed around among men until she shuddered, sore and defeated. I have seen young men, far younger than Uly, taken so roughly they squealed with the pain, and not because they were with an inexperienced lover, but because no one cared if they hurt. I have seen the eyes of either sex open wide in fear or go blank as they sent their minds elsewhere, vacating the body as though it were a thing separate from them, and it made no matter what happened to it. Their sight only returns at the glint of a coin and then, after a time, not even then."

Markis frowned so much it hurt. He tried to ease the tension that had crept under his skin. "Wait a minute. The Illus have whores. They are nothing like you describe." The Illus were another of the nations now under Swithin rule, but rather than fight they had sat down and negotiated. The Swithin had much to offer, and the Illus had voted to join with them. Even if they had not, the Swithin would not have conquered them as they had the Simeon. The Illus were an intelligent race, eager to learn and improve. The Swithin only fought to defeat ignorance and poverty.

"You're talking about a society where being a whore is a recognised profession. They treat them with respect. No means no, if a client asks to do something they don't wish to do. They are not beaten, starved, or forced. It's completely different."

"I suppose it is." Markis could clearly see how one was preferable to the other. "So that is why Uly became a thief."

Ryanac agreed. "He had the talent already, but honed it due to need. Maybe he learned from someone else. He is a good pickpocket, even though you caught him. I have dared him to take things from the other guards and not one has caught him yet. Oh, don't worry." Ryanac laughed, looking at Markis's face. "I make sure I am there if one of them does. I promised to save him."

Markis shook his head slowly side to side. "Why are you encouraging him?"

"Because a good skill should be kept. You never know when it might come in handy."

"So you think Uly was treated like one of the whores you describe?" It might be best just to stay on topic, and it had crossed his mind once, though he had dismissed it. Then maybe he had confused the idea of force solely with rape. Perhaps there were other ways for someone to force you, especially if you were uncertain what you had agreed to. Ryanac nodded.

"Almost certainly." He turned his head, tilting it down a little, to meet Markis's gaze. He even leaned into him. "Markis, my friend. They fucked and chucked him. They didn't

care if they hurt him. As far as they were concerned, if they gave it any consideration at all, they had paid for the privilege of hurting him or not having to care. When he said he liked them, he probably believed that choosing someone he had an attraction for meant the experience would be different. The disappointment was just that. They all treated him the same way."

"Then that makes what I feel so many times worse."

A slight crease touched the space between Ryanac's eyes and then fled. His gaze moved from side to side as he searched for something in Markis's gaze. Though Markis didn't understand, he refused to look away. "This isn't the same thing at all. He wants you."

"I am Shavar. He thinks he owes me for taking him from the street."

Ryanac stood up abruptly. "You really believe that?" Markis nodded. "Then you are a fool. Shaylah!"

How dare Ryanac call him blind? Markis stood up. Despite the man being a friend, his jaw clenched and his hands fisted. He was Shavar. They trained him to be in control. To have such an insult aimed at him ... Shaylah -- one of their curse words. It could mean many things, but essentially, it meant blind. In this context, it meant one who could not or who refused to see.

"Don't waste your anger on me," Ryanac sneered.

"I could destroy you," Markis said quietly, not intending to do so, but reminding the other man only fools set out to annoy him.

"Well, that is the crux of it, isn't it? I am one of the few who truly not only believe you, but also know it to be true, and yet I have the balls to stand up to you. What would you do without me, you idiot? If I cannot tell you when you are behaving like a Simeon penis, then who can?"

Despite his annoyance, Markis's lips switched involuntarily, and Ryanac certainly saw it.

"Your problem isn't with what Uly wants, and you know it." Ryanac took a step closer, glancing at Markis's hands, and Markis unclenched his fists. "This is the Swithin way. Why do you have such a problem with it?"

"I don't, not in theory. I just never ..." Markis let his voice trail away.

"Are you afraid if you do I will take to chasing after you again?" The amusement was not only alive in the voice, but also in those dark eyes and the play of movement about the mouth.

"I was never afraid of you chasing me," Markis retorted.

"Only of my catching you."

"Not even that." He had expected Ryanac to disbelieve him, but he saw the surprise and then the acceptance in the other man's face. "I just had little time for it. For anyone."

"You feared it, you mean."

"That, too. I still do. I have more reason to fear it now than ever." They spoke of love, not sex.

"We all die, Markis. That doesn't mean we shouldn't grasp at the good things offered us along the way. If Uly knew you or he would die a week from today, do you think he would want nothing to do with you? The truth is he would want it more than ever."

"There are various ways to die. No one has ever managed to call up so much power."

"And if the talks fail, you may have to. I know this, remember. I have been there every step of the way at your side. You ask me for advice because you usually deem it wise. Trust me on this. If Uly had a last wish, you would be it. Not because you are Shavar or Swithin, or a noble or rich, but because of how you make him feel. That's what attraction is. You love someone for how you feel when you are with him or her, and you want to make him or her feel good, too. And don't even try to tell me you don't want to make Uly feel good."

A slight struggle began inside as though his heart waged war with his gut. Finally, the battle broke apart, and a small smile touched his lips. Before he could form words, let alone speak them, Ryanac's voice called his attention.

"I would give anything to be with you. It's part of how I feel for you. We are Swithin and it's how we live, but I don't need sex to love you. Neither does Uly. We both love you, but I am not what you need. Uly is what you have needed for so long he probably called out to you the moment you saw him, the moment you touched him. You brought him back to the castle because you wanted him here. Anything else you have to say on the subject is, as they say here, excrement."

Casting his mind back, Markis examined the memory. He had caught the thief and turned his head as the pickpocket let out a yelp, the cry high with pain, but the voice older than he had expected and those wide eyes shining with surprise as well as fear. The emaciated form had called out to his sensibilities and demanded he give the boy a good hot meal, but it wasn't the only reason he had brought him here. He had wanted to save Uly, but seeing the boy was in fact a good-looking young man, Markis had given in to the attraction. The rescue had to do with honour, but also something else. Underneath it all, he had wanted Uly here. Quite what he wanted to do with him at the time had remained unclear. All Markis could admit was he had wanted the young man's presence. He had brought a breath of fresh air to the castle and Markis's existence. If there had been any other reason, he had been unaware of it then and couldn't recall it, but now ... Now was another matter.

"I'm supposed to stay celibate."

Ryanac sighed and performed an exaggerated roll of his eyes. "Do we have to go through this again?"

Markis wanted to swear, but what was the point of pushing the issue and making Ryanac wade through dirty water. His friend would say the same thing he always did. He would have to listen to a long-winded speech of how the old fools wouldn't know how to

interpret a prophecy if it bit them. The power of the comet foreshadowed the end of war, but it might not be in the way they thought it meant. Many believed his power would destroy them all. Reading from the old books, Stargazer and the rest of his advisers insisted the only way to turn aside from this destiny was to deny himself in everything. If he had admitted to enjoying a good meal, they would have had him on bread and water by now.

Ryanac saw things differently. He believed the answer was to give in to love, to every blissful thing. He swallowed and met Ryanac's gaze. "If I go through with it, and I'm not saying I will, then I need to know how to go about this."

Ryanac threw back his head and laughed. Inner heat warmed Markis's face. "You've sampled both cracks. What do you need directions for?"

The use of coarse words wasn't an insult. Ryanac was just trying to goad him. Ryanac had the upper hand, and like always, he would enjoy it. Even as he blushed, Markis was aware Ryanac enjoyed the spectacle of it. "You know what I mean," he said quietly, patiently. He saw Ryanac's expression gradually change. It became a show of their friendship. Still, clearly Ryanac would make him say it.

"If I do this, I need to know. I need to know how to do this for him. I need to know how to take away every rotten thing that's ever tainted him."

"You're not what I'd call a bad lover."

"That's not the problem. I just need to be certain. Emotionally or physically, I refuse to cause him pain. I would rather leave things as they are, if it came to that. His desire isn't enough, if in answer all he receives is the same disappointment."

Chapter Twelve

Everything was dark. A jolt, a bolt of panic slammed through his chest and threatened to stop his heart. He turned his head left and right trying, fighting to see, and yet it didn't really feel like movement. He had no sense of his neck turning. It was more as though he gazed wildly around in the darkness without actually moving. He tried to lift up only to discover he couldn't.

He felt bound, though nothing tugged at his wrists or ankles. He arched his back, but could not feel the bed beneath him as he slammed back down. Truly, he didn't *slam* down. Something supported him, but he had more a sense of floating, of being weightless.

He tried to shout out for help, but something stilled his tongue. What was going on? This wasn't like the rush of power. Then, he lost sense of his body completely until they brought him back by the use of pain, but here ... here he had arms and legs, a head, and yes, a mouth and tongue. He just couldn't feel them.

"Awake at last." The voice murmured over his skin, first comforting him and then making him shiver as it rode the breath that carried it.

He tugged at whatever bound him, metaphysical or real, but all it did was make the warm voice give a soft laugh. The laugh both chilled and pleased him. Fingers brushed over his skin, and he gasped.

"Why are you fighting?"

He didn't know and still couldn't answer. He tried to recognise the voice, for he knew the speaker, but right now it was hard to identify reality, let alone if the speaker was male or female. Without that small knowledge, there was no way he could tell who.

"You know I won't hurt you."

How did he know if he couldn't identify the person behind the voice? Yet, he *felt* it. Though he tried to pull away, he had no sense of danger, no malice.

“You know I don’t claim you for myself, though I’d be happy to do so. You know I just want you to be loved the way you should be loved.”

Those words spoken so softly on a whisper struck some cord within him. The voice sounded definitely masculine, though it remained gentle. Ryanac?

He swallowed and this time received a genuine sense of movement. It felt as though he was in two places at once, but how could that be? Fighting never did any good, no matter what the seers had to say. You fought the power; it fought back. The person who he now believed to be Ryanac touched him, his hand caressing his shoulders. Ryanac’s hands had touched him before in many situations. He grimaced. How many of those occasions had been when he was injured? He didn’t want to think about it. These hands were Ryanac’s, and yet ... they weren’t.

The hands moved down over his chest and rather than draw in his stomach, he tried to lie still, to feel them. The touch shimmered, and the wave of heat behind the fingers was also familiar, but it did not belong to Ryanac. Why would the power ride him like this?

Fingers pinched a nipple, and he jerked. That voice made a sssshh sound. He tried to locate the speaker, but the sound came from all around, as it did when he rode the wave. There was no light here, though, and he was unused to that. There was no light, no scent, and no true sound, not even from his body. The touch of hands returned. They stroked his sides, his hips, brushing up to run thumbs over his nipples. Markis twisted, trying to escape the touch. A vague awareness came to him of lying entangled, wrapped in silk, and then he floated once more in this black abyss. The touch changed to the lick of a tongue, and Markis cried out, partly in consternation, partly in delight. He pulled his hips away from the exploration as the hands returned, but the movement only made the fingers brush against other things.

Particles opened, separated. He drifted. The sensation of being opened, explored, caressed, and invaded violated him by turns. The sweet opening of his mouth searched for promise. He wanted to kiss; he longed to suck. When nothing answered his silent plea, he cried out and heard his voice echo into distance, only to have it swallowed down by the darkness, by eternity.

“Wake up.”

Markis groaned. He had a vision of his skin splitting, separating. The cold of the grave was the only thing that could cool this heat. Maybe it would all be better if he just accepted that.

“Markis. It’s me. Markis!”

Yes, Ryanac. I knew it had to be you. You son of a bitch ...

The power expanded through him, opening him up, stretching him further than human skin could go.

“Wake up!”

Son of a wh-- What?

Markis opened his eyes and stared into the face leaning over him. He became aware suddenly of his room, his bed, and the silk sheets entangled around him. He opened his lips and breathed in welcome air, even as his heart eased off pounding, and his pulse slowed. The sight of Ryanac only in a tunic and breeches puzzled him at first, it being so strange to see the man out of full armour. Even when they shared a companionable evening, he seldom took more than his shoulder pads off. The man knelt beside him on the bed, his hands on his shoulders holding him down. As if reading his mind, Ryanac loosened his grip.

Markis swallowed. He didn't remember going to bed. The last thing he recalled ...

"How did I get here? What happened?"

"You were exhausted after the session. I put you to bed and thought I would stick around to see if you were okay. Good thing I did." Ryanac sounded rueful. "You were struggling in your sleep. You cried out my name." A soft smile played at the corners of Ryanac's mouth. "What were you doing? Dreaming of me?"

He watched Ryanac's eyes first search his face and then the look changed from one of teasing amusement to questioning. "I was only jok--"

With a small cry, Markis sat up, gathering the other man's face in his hands, his fingers sliding under the hair. He pressed their lips together in a firm pressure. Ryanac's resistance lasted only a moment, and it was probably caused by surprise more than anything else. Markis slipped his tongue into the warm cavern and drank in the sweetness of Ryanac's mouth.

By the time he drew back, he shook, cold again, but from a different type of power. "I can't," he whispered, lowering his face to his friend's chest. Ryanac's arms came around him, as he had known they would, no matter how many years it had been since the other man held him like this.

"I tell you, they are wrong."

He shook his head, the linen softly brushing against his cheek, the heat of the body beneath seeping into his face. "I can't take the risk."

"And if I'm right and they are wrong?"

He didn't want to think about that. "I don't know," he finally admitted.

"Well, you are going to have to make a decision one way or the other and sooner rather than later."

Markis sighed. Ryanac was right, of course, about the decision, anyway. Yet, what if he made the wrong choice?

"Lie down," Ryanac told him, and Markis complied. He slipped over onto his side, facing away, and Ryanac moved in against his back. It took him a moment to realise that only the thin linen of Ryanac's clothes separated them. His friend had slipped in under the sheet. They lay there in silence, and as the bed warmed, the distance between them closed.

“Do you remember the first time?” Ryanac’s gentle, warm teasing voice asked him.

How could he forget? They had barely been men. They had slipped away and crawled up the embankment separating his home from the next farmstead. Although Ryanac was the son of a farmer and Markis the son of a king, he had spent as much time running about and helping at the local farms as in the Swithin palace. He and Ryanac were fast friends and had been for over eight years by then. They had gotten into trouble together, grazed knees together, seen things no one else knew they had seen.

“Isn’t she beautiful?”

Markis had turned his head to look at his friend though he could see little of him by moonlight. “Is this what you do of a night? Peek at your neighbours.” Even in the dim light, he could see Ryanac shrug and grin.

“She likes to bathe with the lantern alight and no curtains drawn. Perhaps she knows or longs for someone to see.”

Markis turned his head to gaze back at the woman below. She indeed stripped as though for an audience. Sitting on the chair, she turned to place her feet in the large iron tub. It was the size of what they used as footbaths in the palace, but was probably all she had in which to bathe.

“She could kneel in it, I suppose.”

“What?”

“The tub. I was thinking about the size of the tub. She could kneel in it.”

Ryanac nudged him. “She does.”

Markis swallowed. The image of her kneeling in the tub, water streaming over her naked body while the flickering candlelight illuminated her curves, engulfed his mind. He shifted uncomfortably against the ground and heard Ryanac chuckle.

She used the sponge now to bathe her neck. It lowered towards her breasts. Markis lifted his head a little. Something about the moving shadows in the room ... Another figure came into view, and Markis turned his head to shoot an incredulous look at his friend. “Her man is home?”

Ryanac shrugged again. “Sometimes he is, sometimes he isn’t.”

Markis had visions of the farmer stringing him up or dragging him back to the king in disgrace. He shook his head and made to move, intending to slip back down the slope.

“No. Wait.”

He ignored the order until he heard Ryanac curse and his friend’s weight descended onto his back pressing him into the earth.

“Get off, will you!” He struggled. His friend’s voice in his ear growled for him to keep still.

"If you keep moving, they *will* see us. Don't be such a pain. You're going to be king one day."

"I don't want to be remembered as the king who was a leech and who looked in other people's windows!"

His remark only brought forth that annoying chuckle, but he relented and held still. Unless he closed his eyes, he had nowhere else to look, so turned his attention back to the cabin. The man was now as naked as his partner was. She sat, pale skin, rounded shoulders framing her full heavy breasts, her sides narrowing to her waist and then flaring out again to well-rounded hips. Child-bearing hips, some of the women would call them. Her stomach hung a little. No doubt, she had given birth already, but she was no less seductive for that. The man looked bronzed from working in the fields. His work defined his muscles. He moved towards the woman, and Markis frowned a little at the smile that spread over her face. It reached more than her mouth -- he could see that even from this distance. There appeared to be something a little ... wicked in it.

From their viewpoint, he could not see the man except from the rear, but the woman had reached out her hand, and the man had let his head fall back.

"Isn't he as beautiful? Aren't they just the most beautiful couple?"

Ryanac's words sent a small spike of consternation through him. He never understood why, but it always did when he heard his friend speak of another man that way. He tried not to let it show, but he must have tensed or something, for he heard Ryanac sigh.

"Now what? What's wrong with you?"

He shook his head in a dismissive gesture. He did not know.

"You always get like this."

"Like what?"

"Like I've said or done something wrong."

"No." No, it wasn't that ... exactly. Ryanac could admire both the male and female form; that was the way of the Swithin as a people.

"You don't find him at all beautiful?" Ryanac sounded perplexed, irritated, amused, and a few other things besides.

