

Windbrothers



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TOP SHELF

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They will rise -- a child of the sun, raised in the light and then banished into the darkest agony will be sent to guard one kissed by the moon and tossed into a harsh light.

They will rise -- neither of full blood, of full family.

They will rise -- unto them they will gather others and that which has been broken, will mend.

They will rise -- brothers within the wind, two lives bound together.

- The Ba'shin Oracle

preface

The sands whisper. The faki that hunt us and call us peshir, call us animals, call us dogs and hags and evil -- they tell their soft bellied children that we get our magics from the asp and the black scorpion and the red spider that hides beneath the tiak branches and waits for her prey.

They are, of course, fools.

The sands sing to their children, leading us into the deep deserts to hide and then sending us back to where the infidels sleep. Our ways are the ways of the storm, building quietly beyond the dunes and then sweeping down, raining terror and blood and fears and then dissipating and leaving nothing but sand behind.

Yiama and Joat came to me, told me that a stranger was coming, sent by the sands. She would demand sacrifice and she would share great knowledge -- her stories would be of a time before the sands, when the water held no salt and our second children were not left for the wild dogs, but treasured as the first. Yiama said our visitor had been consort to the moon; Joat that her touch welcomed death.

We have always paid the tribute the sands demand, but Yiama wept with fear and Joat ran into the sands, gouged out his own eyes. It seems somehow fitting that he should be the first sacrifice given up.

She came today, over the dunes on a mount bleached pale, wrapped in a dark veil. I knew, when I saw her, that she was Death and that she would demand great tribute for the honor of serving her. She feeds now and then we shall speak, the Lady Death and I, about before and now and her wishes.

The sands whisper to me and they tell me that something is coming and that this is just the beginning.

chapter one

"Two thousand bags of kelaph grain, five hundred bushels of hymacyth and eighty bolts of silk."

A late afternoon breeze blew through the wide windows, bringing with it the promise of night's cool winds. The heavy silk tapestries, with his father's seal and lineage worked in by his mother's hand, barely moved. The wind, frustrated in its attempts to affect the thick pottery strewn about, instead tickled Surial's papers. They fluttered on the heavy desk, butterflies caught in a twilight meadow.

"The Seika Vorani, my Helan. The silk is raw, to be dyed purple." Rowan's voice was sure, confident. "The man is marrying off his third daughter after the autumn monsoon and the girl believes the color reduces the ruddiness of her skin."

Surial nodded over with a grin. "Perfect, as always. Is the girl marrying a local?"

"No, my Helan. There is a Seika from Begida who seeks a wife. His first was lured away by a desert witch and he needs someone to sit and rule over his harem." His personal Rowani was standing, deceptively relaxed, by the door, his traditional myklos, the asp's fangs, hanging curved upon each thigh. Rowan blended into the tapestries -- bald head, traditional Rowani browns. Even the steel-tipped whip draped around his arm seemed simply a part of the background. "The wedding promises to be a huge event, not unlike your brother Yulial's -- except the vows will not be said upon our blessed cliffs."

Surial sighed, unaccountably annoyed -- whether by the sight of those weapons, the reminder of their homeland, or the fact that Rowan had, yet again, uncovered the best gossip faster than he could, he couldn't say. "I don't need to be guarded in my own home, Rowan. I'm perfectly safe."

"Yes, my Helan, but allow your Rowan his duty."

Smoothing the edge of stacked parchments, making sure they were flat, Surial leaned forward, resting his chin in his hands. "I get tired of hearing those words from you, Rowan."

Dark eyes twinkled at him, for a moment as young and carefree as when they had played together upon Sandide's cliffs. "I believe they were the first words I ever learned, Helan."

"Really? I distinctly remember your mother telling me your first words were 'in the water, mam'. There has never been a man who loved the water more than you, Chedar."

"Rowan, Helan. Chedar died when he gave his hair and his name and his status to serve the Banshinaree line."

"Yes, yes. I know." Surial forced his attention back to business. Only a few more papers to sign and then he would be caught up, seeing that each bag of grain or finely wrought necklace was inventoried and accounted for. There would be another batch to sign tomorrow, and the day after that and so on and so on; it really was the most tedious way to spend one's time. Almost as tedious as answering one of his father's missives, silver

crest across the seal, seeming heavy with disappointment.

He popped the seal, reading quickly, knowing that Rowan's eyes rested heavy on him, desperate for any news of home. Rowan hated it here, far more even than he himself did -- hated the unending heat, the filth, the sand, the constant strain of being an outsider. The loneliness.

"Father says your mother is well. The summer festivals are beginning and the lamps are being hung to honor the dead. My mother's will be green and... oh. Armsmaster Penoc's will be blue."

Rowan's eyes met his, shocked and sad. "Penoc? No, Surial, say it is not so."

Surial nodded, as much as he hated swords, he had loved the scarred old man, and to Rowan he had been as father. Surial's father had insisted he and his brothers learn to defend themselves, even though each of them would have a Rowani of their own. He could still remember the first time Asual had drawn blood from the swordmaster. Surial had been horrified. He'd brought the man a bandage, stockinged feet slipping on the tile...

The gruff man had just chuckled at him, long hair brushing the hem of the heavily embroidered jacket. "Not the first nick I've had, won't be the last -- in a couple of years it'll be you nicking me, young Helan."

And he had, lest Penoc be punished for Surial's cowardice. His father didn't play fair; the old man never had.

"I am sorry, Rowan. He was a good man." Surial bowed his head. "Would you... I would send you back home, back to our people. It is not you who was banished."

"My Helan. You carry no sword and have not since yours sank into the ocean as we left the cliffs." Rowan smiled, his look sad. "I have given my name, my place for you. I belong at your side." Thick, strong fingers stroked over the whip on his shoulder, made from part of the long black hair, the symbol of his status that he had sacrificed to become Rowan. "One day we will return home."

"Yes." He could not make himself look any more, speak any more. Surial read the next document and planned his evening. Drinks and dinner at his club, perhaps a game or two of cards or a spot of betting on the dog races before he moved on to the playhouse. A new season was starting and he was looking forward to the diversion of new acts, new plays, and new scandals. Some pleasant diversions were sure to present themselves after the play; Lady Motring's nephew had just joined her household and the boy was quite lovely, all pale slender limbs and dark ringlets. Surial had caught his smoky gaze more than once in the past week. There was also the promise of new players having joined the troupe that made Azize their home every summer. More than one comely young actor had caught his eye in the past. They were a vapid lot, but often so pretty and eager to please.

He signed the last document and pulled the rope that would bring Argent, not meeting his Rowani's eyes. Argent arrived shortly, graying hair cut short and neat against his scalp, white pants and shirt smooth and unlined though it was the end of the day. The Banshinaree colors were woven into the tunic, light blue and rose threads making subtle patterns along the edges of the garment.

"These are ready to be delivered. Have a bath drawn and evening clothes laid out. I'll dine at the club, but I'll take some of whatever sweet that Madrise is baking. The smell's been taunting me all day."

"Very good, sir. Was there anything else?"

"No." Surial waved his fingers dismissively, barely noticing Argent's bow, and made his way over to the window.

The house overlooked a wide, open street. It was far enough away from those across the avenue that he could see past them to the sea beyond the worn stone walls that marked the edges of Azize. The blue-green waves were relentless, eternally throwing themselves on the sand with abandon, only to be sent back the way they came.

He often felt like those waves, endlessly beating himself upon the sands of life.

Surial arrived at the Seven Swords, pleased to see Yamin was already there. His friend's carriage was sleek and elegant, the horses mincing lively every time someone passed. He grinned at the fierce lion with its sword on the crimson crest. Yamin's family's symbols were so incongruous with the portly, jovial man; it was easy to forget that he came from a line of fierce leaders. Surial had never met the Yamin's sire, but judging by the stories, his mother had married outside of her class and Yamin's father had been jovial himself, kind and not at all battle ready. However, Sieka Delavani's wines were the best in all of Azize, the man able to coax the sweetest flavor from the wine, and Yamin had inherited that ability along with the man's more gentle soul.

"Argent?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I will ride with Sieka Delavani. Go home and put your skills into finding me a groom that can manage more than stealing, neglecting, or abusing my mounts!"

"Yes, Helan. As you wish it." At least the man had the good grace to look ashamed.

Rowan trailed him into the club, silent as a wraith. His Rowani ducked out to eat in the servants' dining hall once they saw that Yamin was waiting, already seated. Rowan could see him from there, he knew it without a doubt. Surial waved a hand in dismissal at the host, Lutart, and made his way over to the table.

The Seven Swords was busy this evening, the tables full, the room a cacophony of sound: silverware against china, stemware and crystal meeting, and the buzz of conversation punctuated now and then by a heavy bass laugh or the shrill voice of one of the ladies. The evening breeze cooled the day's heat through the narrow windows, the heavy red brocade curtains pulled aside to let it in.

Surial wrinkled his nose; the stench of roast meat was heavy in the air; he hoped there would be something meatless on offer from the kitchen or he would end hungry and irritable all night.

The material of his bakai whispered softly against his skin as he crossed the room, only the crimson surcoat and matching turban kept him from standing out among the crowd of nobles dressed in the latest fashions Azize had to offer. At least the wide bustles of two seasons ago had been declared outmoded and déclassé, so he didn't have to fight skirts as he made his way through the crowded tables.

"Well met at day's end, Yamin," he greeted as he sat in the chair opposite his plump friend. Yamin was handsomely dressed, preferring dark, cool colors to the bright plumage of the trendsetters. His coat was a dark blue that matched his leggings, his shirt white accented with gold.

"Ah, Surial, well met." Yamin looked over at him, a quick smile replacing his well-practiced hangdog expression. "I was hoping the cool evening would find you out and civilized, even though you still have not

visited my tailor, I see. Still wearing the clothes of a foreigner..."

Surial forced himself not to chuckle. He knew that look, knew it as well as he knew that Sieki Vinesh would be shoving her overgrown and overrated cleavage beneath every young man's nose by the dessert course.

"So, did Pela catch you whoring? Or was it money this time?"

Yamin grinned, unrepentant. "Well, which is it when she catches a dancing girl wearing one of her old necklaces?"

Surial did chuckle at that, even as he shook his head. "Why you feel the need to attempt to lock yourself down with the affections of a single woman still eludes me." He looked up at Yamin and raised a single eyebrow before drawling, "Especially when you are so incredibly atrocious at it."

"My mind is willing, but they look at you with those big eyes and those big... hearts and I cannot disappoint them." Yamin lifted his glass, swirling the pale liquid around with a knowing grin. The lamp shone through the wine, its light flickering, magnified by the polished brass plate set behind it. "Besides, Pela's father owns the best bordellos in the sands. She should understand."

"All too well, I imagine." Surial sat back as their server placed a napkin on his lap.

"Wine, Sieka?"

He nodded. "I hope you have something decent for evening meal tonight." He turned back to Yamin. "Two days ago the only thing edible on the menu was dessert."

"That would be because you are the pickiest hamman known to the sands." Yamin rolled his eyes. "The way you complain one would think you were a fat spinster looking for a man who still had teeth."

"The menu features lentil soup, Sieka, with bread and cheese. Then roasted kid goat with mixed tubers and pastries with honey and cream for dessert."

"Don't bring me any of the kid; the rest actually sounds edible though -- wait, was the soup made from a meat broth?"

"I would have to check, honored one."

"You do that, and I'll have it if the broth is vegetable based." He resettled his napkin and grinned at Yamin's raised eyebrows. "The meat fat unsettles my stomach. Trust me, Yamin, you'd rather not have me at your table were I to eat it. Meanwhile you might consider staying away from it yourself," Surial added with a nod at Yamin's belly.

"Shows I'm prosperous, well-fed." Yamin wagged his eyebrows and stroked his belly. "Easy to catch and keep."

A young girl, eyes and lips made up and dressed in wide pants and a loose top made of a gauzy material designed more to show than to hide, walked up to the table, offering packets of herbs for smoking. Her movements were languid and fluid, the promise of sensuality pouring from her. "Would you like to sample my wares, Siekas?"

Surial's mouth twisted. "You're asking the wrong man."

One of Yamin's eyebrows rose, mocking him. "You don't smoke now, either?" Chubby hands pulled the girl

over, wrapping around her thigh as Yamin looked through her basket. "I'll take these, they make a sweet pipe." A few coins were tossed at the girl and Yamin patted her behind as she sashayed away. "Pretty thing, wasn't she?"

"Beneath you, Yamin. Not worth risking further wrath from Pela. She'll have you on a leash if you aren't careful." Surial straightened his place setting and looked for the server with his wine. He waved at the packet of herbs by Yamin's plate. "Pulling that into your lungs will kill you."

Yamin laughed, leaned back as a servant filled their glasses. "A leash, eh? No... she's not that interesting and we are all dying, my friend. The question is whether you want to pay attention the entire time."

The wine was sweet, clear and cool, washing the almost constant hint of sand from Surial's palate.

Their soup had just arrived when Lutart interrupted them, bowing deeply. "I am very sorry to intrude, honored ones, but as you can see we are quite full tonight. I do hope you won't mind if Siekas Vanshi and Nunhart join you."

Surial hid his frown behind a neutral smile while Yamin nodded obliviously, pointing at the extra chairs with a smile. Surial sighed. Vanshi was an egotistical bore, while Nunhart dealt in the sale of human flesh. They didn't even allow slavers to cross their lands in Sandide, let alone give them titles and business aplenty. It was a disgusting habit. However, it seemed that Yamin had spoken for both of them -- not that his answer would have been different; the people of Azize went in for the quaint idea that all nobles must be friends by virtue of their station. The pair strode in, Nunhart gesticulating wildly, rat-like face sharp and unpleasant, pointed nose twitching. Vanshi stalked beside him, lips curled and eyes scanning the busy room. Surial couldn't help but notice that Vanshi looked less than pleased when he saw with whom he would be sharing a meal.

"Sieka Yamin, Banshinaree." Nunhart settled down beside Yamin, eyes glittering. "How does the day find you?"

"Prosperous," Surial answered with a grin.

Yamin chuckled. "I wish I could say the same, alas, the dogs were not lucky for me last night."

"Then I know who to draw cards against tonight, Sieka Banshinaree." Vanshi nodded to Surial, eyes returning to Yamin. "I hear you are betrothed. Who is the poor girl and why has your factor not come seeking the perfect stone for her wedding band?"

"His Pela is quite a catch, very devoted." Surial winked at Yamin as he answered for his friend.

"Ah, the lovely Pela." Nunhart clapped Yamin on the shoulder. "I have the perfect gift for your beloved, a young girl to do her eyes, fan her in the heat of the day. Or perhaps a guard, to protect her beauty from the peshir's eyes? There is a barbarian in the new stock who..."

Vanshi interrupted. "Bah. The Sieki Pela does not need to be spoken with in the same sentence with that beast you're so proud of. Once you've tired of trotting him out to prove that you can hold the biggest and most violent, sell him to me, I'll put him to work."