The man reached out and stroked the woman's face. The muscles in his arm bunched and flexed as he stroked her cheek. She nuzzled into his hand. She was all softness; he was hard. No better than one another, just different contrasts. He said so.

"And you don't want to try anything hard?" Ryanac gave that soft chuckle again, which had light and laughter, teasing, and darker things in it.

Markis gasped as his friend wriggled. The ground beneath them gave a little so that he could picture them sinking into it, until they were swallowed up by the earth. He involuntarily opened his legs, perhaps to lift up onto his hands and knees. His companion had other ideas. He forced Markis tighter to the ground with the press of his hips. An arm

slipped between Markis's face and the ground, so he had no choice but to rest his chin against the warm skin. His friend now lay completely along his back. "*She* likes it hard," he heard Ryanac whisper into his ear, and he looked once more to the cabin in time to see the woman go to her knees and take that hardness between her lips. Even as she sucked, as that long, rigid member slid to impossible depths in her throat, Ryanac pressed his length into Markis's rear. That hardness shouldn't have bothered him as much as it did. Leather separated them. Though this position was personal, it was not nearly as intimate as it could be.

"Leave off," Markis managed, but his voice sounded unsteady. The hardness pressed into him, and he expected to feel a similar response. That might happen in time, but something else was happening in the lower part of his body. The space between his legs felt strange, as though it was expanding, opening, or wished it could. He struggled a little, and the movement caused a thin line to open between his cheeks. Ryanac's heat and hardness slipped in. "Let me go," Markis insisted. "By order of Shavar, let me go."

Ryanac jerked, perhaps in surprise, to hear him use those words. They rarely spoke of Markis's future with any seriousness. The words worked though. He let up enough that Markis managed to crawl out from under him, and Ryanac did nothing to hold him there. He ran all the way back to the barn trying to hold back the tears.

How they lay now reminded him so much of that night. Turning a little so he could ease forward, he waited to see if Ryanac would stay on his side, or if he would follow. His body came with his, as though glued together. Turning this way, Markis had to slide his legs down the bed a little, straighten out so they no longer spooned, but one of Ryanac's legs had lifted to cover one of Markis's. He heard the familiar chuckle that he loved and hated so well.

"So you *do* remember," his friend said. Markis could see him grinning without having to look. Fingers brushed gently through his hair as they had that other night.

He hadn't wanted to stay in the barn that night with his friend, though that had been the plan. The house was crowded with children, and Ryanac often slept in the barn. It was peaceful. Markis often slept over to escape the confines of the palace. His father didn't mind, no one but locals knew, and he was at no risk from them. Markis almost sighed. His homeland had been largely open land back then. So many things had changed in so short a time.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Ryanac had said that night.

Markis had lain down to sleep, and Ryanac had left him in peace, but an hour later, he still couldn't sleep, and his friend must have sensed it.

"You didn't. I ..." How could he explain?

"You're cold."

He was, but it wasn't from the temperature. Ryanac moved away and conflicting emotions had confused him, disappointed as he was, and at the same time relieved. The idea his friend would stay on the other side of the stall in his own blanket when he lay upset had

irritated him. The other man had returned though and thrown the blanket over him, then snuggled beneath. Markis tensed and Ryanac hesitated, but it wasn't as though they had never huddled together for warmth. Naked or dressed, they had never made an issue of it. They lay silent for some time, a small space between them.

"I was teasing. I'm sorry. You just puzzle me." That warm voice whispered through the stable.

"I puzzle myself."

"Then why?" Fingers moved through the hair at the back of his neck, and Ryanac shifted closer. "Don't you ever want to know what it's like? Aren't you curious?"

Markis managed to laugh. "With you?"

"With anyone," Ryanac replied, but the pause had been too long. His friend was willing if he wanted to. That was not the basis of their friendship, but they were of consenting age and liked one another. No one of their race would find it peculiar.

"You're so much more experienced than me." Certainly, since coming of age, his friend had lost no time experimenting and trying different things, discovering what he liked. There didn't seem to be much of anything he *didn't* like. None of that bothered Markis, though. Maybe he was even a little jealous. Markis certainly had no qualms about loving someone. He just believed it happened when it happened and there was no point searching for love or sex. He also had different responsibilities than Ryanac.

He closed his eyes. Sometimes he just wanted to crawl under his pillow and forget what the future held.

"Markis." Ryanac's voice had whispered in his ear that night, incredibly gentle, full of concern. Markis opened his eyes to find he had rolled over onto his front and had his head cradled in his arms. Tears wet his eyes and face.

"I don't know what I want," he whispered. "I want everything and nothing."

There came a pause, and then Ryanac said, "You're not talking about sex."

He shook his head. Eerily, he had little doubt Ryanac was the one person who truly understood the weight he carried, even though he hadn't yet had a single lesson. His friend's body came down over his. This time no leather separated them. "You're still cold."

He was, and it certainly felt warmer lying like this on his front, warmer with his friend transferring heat at his back and the blankets keeping them snug. He shifted, meaning only to move, and heard Ryanac's breath catch in his throat.

"Don't move like that," Ryanac warned, but too late. Nothing could disguise the hardness growing against him. Ryanac moved to crawl off him, his movement apologetic. Markis shook his head. Ryanac hesitated and then lowered himself back into place.

The coldness, which had entered the space, evaporated as his warmth returned. A shiver ran through Markis, and Ryanac groaned at his back. Markis lay still, hardly daring to

breathe as fingers once more curled into his arm. Soft lips kissed the back of his neck. “You don’t know what I would give to be your first,” Ryanac whispered against his skin.

When he shivered this time, it was not from the cold. He grew hard against the blanket beneath; his balls grew in weight. Still his desire didn’t centre there. He yearned where he had never experienced that kind of longing before, as though a hidden part of him were seeking, opening. Without thinking, he wiggled under his friend, who began to kiss him, small pecks, licks, and nips at his skin. They made him shudder most at the back of his neck. Fingers brushed him, moving down his sides, sliding in around to play across his small, hardening nipples. He heard Ryanac sigh, and the sound was one he had never heard his friend make.

Those same fingers quested, searched, and explored him, finally teasing lightly where he had never been touched. That ring of muscle clenched, but a finger continued to stroke him there until he wanted it to do more. The fingers withdrew, and when they returned they were wet. Ryanac must have licked them. One finger penetrated, and a sound he tried to hold in escaped. He had bunched the blanket he lay on into great clumps in his hands. The touch tickled, teased, pushed in and out in a mockery of sex. He didn’t know how long this had gone on for, but he became aware of Ryanac adding a second finger. The feeling grew uncomfortable, but he gritted his teeth and it eased. It was different; it felt darker. His cock seemed to like it though; it was all he could do not to twist his hips and rub against the blanket. Only the image of what a lewd picture he would make kept him still.

A third finger made him gasp. He pulled back from the pain. Ryanac kissed the back of his neck. “Wait here,” he whispered, and then for a short time he went away. Markis missed the heat. His body throbbed in his friend’s absence; his heart, his cock, both had their very individual beat.

“Pity we haven’t more.” Laughter filled the voice, and it was possible to hear Ryanac grin. Something hard and slippery touched Markis, and he frowned. It took him a moment to realise Ryanac had greased his fingers. The only grease they had was butter meant for the bread. Ryanac’s mother had given them ale, slices of meat, bread, and a small pat of butter for supper. Ryanac must have scooped up the smears left in the butter dish.

He flinched, searching for a reason to make Ryanac stop, but the greased fingers had already slipped into him. It seemed too late and churlish to complain. When the head of Ryanac’s cock rubbed against him there, every muscle in his body tightened, almost went into spasm.

Relax, relax. If you don’t relax, it will hurt. He had enough sense for that, but still he had no way to hide his reaction. Ryanac eased off and just rubbed against him until he could breathe again. Sinking down onto his arms, Markis drew in soft, steady breaths. This time, an inch or two eased into him before the discomfort came. Ryanac backed off as though watching for every mark of tension that could possibly indicate this caused more pain than pleasure for him. Grateful as he was, now they had started this, Markis wanted him in.

When Ryanac backed off yet again, Markis shook his head. "Just do it."

"You're too tight."

"And that's not going to change. Just push, slow but steady." He didn't know if what he asked for was right, but it felt like what he wanted.

"We can do this another day when ..."

"If you say when we have more butter, I'm going to scream." He heard Ryanac chuckle. "I want you," he suddenly blurted out. "Don't stop. I want you. I want it to be you. I want it to be you."

He had. If he were ever going to have a man, he wanted Ryanac to be his first. With no second bidding, his friend did as he had asked and pushed his way home. When Ryanac finally began to move in earnest and whispered, "My Prince," into his ear, it was as though some part of him had died there and then.

"Ryanac, no." Now in the present, that same sweet pressure began, though they had better things than butter within reach. When had Ryanac taken off his clothes? Markis had dozed while reminiscing, but the hard line of pressure between his cheeks now brought him wide-awake. Ryanac rocked his hips, and his column of flesh rubbed against hidden things. To Markis's consternation, that part of him trembled and gasped, flexed towards his friend. They hadn't done this for years, but still it seemed that part of his body remembered him. Taking a breath and swallowing, he managed to say, "Ryanac, I can't."

"Hush. They said you could not have any release. They didn't say you couldn't have a little fun."

Markis almost groaned into his pillow. Ryanac lay along his back as he had that first time, and his friend had to know what it did to him, that it was the one sure way to undo him. That first time, there had been pain, but it had been no less sweet. Could he do this? The lower part of him certainly wanted to, yet it wasn't fair to either of them callously to dismiss his heart in all this. Perhaps Ryanac would be quick and he could come before Markis strove for his own release. If Ryanac made it quick ...

Who was he trying to fool? Ryanac would not be so forgiving. He opened his mouth to refuse when Ryanac dipped his head. His shadow and heat came down across Markis's back, and he kissed and nipped the back of his neck before whispering, "My Prince."

"Bastard," Markis replied. Ryanac laughed. Whatever he had greased his cock with, it slid inside him easily. Markis gasped. He was tight. It had been a long time, but his body felt so starved, so eager, if there was pain, he was numb to it. He shuddered, the penetration, the sensation of desire spreading out in tingling waves throughout his body. His cock wept.

"You remember that week?"

Markis gritted his teeth and nodded. He couldn't speak. Of course, he remembered. They would shortly leave for separate academies and might not see each other again. Having fucked him -- Markis liked that word after all -- Ryanac hadn't been about to sit back and let

the week pass without doing it again. They had done it twice the very first night, an event precipitated by Ryanac, when he had reached over and slipped two fingers into him.

"You're so open and wet," he had said, and he *had* been, stretched as he was and full of Ryanac's semen. The weight over his back had signified what was to come, but when his friend had drawn him back and made him present to him on all fours, Markis had trembled from other things than his physical need. The idea that in the early growing light Ryanac had to be able to see himself pushing in and pulling out ...

Here and now, his future self swallowed and shook his head. "I can't. I mustn't."

Ryanac pushing in and pulling out of him now in the present said, "You want to."

Markis threw his head back and moaned. "Fuck you."

"I wish you would, but I like this, too. There are many things I would like to do with you again. For old time's sake," he added and again came that chuckle, and Markis didn't have to look to see the evil grin that accompanied it. No, not evil -- just the grin that was all Ryanac, his best friend, maybe his only friend.

Back then, they had one week, and his friend hadn't wanted to waste precious time. He had shown him what two men together could do. He could still see Ryanac on his back in the position he liked, his head thrown back, eyes closed, breathing between gritted teeth, his hands and legs urging him on until Markis grew fearful of damaging him. The week had grown short. Duty dragged on. Markis had never wanted out of the palace so badly. He ran each day to the farm as soon as he could. Yet, there were still times he had to wait in the barn until Ryanac finished his chores and could come to him. If anyone knew what was going on, they gave them their peace.

At the end of the week, an hour before he was leaving, Ryanac had grinned at him. The same grin would be on his face now. He had told Markis to stay on his knees when Markis had made a move as though to get up and greet him. That was the first time he had tasted a man in his mouth and like a woman, it was different. Ryanac had gripped him, entwined fingers into his hair and held him where he wanted, and Markis, knowing they might never see each other again, had let him. In truth, he had hardly tasted a thing, so far down his throat had Ryanac pushed. Afterwards, his friend had kissed him. Their tongues had danced; they had eaten any traces from each other's mouths. That night the only truly bitter thing he had swallowed were any tears he might have shed. He then turned to his future duty. It had been more than six years before they had seen each other again.

"Just come," Markis hissed behind gritted teeth now. He burned inside because he fought this. If he gave in, it would be pleasure alone and pleasure would be his undoing. "Just come."

"No." If anything, Ryanac slowed his movements, but thrust deeper into him. Markis groaned and writhed. "You can let go."

He shook his head. "I can't."

"Yes. You can." Ryanac lay against him now, barely moving. A beat cramped him down there, and Markis blinked, realising he could feel his own pulse down below beating thorough that ring of muscle. It beat double. Maybe he could feel Ryanac's, too. His friend's weight cleared his head a little. "They are wrong."

"If they're not ..."

"You cannot go on like this. Wrong or not, what they are doing to you isn't working."

He wanted to argue with that, but couldn't. He had good reason to wonder if it had ever worked. The lessons, working with the seers and stargazers, had driven him to contact his friend. For too many years, they had not seen each other, and then Ryanac had come because he had called for him.

The note had been a simple one. Ryanac had told him of the summons into the main office, expecting some reprimand and wondering why, because for once he truly had not done anything wrong. The commander had given him a package. Inside it, Markis had placed a simple note. It read: *I need you, M.*

With it had been two envelopes. One had been a refusal. One had been a letter of acceptance and transfer. Ryanac told him it had been nice to know he had options, but he had said it with a twinkle in his eye.

"Call the power."

Markis shook his head.

"Let it come!"

He couldn't; he was afraid to. If they carried on like this, though, he might not have a choice. Until he claimed full control, the power could threaten him at any time and emotional extremes were a good catalyst. Ryanac rocked inside him while his cock slid back and forth against the silk sheet. His balls drew up into his body until Markis gritted his teeth so hard they creaked.

The first time Ryanac had seen him riding the power, Markis had been down on his knees and naked. They had wrapped thin leather straps many times around his wrists. They were almost better than chains. The more the captive struggled, the more they tightened. If not tied right, they could cut off circulation completely and threaten life and limb. He had been down on his knees because the power had driven him to them. He had been as curled into a ball as he could with feet and knees together, and his head forward only an inch or two above his knees. He could see his cock nestled in his lap. Not hard for once -- the power had rent him so much that day even his dick had relented. Usually it made him want to explode. His body wracked with pain from the power and the lashes, his arms were in agony because in this position they bent out and back. He had slumped in his bonds and those teaching him had done nothing to release or ease them.

In a moment of respite, Markis had heard the soft scrape of boots -- someone entering the room and walking towards him -- and he had forced his head up through a haze of pain.

Ryanac had stared back at him, not moving, looking every bit the captain of the guard that he, Markis, had just made him. He had spoken softly with the teacher in charge and had the man shoo the others away. Ryanac had released his bonds. Ryanac had picked him up and carried him up the back stairs, where no one would see them, to his room. The idea that Ryanac had already learned the layout of the palace had amazed him and made him giggle. The bright, answering look in his friend's eyes had made him afraid he had done the wrong thing. Since then the power had ridden him, but so had his friend, not sexually but with his nagging.

The old men, the wise ones and the seers who surrounded him, told him the best way to control the power was to cage it. Ryanac disagreed. Markis told him that was how they had always done such things. Ryanac told him if he had known Markis was going off to be tortured like this, he would never have left him. Markis tried explaining the power was what tortured him. Ryanac told him it was a gift, and gifts, like love, needed embracing. Finally, Markis had agreed that if in time what they had shown him was not working, he would relent. So far, he had managed to dodge his promise.

"Why did you make me captain of the guard?" Ryanac now asked him. Considering the position his 'captain' had him in, it felt a little unsettling.

"Because the old one was a fool and past his prime, and I had to retire him."

"And?"

Markis sighed, which eased the ache in his jaw. It also let other sensations flood in, and he whimpered, much to his chagrin. "Because I needed you," he said, after swallowing. "I needed a friend."

"Someone to trust."

He nodded.

"Then why won't you trust me?"

"I'm afraid to. You don't know how this feels. You don't know how easily I could lose control."

Ryanac snorted. Markis could have sworn the vibration ran right through the man to the tip of his penis where it quivered inside him. "Don't tell me I don't know what you're going through. I'm the one that's mopped up your piss and shit and your vomit."

He had. He had also wiped blood from his skin, sweat from his brow, kept others from bothering him when he had given in and slept for days at a time.

"You cannot go on like this. Just try. Call a little of the power. Let it in."

He didn't want to, but could no longer argue. He 'opened' up the part of him that called or contained the power -- he didn't know which and accepted he never might -- and it trickled in. Ryanac stilled for a moment, as though he felt it too, and then he kept moving. Something changed. The power ... hesitated, as though it didn't know this place, the person that called to it. Then it slid forward ... interested.

Markis frowned. He had expected ice. Instead, golden light coloured his vision. Markis turned his head to the side, aware he had laced his fingers with Ryanac's. He stared at their hands, joined, entwined, tight, gripping, and unforgiving. The power thrummed. "I could burn the skin from you."