"You get better and safer workers if you pay them," Surial murmured, voice dry as the sands, "but if you prefer worrying that you'll be murdered in your bed at night..."

Vanshi snorted. "Pay them? The mines are dangerous at best, deadly as a rule. I'd no more get someone con-

vinced to work and a tunnel would collapse. With vakli, you can lose twenty a day and no one complains, especially if a vein of ore is opened."

Surial's lips tightened but before he could say anything Yamin jumped in. "Perhaps a young girl who can take care of my wife's needs, if you know what I mean. It would make a nice wedding gift, Nunhart."

The servants came, adding and removing plates, freshening drinks. They were exceptionally trained here, almost beneath notice.

Surial turned his head to nod at Sieki Emit, a rather terrifying old dowager who was, quite surprisingly, fond of him. She smiled, huge wig tilting dangerously as she turned to snarl at the petrified young woman beside her. Emit had been the first noble here to embrace him. She was, rumor had it, pleased at how he presented himself at her summons. The truth was, Emit was too smart and too well-read to enjoy many of the nobles' games. Surial, with his long-gathered knowledge, amused her.

Amusement was an extremely marketable commodity in Azize.

When he turned back to the table, Yamin was showing off a lovely bracelet, pale moonstones set in a dark metal, delicate designs etched into each stone.

"Pela's betrothal gift." Yamin's face was surprisingly gentle for the briefest of moments. "It will look fine upon her skin."

"Oh, look," said Vanshi as he dug into his goat, "he's actually in love."

Surial took the bracelet from Yamin's hand. "I'm sure she'll appreciate it." He winked again. "If it makes it to *her* hand."

"Well, it is *intended* for her, that counts for something, doesn't it?" Yamin grinned, tossing his roll over to Surial. "Eat this, too; man cannot live off lentils alone."

"No, he needs plenty of sugar as well."

"You do eat less than a vakla's share," noted Nunhart.

"Couldn't do a vakla's work though, could you, Banshinaree?" Vanshi wiped the gravy from his chin with his sleeve.

"And why in the world would I need to?" Surial blinked at Vanshi, eyebrows creeping up into his hairline.

Yamin was beginning to chuckle, round face flushing. Even Nunhart looked amused. Vanshi went a little red in the face and choked on his food. "Well, a man has to have energy to satisfy their bed partner, now don't they?"

"I haven't had any complaints, Vanshi. Nor do I see the fair virgins lining up at your door." He couldn't stop the wrinkle of his nose.

Yamin cackled loudly. "That's because he has a harem above his bedroom. Girls just slide down this pole and bounce onto his bed." He winked at Surial. "I'm *so* envious."

Surial chuckled, his mood lightening as the main course was cleared away, the stench of meat going with the plates. "Now that would be something to see."

Nunhart and Yamin both laughed uproariously. Vanshi flushed and then chuckled, eyes cool. "Yes, well, there are times when a man needs to be a man, Sieka Banshinaree. I don't think that's something signing shipping invoices can teach you."

"Perhaps not, but you'd be surprised how much experience six older brothers can pack into one's youth."

"Six?" exclaimed Yamin. "I didn't realize it was that many; no wonder you came so far to make your own fortune."

Surial smiled and nodded his head at his friend. Though many might have guessed, there were none who knew for sure that his tenure in Azize was rather less than a choice on his part. None but his Rowani.

Nunhart bobbed in his chair as the dessert trays were presented. The man was in constant motion, hands and mouth moving like the wind. "I was not blessed with any brothers. I have four sisters and I lived in fear of them; they move in packs, women do."

"I think one is only blessed with brothers if one is the eldest." Surial grabbed a second dessert as the tray passed. "I'm hungrier than I thought."

Yamin's eyes twinkled. "Ah, good. I hear there are new dancers at the theatre -- I hear the young Motring is about, too. We should go and find you some trouble and some exercise."

"I'm not the one in need of the exercise, Yamin." Surial looked pointedly at his friend's girth. "I did have my eye on Motring, though."

"You'll never find a wife if you keep dallying with boys." Vanshi was eating his honeyed custard with the same gusto he'd shown the goat, and the same clumsiness, a drop of the sweet syrup staining his blouse.

"Which works out just fine for me. Unlike Yamin, I am not in the market for a wife."

"Just wait until you're in love. You'll change your tune then." Yamin waved his spoon at Surial.

"Pah, love is for poets, women and fools." Vanshi frowned. "To be a noble, you must further your line, have fine sons to serve as your immortality."

"And you cannot have love at the same time?" Yamin shook his head. "One decides to be in love."

"Some of us would be happy to just get a discount rate with the courtesans." Nunhart's voice was full of self-pity, but his eyes were mischievous.

"Some of the greatest love poems of all are written for courtesans." Surial finished his dessert and sipped happily at the sweet after dinner liqueur the Seven Swords was famous for. It was made from the flowers of the lyan – the magic of the moon seemed to glow within the crystal. It was the main reason he ate here as often as he did. "It is the subject of a number of tragedies by everyone from Lazona to Briante."

The entire table groaned in unison, Yamin finishing his lyanette with a flourish. "Come on, Sieka Banshinaree. Let us find you a lover before I'm subjected to another three candlemark discourse on the metaphor of late-Hazorian meter."

"It's a very engrossing topic," began Surial.

Another groan filled the air and Yamin stood. "Come, friend. The night grows old and there are entertainments awaiting us. Your books will wait for the morning."

"You know it wouldn't kill any of you to open a book yourselves." Surial shook his head at the bored looks that met his gaze. Shrugging, he got up to join Yamin. "I keep imagining I should donate a library to the town and then I ask myself, 'what would be the point?'"

"Would there be erotic books in this library?" Yamin grinned and threw some coin on the table. "Maybe ones with illustrations?"

Surial added his own to the pile, laughing. "If it would get you through the door, I don't see why not."

They meandered out of the club, stopping here and there to say their goodbyes, to share their plans, to play yet another part in the at once complex and mind-numbing game that was Azize nobility.

"I hear the new play is quite interesting -- the tale of Oymn and Fethir and their struggle to build the jewel of Azize upon the sands so their people would flourish." Yamin grinned over. "The Magistrate must be considering raising taxes, to hire that play done."

Surial yawned. "I've read the history of Azize by Lemont and several others, as well. Interesting isn't the word I would have used. I hear that the boy they've hired to play Oymn is quite comely."

"All doe-eyed and slender, kept close and fine by his troupe." Yamin's carriage pulled up, its dark wood shining and rich. A young boy hurried to pull the door open as Yamin climbed inside, Surial's Rowani climbing up to sit with the driver. "Looking for a sponsor, too, from the rumors."

Surial shrugged as he climbed in after his friend, the rich, red velvet seats enveloping him in comfort. "That would depend entirely on how good an... actor he is."

"I'm sure he's been well-coached. These peshir know how to assure their position among their betters, my friend." A quick grin was visible in the flare of light as Yamin lit his small pipe. "Now he just needs you to show him new... positions, yes?"

His nose wrinkled at the scent of Yamin's pipe; it was similar to a blend his father used to smoke in the evenings when he was young. He squashed the memory as he grabbed Yamin's pipe, opening the door and knocking out the contents. "If he's been as well-coached as you think, he should be familiar with all the positions."

"Surial!" Yamin reached for his pipe, looking vaguely like a disgruntled camel. "I was smoking that!"

Surial waved his hand through the air several times before letting the door close again. "It stank." He sat back and regarded Yamin. "I could walk if you'd prefer."

"Tell me, Sieka Banshinaree, is there anything you're not particular about?" Yamin tucked his pipe away in his jacket and settled back into the cushioned seat.