He only knew he had spoken aloud when Ryanac faltered in his rhythm and said, "I'd rather you didn't." It made him laugh, and the power spread through him. "Sweet ..." Ryanac said and there had to be a curse word to complete the sentence, but if there was, Ryanac never uttered it. If this felt half as good to Ryanac as it did to him ... He wanted to send a little of the power into his friend, but feared to. For the first time in a long while, it acted benevolently, but it could turn all too quickly.

Ryanac gasped. "You're beautiful without this, but with this ... it's like seeing inside of you."

He could take that as meaning something beautiful or something gross. The horror behind the statement slid the power one way, but his laughter sent it flying the other. Markis gasped, writhed, clutched at the covers, at his friend, slid backwards down the bed impaling himself to the point of pain, testing both his and Ryanac's limits. He clawed skin and didn't know if it was his friend's or his own. He bit and tasted blood and didn't know to whom it belonged. He came, screaming, heard Ryanac swear in what had to be his release, and as his friend pumped into him, the power dispersed into the universe.

* * * * *

"Did I do that?" Markis stared at the claw marks on his friend's left arm. The bite he had inflicted on himself, the arm he had had under him. Ryanac finished spreading ointment on the scratches and grinned.

"I'm not complaining."

Markis gave him a look that meant too many things. Ryanac raised an eyebrow in question. Markis eased himself gently into the opposite seat for more than one reason. The look on the other man's face told him he knew what one of those reasons could be. Did he have to look so smug about it?

"Hey. You got laid and the world didn't end."

"No, but the power has changed. I don't believe it will be so easy next time."

"How do you know?"

"Because I can't use sex to control it." He looked to Ryanac's face. The eyes were a little wide, concerned. "Maybe the old ones were right, but just lousy at explaining it. Maybe the reason to avoid sex isn't that it will let the power get away from you, but that you might have to rely on it. I can hardly have you fuck me in the middle of a battle or peace negotiations. That will go down a treat on the table or in the midst of a field."

"Maybe it won't take sex. Maybe ..."

Now what harebrained idea would his friend come up with? "What?"

"Maybe affection will be enough."

"Affection."

"Of course, I mean Uly."

"What?"

"You see him as clean, untainted. Something uncontaminated."

Markis raised an eyebrow. "He's lived on the street. He's no seraph."

"No, but he's not been a part of your life. He's untainted by the dirt you foolishly surmise is stuck to your skin, visibly evident to anyone of our race who so much as glances at you. Our people are happy to use the power of the comet, but treat it like something dirty. They cheer and celebrate in the open, but don't want to be touched by the man wielding it. He can wave to a collective audience, but none want Shavar's eye directed at them personally. That is why you resist explaining this fully to Uly. You don't want to appear tainted in his eyes. As for how you view him, he's someone who can love you for who you are. Aside from me, he's the only one who can do that, and I'm too close to the dirt you have to wade in at times. Uly's a bright star you found wandering in the dirt of the city. He delights and amazes you, and he's someone you can love unconditionally."

Markis was surprised and startled by the idea that Ryanac could still surprise him to such a degree. The other man regarded him calmly. He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture as he began to speak. "Forget the seers. They are old fogies. From what you told me, the power dissipated when you laughed, turned dark when you got angry or had darker thoughts."

Markis nodded, reservedly.

"You've said some days when you're especially unhappy it's more difficult to call. Other times when it's riding you, your moods are volatile and unstable."

Again, he nodded.

"I think you need to be happier."

Markis closed his eyes. "That's daft," he protested.

"No. It isn't. You struggle daily with something no one else will understand. You have tried all the old ways, and maybe the seers are right, and they will work ... eventually. You don't have that time." He looked away. "I was going to say you don't have that luxury, but even if you like the lash, there's no fun in the way they are doing it."

Pain was something else they had tried in teaching the way of the comet. Ryanac was right. That hadn't helped him either. He stood up, winced as he did, and paced. Ryanac leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and might have looked as though he were trying to help if he hadn't been smiling.

When the silence spun out, Ryanac finally said, "You know how I feel about you. You know as well as I what we mean to each other. Nothing is ever going to change that. But Uly. Him, you're in love with."

Markis stopped pacing. It would belittle what they had if he tried to deny it, so he didn't. "It doesn't matter. I can't do anything about it."

"Of course you can. The universe won't fall apart, and even if we end up fighting hand to hand, then that's what we do."

He shook his head. "More will die that way."

"Then they'll die."

"How can you say it like that? When you know I might be able to stop it."

"Because you're one man and my friend, and I see what this is doing to you." He rose to his feet. Only a small space separated them. They stared at each other. "Try another way."

"Your way?"

"It's as good as any, yes. Just try another way, and if it works, fine. If it doesn't, then let go of it. If you carry on the way things are going, you will either destroy yourself or claim what is yours too late to use it. Both will achieve nothing, and I won't lose you for nothing."

Markis still shook his head. Training could take some up to twenty years before they were ready to take the place of the king. Markis was the oldest of his brothers, and thankfully, he happened to be the strongest. Of course, the council would prepare the other boys, in case the Shavar in training died, or the king died, and someone trained in the power had to take his place before his rightful time. Right now, all the candidates were younger, so Markis, by right, stood the next in line. The king had fallen ill some years ago and could no longer wield the power sufficiently. Despite his father holding the supreme title, the responsibility lay solely at Markis's feet already. "They have done it this way for centuries ..."

"A decade without sex, without release, unless it happens by accident. Great! I tell you it's like trying to make me stand in the corner by force rather than asking me. You would not be able to push me. You might be able to order me, but if I obeyed, it would be out of duty, and I wouldn't like it. If you asked me, I might do it just because you asked."

"Because you're a friend?"

The other man shrugged. "Why not?"

"You're talking like this power is my friend."

"Wouldn't you rather have it as a friend than an enemy? Besides, as far as the seers go, you've already broken their rules."

He couldn't help it; he smiled. "Whose fault is that?"

"Mine," Ryanac said and looked far too pleased and proud of it.

Chapter Thirteen

The hive of activity finally decreased in preparation for sleep. Uly watched the bright lights slowly extinguish. Soon the castle would rest. In the morning, a large garrison was riding out to the Azu plains for a gathering, something to do with politics. The pain of this, what a separation from Markis would feel like, had gripped his heart in a vice until Ryanac had told him he was going with them. The startling words had accompanied Ryanac's usual amusement. Laughing, he had sent Uly off to pack, with clear instructions how little he would need. Uly had learned how to pack saddlebags -- it had been one of Ryanac's lessons -- and later the large man had inspected his pack with wry approval.

Dinner had been a hurried affair, with Markis and Ryanac hardly speaking two words to him and then disappearing off on some errand. Retiring to his room, Uly had taken the time for a long, luxurious bath, for he was aware how men could smell after many days in a saddle, and he was in no hurry to smell the same way. He may have smelt worse once, but he had no desire to develop such an odour again. Unable to sleep and wearing only a night sidon, he had left his room and gone out on the parapet to watch the hustle and bustle of men getting ready for a journey. Now he wandered back into the castle, shivering slightly as the warmer air stroked him.

He experienced a strange combination of fear and excitement, though he had grown used to such feelings, as though most of his life had consisted of a combination of those emotions, at least since he had met Markis, sometimes even before. He didn't understand Swithin politics, but he knew enough to sense when Markis felt unhappy, and the man definitely had gloomy thoughts about the upcoming meeting. That was enough to set the rest of the castle on edge. During the last few days, Shavar's temper had burned with an extremely short fuse ... except with him. With Uly, Markis had been entirely gracious.

Entering his room, Uly stopped in surprise to see Ryanac there. The big man stared at the frame on the little round table. As though sensing Uly, he turned his head and gazed at him.

"There you are. I've been looking for you."

"I couldn't sleep and walked."

Ryanac raised one eyebrow. "In your night shift?"

Uly shrugged. "The Swithin people are hardly modest, and there is no one in these quarters this time of night."

For a moment, Ryanac looked nonplussed. Then he laughed. "Once you wouldn't have dared answer me, let alone be cheeky."

Uly flushed and glanced down. He couldn't help the slight smile that touched his lips, though. Somehow, he and Ryanac had formed a friendship of sorts. The large man now stared back at the framed drawing. "This is your mother?" Uly gave a sharp nod. "You told me she sold you."

Yes, he had done that one night over dinner when he and Ryanac had shared a meal alone. Questions about his childhood and an easy manner had loosened his tongue, and a few truths he would rather have kept hidden had slipped out before he knew. It would be useless to question Ryanac's intentions that night or to deny what he had said.

"Actually, it's my adoptive mother, the one who bought me because she couldn't have a child of her own. Alas, the desire never left her, and she died trying. She looked after me as well as any woman in her place could. My birth mother ... well, I don't know her reasons, but she sold me as many Simeon mothers do. They often cannot feed their children."

"They don't do it anymore."

Swithin law no longer allowed this, and now food kitchens were gradually opening up. The meals might not be fancy, but it helped the poor survive until they could get back on their feet.

"You weren't here then."

"So you think she sold you to save you?"

Uly shrugged again. "How do I know what she was thinking?" A hard edge had crept into his voice. Ryanac regarded him.

"Do you have love for her?"

"She was my mother." Those dark, glittering eyes continued to stare, asking more clearly than words. "I don't really feel anything one way or the other."

"For your birth mother or your adoptive one?"

"Either. Both."

"Then why keep the picture? You've looked after it well."

Uly had mentally asked the same question many times. The drawing was creased and the edges torn, but the frame disguised the worst of the damage. He walked towards the table now and gazed at it. With a shaky hand, he reached out and traced the rim of the frame. "Not many of my race can draw or bother to," he said. "I've often wondered who did it and when it was done, and I guess it's a link to the past. It's a person who wanted me, if only for a short time." He drew in an unsteady breath. "As for my real parents, from what little I can remember, they say my father gambled. He drank and owed money to many people." Owing money to people in this district often meant broken bones in payment. Ryanac would know that.

"It's possible your mother sold you before debt collectors could harm you."

Uly nodded. "If that were the case, then even if she couldn't be sure of my future, she at least tried to see I had one."

"Do you want us to try to find them?"

"No." The words left his lips almost too quickly. He looked up into Ryanac's eyes. "With the changes coming in the city, if either of them are alive, their lives will only get better. If they are dead, then I don't want to know how they may have died. How she may have died." He didn't have to say more. If his father had debts and failed to repay them, then it made sense they had found the mother waiting in place of her child. Slowly, Uly lay the picture down to rest upon its face. He had lost the desire for it.

"Sometimes I forget who you were when we found you." Ryanac studied him for some moments, but Uly did not look away. "Markis wants to see you. Run along to his suite."

Uly felt some surprise Markis would have time to spare for him this night, but was also very happy to answer the summons.

* * * * *

Markis was closing the shutters when Uly entered. He heard the young man's arrival, but did not look around. He had dismissed the servants for the night and made certain Ryanac was the last to see him, though the teasing gleam in the big man's eyes had done little as reassurance. Finally, as Ryanac was about to say goodnight and go to send Uly to him, his friend had clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. That single moment of intimacy was what he had needed. He was Shavar. It was ridiculous for his hands to shake, but shake they did.

"You took awhile to get here." He didn't mention it because of annoyance, just the need to speak.

"I was outside on the parapet. Ryanac only found me a few minutes ago."

Turning, Markis saw Uly wore his night sidon. At once, the young man became conscious of what he wore. His arms moved as though he desired to cover himself, but then

dangled back at his sides. Markis had chosen a black and gold robe. Ryanac had whistled and told him it brought out the colour of his eyes. Markis had growled in reply.

"Ber-- brandy," Markis managed, and Uly moved to pour the usual measure for him. "Get one for yourself, if you like." Markis leaned against the wall, feeling drunk already, uncertain the alcohol was wise. He had to move to the bed, but in relative terms, it suddenly stood several miles away. He had to move, though, before Uly finished his chore. Then the young man would bring the drink to him. He didn't know how else to manoeuvre Uly to the bed without looking awkward. Gritting his teeth, Markis pushed away from the wall and walked across the room. To his gratitude, he almost tripped only once.

Earlier, he had ordered the bed made up in blue satin, trying not to blush as he issued the command. Though the servants had moved to do as he asked without batting an eye, it had been impossible to shake the feeling they knew why.

Utterly, *utterly* ridiculous; he was Swithin. He had no reason to feel embarrassed, but the truth shone painfully clear. The embarrassment came not from his intent but his ineptitude. How do you know when you love someone? He had asked his mother that once, questioning at the time why his parents had chosen each other, and she had answered he would just know. He was young at the time, before he had understood that sometimes it was a monarch's duty to wed for something other than love. Still, a good sign, she had said, was if you cared more for someone else than you cared for yourself. Tonight Markis cared more for Uly's pleasure than his own.

Of course, the two should go mutually together, but if he fouled this up and got it wrong ... *Come on. For the sake of the comet. You are Shavar.* Taking a deep breath, he almost jumped when Uly approached him with the two glasses of Swithin brandy on the little silver tray.

The sight of those pale eyes shining brightly, searching his face, made the breath catch in his throat. "Is anything wrong?" Uly asked, a slight frown tightening his features for just a moment, and Markis shook his head. He cleared his throat.

"No. Nothing at all." Moving to sit on the bed, he watched Uly place the tray on the small table. He went to reach for the glass, but Uly, seeing his intent, handed it to him. Their fingers brushed as he took it. His heart tripped in his chest, but oddly, it helped him gain control. "Uly, if I ever asked you to steal for me, would you?"

He and Ryanac had discussed this, and it was worth considering. Those eyes opened wide and then glanced towards the bed where Markis patted the cover to indicate Uly should sit beside him. After only a slight hesitation the young man moved. They sipped brandy and sat quietly while Uly considered the question.

"Is it dependent on my being allowed to stay here or ... anything else?" The words slid off in a quiver at the end.

"By the stars, no!" Markis sat back in horror. Only now did he realise how it must appear to bring this up now, considering what he was about to do. "No! Uly, in the gathering

there are things I may have to do, and I may have need of your ... special talents, but I will not make you do anything, not anything without at least telling you what I can first of why. I wouldn't ask at all if I didn't need to. If they catch you, I will defend you. Besides, this won't be that kind of theft. I cannot tell you more now, and it may not even be necessary."

Still, Uly stared at his glass, with a slight frown. Equally startling, he had drained it. Markis took the empty glass, drained his own, and set both aside. "If you think it is necessary, then I will do it," Uly whispered when Markis turned back. "I'll do anything you ask."

The brandy had brought forth a yawn. It had truly been a long day. When Markis told him to lie down, Uly didn't think anything of it. Neither did he feel especially surprised when Markis lay down beside him. His whole body felt heavy, and the feathered mattress with the satin sheet both warmed and cooled him at the same time. It was easy to slide across to the other side of the bed, and he gave a passing thought to how it would feel to slide satin across bare skin. Markis wore silk. Did the silk slide against the satin or catch?

Opening his eyes in one of those moments when one fights between sleep and waking, Uly became aware the light in the room had reduced to a soft glow. He murmured something unintelligible, and Markis's hand pressed against his chest, not pushing, just sort of resting. When the back of his fingers brushed against the right side of his face, Uly's eyelids fluttered open, then closed. Markis's fingers were moving, brushing softly over his face, across his lips, to his neck and then out to his shoulders, small, circular, soothing movements that banished all worries.

"Do you like this?" The voice sounded very close and hushed, somewhat warm and sensual.

"Hmm, yes," Uly managed to murmur. The movement didn't cease, but continued moving down over his chest, though the muslin of the sidon now separated the heat of the hand from his skin. Uly drifted. He could think of nothing nicer than spending the night here next to Markis, before morning came and the outside world interfered again. A faint sound of something tearing and a slight pull on his body almost brought him awake, but though his eyes fluttered enough to see the hazy golden glow of light from somewhere off to the side of the room, they closed willingly. Markis's warm and amazingly gentle hands took up the rhythm again.

"Do you really want to sleep, my little thief?" This time the whispered words sounded right next to his ear. Uly opened his eyes, coming awake immediately. Though his limbs remained heavy, his other senses had returned. Cool air caressed his body, and though not so cool as to be unpleasant, it was a sharp contrast to the heat of Markis's hand. Glancing down the length of his body, Uly saw Markis had used the jewelled dagger to cut open the sidon. His eyes opened wide. He had heard the sound of something ripping, but had dismissed it as part of a dream. He should have felt more of a pull, surely, or the dagger had to be very

sharp. The sidon gaped, though Markis had only separated the fabric at his chest. His fingers moved in those slow, enticing circles over Uly's chest and stomach.

Moving his eyes slightly to the left, he met Markis's gaze. Shavar's eyes were bright and clear, intent. They were as dark as the chocolate Uly had come to love so well, though in that moment he could not love or want anything more than this. His pulse sped up. Surely, Markis could feel the thudding of his heart in his chest.

The hand moved now back up to his face to caress his cheeks, his jaw, and his lips and then moved to thread the fingers through his hair. It was longer now and with luck would grow more. He wanted it to be as long as Swithin men wore it.

"Do you know how sweet you look?" Markis asked, though it didn't really feel like a question. Every caress was light yet sent tingling messages to his brain, making his skin and other things dance and come alive. "You've wide, innocent eyes, and yet they have such desire in them. You wear your heart in your vision, Uly. I look into your eyes, and I can see what you want and hope for. I only wish I could give you the world."