He grinned wryly and raised his eyebrows. "My friends?"

Their joined laughter followed them to the front of the playhouse. The crowds were beginning to gather -- a multitude of jewel tones competing for attention, stunning dark women draped in diaphanous layers of silk which billowed in the gentle winds, guarded by eunuchs dressed in white. Myrrh scented the air, as did the heady sweetness of jasmine oil.

It was lovely and gaudy and exactly the same as last year's season and the one before that and the one before that, except for the colors and the names and which dowager's daughter would make the biggest splash. It would go on with or without him and it was becoming harder to care which it would be. Azize wasn't his home; these weren't his people. He didn't belong.

He had nowhere else to go.

"Do you want to mingle? You've been absent lately." Yamin straightened his turban with a practiced hand. "I've reserved a pleasant box by the stage."

"Then we should let them come to us."

A short nod answered him. "Oh, and coincidentally, the boy actor's been told to serve you at intermission."

He threw his arm around Yamin's shoulder. "Are you trying to get me rolled, Yamin?"

"Of course, Banshinaree. I'm your friend." They left the carriage and their servants behind, the crowd offering little resistance as they moved toward the door. The top of the theatre was open to the night air, beasts and bugs kept away by massive panels of gauze in every color of the rainbow. The dozens of candelabras inside seemed to be firelight flies, lighting and dancing about. "It's been too long since you had someone mooning over you. It'll distract you from your work."

He clapped Yamin's shoulder as they entered the box. "You know, I've been thinking -- I am particular in my friends after all."

"You just remember that the next time Pela sends me out of the house and I need somewhere to sleep. Ah, there is the box." Yamin pointed at a well-appointed niche, low sofas well padded and tables covered in delicate finger foods and bottles of liqueur.

There wasn't a speck of sand to be found anywhere. Inside the thick stone walls, one could forget the heat and sand that were synonymous with Azize. Hundreds of white candles hung from the ceiling, lighting everything with a soft glow as dozens and dozens of vakla fanned the air. The crowds were light, most people kept outdoors until the nobles were comfortably seated. The well-appointed boxes were arranged around the outside, with a large space before the less valuable seats began. The stage itself was curtained in maroon, a hint of dark shiny wood showing.

Surial slid onto one of the sofas, throwing his turban on one of the tables and relaxing back into the cushions. "Who else will be joining us tonight?"

"I'm not sure. There is a rumor that some of Sieki Hamed's daughters were going to be out tonight." Yamin grinned, the expression vaguely wolfish. "One of them has blue eyes. *Blue*."

"You're incorrigible."

"Yes." They settled, watching the room fill. "The girls love it, though. Your icy distance doesn't seem to be getting you a wife."

Surial chuckled. "What makes you think I'm looking for one, Yamin?" He waved his hand at the feast before them, the stage. "Why would I want to give all this up for a nagging shrew and a house full of screaming children?"

"Surial, look around you. How many of these men have a wife and children? You get them pregnant, give them some money, and then go find yourself a mistress." Yamin poured them both a glass. "Or a sweet boy, in your case."

He sipped at his drink. "So why go through the charade? The misery?"

"It's what we do, my friend. Assure our lineage."

"I know it will shock you, Yamin, but I do not share the same goal. With six older brothers, I have no need to assure my lineage." It wasn't a lie, unless one counted what he wasn't saying, that he had no desire to put a child through what he'd suffered growing up, that even thinking of having children brought up memories he'd rather keep buried. "So how long until we get a glimpse of this purportedly lovely young man?"

"He's in the second act." A lazy wink was directed at him. "And he'll be here to freshen your drink at intermission."

"Just my drink?" Surial drawled the words, giving Yamin a knowing grin.

"That, my dear Lord Banshinaree, is completely between you and the lad in question." Dark eyes twinkled and then Yamin's attention was captured by the form of a slim young woman walking by.

"Oh, my. She's just..." Yamin stopped and shook his head. "What were we talking about?"

Surial chuckled. "You were explaining how you were going to pay me a thousand gold wehan for that painting I acquired last moon."

"A thousand gold... that painting of the moon and that big ugly bird?" Yamin grinned. "I haven't smoked that much, Surial. Not even close."

The crowds were beginning to file in, a low rumble of voices filling the theatre.

"I like that big ugly bird." Surial chuckled. "But not a thousand gold pieces worth."

"I think you put it in your foyer to scare off guests. Oh, ladies! So glad you could make it. Please have a seat!" Yamin's casual attitude was immediately replaced with gentility and suave care as the three dark-haired beauties sauntered in.

Surial nodded, noncommittal, and let Yamin do the lion's share of the work in getting the ladies settled, drinks in hand. He was appropriately flattering and they were suitably impressed and by the time the time-honored dance of flirtation was over, the curtains were beginning to rustle.

He settled in, hoping the play would be at least entertaining. If the young man playing Oymn was all he was supposed to be, chances were Surial would be watching it more than once. A tall, thin man stepped through the curtain, dressed head to toe in bright yellow, the glittery material hanging from him. Surial smiled at the sun, come to play chorus and guide for the audience. When the sun spoke, his voice was low and booming.

"Once, before the oceans kissed the sands with their bitter life, there was no Azize. Then came Oymn and Fethir over the mountains, tired and weary and looking for a home."

The sun continued in the usual manner of narrator and chorus in a play, telling the story in its entirety. Surial had often wondered about this custom; were the playwrights so doubtful that their audience could follow the play?

He let his mind wander as the sun continued to extol the many virtues of Azize and its early history as the foundation of the center of commerce and culture at the edge of the desert. He knew the history of Azize, probably as well or even better than any of its denizens. They were a rather common and dull lot, more interested in gossip and pleasure than culture and history. Even the lowest among his own people could read and was encouraged in creative endeavors alongside more mundane business; the same could not be said of these... people.

Yet, for all its lack, it *was* the jewel of the desert, and its white homes rose from the sands like pristine hills, perched on the sea. The harbor reached out into the water like a glittering crown. It was here the tribes came to trade their wares, here that the peoples from all the continents of the world met to exchange goods. A small number of temples dotted the religious quarter, offering several gods allegiance, though the people of Azize were largely unaffected by even their own gods.

A poke in his ribs brought him back to the present. He shot a glare at Yamin, only to be met with a knowing grin and a nod at the stage. The second act had begun. He inclined his own head, grinning sardonically as Yamin leaned forward to grab another sandwich from a tray. Yamin shrugged and grabbed the entire tray, placing it in his lap as he leaned back against the cushions.

"Save myself the constant reaching," his portly friend whispered and then pointed at the stage. "There's your boy."

Surial turned his attention back to the stage, allowing himself a soft sense of anticipation. Fethir's portly girth was blocking his view, the older man one of the thespians of the company. Surial remembered him from previous years as a decent actor. Finally, he moved across the stage, leaving Surial an unobstructed view of the young man Yamin was trying to interest him in.

He had to admit the boy was lovely. As Oymn, desert wanderer, he was dressed in loose, flowing, and almost diaphanous robes, revealing lithe, bronzed limbs and sleek muscles. The boy's hair was dark brown and worn quite short, curls neatly cropped. He was fair of face, without being too pretty, and his hands, as they waved about, were quite delicate. Now if the boy had a few brains to go with his looks, he might just be the thing Surial was looking for. The theatre season lasted nearly eight moons, just the right length of time for a lighthearted dalliance.

"Just your type, eh, friend?" Yamin whispered low enough that the girls couldn't overhear. "Not too big, not too little. Not too... anything."

Surial looked again and shrugged as Yamin chuckled. "You'll see when he's not so far away and under better lighting. I guarantee you, Surial, you'll be pleased."