He leaned in then, to kiss, and Uly almost pulled away, though he didn't know why. He wanted this, but fear lanced through him. He had learned the term 'unrequited love', from Ryanac, naturally, though he had the sense to judge the man had been teasing. Still, perhaps his heart would prefer that. The kiss lingered without intrusion, a press of lips, a soft slide, and the lightest lick of a tongue. Markis seemed to seek permission, and in the resulting confusion, Uly turned his mind to other things. Markis's hand had moved back to caressing his chest. Now it slid down the central line of his stomach. A finger dipped into his navel and traced it in a gentle, caressing circle. Uly couldn't help it. He gasped and opened his mouth, and Markis snaked his tongue inside.

Uly arched as a bolt of desire lanced through him, spreading across his chest and spiking down to his testicles so they tried to crawl up inside his body. At the same time, fearing Markis would draw back, he clutched at the man above him, tangling his fingers into the long hair that for once Markis had left out of the braid. Uly sucked on the mouth pressed to his, moaned aloud, pressed their lips together harder, thrust his own tongue up to meet the other's onslaught, not sure if he did it right or merely appeared desperate. He cared neither way. For a few seconds his instinct rode him and he let it. Only when he became aware he arched and writhed against the other man did Uly let doubt pull him back from the pleasure.

It was almost as though Markis sensed his withdrawal. He pulled back slightly, but his hands moved confidently, tugging the right sleeve of the sidon down Uly's right arm and off, so he now wore the garment only on one arm and trapped under him. Then Shavar's silk robe parted and Markis dragged it off. It slid off his body as naturally as a snake shedding its skin. That warm body covered his and gathered him up into its arms. Vaguely, he came aware that the man tugged the sidon off him and pulled it out from beneath. The soft,

smooth satin of the bed cover warmed his back, and Markis's body warmed him from the top. From inside came a different heat, a burning insistent need.

"Sssh, calm down, Uly." Markis's warm gentle voice urged, but Uly shook his head, tears threatening. Despite his fears, Markis had to realise he wanted this. Almost as though he had read his mind, Markis's hand returned to stroking him. The voice next to his ear seemed to speak directly in his mind when he said, "Calm down. We have as long as we want. All night, if need be. I won't do anything you don't want, but I want to make love to you." The kiss was gentle, not even an exploration. Drawing back, Markis murmured against his lips. "If you want me. If you'll have me."

Was he joking? He wanted to run his hands over Markis's hard body, he wanted his lips to follow, but Uly held back, aware Markis tried to tell him something. His questions weren't just questions. Swallowing, Uly let Markis hold him and considered. Before, it had always been hurried. It had hurt, and he had taken no enjoyment from it, had been unable to. He wanted and needed tonight to be different. Markis's lips pressed gently against his and giving himself up to Shavar's embrace, Uly let Markis lead him.

The fire barely held in check beneath him threatened to engulf them both for a moment and it had taken all of his will as Shavar to pull back. If he hadn't, Markis would have taken the younger man roughly, without compassion. That was fine between experienced and knowing lovers, but not for Uly's first time, and it *was* Uly's first time as far as Markis was concerned. What had happened out on the street lay in the past. He had buried it, and the time had come for Uly to do so, too. Still, those desperate, clutching hands had sent any hesitation on his part into retreat and allowed lust to spike through him. The feeling was physical; a hard jolt of pleasure-pain, and his semi-tumescent cock had grown rigid. He kept his hips still now, afraid the sudden touch of his rock-hard dick even against Uly's hip would invoke fear. Instead, Markis turned his attention to more kisses, moving slowly out from the mouth to nibble across the neck and shoulders. Their bodies touched, but the contact was light, almost accidental caresses. For a brief moment, Uly twisted beneath him as though fighting the pleasure, but then he calmed. Glancing down into that sweet face, Markis could see what the other man was suffering. He suffered it, too -- the underlying urgency he had to deny. He sent it into retreat along with his doubts, taking control of his body before his needs ungoverned his mind.

Moving down from Uly's neck, he followed the trail of his touch with his kisses. Taking the small right nipple into his mouth, Markis first pressed against it with his tongue. Uly's response was to jump and twitch, fling back his head, his eyes opening wide in shock. Immediately, Markis swirled his tongue completely around the aureole, then sucked. Uly closed his eyes and groaned, the arch of his body coming back down and almost reversing as he pressed his spine into the mattress.

"Want me to do that to the other one?" Markis whispered, and Uly looked at him with such a mixed expression of pain, desire, frustration, and even a little bit of annoyance, he had to chuckle. Dipping his head, he paid attention to the left nipple, and Uly hissed in his next breath.

"Again, again," Uly muttered though Markis doubted Uly was even aware he had spoken. Still, he was happy to oblige. He repeated the gesture a couple more times until Uly writhed so much he threatened to pitch them both from the bed. Then Markis slid down, taking his tongue across the ribs and down the stomach, then dancing it inside and around Uly's navel. Uly shook in his arms as if he shivered, though neither they nor the room had grown cold.

With the lightest touch, Markis stroked Uly's thighs while he licked and nipped at his stomach. Having slid down the bed, he didn't have to worry about Uly encountering his erection. Unable to help it, he rocked his hips a little against the bed, the feel of his cock trapped between the varying warmth of the satin and his body creating a delicious sensation. It took all he had not to groan aloud. Pulling his attention back to Uly and the more important task, he stroked up the inside of Uly's right thigh, only moving outwards toward the hip as he reached the top. Uly wriggled, his hands clutching at the coverlet as though he didn't know what to hold onto.

Markis couldn't help it. He allowed himself a small smile. When his hand next stroked upwards, he cupped Uly's testicles in a gentle caress, massaging them. Uly opened his eyes, but his gaze appeared unfocused, sightless. Still, Markis watched him for any signs of fear or discomfort. By the time he moved his fingers in the lightest touch to the cock, Uly had closed his eyes once again and tugged on his lower lip with his teeth. A small frown had appeared between his brows, and he turned his head as though trying to bury into the coverlet. Markis bit slightly at his own lip. He had to make a decision. He wanted Uly to feel so swept up in pleasure he couldn't possibly feel any pain by the time he took him. Part of that, and part of Markis's desire, was to take Uly in his mouth. The trouble with that plan was Markis had no doubt he had never experienced the sensation. It could be too abrupt, or he might even suffer foolish embarrassment. Desperate to taste cock, still Markis choked back his own needs. He meant to take it slow.

He almost laughed. What would Uly think of him if he knew? Shavar had no room in their life for love until they married, and often not even then -- the marriage being one of convenience. As for pleasure, until he mastered the power, he should have remained celibate. A decade without even a solitary hand ... well, Ryanac was right in that it had done nothing for his temper. He had slept with few women before he began full training and never had time for any man other than Ryanac. Not because the idea didn't entertain him, but because if he had chosen any man before this day, in truth he had only ever desired his friend, and Markis had never felt entirely comfortable about where that level of affection might lead. Despite his affection for Ryanac, Markis was Shavar. One day he would be king. In the bedroom, Ryanac would forget that. If Ryanac could have been even a little

compliant, he might well have given in to his friend's arguments long before now. Even flat on his back, Ryanac wasn't compliant. Markis rubbed his fingers across his forehead. Such thoughts were unfair. Ryanac was just the way nature and life had made him. They were equals, and Markis wouldn't want him any other way. The training, not Ryanac's attitude, had caused his reluctance -- that small part of him that said he could not let up for a second, for necessity had trained him to exert control. Then Uly had entered his life, and Markis had wanted him as a petulant child wanted an animal. He had sulked, lost that control, and opened his heart to his friend. Now, only his concerns seemed childish. Now, the only thing Markis feared was to see fright in the younger man's eyes. With this in mind, he dipped his head to kiss and lick Uly's thighs, gradually moving in until his tongue pressed against those youthful testicles.

Again, Markis wanted to giggle. Strange, how he knew the right way to do this. True, he was a man and that helped, and he had tasted a few women, but his experience with Ryanac was limited. What he did now had more to do with instinct. That one time he had let Ryanac have his way in this lay so many years in the past, and Ryanac had come so far down his throat, he struggled to remember the taste or if there had been any. Seeking advice, Ryanac had told him semen didn't taste as wonderful as people often said; the sheer sensuality of the act counted more. Now, Markis understood what he meant as he moved his tongue from Uly's sac to the base of his cock. Already hard, Uly's member twitched in response, and Uly cried out, a meaningless shout but more eloquent than most conversations, and even before the cry faded, Markis swept his tongue up the back of Uly's cock to the head. The cock twitched, and both it and Uly's hips pushed up involuntary towards his mouth.

It would be nice to have Uly come in his mouth so he could truly taste him, but with consideration, it might not be the best thing tonight. Uly would be spent; he would have to take time to arouse him again, and if Uly desired sleep afterward, it wouldn't be fair. He had to wrap Uly in absolute need for this to work the way he wanted. In which case, the first drops of moisture leaking from the tip of Uly's cock would have to do. Gathering the drops on his tongue, Markis then licked his lips. Pursing his lips over the smooth glans, Markis glanced up the length of Uly's body just once, seeing Uly's eyelids flutter as though his eyes had rolled up into his head, before plunging down over the head of his cock and taking it into his mouth. A spurt of surprise shot through him even as he did, for as he tried to take as much of Uly's length as he could without gagging, he finally noticed just how long and thick Uly's cock was. Maybe it was not quite as long and thick as his, but certainly long enough. He pulled back as the first reflex tightened his throat. Soft pubic curls brushed against his lips and chin as he did. Grinning, Markis choose to work on the head awhile before he did that again.

Chapter Fourteen

Uly had known people did these things, but he had never tasted a woman, let alone a man. Only one of three men he had gone with had wanted him to use his mouth, and when Uly had refused, the stranger had been disgruntled but not much put out. The encounters were rough and crude, speedy and over too soon and yet ... not soon enough. This was entirely different. Already they had spent more time making love than Uly had spent in an entire fuck.

Markis ran his tongue slowly around the ridge of Uly's cock until the younger man could no longer focus. He blinked, yet didn't seem able to see straight. The word, "No," hissed out from between his teeth, and at once Markis paused. Unsure if he wanted Markis to stop or continue, all he could do was whimper. In answer, Markis slipped him back into his mouth and slid his firm lips around the shaft in a very slow glide. The heat engulfed his cock a fraction at a time. Sparks of light went off behind his eyes. Every nerve in his body tightened.

As Markis withdrew, the chill of the night air where his cock was left wet by Markis's mouth, created a different sensation. Blinking to clear his vision, Uly glanced down, shocked by the expression on Shavar's face. A smile danced around his lips even as he drew the head of Uly's cock back between them. The light in his eyes danced equally. Shavar looked pleased, maybe a little victorious, certainly altogether happy. Markis's head started to move in a rhythmic motion and with every sweep up or down, an even sweeter tightening gripped him. Uly recognised it as drawing to the moment before he would come, but it had never felt like this. Before, even using his hand, it had been quick and urgent, almost as though a rush to get things over with; this was long and drawn out, Markis spinning out one sensation on top of another, one wave cresting over another.

Even as Uly started to struggle against the tide, Markis eased off. Sliding up the length of the bed at his side, he pulled Uly into his arms, brushed the hair back from his face, kissed

his eyes, his forehead, his nose, his lips. Not only could Uly taste his own salt on those lips, for the first time, the other man's cock nudged his hip. It burned hot and rigid. "I want to be inside you, Uly," Markis whispered between kisses, "but only if you want me."

Knowing his cock wept and twitched, seeking attention, various degrees of protest scuffled inside Uly. Part of him wanted to say yes, but it seemed as if his emotions split him three ways. Part of him wanted to be back inside Markis's mouth and part feared pain. Either way, the two parts warred against the third, the ultimate desire to have Markis claim him. If he refused, he lacked the courage to ask to be back inside the man's mouth. Surely, he didn't even have the right to contemplate spilling inside Markis's mouth. Markis was Shavar. That he had taken Uly into his mouth at all seemed unreal, imaginary.

Even as he sought his way through the various protests, once more Markis replied to his anxiety without his asking. He reached out and stroked Uly's cock, pumping it just enough to make Uly clench his teeth. "The more aroused you are, the less you will sense any pain." The hot breath as he spoke made Uly shiver. Under Markis's gentle, guiding hand, Uly rolled onto his side and then onto his front. The knowing fingers stroked and massaged every inch of skin they touched.

The man's mouth, no longer able to kiss Uly's lips, kissed the side of his face instead, then the back of his ear and neck, his shoulder, and then trailed a tongue down his spine. Then Markis rose up and came over him, and the sudden weight caused two reactions: one, for a flood of desire to make him pump his hips and so rub his cock against the smooth satin cover, and two, for panic to ride the desire close behind. Markis at once eased back. His hands pressed gently down, pulling Uly's hips still. The movement also put some space between them and eased the panic.

Uly closed his eyes. This was Markis. The man had given him a choice. He could say no. He had promised not to do anything Uly didn't want to do. He tried to believe it, for he wanted this. The hands stroked his back and hips. Markis lowered his head and kissed his neck. Uly sank into the cover.

The panic had driven back his need, but immediately Markis began to rebuild it. His hands moved in smaller and smaller circles across Uly's back, over his hips, and finally across his butt. Feeling someone else touch him there made Uly squirm. The feeling was not unpleasant; it even relaxed him as well as aroused him. Still, he had expected a hard and fast grip, and this sensation was altogether new. When Markis slipped his hand down between Uly's open legs, he gasped to feel the sensitive spot between his balls and backside stroked. Even as he did this, Markis pressed his tongue into the dip just at the top of Uly's buttocks. Then he went back to stroking and massaging. It felt so good that Uly was awash with the sensation only for a moment before he realised that with each pull, Markis gradually but increasingly opened him. The cool air raced in to tease the gap. Heat alternating with cooler air kissed his body's entrance.

Uly released a small cry he hadn't known he had been holding until he heard it. Though Markis didn't stop what he was doing, he eased up. "You can say no," that soft quiet voice said. "I meant it when I said it. I will make sure this doesn't hurt, but we don't have to do it now if you don't want to. We can do it another time."

Another time. That meant Markis wanted there to be another time. The question remained of what Uly wanted, and though he could have given an immediate answer, it wasn't so simple. He wanted Markis, but he didn't want it to be like all the other times. He didn't want to be lost in pain and then discarded. But Markis would not discard him. He believed that now. Even if there were pain, Markis would not throw him from the bed, from the room afterwards. If it hurt, he had to trust Markis would stop. The hands roamed. So did Markis's lips. Uly sank into the satin and gave up to the sensation completely.

By the shifting of light and by the feeling of heat, he became aware Markis had moved up over him. Taking steady and deep breaths, Uly fought any panic. He refused to let his fear rob him of this moment. Markis's touch remained tender and patient. It seemed a wonder that such an important man would take such time over a street brat's needs. Still he tensed, though he hated himself for it immediately. Even as Markis paused, he moved, instinctively pressing back so that his cheeks touched the hot, hard cock. He had to let Markis know he wanted him. A soft sound escaped him, almost a plea.

The pressure increased. Markis not only rubbed him with his hands now, but also with his cock. As he did, Uly opened his legs, and the head of Markis's cock brushed against that small entrance by accident. Even though it was no one's fault and he could tell it was not yet Markis's intent, he jerked, and then he jerked again. The first time was from shock and a little fear. The second came from need as fingers gently stroked him back there. They touched like a kiss, not trying to penetrate. Uly leaned back towards him, seeking something more.

"We need help," he heard Markis say, the voice laced with warmth and amusement. Aware Markis reached for a small glass bowl beside the bed, he still gasped a little as Markis sat back and something warm and slippery poured into his crack. Markis had to be holding the bowl in his left hand, for with his right he stroked the oil into Uly's skin, separating the cheeks with his right thumb. More oil came down, and the fingers slipped and slid without meeting resistance. As Markis leaned forward to set the bowl down, the oil dripped down to coat Uly's balls, and then trickled around to the base of his cock. He gave a passing thought to whether it would ruin the cover and then lost the ridiculous concern as Markis's thumb penetrated.

The breach was only slight and only for an instant, but almost immediately a finger replaced the thumb, eased in, and teased his entrance. The oil and the small penetration caused no pain. When the expected pain failed to materialise, Uly thrust against the cover on instinct alone, rubbing his cock against the satin and pushing the finger deeper into him. Markis allowed this for a few strokes, and then the left hand came down and caught his hip, holding him in place. Markis taking hold of him this time failed to frighten him. He trusted

Markis's intent, and when the finger withdrew only to be replaced by a slightly thicker penetration, Uly bit at his lip, not in fear, but delight that Markis was taking the time to stretch him. By the time Markis moved over him, he couldn't be sure how many fingers fucked him.

The tip of Markis's cock touched him, and Uly almost jolted back onto it in response. Only those strong hands holding onto his hips stopped him. Just as well. If they hadn't, he would have caused himself pain. His breathing had quickened and rasped in his throat. He had tensed, but could not help it. Yet even as Markis left his cock pressing against Uly's entrance, his hands took to caressing the younger man again. Uly concentrated on his ragged breathing until it eased. The head of Markis's cock pushed into him just as he thought he might be able to take it.

He expected a hard, sharp thrust and to be speared with pain. It didn't happen. Instead, Markis withdrew and then pushed forward again. A slight ache started to spread in the midst of the pleasure, but he had already pulled back. Uly had no idea how long this went on. It could only have been a few minutes, or surely he would have come, but it could have been hours. Markis pushed in to a comfortable depth and would stay there for another two or three thrusts, and then he would get a little deeper only to pull out again to the lesser depth. As soon as Uly squirmed for more, he gave it, moving in a little more each time and staying there, teasing only so deep for a few seconds before trying again. The one time Uly did feel a short spike of pain, Markis seemed aware of it and stroked him. That soft whispering voice told him to push out, assured him his body would open. At such gentle instruction, Uly almost longed for pain. He wanted to push backward, to have Markis inside him at any cost, but he forced himself to hold back. Concentrating, doing what Markis told him, he was lost to what they were doing until Markis came down over him. He held his weight off a little but still touching enough so Uly could feel him press against his length. As Markis started to thrust -- small short movements at first, expanding into deeper, longer, and harder strokes as Uly began to writhe back seeking him -- the younger man almost laughed.

Any discomfort he could only call slight; it certainly wasn't pain. Even then, when Markis thrust too hard, no doubt lost to personal needs, the bombardment of sensation on his nerves changed. Somehow, even some pain felt welcome. In what part of his mind still functioned, Uly wanted to thank the stars for the difference a caring lover had made.

He gave up thinking or caring, rode only the feelings, wave upon wave of sensation building until his entire body pulsated with arousal and need. *Please please please*. Only vaguely did he realise he had spoken aloud. His cock tensed in response. His balls began that familiar tightening to his final release. Even as he ached for it, had to wonder how he had held on for so long, he wanted to wait. He wanted Markis to claim him, take all of him first. In that moment, he heard Markis speak in his ear.

"My little thief," Markis ground out through what sounded like gritted teeth, and at the same time, the older man's body went tense. The feel of hot seed pumping into him triggered his body to orgasm. Uly bucked so hard, he almost lifted Markis's weight. Somewhere in the

back of his mind, he was aware only that Shavar's greater strength held him against the bed. He convulsed, gritting his teeth so as not to bite his tongue.

The release called to something else inside him. As the tension flooded away, so did his hold on the waking world. Though Uly fought it, sleep swept in to take its claim. He wanted to stay awake, to look into Markis's eyes, but his body would have none of it. The last thing he knew for sure was Markis pulling the covers around him. Markis's lips placed a kiss against his forehead, he might have heard the words 'My little thief' again, and then Uly knew nothing.

Chapter Fifteen

It was all Uly could do to stay in the saddle. If it were not for Markis's occasional glances and the warmth he could see in those eyes, he might have believed the events of the previous night a dream. Even when he had opened his eyes and found himself in Markis's arms, those brown eyes twinkling, a smile on the man's lips, he still felt like pinching himself to test reality.

However, if he needed a witness, then Ryanac's knowing grin over breakfast had brought the flush to his face. Markis had frowned, but Ryanac hardly looked repentant. Clearly, the other man had known why Markis had called Uly to his suite.

It would take two days riding to reach the Azu plains, and they would not camp until dark. Though the pace seemed slow to conserve the horse's strength, Uly already shifted uneasily in his seat.

"A fuck up the arse is gentle compared to a day in the saddle, is it not?" Ryanac chuckled.

Markis flashed Ryanac a dark look, but the larger man only grinned. Not wishing to be meek, Uly said, "Once upon a time I wouldn't have agreed, but then last night was the first time I've ever had a fuck so good." The moment he said it and saw the look of surprise come over both men, he regretted the words. What if Markis didn't find it funny?

Slowly a smile crept over Markis's face. "Funny that, my little thief. Last night was the first good fuck for you, and the first time I've had a man besides Ryanac." Both men burst out laughing at the expression on Uly's face. He couldn't tell what it looked like, but it felt peculiar even to him. He frowned and then tried to settle his features into some sort of order.

"He's not kidding," Ryanac said.

"Seriously," Markis muttered, moving his horse a little closer. The three of them rode in the middle of the convoy, but no one crowded so close they could hear what they were

saying. Those dark, bright eyes regarded him. "So you see, the only plan I had for you last night is that I wanted it to feel good for both of us."

The idea Shavar had wanted to make it good for him ... Emotion swelled up within him and spread throughout his body. He almost shivered, but would not allow it to show, not that way. He didn't want Markis to take it for a shudder of revulsion when it was anything but.

* * * * *

By the time they set up camp, Uly could barely keep his eyes open. He managed to eat and then fell asleep on the ground. Tonight's camp would be rough. He woke one time to find Ryanac massaging the knots in his lower back and legs. He gave a soft cry of complaint at both the pain and the fact Ryanac and not Markis touched him.

"Lie quiet. I am here because Markis told me to check on you. This isn't sexual. If I were having sex with you, you would know it. This is about you surviving another day in the saddle."

As Ryanac's hands found a particularly stubborn knot, Uly had to agree -- this had nothing to do with sex. He pulled a face, which only made Ryanac laugh. It also made him redouble his efforts until Uly moaned and squirmed in his hands. Gradually though, he began to feel some relief. Sleep even tugged at the edge of his senses.

"Would sex with me be so offensive?" Ryanac's question made him open his eyes again. Uly glanced at the other man in disbelief. The answer he received was one of those chuckles. "Relax. I am teasing. Not that I wouldn't be interested and would love it if you would consider a threesome one day, but right now I know you're swept up in love. Both of you are. Oh, it surprises you, does it?" Ryanac added, looking into Uly's wide-open eyes. He leaned down and spoke right beside his face. "He's taken with you, you dolt. Shaylah, the pair of you as blind as can be. Lucky for both of you, I have eyes to see."

The next morning he saw Markis only once, early as they were starting out. He reined in beside him and waited for Uly to turn his head and look. "We pitch a much better camp this evening. Tonight you spend in my tent. I will finish what I started yesterday." There was nothing to show in his expression, but he winked and then with a click of his tongue galloped off down the procession.

Finish what he had started. Uly swallowed. Markis meant to take him in his mouth and this time, make him come with his lips and tongue.

* * * * *

"Neutral terrain?" Ryanac sounded like wry sarcasm personified.

"It's open. We can see each other coming."

Ryanac's eyes turned upwards. Uly took his gaze off the other man's face and followed suit. He might not know much of politics, but he understood the feeling. The Azu plain was a flat, wide-open expanse of hard grey ground with the odd, low-lying dry shrub not even big enough for a child to hide behind. A high ridge overshadowed this, at the top of which many castle-like structures rose up like jagged teeth. For the first time, Uly connected the Azu plains with the name Azulite, though it made him feel stupid for it not to have crossed his mind sooner. Aside from the Swithin, the Azulite were the second dominating force on the planet. A war between the two races would decimate most of the land and its inhabitants. He turned his head to the two men on his right.

"Are you here to discuss treaties or something?" The two men glanced at one another and then looked towards him. Uly refused to look away. "You *are* talking peace?" They had to be. They couldn't be here to discuss anything else. When the two men failed to answer, Uly couldn't keep the fear and anger from his voice, though he had the sense to keep his voice low. "Do you know what a war between you two would do to this world?"

"Hush, Uly." Markis's voice was so low he could only just hear it. Shavar spared him a glance. "Not now. Not here." He turned his horse away and Ryanac followed. Taking a last look at the ridge, Uly urged his mount after them.

* * * * *

Camp pitched without Uly's help. When he finally located Markis's tent, it stood erect, its floor lined with tarpaulin, on which sat a raised platform to serve as both a seating area and a bed, with a feather pad for a mattress and satin sheets. Though by a prince's standards it was shabby, it was far better than most would sleep in tonight. The men would not allow him less, though it was the most Markis would let them prepare. He was a strange prince in many eyes, but well respected for it just the same. Within Uly, a strange pride swelled when he set eyes on their quarters, and not just because he loved Markis. As Shavar, he was a good man.

A guard stepped to the side, and when Uly just stood there, he received a slightly puzzled look. Trying to interpret the look, Uly took a hesitant step forward. When no one made a move to stop him, he crossed the opening and went deeper into the tent. Apparently, they had expected him. Seeing no second bed, his gaze wandered over the floor. Did the men know he would share Markis's bed, or did they think he would sleep on the ground? He chewed slightly on his lower lip and considered that he really had to stop doing that.

Dropping his things, he went back outside to look around and to see if he could locate Markis or Ryanac.

He found them easily enough, having come across a part of the camp where the bustle was muted. Off to the right a fire burned, and he headed in this direction. No one stopped him, but he received some strange looks, though all of the guard recognised him by now. The fire burned low on the ground, and around this, a circular area had been marked off. Seeing

Markis and Ryanac in the circle, he went to step forward, but one of the other guards caught his arm and tugged him close to his side and slightly behind. Surprised and worried, he glanced at the guard, but the man kept his eyes on the circle. Uly strained to hear.

"Thou shalt say all the sweet entreaties that spring to mind. We have the ear of our princess, and until we consider your commission wise, the encounter needs must be delayed."

An older man was speaking. He stood out in his grey and blue robes against the men that flanked him who were dressed for battle. Clearly, he was their spokesman. Uly pulled a face. Did they all speak like that?

Markis inclined his head ever so slightly in acknowledgement. "Nothing I can say will alter this course?" It seemed a perfunctory question at best. The other emissary inclined his head, this time a little to the side, as though in regret. "Then I concede this cycle."

A slight murmur ran through the assembly but quickly faded. The other man widened his eyes in what had to be surprise, but then quickly tried to hide it. Markis began to bow, and the emissary hesitantly followed suit. Both parties backed out of the circle and then dispersed.

Markis caught Uly's gaze, and he fell into step with him all the way back to the tent with a silent Ryanac. Once inside, Ryanac had something to say. "Do you think that was wise?"

Markis, pulling off his gloves, sneered. "I will not waste time on preliminary bantering just because they like it. As it is, I have done little harm. They've won a cycle they would have won anyway by sheer stubbornness, and I've unsettled them to boot."

Ryanac looked unhappy, but conceded. "What's a cycle?" Uly asked. Markis glanced at him.

"In these discussions each point of order is a round or, as they call it, a cycle. Win the argument, win the cycle."

"And what? The one with the most cycles wins?"

"Something like that. Yes."

"That's stupid."

Markis smiled. "I'm glad you think so, and I'm glad you realise how devastating such a war would be." As he struggled out of his battle dress, Ryanac stepped forward to help him. A twinge of jealousy threatened Uly's composure, but the chest plate consisted of metal and leather. It *was* heavy. When Markis pulled off the underlying tunic too, he couldn't keep a sharp intake of breath quiet. It was ridiculous though, for he had seen Markis naked only a couple of days ago. Markis and Ryanac exchanged an amused look. Then Markis turned to help Ryanac off with his heavy gear. Uly noted that the man had taken to removing more of his battle gear than was usual just lately. Ryanac groaned appreciatively.

“Damn thing. I feel like I’ve just been let out of a cage.” He crossed the tent to a small table and poured six drinks -- three of water and three of alcohol. “Let’s start with these before food.”

Uly took the proffered drinks, drained the water, set the cup aside, and then cradled the other small cup in his hands. The familiar scent of Swithin brandy filled his nostrils. He glanced up to see Markis sat watching him. They all sat on the platform, Uly with his legs crossed, Ryanac on the edge, and Markis in the middle, his feet together, his knees bent and his forearms resting on them. His gaze was intent.

“What’s going on?” Uly asked of him. “What are you going to ask me to steal?”

* * * * *

Uly sat and ruminated over what Markis had said. Some of it was too large for his mind, but in simple terms, it boiled down to this. The Azulites were powerful -- they always had been -- but the Swithin were quicker to change. The Azulites had laughed at this and kept themselves solitary. The Swithin had grown more powerful, and in a small number of decades, they had expanded, at times conquering, at times assimilating other colonies that wished to join. Some even approached them. The Azulites had ignored this and sat complacently by. Now that the Swithin were an equal force to reckon with, the Azulites were afraid.

“You really want nothing to do with them?” Uly had asked.

Markis had shaken his head. “They have nothing we want, and we know a war between us would be foolish for both sides. They, however, now want us to bow down and be governed by them.”

“Karma,” Ryanac had sniggered, draining his glass. He had seen Markis’s look and shrugged with a grin.

“The thing is, if they left us alone, we would leave them alone.” At this Ryanac sniggered once more, and Markis sighed. “Please, Ryanac, you’re not making this easy. It’s difficult enough to explain.” He took a deep breath and began again. “Some of us want a war. The ... king favours war.”

The shock of that lanced through Uly and out between his lips before he could think. “He’s crazy!” At once, the shock of what he had said brought forth an apology. “I mean ...” Markis had raised a hand, silencing him.

“I wish to try and calm things, but I will get nowhere with these dignitaries. Tonight I asked, as I was supposed to do, to see their princess.”

Uly frowned. “Their princess?”

Ryanac chuckled and answered him. “She is young and unwed. Marriage would make for an easy alliance.”

"Marriage?" The word left his lips even as he saw Markis cast Ryanac a hateful glance. Ryanac blinked in what seemed to be surprise. Then his look darkened in question as he returned Markis's stare. To Uly's surprise and dismay, Markis turned his gaze away first.

"I ... hope she is one who will listen to sense. Marriage and a union of our nations is an option."

At first, Uly didn't recognise the sensation creeping through him. Then he acknowledged it as grief, as though Markis was already lost to him.

"Uly." The other man's quiet voice had called. He looked up, trying to keep his eyes hard and staring. He didn't want to cry. "None of us know what the future holds. I cannot tell you whether you will be a part of it with me. I won't make promises I may need to break." He swallowed. It seemed Markis struggled to hold Uly's gaze but he did. "I am Shavar. I have a duty. There are bigger things here than you and I. Tomorrow will be a cycle of posturing. At the end of the day, my patience will have grown thin, and I will wait no longer. Uly, I have to see their princess. I need you to steal a key so I can. I am asking you, will you do that for me?"

Chapter Sixteen

Steal a key, such a little thing. Looking away, Uly had agreed, but then the tears came. He couldn't stop them and couldn't hide them. Movement told him Markis came to him, though he couldn't see and couldn't be sure until that familiar warmth and smell held him and rocked him. When he recovered enough, he saw Ryanac had left them alone. Markis continued to rock him until he calmed. Then Markis started to speak.

"I know what I'm asking of you. Uly, I am so sorry. I never wanted this. So many times, I was angry with you purely out of my own selfish needs. I wanted an argument between us. I wanted to break the feelings I had for you, knowing where they might lead. I lost it, too. I lost my temper so much I went slightly mad. You're not the only one who has been having lessons you know." Strong, knowing fingers brushed the tears from around Uly's eyes. "I almost killed you twice, and I wanted to cut my own heart out each time. If it had happened a third time, I would have sent you away for your safety. I almost did anyway, but Ryanac talked me out of it. He said I needed you, and I didn't understand why then, but I know now."

Markis pulled him back into his embrace, resting his chin against the top of Uly's head. "I don't know what the future holds for any of us. We might face war or something better or worse." Uly frowned. What could be better and, even more importantly, worse than war? "Every one of us might be killed. I might kill us all."

Despite the ache of his grief, Uly struggled to speak. "What do you mean?"

Markis shook his head, the movement pressing his chin into the top of Uly's head. "I won't burden you with things that may not happen. And I'll make no promises but one." Gripping Uly tight, Markis pushed him away, but still held him close, staring down into his eyes. "If we can be together, we will be. If I cannot make it happen, then it is because it's beyond my control. But there is something you have to understand, Uly. If you are with me,

it might not be just you and me. I'm hoping if the marriage goes ahead, then the princess will like you, too." Those dark eyes searched his face. "It's the Swithin way, if all involved are happy, but I don't know how willing she might be to adopt our ways, even if she agrees to the marriage." A slight smile touched his mouth. "I've heard she's a sexy little thing. All Azulite women are hot, but with luck, you will learn more about that in time. You like women, don't you? Or are you disgusted with me?"

The shocks just kept coming. Could he share Markis with another? His thoughts wandered to Ryanac's teasing about three in a bed, and the idea brought a blush to his face, which Markis could obviously see. "What? What is it?"

"I ... just had an image of you, me, and Ryanac."

Markis laughed. "Well, that's a little off track, but it would certainly make him happy. Leave that thought for another day. Things are complicated enough. So, no women? It's important you tell me."

Thinking about it, Uly didn't know what to say. "I ... I haven't had much experience of women." He tilted his head to the side ruefully. "Or anyone, really. I didn't ... dislike it. I guess I just don't know."

"Well, that leaves possibilities at least. There is one more thing I hate to ask, but I have to, though I have every faith in you. *Can* you steal the key?"

Only slightly offended, he chose to consider the question carefully. He had been too upset when they first mentioned it. The key lay in the pocket of the spokesman's robe. Tomorrow Uly would be one of those serving refreshments at the afternoon talks. He nodded. "I can get it."

Markis smiled in what had to be approval. "Replace it with this." He held up another key. "It's not exactly the same, but it's a close match. At a glance, he should not see it has changed. Only when he uses it in the lock, and that's something he only does occasionally."

"What lock?"

"Never mind that now. Let's just say it's the key to get me into the princess."

The tent flap lifted in that moment, and Ryanac said, "It's me and dinner." Markis glanced at Uly and then told Ryanac to come in.