"Can he do more than recite lines? I'm not just looking for a pretty face, Yamin. I want someone who won't roll their eyes when I start discussing the poetry of Hazor." He gave his friend a sharp look, knowing well that Yamin's proclivities ran to soft curves, an energetic manner, a pleasing smile, and at least the appearance of very little between the ears.

"Rumor is he'll be leading man within three years and running the troupe in ten." Yamin grinned, "I know you, friend. It's a good match. You have money; he has class. You'll have a good time and part pleasantly."

Surial nodded and then chuckled. "And I'm still waiting to find out the true cost of your efforts, Yamin. And I must warn you now, that I will not entertain any more of Pela's relatives. No cousins, no nieces, no maiden aunts."

Yamin's face fell just slightly. "I don't know what you're talking about, Surial. I would never..."

"Oh, yes, you do, you old dog. Aunt Sophia was a dried-out old prune. I thought I was going to shrivel up into a husk when she got her lips on mine. Tasted like the sand, too." He shuddered at the memory. "And Cousin Rania nearly sat on me thus tragically ending my short life. Your betrothed is the only beauty in her family and while I would never insult her, my friend, that is damning the rest of the family with very faint praise."

It was a blessing that the scene ended and Yamin's burst of laughter was hidden beneath enthusiastic applause. "So you thought Sophia's lips tasted like sand? You should taste her..."

"Sieka Banshinaree! Yamin, darling! How are you?" A small, dark woman, chin as sharp as her voice, eyes glittering fiercely in the light, stood before them. Surial swallowed a chuckle as Yamin sat up, straightening his clothes.

"Pela! Love! I thought you were..."

Pela smiled, the action knowing and cold. "Busy with my poor maiden aunt? No, my betrothed, I am free for the evening."

Surial rose and gave a bow. "Please, Pela, take my seat next to your affianced."

This time he had to turn his chuckle into a cough as Yamin's foot connected briefly with his shin.

Pela's eyes twinkled as they met Surial's. "Thank you, my dear Sieka Banshinaree. You are a gentleman." She sat next to Yamin, her movements practiced and stiffly graceful, almost as if she, as well as her clothing, had been lightly starched.

Surial settled himself on the couch adjacent to Yamin and Pela's, which had the advantage of taking him farther away from the bevy of young ladies whom Pela was now quizzing. He turned to Yamin, grinning at his friend's discomfort. "Remind me again why you fetter yourself with such ties?" he asked his friend, sotto-voiced.

"The future, my dear boy. For my future and my sons' future." Yamin winked. "Your boy's on his way."

Itching to turn, Surial instead gave Yamin a bored grin. "Your future sons... you haven't by any chance noticed that Pela's family tends to run to girls?"

He allowed himself a small smirk and then swallowed it, turning toward the movement he could see out of the corner of his eye. The visage he presented to the young actor was one of calm, almost boredom.

A soft, open smile met him, steady, practiced hands holding a tray. "Sieka Banshinaree, my name is Di'une. I would be honored if you would allow me to serve you."

The boy's voice was like smooth butter sliding over warm bread, pleasing and sensual. Surial reminded himself this boy was an actor and had been primed with information regarding Surial's position in society, his needs and desires, as well as Yamin had discerned them at any rate. Di'une waited patiently for the slight nod of Surial's head and then he knelt beside him, movements flowing and graceful. A drink was prepared and offered up with a quiet smile. "Are you enjoying the play, my Sieka?"

"An old tale, but fairly well told. It certainly beats the debacle of last year's opener." He sipped at the drink, finding it cool, sweet, and only slightly alcoholic. He smiled in pleased surprise. "This, on the other hand, is

a new tale, and quite well told."

The boy was still young enough to blush faintly with pleasure. "I am glad it pleases, my Sieka. How else might I serve you?"

"Do you have time to sit and chat a moment? Tell me your thoughts on this play of yours?" If the boy had no brain he wanted to know right away; there was no use wasting his time.

"Of course, my Sieka." Di'une settled himself back on his heels. "I believe the dialogue is well done, indeed, very evocative and pleasant to the ears. I do wish more risks could be taken with the chorus, but the playwright insists the Sun should speak the plot, so no one misses the salient points."

Surial let an eyebrow rise. "And you would be bolder?"

"I would like some subtlety to the text, yes, honored one. Just because a tale is well-known, does not mean it cannot be quite beautiful and interesting to the ear."

Surial nodded his agreement. "Indeed, one could almost argue that the more you spoon-feed your audience, the more they will come to expect and even need such intervention to enjoy any creative endeavor, thereby stiling the dialogue between artist and audience."

Yamin's snort was almost lost in Di'une's earnest and heartfelt response. "Oh, yes, Sieka! Without the communication, the art form is lost, becoming dead and dull."

"It would be interesting to see how you would treat a similar topic. Do you count play writing among your talents?" He was rushing in, he knew it, but Surial was used to blank stares or derision in reply to his attempts at any discussion that ventured beyond the realm of fabric colors and the latest dance to hit Azize.

"I don't have the touch for dialogue. Not yet." Full lips tightened for a moment before relaxing. "But I'm learning. It is my hope to run a troupe one day, to make great art so that my words live on beyond me."

"The next Onain?" Surial teased gently. "You are certainly a match for him in looks."

Another sweet blush, laughing eyes averted to the floor before flirting up to meet his again. "A man can dream, honored one. Now you, I believe you would be more likely to enjoy the comedies of Delinn -- enough bite to amuse and a great turn of phrase."

Surial inclined his head. "Indeed. Now there is a man who expected his audience to keep up with him. Some argue that is why he died penniless and alone, but my theory is that it had more to do with his wife and six mistresses."

Di'une's laughter was warm and unaffected and quite entrancing, Surial decided. "You may have a point, Sieka. I cannot imagine the muse being able to live in a heart that was so very... full."

The bells chimed, signaling the end of intermission, and Surial found himself genuinely disappointed. "Perhaps you will join us once again when the play is done?"

"It would be my pleasure, honored one." A soft kiss against the back of Surial's hand and the boy disappeared, as gracefully as he'd come. Surial's smile lingered on Di'une's figure and when he turned his attention back to his friend, Yamin had a knowing grin on his face.

Surial felt a matching grin pull at his own lips as excitement fluttered through him. "I make you no prom-

ises, my friend, but I just might be grateful enough to let Aunt Sophia kiss me again."

chapter two

A piece of colored glass glinted in the fine sand, jagged edges catching the brilliance of the midday sun and sending emerald light onto the unending beige. Once, he had bathed in pools of water that same color, spearing fish with Kama. His mother had scrubbed clothing on the bank, laughing as the children played, her curly straw-colored hair a beacon amongst the shiny auburn pelts of the other villagers.

Fresh water, sliding smooth along his skin, cold and crisp, the light filtering through the wide leaves of the takavas, the pale yellow flowers blown loose by the spring winds -- Kade closed his eyes, sinking himself into the memories of before.

Muk's heavy mane, decorated with beads from the games and bones from their kills, tinkling in the moonlight as he rode the perimeter, watching for raiders.

His father's eyes, the color of a doe's pelt, just like his own, sitting and smoking with the elders, deep voice blending in their prayers to the One who is All, the chanting running like lightning beneath his skin.

Waking up to a thunderstorm, lost in a tangle of dogs and friends, heavy pelt of the wataja covering them, one of the younger warriors guarding the children's tents, eyes fierce, cheeks marked, rahat gleaming sharp and deadly at his side.

The sweet laughter of Hassi, black eyes smiling at him across the fire, sweet lips crushed beneath his own, soft musk of her on his fingers, on his tongue, her moans caught within the wild berry bushes.