* * * * *

A key, and such a small key, at that. By the comet! Markis couldn't get the bloody thing out of his mind. Although Uly clearly wanted this as much as he, what tomorrow might bring interrupted Markis's thoughts, driving the sensations back. *I am not having this.* This could be their only night together. With a barely suppressed violence, he tugged the last of Uly's clothes down to his ankles and off. Lying the young man back naked on the pallet, Markis took hold of Uly's hands and brought them up to run over his chest.

"I know you want to touch me, so touch me," Markis growled, and Uly did. His hands roamed over the smooth skin at his chest -- unlike Ryanac, Markis had no hair there -- over the hardened nipples, around to his ribs, and then up and down the hard line of muscle at his stomach. The look of wonder in Uly's eyes finally made Markis's cock hard. Glancing down, he saw Uly's cock lolling in a pale, soft nest of hair. He ran his fingers through the golden curls, and the gesture made Uly flinch. The movement was no longer from fear, though. For so long, he had wanted to stop Uly jumping at every sound and shadow. Uly still jumped these days, but it was from other emotions. Markis knelt and breathed warm air from his mouth against the semi-hard cock. It twitched and rose up to meet his lips.

Part of Markis wanted someone to fuck him. They had not reached such things and now facing an uncertain future, he had no wish to die with such regret. Still, Uly was too inexperienced. He needed Ryanac for the type of fucking he craved. *By the comet! Why did I leave it so long? Why did I listen to a bunch of dried-up old fools?* Ryanac would laugh and tell him it was because he had been waiting for someone like Uly, and he would be right, fuck him! He couldn't call Ryanac in here. Despite what Uly had said, the time wasn't right for that.

That left him with one option and his first choice, for Uly to come in his mouth. He wanted to drink the young man down. He'd had a few women in his life, and the same way they had bucked under his mouth, the way their sex fluttered in orgasm against his lips, he wanted to feel Uly's cock pulse with release. He wanted to taste it. Uly was beautiful, every inch of him. Though he had only lightly defined muscle yet and would always be slender, Markis could see the older man Uly would one day become. That man would still be beautiful. The hair would stay pale to gold blond. The grey eyes would look wide and open. That generous mouth would curve so slightly into a sweet, self-deprecating smile, and he would always tug on his lower lip with his teeth.

Though Uly was not yet quite solid, Markis took the inches into his mouth. At this length, he could nestle it easily in the back of his throat, but even as he held still, it swelled and lengthened. Glancing up, Markis could see Uly had closed his eyes and turned his head to the side. His face wore a slightly pained expression.

Gently sucking and licking, Markis teased while refusing to withdraw. He wanted it in the back of his throat. Not until the gag reflex began did he pull back, and even then, he resisted for a second or two before he absolutely had to pull up. Gripping the base of Uly's cock, he pumped it while keeping the head in his mouth, sucking. Taking a breath, he plunged the length of the shaft down his throat even knowing he would gag. He did and withdrew, but then did it again. At last, Uly moved. He thrust up, surely, from instinct. Even as he did, Markis tasted salt. He swirled his tongue over the now dark purple head of the youthful cock, lapping it up. Uly's hands reached down and tangled in his hair, pushing his head onto him. Certain Uly was unaware he did it, Markis chuckled. With Uly's cock still in his mouth, the sound reverberated along the shaft. Uly let out a cry. Then he tossed about on the bed, groaning. Much to Markis's surprise, he had growled in reply.

By now, Uly's movements truly threatened to gag him. He no longer felt in control, but Markis let him have his way. If Uly wanted to use his throat, then so be it. He didn't care. Closing his eyes, Markis concentrated on coping with Uly's hard, thrusting need, aware the pallet creaked and their deep, breathy sounds rolled around the inside of the tent. The dam released. Markis swallowed three hot streams.

As he lowered his head to rest against Uly's thigh and licked liquid satin from his lips, he heard the flap of the tent raise just a little bit and heard Ryanac's voice. "If you two are going to make any more noise, you'll wake the entire camp," that deep masculine voice hissed. Markis couldn't be sure, but there might have been a hint of envy in there somewhere. He smiled for many reasons. For the first time in his life, he not only knew he was guardian of the future, he wanted to be. He was now even more determined there would be a future -- for him, for Uly, and for the people he loved, like Ryanac.

Chapter Seventeen

“As we see it, you are our problem.” After several tiring hours, the Azulite spokesman had finally eased up on the thees and thous. Unfortunately, he always did this when about to insult someone or speak a nasty truth. “You,” he said, and gazed straight at Markis, “are the entire problem.”

All day Markis had not answered any of these jabs, but as Uly bent to remove old cups and serve fresh water, the time had come. They all sat in tall-backed chairs at a round table placed inside the circle. Each man present had a guard at his back. Strangely, both parties allowed two servers from each camp. It almost resembled a test to see if the other had the audacity to try poison, but the princess had promised to skin any of her assembly that tried it, and Markis had good reason by reputation alone to believe her. He hadn’t lied to Uly -- she had the reputation of a sexy young thing, but she could also be ruthless. “I don’t see your point,” he prompted, as Uly set the empty vessel down on the bench, placed a new cup in its place, and appeared to struggle with a full pitcher of water.

“The king is the power, but the king is old. You are the new, and some say bright, star. You are as good as king by a few short days or weeks at the most. You are the problem.”

As Uly splashed a little of the water and at once moved to wipe it up, the Azulite spokesman finally noticed him. He went to turn his head, but Markis spoke up.

“Some would say that for a married man, the woman is the power behind the throne.”

Part of this discussion was to put forth the marriage proposal, though the Azulites expected this and had already rejected it even if they hadn’t said so. A ripple of laughter sped through the gathering. Uly finished wiping and picked up the empty cup to move on down the line. Those pale eyes didn’t even look towards him. Markis approved.

“Some would say why have a hound and bay at the moon, that is true.” The statement implied that married to their princess, he would be a puppet.

"Yet any bitch in heat will howl under the right hound." The amusement bled out of the other man's face. He rose without speaking, tossing the long hem of his robe over one arm so that it would not hinder his leave-taking. Markis said nothing. He didn't even bother rising to his feet. By leaving like this, the cycle conceded to him. They were even, but it made no matter. Markis saw the spokesman unconsciously touch the pocket containing the key, as though seeking reassurance it was still there. Seeming satisfied, the older man turned to walk away. Markis watched him go, unconcerned. He had no doubt his little thief had successfully switched the keys.

* * * * *

Annoying the assembly so they would break early had been part of Markis's plan. Luck had come as the stroke for opportunity arrived in the form of a distraction while Uly switched the keys.

"That damn pocket was fastened. I thought my heart would stop in my chest."

"You looked calm enough."

Ryanac flashed him a grin and, turning, Uly saw Markis smile at him also. Both smiles were approving. A strange flash of pride brought a small answering smile to his lips. His gaze followed Ryanac's as the large man turned his head up towards the sky. Dark had fallen moments ago, and the first stars had just started to shine.

"What is it with the Swithin and the stars? Why do you look to them so?"

Ryanac answered without lowering his gaze. He had just finished fastening his clothes and hidden the last knife. "This planet is among the stars," he said. "Some believe we are all made of stuff from the stars."

Uly snorted. "I've been told a lot of pretty things in my life. Most of them were lies."

"Some had to be true." Markis's more melodious-sounding voice broke in. Like Ryanac, he wore a grey, tight-fitting tunic and grey breeches. Soft calfskin boots protected his feet. Markis hadn't had to explain. Many thieves wore black in the night, but black could stand out more than grey. Ryanac's slight stubble -- he hadn't bothered to shave in a day and a half -- and his skin, which always seemed to be lightly bronzed, helped to tone down his face. Markis, however, looked pale in comparison. He had loosened his hair to a ponytail rather than a braid and now wrapped a dark scarf around his neck. Though it presented some danger if someone should grab it, it could hide his face. Besides, if caught, it was over for them anyway. The idea of waiting while his lover went off to do the comet knew what, wondering if he would ever return, made Uly feel sick.

Markis walked towards him. "Do you want to come with us?" He held similar garments in his hands. Uly frowned. A glance at Ryanac showed the large man trying to suppress a grin. "I made you a promise," Markis said, drawing his attention. "If we can be together, we

will be. That was no lie. What happens tonight affects both of us. I have to see if the princess likes the look of me. We may as well see if she likes the look of you as well."

* * * * *

The path leading up to the ridge was fine ... for a mountain goat. Uly took a deep breath, thankful he had taken Ryanac's advice and not looked down -- not until he reached the top anyway and then suffered a moment of vertigo for his curiosity. An informant had told them the way and been true to his word. Uly was sick of politics and had accepted Ryanac's word that the informant was reliable. This was surely the swiftest route to use ... as the crow flew.

"Is the princess going to like us all covered in sweat?" Uly couldn't help asking, in a whisper. Markis grinned. A moment later and they were off again, Ryanac leading.

Slipping into an alley, Uly saw that an open courtyard with a fountain lay ahead. As Ryanac disappeared around the bend, Uly caught Markis's eye and made a shrugging gesture with his shoulders. He mouthed the word, "Where?" Markis pointed to a nondescript building. The Azulite apparently thought no one would think to look for the princess there. It stood to reason she had to be nearby. The main castle was a day's ride from here. Uly saw a dark figure and turned his head. Ryanac swung something on a rope in regular circles. Suddenly he released it. A second later, Uly heard a distant clatter. Ryanac had already ducked into the shadows. They waited, but when no one raised an alarm, Markis pulled Uly forward. The task of climbing the knotted rope proved easy.

At the top of a parapet, the left leadoff would take them to the window of the lighted room. Uly frowned in question at Markis. It all seemed too easy, like a trap. "They are arrogant and besides, they know it would work as a disadvantage to us if we killed her, and so they think the lady is safe without the key."

Key to what? There didn't appear to be a door they needed to get through. They made short work of it, helping each other up to the window ledge. They dropped down inside a well-lit but apparently empty room. Square in design, only freestanding screens segregated the room. To the right there stood a four-poster bed. Another area had a table and chairs. In the far corner of the room, four chairs were set in a rough circle before the fireplace. Moving to each side of the window, Markis and Ryanac pushed the shutters closed so no one could see in. At once, they heard singing. A moment later and a small woman with long black hair came out from behind one of the screens and began to walk across the room. She wore a long gold dress with white petticoats, long sleeves, and a low-cut neckline. Uly swallowed at the sight of the twin globes of her breasts, which pushed together as well as up. Even Simeon whores didn't dress like that, though some Swithin women did and worse.

She carried a small book from which she read and muttered a strange song almost like a lullaby. She had crossed half the room before she noticed them. She stopped. Then her

mouth fell open slightly, though she still held the book out in front of her. She uttered a small sound of "Oh!"

Markis bowed at once. "I mean you no harm."

She inspected them, her gaze going first to Uly, then to Ryanac, and back to Markis. "What about them?"

Markis smiled. "They do as I tell them."

"Well, that be some comfort, I suppose."

"I take it we are alone?"

"Do you hear an outcry?" Despite her answer, Markis made a small gesture to Ryanac who moved to examine the room. She raised one small dark eyebrow. "Shavar?" He tilted his head in a bow as his reply. A small smile played about her lips. "Somehow I have been expecting you."

* * * * *

"I rather thought you might," Markis said stepping into the room. "The handful of guards?"

"They do not believe you will try anything, and I dismissed a few of the guards. How else could you have made it in here?"

"You wanted us here?" Uly spoke before he could help it. Her gaze flickered to him, the dark stare unflinching beneath her fringe. Her eyes were almost as dark as her hair, her gaze a deep pool under moonlight. He blushed.

"They said you had a young male lover." The heat in his face increased, and surely his colour deepened. His eyes went wide, and he lowered his gaze to the floor.

"Who said?"

At Markis's question, Uly looked up, but he kept his head down, gazing at her from beneath his brow. The young woman smiled with her lips together. That smile looked altogether adorable, and somehow cunning like a cat, yet she hid none of it. "I too have my informants." She watched Markis's face. "I did say *my* informants. Not the envoy's sneaks."

"A subtle distinction."

"A bloody great big one." Her voice had hardened, and the humour had disappeared. "Do not insult me."

Something flickered through Markis's gaze that Uly couldn't interpret. He appeared to reach a decision. "You expected us," Markis said, "and I expected as much. Yet I have to wonder, did you expect this." He held up the key Uly had acquired.

Her eyes widened in surprise and something else, some far deeper emotion. Her lips parted just slightly, but her eyes took on a hungry look, like someone who hasn't eaten for days seeing food. "Oh, praise be, yes!" The cry was far from a scream, but had a high pitch to

it. At once, the elegant little woman dropped the book and began to ruffle through her petticoats, lifting them and the skirt. Markis went to his knees in front of her just as Uly saw a flash of dark, cold-looking metal. The princess wore a chastity belt of the crudest kind.

The significance of the key suddenly sparked like a light inside Uly's mind. "Oh. It's to get you *into* the princess." All three other occupants of the room turned to look at him and even more heat warmed his face. Uly pressed his hands over his nose and mouth in shock at his outburst. Even so, a giggle escaped him. He saw amusement in Markis's face. His lover turned back to the lady.

"Do you not fear for your virtue?" Sarcasm and humour weighed heavily in his voice.

"I can take care of my own virtue. Get this bloody thing off me."

Markis complied, inserting the key into one lock, then a second, and, by the comet, if there wasn't a third. The young lady's eyes cast upward to take in the ceiling as Markis reached that last, intimately placed lock.

"Slick," Markis remarked, and the comment dragged her gaze down to his face. Still she sighed as he took it away. Uly saw a small mound of dark hair before she dropped her skirts. Markis set the hated thing aside, but stayed on his knees. The young lady had closed her eyes and now pressed her hands to her abdomen. Finally, she took a deep, shuddering breath.

"I do not know how you got the key from the envoy, and I do not care. I suppose I should, but I am only glad."

"That one's mother answered a call of nature in an illegal tavern and got something she didn't bargain for as a son," Ryanac remarked.

Though he surely said it to make the princess laugh, she only managed a smile. "I am sorry," she said. "You do not know how long I have worn the dreaded thing. Would you permit me to wash?"

"Of course," Markis said. Still he stayed on his knees until she had turned from them and hurried behind the screen. They could hear the rustle of garments, water pouring into a basin. Then they heard a heartfelt sigh. Her voice emerged from behind the screen.

"My dreaded father put that on me while I slept. He had me drugged. I have not eaten a thing since without someone tasting it first. The women were all in an uproar, and my mother has refused him sex since he did it. The damn thing chafes, and you cannot clean yourself properly without help. They only remove it occasionally so that my maid may clean me thoroughly, and only if I agree to have my hands tied first so they can replace it without much of a fight. My maid has been so good to me in that respect, even helps me pad it away from my skin to stop the sores, but then I feel like a damn baby."

When she had finished her rant and emerged from the screen, she had removed the gold dress. She wore only her under things, although the long white petticoat was another dress in itself. She gazed up into Markis's eyes where he now stood, with a smile on her lips

while smoothing down the white cotton. "I am Tressa," she told him. "Do you not think we Azulite are just the silliest things?"

* * * * *

"So, if we wed, does it mean you give him up for me?"

Her question speared Uly's heart. They had talked for the last hour. The time was not yet midnight, but he was aware of minutes slipping away. So far, what she and Markis had discussed involved the state of the world and their nations. For someone so young, she had a quick mind and sharp eye. Uly instinctively sensed she took in more things about him than he wanted her to know. That Markis liked her was obvious. Hell, even he liked her. He had wanted to kiss her rosy lips since she had emerged from behind the screen. Or see Markis do it, though the notion also disturbed him. He had his suspicions that she knew all of this too, as though she were aware of every emotion that passed through him.

"Are you a virgin?" He blurted it out. Both Markis and Ryanac turned to look at him, their muscles tightening in an almost aggressive gesture. He couldn't blame them. The fate of the world could rest on what this small woman did.

"No." Tressa answered so quickly and calmly even Markis looked startled. He stared straight at her, and she returned Shavar's gaze. "But I have never had two men."

Markis smiled. "Neither have I. I'd barely had one until recently."

"Truly?" Her interest sounded genuine.

"Time. Affairs of state," Markis stated. "Duty."

"Yet your guard loves you."

Ryanac let loose his laughter, though they conversed in hushed tones in case of discovery. Markis's gaze narrowed. "Nothing much flusters you, does it?"

"What kind of queen would I make if I got flustered so easily?"

"I like you," Markis told her outright.

"I know. As I do you. But my father will not allow this marriage."

"He'll have no choice if we fuck."

"He'll say you raped me."

"People would actually believe that?" Ryanac's tone was jesting. "It's not the Swithin way, and everyone knows it. And begging your pardon, my lady, but I'm not even sure the man I love has the balls to try that with you."

Tressa's gaze went from Markis's face to his groin and back. He sat before her, legs crossed at the ankles out in front. She leaned towards him hands clasped against her knees. It gave a fine view of her breasts. Uly's glance followed Markis's gaze, and then he looked away again. "I would not know," Tressa said. "I have not seen his balls." Even Markis laughed.

"No wonder your father put a chastity belt on you."

Tressa's face darkened, and she tilted her head in a gesture of warning. She actually growled. "It is an old custom. It is up to the father of the house if he places such things on his women, wife or daughters. If the father is dead, it is up to the oldest son. Not all follow the barbaric custom any more. If a woman needs to have such a thing on her parts, why does no man need a cage on his cock? That is not to mention what he has put my mother through. She would have gone mad by now if it were not for her toys. He does not know she has them, of course, and would not believe it if someone told him. A queen cannot be seen to break the law, and he would never believe she might even grow to prefer an artificial dick to his wrinkled prune. That is his ego. My father put the belt on me as soon as I started to bleed. Though in part, he put that thing on me to protect me from someone like you, need I remind you?"