A slap to his flank saved Kade from drowning in his past. He jerked, slamming his head against the hard wood of the stocks, stars flashing before his eyes for a heartbeat.

"Does it have a civilized tongue?" Kade forced himself not to growl at the man, not to snarl the frustrated rage that had landed him here at auction.

One owner after another - good, bad, all the same. Life at Kasiik's had been hard, but stable. The horses were fine, the food reasonable. A'chaffa! He'd been whipped only on rare occasion, never harassed. Life had been tolerable. Then the head man had come out with the branding irons and announced the slavers were stealing slaves. Kade had fought, upending the bin of coals and attacking the head man with his bare hands.

He wore his clan marks; he wore his scars. He would not wear the marks of a master.

It was a matter of pride that he'd run for a moon before the hunters found him, blistered hands weeping and infected, half-delirious in the sands. Kasiik had whipped him, whipped him again, and then sent him off to auction.

A greasy face appeared before him, breath foul as a three-day dead carcass in the mud. "Do you speak, barbarian?"

Kade closed his eyes. He heard the crack of the whip before the searing heat registered across his shoulders, sharpening his focus, drawing his fury into a fine point to be saved and savored. "I speak."

"Have you any skills, barbarian? Besides bleeding from your master's whip, of course."

"This one is a stable hand, Sieka, they say the horses are drawn to him. He comes from the west. The Naik."

"The rumor is those warriors are fierce as desert lions, more sturdy than oxen." The Sieka's voice was thick, as if the man were drowning in oatmeal.

"Yes. Leave them their hair, the marks upon their cheeks, and you can work them into the sand itself. Cut the braids and they lie down to die."

"Superstitious nonsense."

"What does it matter? It's of little consequence and less bother to leave the ugly things and not waste the wehan." A sharp laugh sounded. "Just soak them in lye soap if the lice bother your delicate nature."

"Lice and vakli? They are natural brothers."

Another memory, sweet as honey, whispered to him beneath the weight of mocking laughter. The plains, open and free, T'lik resting her claws upon his leather-clad arm, bright eyes blinking as they rode. Her golden feathers like metal in the sun. Looking to hunt, to fly.

The rodent of a man stepped away, landing square on the glass. His scream was pained as he hopped about and Kade closed his eyes, unwilling to see those pools yet again splashed with blood.

From one dark, smelly, infested hole to another -- Kade slumped against the wall where he was bound, breath hissing from him as his marked back caught on the rough stone. The slimy one had bought him - A'i-tama, the bastard had bought every able-bodied man in the auction.

Either farming work or mining work, then. Kade shuddered. There was precious little farming done in the desert.

He began to stretch his fingers, forcing the blood to wake the nerves to screaming. He'd seen too many slaves with only one or two swollen fingers left on the end of gnarled arms.

A slave without fingers was a slave who couldn't wield a carelessly forgotten weapon and make an escape.

"Barbarian... you! Are you awake?"

Kade turned his head, focusing on the gaunt face of the man shackled beside him. One eye had been rather crudely removed and blood seeped from the closed eyelid. He forced himself not to turn away, not to shiver.

He forced himself to be grateful it wasn't him.

"I am awake. What want you, old man?"

"Just making sure I'm not the only one left alive here." The breathless voice sent shivers along Kade's spine

and, for a moment, he would have given anything to see the sun. The rough walls seemed almost to crawl with vermin. He could feel the sand pressing against the stone walls, looking to fill the hole, smothering them all.

"I live."

"Not for long," suggested another voice and Kade squinted past the old man to the scrawny youngster. The boy didn't look as if he'd seen more than fifteen winters, but there was a hardness in the lines around his eyes and his mouth.

"I heard them talking. We're going to the mines. One of the other keepers said our new Master," the boy spat on the ground, "works his slaves to death."

"Better death than an eternity in the mines, boy." The old man shuddered, echoing the feelings running through Kade.

"Do you know when we move? When we leave here?" If he was careful and lucky, he could break for the sea, maybe the high desert. Anywhere but the mines.

The answer was forestalled by the creaking sound of wood and a door opened, light pouring in. Several buckets of water were thrown at them, trickling dirt down along Kade's back and into his wounds.

"Look sharp, the Master's coming," ordered a voice, rough with too much sand and too little water.

Kade forced his eyes open, forced himself to ignore the complaints of back and legs and fingers and spirit and focus on the men entering the holding cell. They would hold the secrets of escape, if there were any secrets to be had.

The handler came in first, a tall, emaciated man brandishing a whip. He cracked it with an expert touch, lashing the old man across his thighs. "Eyes on the ground, vakla. Or should I say 'eye'." He cackled, the sound harsh, a vulture's call.

The old man cried out, the sound lost, and Kade fought back his growl. Hate and fury filled him, made him focused and strong. He kept his eyes down, kept himself perfectly still, his control an iron band around his chest. He could feel the filthy water sliding into his cuts, into his blood, sending the infection of these sands deep within him.

The master, the sieka, stopped in front of him, small, soft hands with pudgy fingers testing his muscles. His mouth was opened and it took everything Kade had not to bring his jaw closed on the fingers that poked in, feeling his teeth.

He couldn't help jerking when the cloth at his groin was pushed away, his genitals manhandled. "This one will do well for breeding. Get him cleaned up and move him into the vakla house. There's a half dozen girls that need to be seeded."

The relief from not having to go into the mines warred with the metallic taste of agony at the thought of more of his children born. For a moment, the temptation to fight, to push himself off the edge of sorrow into the emptiness of death, filled him. Kade's well-honed survival instinct won, kept him still, kept him silent, bade him wait.

"This one is not well-trained, Sieka, prone to rage and violence."

The man in front of him shrugged. "So if he misbehaves cut off his balls and send him to the mines." The man squeezed his testicles before dropping them and moving down the line.

His eyes fell upon the talons carved upon his chest, marks of honor, of pride, of strength and responsibility and care long past. He heard the men as they moved down the row, passing judgments and dealing out death sentences on the creatures that had been born men.

His new master left first, walking by without even a glance at the men he had condemned, mind already on whatever he had to do next. A few moments later, the handler came by with two men shackled together behind him. He unlocked the shackles that kept Kade in place against the wall, relooping the chains around his wrists and attaching them to his feet with practiced ease.

They shuffled out into the yard. The sand was hot, almost burning beneath his feet, but Kade barely noticed as the sun's heat blasted him.

His braids fell around him, twisted and matted. He could see the insects that traveled the long copper roads looking for patches of skin to make their home. It occurred to him suddenly that he did have a tribe that depended upon him -- Kadrass, the keeper of the tribe of lice and flies. That amused him, made him chuckle, made his eyes sparkle with something too near madness.

"Clean them up. And mind you don't get tangled in their chains or you'll all suffer the same fate." The handler barked the words at a half dozen dark-skinned young boys who began to pour buckets of water over Kade and the two men next to him.

The handle of the whip touched Kade's chest briefly. "This one's going into the women's house, so make sure you get rid of the vermin."

Kade felt something tugging on his chains and he looked down into a small round face that seemed to be full of big brown eyes. "You're too big, you need to kneel," the boy told him.

The trip down to his knees was familiar and worth it, for the sensation of water upon his body. Even though the sea salt stung his wounds, it was a clean pain and welcome. The smell of lye followed and he set his teeth against the burn that was coming. Small hands worked the soap into his braids and then over his skin, working as quickly as possible. The boy sniffed a few times, clenching his little hands against the bite of the harsh soap.