Markis had sat staring at her intently while she gave her longest speech yet. "So, are you grateful?" His eyes were bright with suggestion. Her reply came in the form of a sneer. Somehow, her beautiful face managed to look feral.

"I will be grateful if you stop this war occurring, but I do not bargain with my gratitude. Still, I might be able to arrange the marriage."

"Meaning you already have it planned."

Their eyes slid back and forth examining each other.

"Oh, by the stars," Ryanac said. "Just take a bite out of each other and decide if you like the taste. We'll be here all night."

"I rather hoped to take all night," Tressa answered, her gaze never wavering though it was clear to what she referred. "You are right, of course. I have someone who will marry us if I decide to say yes. I had to see if you were old, ugly, or perverted first."

"Am I?" The gleam in Markis's eye looked akin to love, and Uly's heart stuttered in his chest.

"You are not old or ugly. Two out of three cannot be bad."

"You think I'm perverted?" Markis sounded delighted.

"Some might. Many do not understand the Swithin way of life, the casual attitude to sex."

"Yet it interests you."

For the first time, Tressa looked uncertain. She turned her gaze away. "The Azulite way makes no sense. Women hold few positions of power, yet they do hold some. I can order a man's death, but in my spare time, I should do no more than sit and sew. By no means are we allowed to satisfy our desires when it comes to sex. I know you find me attractive. All men do."

"It doesn't sound as though you like it."

She picked at a stray strand of cotton on the upholstery of the chair. "No one has ever viewed me as an equal ... until today." She glanced back at him, sideways.

"Swithin women are equal to their men. Some do what others class as menial jobs, but both sexes do what needs require, and our race looks down on no chore. If it needs doing, it needs doing."

"A somewhat eloquent speech, and I would love to help my people, however ..."

"Yes?"

She hesitated and then shook her head. In that moment, she looked so like nothing more than a young woman, Uly wanted to protect her. From the hard, steady gazes of the other two men, certainly they felt the same. "I should not have to deal with this alone." Her voice had lost power. She sounded more exasperated than anything.

"I know how you feel."

"Do you? You have them." She tilted her head towards Ryanac and Uly. "I do not even have that. Just a maid who has wiped me clean."

"You have us, if you want."

"Are we back to marriage again?"

"Would it mean I have to give up Uly?"

Uly visibly started. He had forgotten her earlier remark, but apparently Markis hadn't. No one reacted to his flinching, however. Tressa's eyes moved back and forth, as she looked at Markis. "You care for him that much."

"I love him," Markis said simply. "And I love Ryanac, though in a different way. I like you, and I think I could even grow to love you more easily than I ever dreamed, but the question is whether you feel anything for me."

Her small pink tongue darted out to lick at her lips. Her teeth tugged lightly on her lower lip in a gesture all too familiar. It made Uly jump again, and when he looked back, Markis gazed at her mouth in a way that said he had noticed it, too. Her smile became coy and mischievous. "If someone is your lover, would it make them mine also?"

"It could, if all parties were happy about it."

She glanced up at Uly, as though seeing if he liked her. Gazing at her, he didn't know what to do. Seeing something like wariness in her eyes, he managed a small smile.

"Of course," Markis said. "I could always argue that under Azulite law, a bride who isn't a virgin is useless to me." Her dark eyes widened until she saw the amusement in his face. "And if your father put that on you from the day you bled, I'd be interested to know how you managed it and who with."

Uly shook his head. The pair of them would be murder if they continued to bait each other like this. He shared a look with Ryanac -- a kind of 'what have we let ourselves in for?' look.

"I can call for someone who will marry us here. Then in the morning, all hell will break loose. Do you think this is a good idea?"

“Before you do that, I have to ask the same question of you. You have to know what you are accepting. We have a few things to discuss.” Markis looked across at Ryanac and nodded. Ryanac tugged Uly to one side. Though he wanted to hear, Uly went. To do anything less would be foolish. The last thing he saw was Markis lean forward, take Tressa’s small hands in his and hold them to his lips.

* * * * *

“Do I really have to put this on my head?”

Tressa grinned. “Stop it. They are gemstones. I am wearing one.” She tapped the circlet that surrounded her head.

“And not much else, my lady.” Tressa’s maid sounded vexed. The celebrant who had apparently known Tressa since her birth just rolled his eyes. He asked if they were ready.

“It is not the dress I planned to marry in, either. The petticoat is white. It will have to do.” Tressa replied and then nodded to the celebrant.

“Tell you what, I promise if we survive this, I will provide you with another wedding, one fit for any Swithin princess,” Markis promised.

“I am Azulite.”

“Not once you say ‘I do’.” She started, and her reaction shot up his arms, her small hands gripped as they were in his for the ceremony. The celebrant mumbled many incoherent sounding words and threw water in his face. Markis flinched this time, and Tressa began to laugh, only to gasp a moment later when the celebrant did the same to her. In the corner, Ryanac bent over, almost doubled with laughter. Uly managed to look upset and amused all at once. Markis made sure he caught the young man’s eye, and then his attention returned to the ceremony as it came time for Tressa to say yes. She hesitated, so he squeezed her hands gently and winked. Her hesitation vanished in the midst of a grin. “I do,” she said.

“What comes after the wedding?” she whispered as the celebrant repeated everything he had said so Markis could say yes in turn.

“I smuggle my bride out of here and back to my camp.”

“And these two. I am not leaving them here.” Her tone sounded insistent.

An old man and a plump maid; just great! Not that he had anything against them. The logistics of getting them down the ridge just filled him with dismay. “Fine, but when we get to the camp, I want sex.”

Tressa gasped, then flushed, yet managed to look pleased. The celebrant stumbled over his words and then said the last two again. One more sentence, and Markis finally said yes.

Chapter Eighteen

The celebrant wore black so his garments had sufficed. Similarly, the maid had worn a grey dress with black trims and a white apron. She hesitated only slightly when Markis told her to remove anything white. The celebrant had a white bib to mark his office, but the lapels of his coat fastened over this hiding it from view. Tressa had changed out of the petticoat into a serving boy's dark green uniform for the descent. The outfit proved to be a snug fit, and even Uly gulped to see her luscious curves so displayed. Somehow, the hidden promise enticed more than naked skin might. The slight smile on her face told Uly she was aware that her appearance unnerved every person in the room, though for different reasons.

The descent had not proved so tiresome. Tressa led them by another route -- this one through caves in the ridge so that for some of the descent their passage proved less precarious. They passed two guards on the way, but though Markis and Ryanac tensed, Tressa had calmed them with a glance. These guards were her friends.

"You sure do appear eager to leave your homeland," Markis remarked.

"My father, you mean," Tressa almost snapped. "That sod deserves some heartache. This will teach him to truss up a woman. I have heard good things about Swithin men and women, that they are equal. My father should learn your ways. I will be no man's property."

"You married me."

She had rounded on the path, in the dark of the cave. Even in the small fiery torch Markis carried, Uly could see her eyes blaze. "You think that makes me a slave and you my master."

Markis grinned, and her anger faltered. "By no means. Probably the opposite." His voice sounded dark and sardonic. Her small white teeth flashed.

"I treat others as they treat me."

"Fair enough."

Now, with Ryanac leading, Uly walked behind her as they moved through the semi-sleeping camp, and he couldn't help staring at her small, pert behind. He had never seen a woman's bottom in breeches before, and these were very tight. Instinct made him look to the side where Markis walked. Shavar returned his gaze in a most peculiar way. To Uly's horror, a wry smile twisted Markis's lips. The tent lay just ahead.

At Ryanac's command, another guard led the maid and celebrant away. Ryanac opened the tent flap, and ducking her head though it wasn't necessary, for Tressa was that tiny, the princess moved into the tent. Uly, awash with confusion stopped just outside. Markis roughly pulled him into his embrace, kissed him on the forehead and then briefly on the lips. The passion behind that kiss was welcome, but still his heart ached as Markis turned to follow Tressa. He could make no mistake; Markis had dismissed him for now. Ryanac let the tent flap fall.

"Don't take it to heart. Needs must a marriage is consummated. This one especially, though if those fool seers had their way, Markis would have a wife and no sex. Don't look so concerned." The big man gave a soft laugh and threw an arm around Uly's shoulders. "I have a feeling things will work out for the best." Sitting on a nearby low-lying rock, Ryanac took up guard outside. Uly dithered, not knowing what he should do with himself until Ryanac patted the surface of the rock beside him. Uly sat down.

"So we just wait?"

"For now."

Uly, gazing up at the lightening sky, asked, "Is it late or early?" He needed a distraction from what was occurring inside the tent.

A soft laugh answered him. "Both. We have plenty of time until full daylight, and Tressa said they won't notice her missing until almost midday."

All these years of waiting until she could find a way to be free, Tressa said she had used the time for studying. A self-taught Azulite woman, now that did take some getting used to.

A gasp sounded from within the tent making Uly jump. Then a small moan followed as though released through barely parted lips. The sound was female. Uly started again as Ryanac reached out and ran a hand up and down his back. The sudden heat of that hand made Uly shiver. He stared straight ahead, but now his attention lay riveted to his back. His ears strained for sound.

Another gasp came, harsher this time, followed by Markis's soft chuckle. Rising, Ryanac pulled Uly to his feet and then moved them towards the tent. Uly resisted. He would rather be further away, but Ryanac ignored what he wanted and pulled him along. Why would Ryanac be so cruel? They resettled near the open tent flap in time to hear Markis say, "You like this?"

Uly frowned at Ryanac, asking him silently why he would make him listen to this, but the other man only grinned. Glancing around, Ryanac's gaze scanned the terrain. Other men

and tents stood nearby, but they were all dim indistinguishable shapes. Their tent would hardly be discernable from the rest except as one of the larger ones.

"What if I won't do it again?" Markis's voice sounded more than a little teasing, but a dark question underlined it. Uly frowned harder. Somehow, he sensed the play going on inside the tent, but he couldn't fully comprehend it. A whimper of complaint escaped the princess's lips. In that instant, Ryanac reached out, entangled his fingers in the front of Uly's tunic and yanked him forward. A hot tongue stabbed into his mouth before he could cry out in surprise. He tensed, and then softened, at once closing his eyes and giving into it, though a little dismayed by his own reaction.

Inside the tent, the bed had started to creak. Releasing his mouth, Ryanac pulled back and stared at him. This close, Uly could just make out his eyes as early dawn light filtered into the sky. He couldn't look away. They stared at each other, but listened to the series of small breathy cries coming from within the tent.

"There, oh, there, please." Her plea sent a bolt of desire through Uly. His lips trembled and he bit at them. He wanted to answer her. Some part of him said he should be raging with jealousy, but he couldn't hold on to it. He had no doubt Markis loved him, and the princess had said nothing about Markis having to give him up. If the princess could happily share Markis with him, could he happily share Markis with the princess? Maybe he could. Those desperate sounds pulled at his heart and his cock. Tressa was easy to like and even easier to desire.

"Samir," Ryanac whispered, somehow drawing the word out until it sounded seductive.

"You've called me that before. What does it mean?" It took all he had to ask, but he wanted to know.

Ryanac's smile this time was indeed more of a smile, less of a grin. "It does not translate well. Closest meaning is 'entertaining companion', but in our old tongue, it means so much more. You are Uly Samir. You are Markis Shavar's first and true love."

A guttural sound escaped Markis now. No wonder his tent had no nearby neighbours. Indeed, a fair distance existed between most of them. Had he and Markis really made so much noise the other night? Ryanac's large warm hand cupped his face and chin. A thumb brushed over his lips. A series of small, high-pitched cries came from inside.

When the thumb pressed insistently against his lips, he opened his mouth to it. The digit entered his mouth and pressed against the pad of his tongue. When it stayed, he fastened his lips around it. When he heard the familiar sounds of Markis poised on the edge of release, Uly gripped Ryanac's hand, wrapping the fingers of his left hand around the back of the hand and wrist. His right hand clasped Ryanac's forearm. As the commotion in the tent reached its peak, he couldn't help it. Uly let his mouth sink down on the thumb and began to suck. He withdrew and dipped his head, drawing the thumb in and out of his mouth rapidly until he heard a strange sound escape Ryanac, a groan and grunt combined. It

brought him a little to his senses and he noticed the noises in the tent had ceased. More than that, the flap now pulled back.

Feeling dazed, he lifted his mouth from Ryanac's hand and, turning his head, stared at what could only be Markis's feet. His gaze trailed from the bare feet, up the naked calf to the bare thighs. Markis's sex lay in a dark curl of hair, glistening wetly. From there, Uly let his gaze wander up the line of the stomach and chest to finally rest on Markis's face. The naked man's expression was unreadable, but Markis held out a hand towards him.

"Come, Uly," he said.

Standing on shaky legs, Uly moved to obey. Markis stood aside so he could dip into the tent. The first thing to view was Tressa lying there as though asleep, her arms thrown back, her black hair tumbling, and the widest smile on a woman's face he had ever seen. Her black hair fanned out over the pillow like a dark halo. At his back, Markis said, "You, too, Ryanac."

Chapter Nineteen

Those shining black eyes stared into his. Her soft hand reached up and touched his face. Though this small precious thing resembled a china doll that needed careful handling, remarkably she comforted him.

"Sweet Uly," she had said as she examined him. "I can see why Markis loves you."

She lay on her back now with him moving inside her. The tunnel that held his cock was warm and slick, slippery with both her and Markis's juices. When Markis had urged him into the tent, at first he had balked at the idea. Then Markis's touch had calmed him. His kisses had stoked the fire the sounds from the tent had set burning. Knowing those dark eyes were open and she watched them kiss had made him rock hard even before Markis touched him there. Knowing Ryanac watched from the shadows, made him shiver. Markis's arms had engulfed him as though to save him from a non-existent chill. Laying Uly back on the bed, Markis had devoured him with kisses, and soon her small fluttering hands had taken to examining him as well, as his clothes disappeared one garment at a time.

Coming up out of the haze Markis's mouth had created, Uly had blinked in some surprise to see Ryanac kneeling beside the princess. The two of them had looked at each other as though they reached for a mutual understanding that Uly failed to fathom. Ryanac lay naked to the waist, and even as he watched, Tressa and Markis unfastened the other man's breeches. The two men leaned toward one another, their foreheads touching in a way that ignited that spark of jealousy, even as the beauty of the moment chased it back.

When Tressa had turned to him to welcome him into her body, it had only taken Markis's permission to send Uly into her arms. He liked Markis's hardness, but the soft, smooth flesh beneath him was a sharp contrast he also had a liking for. Now he began to understand why the Swithin took lovers of either sex. He rocked his hips knowing he tugged at her lower lips as his mouth pulled on the lips of her mouth or a rosy ripe nipple. If there

was one thing he liked more than all else about her body, it was her breasts. After kissing her, he had sucked on a nipple, for her head had tipped back so her mouth could be used elsewhere. Ryanac knelt at her head, his hard, wide cock filling her small mouth impossibly. Behind him, Uly could feel Markis's hands roaming over his hips and butt. As a finger pressed against that small rosette, he writhed, pushing back towards it.

Tressa chose that moment to come up for air. His writhing movement might even have caused the small gasps that escaped her. Her chest rose and fell in heaves. "What do you want, Tressa?" Markis asked.

"I ... I guess I want all three of you inside me, but it won't work like this."

"No, it won't." Markis's voice sounded thick with desire and that ever-present amusement he shared with Ryanac. "The trouble is I have an orifice here that seems to be begging for my attention."

Flushing from embarrassment, he had no time to protest as at least two of Markis's fingers slipped inside him.

Markis and Ryanac shared a look over Uly's back. The younger man's reaction had equally stunned them. They had expected reluctance, if not on the princess's part, then certainly Uly's. Azulite women had a much-denied reputation of having a high sex drive -- far higher than one man could happily satisfy, and a desire that was denied in more than one way. This they had known and relied on heavily to seal their plan. As the princess had said, not only the king used chastity belts on females. Many Azulite men did, until they had their women begging. If the king truly believed his daughter entirely innocent, then he was a fool. She would have gone mad long before now -- many did. That the queen had left her husband's bed and relied on a toy to satisfy her spoke highly of the woman's will. If she had a lover her husband knew nothing about, neither of them would be surprised. Azulite men wanted their women subservient and monogamous, but they wouldn't even allow the women to touch their own flesh and so bring about their release. In times past, they had taught them to do so was a sin. The chastity belt might have left Tressa largely without the touch of a man, but the princess's hands were so small those tiny fingers had surely been busy. Still, in time she would have gone crazy, grown bitter towards all men. Such things were changing, but Azulite women had heard how the Swithin race regarded sex. In Tressa, Markis not only had a lovely, sexy wife equal in intelligence and wit, he had the vote of the female population. Once they heard their princess had married a Swithin man, they would want such a choice.

That the princess, starved of even affection and trapped in such a hideous harness for so long, should be desperate for the touch of a man came as no surprise or shame in either of their minds. The fact that Uly knew little of this, yet burned with equal passion, was the thing that amazed them. This wasn't just a fuck though. The total deflowering of the Azulite

princess served another purpose; only Uly remained ignorant of that. Still, needs must be fulfilled, and no reason existed to say they could not or should not enjoy it.

"In a few moments, Princess," Markis said. He didn't have time to please Uly entirely, but on the slim chance they might all die this day, he wanted to be inside him one last time. If they survived the coming day, Markis fully intended to start the first day of peace between Uly's lips. An image of how many positions three men and one woman could contrive rose up in his mind, and he had to bite back his cry.

* * * * *

Uly dreamed. In it, he relived all that had happened to him. Reaching the conclusion of a long and difficult journey, he whimpered and sighed, turning his head into the warmth beside him.

In his mind, he relived the last year -- Markis catching him, those first hot meals, the baths, the longing for Markis's touch, and the final discovery that Shavar loved him. Even Ryanac cared for him, and now so too did the princess. Her breathy cries and soft sighs had filled the last empty space inside him. He lay at peace.

After Markis had filled him, he could have died happy. The conviction hadn't lasted. Before he could come, Markis had moved them. Uly found himself in the princess's place, on his back. From above their heads, Ryanac knelt, and from this position leaned forward to kiss and stroke him. Aware of Ryanac's warmth and proximity, it had all felt very nice, but he had to wonder what Markis and the princess were doing. Moments later, she had come down on his cock so swiftly, it left him gasping. He had tried to thrust instinctively, but too many hands held him. When she finally started to move, it still took him a moment to realise Markis controlled the rhythm, and that both he and Markis were inside her, separated only by a thin membrane. Looking over her shoulder, he met Markis's gaze. So many questions and emotions had burned in those dark eyes, and he had surrendered to them, to whatever Markis wanted. He had seen the smile touch his lover's lips, seen the peace flood Markis's face. As Markis pushed forward, he drove her from Uly's cock; as Ryanac thrust into her mouth, she went back on it. The quiet demure princess -- though who had ever called Tressa demure was shaylah -- had found release with a man in every orifice. Only later, as they all drifted off into a comfortable sleep had Ryanac whispered in his ear, explaining an Azulite woman's needs. Uly had no energy to argue and no reason to complain. He lay sandwiched between Ryanac and the princess, Markis on her other side and both men's arms reaching out and entwined over them both.

Now he opened his eyes to see Markis at his side. Shavar lay there dressed. He turned his head as Uly shifted.

"The princess is getting dressed. As delightful as she looks in those breeches, I had to find her a suitable gown for the gathering. I wanted to be here when you opened your eyes, though a few more minutes and I would have had to shake you awake."

“There’s going to be a fight, isn’t there?”

Uly sat up at his side with only the satin sheet to cover him. Markis looped an arm around his back. “There’ll be no fight, not if I can help it, and if I cannot stop the war today, it will likely be because I’ve lost control. If that happens, then the chances are I will put an end to it all. That is why I am here. Shavar is the deterrent.”

“I don’t understand. Not completely.”

“I know you don’t, and I haven’t time to explain. I hate now I never explained it to you. I tried, but failed. I hated the idea that you might think ill of me. I hate the idea I might have to hurt those I love. If I have to use the power of the comet to stop a war, then some will survive, but there is no knowing whom. I hate that I haven’t told you this, but I couldn’t bear it changing the way you looked at me, and it would have. Knowing the responsibility and the pain I carry and what might happen, you would have gazed at me with suffering and grief, not love and joy. Still, I need you to do something for me.”

Rising, Markis pulled Uly to his feet and began to dress him. “I need you to stand with Ryanac at the princess’s side. If they force my hand, Ryanac will bring you all to me. I will try to protect you all by having you close by, and I hope to draw strength from your feelings for me. If Ryanac is half right, and he has been lucky in his predictions up until now, then it may well work, but there are no guarantees. I cannot explain. I don’t have the time.”

“You mean to use me.” Although he didn’t quite understand how, Uly saw the truth of his words as Markis’s face tightened.

“I don’t wish to. I wanted to leave you in your homeland, safe from all this, but Ryanac rightly reminded me that distance is no guarantee of safety. He also convinced me I couldn’t do this without you.” Markis took in a deep breath that caused him to shudder. “Almost all of my men here know what is about to happen, except you. I couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t risk you turning from me.”

Uly stared at Markis’s face, at the way the other man wouldn’t look at him, at the shine in the eyes from what he suspected were unshed tears. “Even if it meant my death, you had only to ask me.”

His words seemed to drag Markis’s gaze to his face. Shavar looked at him as though his declaration was priceless. He lifted Uly’s head with two fingers under his chin. “Know this. I love you, Uly. Completely. Nothing will change that.”

A slight cough drew their attention. Ryanac stood in the now open flap of the tent. “Wipe your face and brush your hair,” Markis said. Uly hurried to do it, chewing a couple of juberry leaves to clean his teeth as well. He strode over to where the two men now stood at the opening. At once, Markis pulled him close. His other arm already embraced Ryanac. He heard Markis say, “If this goes wrong, look after whoever survives, if you can.”

“You know I will,” came the reply. “But then you always wasted time saying things you didn’t need to say, like I love you.”

Turning his head, Markis pressed his lips against Ryanac's mouth, and they kissed. The kiss lasted, exploring. Within Uly, jealousy still existed, but it had lost its fire. Markis loved him and nothing would change that. That wasn't what made tears sting the back of his eyes. The two friends kissed as though it might be for the last time. Drawing back, Markis and Ryanac exchanged a look, and then Markis turned his attention to Uly. The urgency in his lips said more than all the explanations he might have given.

A last squeeze of his arm, and then Markis stepped away from them both into the open. He left Uly standing beside the captain. "Come Uly," Ryanac said. "It's time, and there are some things I need to tell you."

* * * * *

The princess already stood in the gathering beside Markis. She wore a dress of deep red brocade. Her representatives were fanned out opposite and shouting, demanding her release. Tressa answered calmly she was not a captive, but a happily wedded wife.

Much arguing followed her statement, and then she said something Uly failed to catch. The emissary recoiled as though she had slapped him. Colour leached from his skin almost as though he were sickening. Uly caught his words. "Examine her."

He could tell by the tightening of her jaw that Tressa resented this, but she went demurely, her head held high. Ryanac smirked, but his expression held a touch of disgust in it. "They are checking we thoroughly deflowered the princess," he murmured.

"How?"

Ryanac shrugged. "They'll sniff her breath, take a swab of her throat, shove unwelcome fingers where they've no business going, and check for damage, entry, and semen."

Uly swallowed and grimaced. Ryanac's gaze alternated from scanning the assembly and watching his face. "A thoroughly deflowered princess, particularly one deflowered by more than one Swithin, is of no use to them. They will have to accept the marriage. Before that, of course, we expect them to react with violence. They will use this as an excuse for a war and use her that way, as a symbol of treachery. Once Markis responds to that, and makes them understand she is coming with us, they'll have no choice but to accept it. They will not like it, but they will accept it, though they will also accuse us of degrading her and corrupting her so pure and innocent flesh."

The words the envoy currently aimed at Markis seemed to support this theory. Markis stood there ignoring the torrent.

"You need not fear she faked what happened last night. I told you of the needs of Azulite women. As to what Markis or I feel for you, for her, for each other, you can have faith in it. The four of us became a force to be reckoned with during the night ... if we can only survive the rest of the day."

How had Ryanac known what he was thinking? He had answered Uly's fears anyway. The princess needed them, and in some strange way, they needed the princess. None of it changed anyone's feelings. The princess returned, walking as elegantly as she had left. No emotion touched her expression, though she held her small hands clenched. Uly tugged on Ryanac's hand. "What you are saying, he can't possibly pull it off. They won't believe he will do such a thing. They'll never believe he'll risk hurting his own people."

"He will, and they know it. When they feel it, they will believe. They will have no choice." Ryanac paused, glancing into his eyes. "As for our people here, they know what's coming, though we brought only the number that was necessary. Still, if he loses control, distance might have no bearing. Survival could be a thing of dumb luck. This is his duty. The king is too weak now. The threat had diminished. Enemies see weakness and grow confident. This is why Shavar exists and why he has been so afraid to love in case he had to hurt ... to kill those he might love. I talked him into loving you, of allowing himself to feel. Don't prove my judgement wrong."

"You're not. You were not. But ..."

"Uly." Ryanac gazed down at him, and the years of pain, of Markis's training, of their hard and fast friendship shone in the other man's eyes. "This is what he was born to do. No one has ever been this strong. No Swithin has known a prince, a king this strong. The fear is our best weapon may not be able to control his power. Events have forced him to this moment, this choice, before he is ready. That is why I fear him as much as anyone does. Yet given the choice, I would rather die at his side. He is Shavar. He is not called Shavar, the Comet, for nothing."

In that moment, Tressa turned her back on the gathering. She walked away from Markis, from all of them straight towards Uly and Ryanac. Breathing in deeply, Ryanac gave her a small nod. She stood close to them and then turned back to the circle. She was shivering, and Uly placed a hand on her shoulder.

She really was a slight thing. How could she look six feet tall when arguing with her own people? How had she taken three men in her bed at once, come to that?

"I have warned you," Markis said. His voice rang out clear. "Throw down your weapons." Instead, several of the Azulite army drew their swords. Uly tensed. Even though Ryanac had explained what would happen, every nerve in his body screamed it was wrong for the captain of the guard to stand motionless and not defend his prince.

At once, the wind kicked up. Markis had started to flow. "Now," Ryanac said and at once, they rushed towards him. As they reached his side, the power appeared as a thin nimbus around him. Then it thickened and expanded outwards. The golden glow sent pain through every nerve ending -- a pain that settled in every one of his teeth. Uly tried to stifle the moan, though Tressa and Ryanac were similarly afflicted. The initial glow had made the Azulite army hesitate, but now seeing the three close to Markis, they grew confident.

"Don't harm the princess," the envoy's voice rang out. Too late the men surged forward. Looking at Markis, Uly saw the colour bleed from his eyes replaced by midnight, and in the midst of night, stars.

Ryanac tugged him down, and he fell to the ground. Like the princess, he wrapped an arm around Markis's leg, she on the left, and he on the right. In front of them Ryanac put his arms around all of them and leaned his head against Markis's knees.

"Don't look, Uly. You might not like what you see," Ryanac warned him, but too late. The men who had touched the outside of the now glowing circle shrieked.

Even if Uly had closed his eyes, he could not close his ears. Like Tressa, he whimpered, and at once Markis's fingers came down to touch his hair. The pressure within the circle increased. He feared his eyes might bleed.

"Shouldn't we be away from here?" Uly managed to ask. Their soldiers had certainly begun running away just as they had run forward; he found that disturbing.

"No." Strangely, Tressa replied. "We would die with all the rest for sure."

"She's right. Right now the safest place is right by his side."

"And you're not even sure how safe that is."

"No." Ryanac gave him one of his grins. "No man has ever touched the power of the comet like this before."

"What comet?"

"An old legend," Tressa said. "It fell to the world years ago, decimating the land for miles around for many years to come. Only one man walked from the decimation. That ground is where the Swithin city now lies. That man became the first Swithin king."

These men burn with the destructive force of the comet. Ryanac had said that to him, but he hadn't fully understood what it meant until now.

Incredibly, Ryanac was laughing. "The old fools tried to teach Markis to control all this power by denying his needs, making him thirsty, hungry, and starved for sex and affection. I told him to love somebody. I told him this was the way to control the comet." Ryanac was shouting, yet it seemed unlikely anyone outside of his embrace could have heard. The comet didn't manifest silently.

"Why?" The plaintive sound in Tressa's voice said that she was as amazed as Uly. "What made you think you knew better than his teachers?" She sounded as though she feared they had made a mistake. The same thought had occurred to Uly.

"Because I know him. I know what he needs, and he needs us. He needs us to love him and to be able to love us back. Like me, he's a man who needs his desires met, not restrained. Right now, he needs us to ground him." Ryanac's voice was so strong, and so confident, it caused the fear to retreat. The way Markis stroked his fingers through Uly's hair, told him that Markis could hear their conversation and agreed with it. Maybe he even shared Ryanac's laughter. "Close your eyes, Uly," Ryanac told him. "Before you go blind."

That described it mildly. His eyes stung and wept. He happily complied.

Now in darkness, he had only sensation. The pain in his jaw threatened to engulf him, but other impressions held it back. His limbs shook now, as though the muscle wanted to detach from bone. His skin didn't crawl; it wanted to crawl *away*. He shivered from heat, not cold, but the effect was the same. His head buzzed; his breathing hitched. His heart struggled for each beat, and beneath all this, his cock had grown hard. The hand on his head caressed him as though Markis knew even this. Uly reacted by sliding his hand further up the leg until his fingers nestled in the heat of Markis's groin. He pressed tighter and turned his face into Markis's thigh.

While he had quickly explained what Markis wanted of them, Ryanac had said the centre of the circle would be the calmest. If this was calm, Uly did not want to know what those outside the circle were feeling. He couldn't even think and gave himself up to random ideas and images, aware death lurked in their midst.

"Hear me." Markis's voice burned through the storm. Despite the pain and confusion, that voice rang out perfectly clear. It rang inside his skull. There was no question everyone present heard this too.

"You want war. You want death. I will give you death. I am Shavar, and I will have peace, or I will kill each person with war in his or her heart. You Azulites are not the only guilty ones in this. The Swithin king wants me to annihilate all of you, so that only the Swithin survive. That is what he believes I have come for. It is what my own council believes I have come for. I will have none of it."

Uly imagined Markis surveying the landscape and the men groaning at his feet. The shrieks had ceased. Their pain had gone beyond cries. The odd whimper and moan was all any of them could manage, and Uly couldn't even manage that.

"I have told you what I can do. I have told my own council, but none of you cares to believe. Therefore, I show you. I will have absolute peace from Azulite and Swithin alike. Tressa is now my wife, and we are one nation. Let any man or woman refute this to my face. All or nothing, those are my terms."

Yes. Yes yes yes. Just make it stop. The sentiment echoed from several thousand minds.

"Uly." He opened his eyes at the sound of his name. Ryanac had a hand on his shoulder. The big man still knelt, blinking, tears streaming from his eyes. He wiped them away and gazed around. Uly wiped tears away also. He wasn't crying, yet tears ran down his face. A small gasp escaped Tressa, and she wiped the back of her sleeve across her eyes likewise. Aware now, they all gazed around blinking, as though surprised to find the power had died down, or perhaps amazed to discover they were still alive. Markis's fingers still tangled in his hair, but the touch had grown light. Uly stared out at a landscape of fallen men. Even as he watched, some struggled to their feet or to their knees if they could not stand just yet.

Turning his head, Uly turned his gaze up to Markis. The man scanned the sea of frightened faces and then, as though sensing Uly looked at him, he turned his face downwards. His eyes held golden flecks now, and Uly suspected they would always be there.

"Will it work?" he asked, amazed he had the courage. His voice sounded as though it came from some distance. Ryanac chuckled and that, too, sounded distant and slightly echoey.

"For a time. They will slink off home and lick their wounds until they grow complacent. Then one day someone will try again. By then Shavar will have had a few more lessons and be able to direct that temper of his. Who knows, maybe he will even be able to control it. Then they will see what they are truly up against. He won't have to risk everyone's lives to use it. He will be invincible."

"And until then?" Both Uly and Tressa asked, staring at each other in surprise before looking back to Ryanac.

"Until then, they have to get through me. Now we go to the Swithin City where Markis will reside as the new king and Tressa his queen. Now, we take this man we all love safely home." Ryanac looked up to Markis and winked.

Home? Uly didn't realise he had said it aloud until Markis's fingers slid further into his hair. He looked up and saw Markis's suggestive grin. Then the expression broke apart as he spoke a solitary word. "Samir."

 THE END 

Glossary

Markis -- pronounced Mar-ques; (Marques: Portuguese - nobleman); (Shavar: Hebrew - Comet)

Uly -- pronounced Yuli; (Ulysses: Latin - wrathful); (Samir: Arabic - entertaining companion)

Ryanac -- pronounced Ryan-Knack; (Ryan: Irish - Little king); (Silas: Latin - forest dweller)

‘S’ names are designations rather than names.

Shadd -- happy-go-lucky (as a child)

Swithin -- strong

Simeon -- little hyena (a scavenger)

Sidon -- fine linen, masculine (night sidon - a male’s nightgown)

Sidony -- fine linen, feminine (night sidony - a female’s nightgown)

Sundip -- enlightened

Safiyah -- best friend

Samir -- entertaining companion

Shaylah -- blind (someone who refuses to see)

Sharon Maria Bidwell

Sharon Maria Bidwell was born one New Year's Eve within the London area. Since having her first short story accepted and the editor announcing her as "a writer who is going places," her work -- poems, short stories and articles -- have appeared steadily in print and online publications. Previously, she kept the erotic side of her writing separate. The genre appealed though as it allows her the freedom to create something more expressive, less oppressive. She firmly believes that having a chance at such "free reign" reflects favourably in her work. It has always been a part of her personality in that she likes surprising and delighting people. She links her most favoured and often most successful work closely to fantasy, though her writing crosses genres. *Uly's Comet* is her first novel.

She loves reading, the movies and going to the theatre and spending time with a few very special people. Her friends are waiting to discover something she isn't good at. She often thinks about moving but lives primarily in a world of her own. Visit this diverse writer's site at: <http://uk.geocities.com/theviewoveraonia>.