"Careful, little one. Do not linger. It stings." Kade's whisper was low, pitched so only the boy could hear. He met dark brown eyes with a soft, sad grin, trying to put the boy at ease.

One side of the boy's mouth quirked up into a slow half-smile that was quickly flinched away when the handler's voice called out loudly. "No dawdling, boy, he'll eat you if you aren't careful."

Kade bit back a flash of anger and then winked. "You promise no fear, I promise no biting."

It wasn't right -- those scared eyes, those tiny hands raw with lye when all they should know was play and care.

A quick smile flashed across the small face and then he was rinsing Kade off, water sluicing away the burning of the soap, leaving only its harsh scent behind.

The handler came over and drove an iron stake through Kade's chains before grabbing the other two slaves' leads and moving across the sands. "Get that stink off him, while I take these two to the barns and then get

back to the kitchen."

Kade silently pulled at the stake, but it was stable and firm. He could work it loose, given time, could even use the stake as a weapon, but he needed the child out of the way. "Hurry, a'atosi, and you can tell you soaked a monster."

"Need to get the smelly soap they use in the slave house. The sieka won't want you making the place smell like lye." The boy trotted off, reappearing only moments later with two more boys, each carrying a pair of water buckets. Even the joy of being clean could be made filthy. Kade worked at the spike as the boys washed him, bloody suds sinking into the sand. When they finished, Kade was shuddering, gagging at the scent upon his skin -- rotting flowers and too long-left oil. He smelled like a whore.

Just as they had upended the last bucket over him the handler was back, sending the boys scattering with a crack of the whip. "Get back to your work, you lazy brats."

Unfastening the rusted chains from the stake, the handler tugged Kade to his feet and led him to a small building situated beside what could only be the main house. Kade tensed, looking around. The courtyard was fenced and this one was good with the whip. He could take the handler down, break the thin neck before he screamed. Then he'd have a weapon. If he failed, he'd lose his manhood and spend the rest of his life buried in the mines. The risk was too much, too close.

"Forgive me, Ata," he prayed, hoping the winds that winged his silent prayers to the One who was All blew even across these accursed sands. He followed, trying to ignore his own stench.

The slave house was essentially a single storied box with few windows, small little apertures placed near the roof and too small for even the boys who had bathed him to climb out. There was but a single door and that was closed and barred from the outside. Inside were two doors. The handler pointed to a heavy door with a gilded flower upon it. "These are the sieka's women. You don't touch them. Not that you'll get a chance."

The handler pushed him through the plain door into the back end of the building. It was a single room with several dozen women, some pregnant, some with babes at their breasts, still others plainly childless.

"You all know what you have to do," the handler called out as he pushed Kade in. "If they aren't with child in two moons you'll be taken to the mines with your useless balls cut off and offered to the pigs for dinner."

Kade hit the floor with a thump that rattled his bones and, as the door slammed shut behind him the soft, scared weeping of young girls surrounded him.

He sat there, eyes closed, the smell of rotten flowers all around him.

He'd heard of tribes that buried their dead in tombs piled high with cut flowers, tying them to those places for eternity. He imagined he knew how they felt.

Looking into the glass, Surial wiped at the corners of his mouth and then straightened the sleeves of his orange cloak. The collar sat above the low top of his undertunic and grated him; the color was unbelievably gaudy and just the latest thing in Azize. It would not do to appear unconscious of fashion, but he found himself longing for the garish reds that had opened the season several weeks ago.

Dinner had been a disappointment; he wasn't sure why he kept coming to the club for dinner; Madrise's

cooking was far superior to anything he'd ever eaten here and the latest cook the Seven Swords boasted was really just appalling. There hadn't been a single meal that wasn't tainted with meat, even the dessert, a soft custard with nuts and sugared fruits, had been butchered with pork lard.

He'd have indigestion all night at this rate.

The company had been dismal and he was loath to keep any more of it; cards were out of the question. Even Di'une was chafing at the bit, upset that Surial didn't want to hear, once again, how changing a single word among his lines had lifted the current play from the gutter. Di'une was smart enough, but...focused.

He wondered if perhaps the racing would tickle his fancy; it certainly couldn't be any worse.

He left the powder room, stopping at the edge of the dining hall to find a servant. One appeared at his elbow. "My carriage."

A silent nod and the boy disappeared. Surial sauntered slowly across the room, the long skirts of his robe brushing against his legs.

"Sieka Banshinaree, will you be joining us for a game?" The reedy voice, as oily and rancid as the face that it emitted from, made Surial cringe.

"I must, regretfully, decline, Sieka Vanshi. I have other amusements planned."

Eyes as hard as the diamonds his family had pulled from their mines stared at Surial. "Amusements? Have you fallen so far that you have to search out your amusements on the street like a common peshir? Surely you haven't squandered yourself into poverty so soon?"

Gods above and below, he was tired of what passed for banter among these people. Usually he could count on Yamin's large-hearted presence to keep him from snapping, but tonight even his portly friend was absent. "I'm sure I would find better amusements in the street than here, this night, Vanshi."

While the man was spluttering, he made good his escape; one didn't get the better of Vanshi often and he knew well not to push his luck.

His carriage was waiting, the horses sleek and fine, one of his personal mounts flaring her nostrils and stamping in protest. Dalan despised the carriage harnesses, too proud and stubborn to be happy trapped in tandem with another mount. Surial chuckled and allowed Rowan to see him into the carriage, hands careful against his skin, impersonal and cool. Di'une waited silently for him, offering him a pouting kiss as Rowan closed the door and climbed up next to one of Argent's grandsons who was temporarily acting as groom. He sat and called out. "The races, boy, and hurry. I'll miss the betting if you're slow."

They moved through the dusty streets as if they themselves were in a race, the horses' hooves loud against the stones. He opened the small window, allowing the wind in to kiss his cheeks. It was almost exhilarating.

"The night air is bad for my complexion," Di'une complained. Surial rolled his eyes and closed the window with a sharp motion. Spoiled brat.

It seemed far too long before they slowed. The races were held on the edge of town, lit by smoky lamps and the light of the moon. They were noisy and dusty and altogether rather coarse.

Surial stepped from the carriage, moving immediately to the reserved tents resting atop the ridge of the carved pit that held the track, not caring if Di'une and Rowan followed. The tents were filled with light and

soft pillows and softer skin, lush and available.

Welcoming smiles and nods met him as he entered. He was led to a pile of cushions, a cold drink offered up by a young girl, chains tight between her ankles, keeping her steps careful and graceful. His hands and feet were washed and oiled by a beautiful young man with kohled eyes and perfumed hair.

"Does the honored one wish to lay a bet this evening?" The soft question came accompanied with a parchment, the dogs and their odds listed in a sprawling hand. The peshir holding it was old, sharp eyes peering out at him from a wealth of wrinkles. He perused the list, searching out the underdog, the one with the worst odds for winning. Many of the dogs had already been chosen, but not this one; he enjoyed picking the long shot -- shocking people by backing something that seemed impossible.

He signed his name against Belos, grinning at the wide eyes of the man who'd brought him the betting sheet. "Is the honored one sure that is the dog he wishes to champion?"

"Are you questioning me?"

"Oh, no, Sieka, of course not." The man bowed deeply, showing his respect. "The standard bet is one thousand rukats, Sieka."

Surial nodded and dug in the bag at his waist. A ruby, small but pure, glinted in the lamplight. "This should be suitable."

"Yes, Sieka. May Azik himself smile down upon your choice." The jewel was taken to the betting pool, mixing in with papers of promise, some coin, a few gems and what appeared to be a certain bracelet of promise set with moonstones. Surial shook his head and chuckled. Yamin must be around. The race was about to start, the whistles blowing, and Surial leaned forward. His dog was number twelve, but it was impossible to see the numbers on the beasts as they fought for space in the holding pen. Di'une sighed beside him; the young man had no time for the races, in fact he had very little time for anything that was not to do with the thrice-damned theatre.

The hare, long and lean, was released and the dogs sprang after it, their sleek gray bodies flashing along the track, lightning quick. They moved as one, a flowing torrent of moving flesh. Slowly they separated out, five dogs taking the lead on the pack, Surial's pick with them.

Di'une's thin form settled beside him, leaving the respected amount of space dictated by their station, muttering some ridiculousness about sand and heat and his skin. Surial forced himself to ignore the boy, nodding to Yamin as his friend found a seat. Then both men focused on the race. The noise around the track mounted as the hounds turned the corner, three of the frontrunners moving ahead of the rest and firmly into the lead. Surial's choice, Belos, was still among the leaders, sweat making his pelt shine black.

Another turn and Belos edged ahead of the other two. Surial leaned still farther forward, eyes intent on his dog, heart hammering with excitement. They headed to the final turn, speeding towards the finish. Belos began to lag, the other two almost catching him.

Surial murmured beneath his breath, encouraging the pup as if he could hear. "Come now, don't fade now, Belos. By the whispering gods, go!"

He hadn't had this much bald fun in ages and, as Belos caught a second wind and crossed the finish line well ahead of the others, Surial pumped his hands in the air and gave a laughing cheer. Better than winning was the knowledge that those who had paid to back the "better" dogs would be furious that his little runt had beaten the odds.

"I should have known you would be the one to have backed that mangy cur."

He turned, grinning at Yamin's hangdog expression, and patted the man's thigh. "I don't envy you explaining this one to Pela."

Yamin rolled his eyes, pushing his dark hair away from his face. "Ah, Azik is with you, friend. Pela's going to have my jewels served up for her breakfast, along with fresh quail eggs and some odd fruit her father's had imported from the western islands." Yamin leaned forward, grinning. "I hear tales that the women on those islands go about dressed only in the light of the sun, that their nipples are large and full and their skin softer than silks. We should hire a boat, my friend. Go and see for ourselves."

Surial chuckled. "Well, that's only slightly less dangerous than having to tell Pela about losing her bracelet."

A bored, dramatic yawn sounded from his elbow. "Did you win, Surial?"

He gave a short nod to the young man he was becoming tired of and then motioned for another round of the sweet fermented drink, made from the young shoots of the flat, round sucinali that thrived in the high desert.

Yamin's eyes were twinkling. "Well, what other treasures will you call your own, Surial? Goats, horses, jewels?"

As if on cue the old peshir returned to the tent, all toothy false smiles and grand gestures. In his clutches was the tray loaded down with Surial's winnings. "Congratulations, Sieka Banshinaree, I had no idea you had such a good eye for choosing the dogs."

Surial laughed and shared a look with Yamin; these peasants were all alike, wanting only their cut and a tip on top of that. He picked up Yamin's betrothal bracelet, sharing another devilish look with his friend before tossing it to the manager.

"Oh, thank you, honored one, you are more than generous." The man bowed obsequiously and Surial waved him away impatiently.

Yamin glared, even as he laughed. "You are demon-spawn; there's no question. I suppose I should be grateful you gifted it to someone I can buy it back from when the night is through. Wonder if Pela could tell her stones were owned by a peshir?"

"Well, the priests say the moonstones will blacken if touched by an impure hand, but Pela has worn it for several weeks. Surely the peshir can't hurt it in an evening."

Yamin snorted, almost choking on his drink, spilling the faintly green liquid in his lap. Black eyes twinkled over at him, Yamin's perpetual humor bubbling to the forefront. "A demon, come to torture me and disrespect my beloved. Now, demon, what have you stolen from your betters?"

There were several jewels along with his own, trinkets that he pocketed with hardly a second glance, after dropping one in Di'une's waiting hand. Two of the promissory notes were for the amount in gold wehan, one for a baker's shop, several were for various combinations of livestock, cows, pigs, chickens and sheep. The largest piece of paper he saved to last, unfolding it to discover they were the papers on a vakla. Surial made a face, curling his lip up in disgust. Really, what was the point of owning a vakla when money could buy you better workers who took their problems home with them?

"A vakla? Interesting. Will you claim it, then? Or just let them sell it and take the fee?" Yamin leaned back

on the pillows, stretching out long legs. "I had a vakla once, a few years back. She was useful enough; spread her legs willingly, you know. I finally sold her over to the foreman of the mining camps. She was too coarse for public view. Made the house look shoddy, with her scars and clumsy habits."

"Scars?"

"From beatings and whippings, you know how these vakli can be -- a recalcitrant bunch in my experience." Yamin waved his hand, apparently unaware of Surial's mild horror.

Another reason he preferred servants to vakli; you were unhappy with a servant's attitude or ability and you fired them, threatened to have their hands cut off first if you found them stealing, and then escorted them from the house. Really, Sandide was far more civilized than Azize and Surial felt the familiar wave of resentment toward his father go through him.

He looked at the paper in his hand, fully prepared to send Argent to the auctions with it before the vakla even stepped a foot inside his home, but something stopped him. Another look at the paper revealed it to be from Lord Vanshi and it struck him that the man would be annoyed at having lost, but even more so at having lost to Surial himself. He called a runner over and sent a message to Vanshi to have the vakla delivered to his house in the morning.

At Yamin's questioning look, Surial shrugged. "I'm curious, and besides, my luck is in tonight. I may have won myself one of those girls who dance."

Yamin laughed, "If you did, I expect you to throw a feast to introduce her. You coming to the playhouse? I hear the play tonight is quite good -- a tale of the gods and the tricks they play on the wicked. But then you'd know all about it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, actually, I have already seen it and I was less than impressed. I'll pass."

Yamin's eyes rose to his hairline. "Problems? You and the theatre seemed to be getting along well."

"I was just less than impressed with the choice of material this season, and there's so much left of it." The young man beside him made an unhappy noise, but Yamin laughed.

"I think you really like him, my friend."

"What do you mean?"

"All the fussing and sniping." Yamin was grinning at him knowingly.

"Don't be ridiculous, I fuss and snipe at everyone."

"No you don't. Only your friends and staff. The people you don't care for at all you ignore, snub and make nasty remarks to."

Surial made an indelicate noise. What utter nonsense. "Well I certainly don't plan to marry the boy!"

Yamin laughed, the sound rich and hearty.

"My lord, I'm afraid I missed the joke," murmured Di'une.

"Of course you did -- you heard me mention the theatre and your head immediately made its way there, in

other words, it was buried up your ass, as usual," sniped Surial. Yamin laughed all the harder. "And you -- I'll sic my Rowani on you!"

Yamin looked as if he were going to expire from his laughter.

Rowan stepped forward from his place at the back of the tent. "My Helan?"

"Stand down, Rowan -- it was a joke!" snapped Surial, his irritation growing and not helped by Yamin finding this just as funny as the short exchange with Di'une.

"I am surrounded by fools," he muttered.

"Yes, my friend," Yamin said, patting his shoulder. "And we are fond of you as well."

Surial huffed and waved him off. "Go and rescue your bride's jewels and I'll have the carriage brought. It isn't as if I have a thing to do at home."

With a nod and a quick grin, Yamin went to haggle and Surial motioned for a servant.

The moon shone down upon the track, one of the dogs howling, the remains of the rabbit almost cleared away.

Surial finished his drink quickly and moved towards his carriage, away from the dust and mess of the tracks and towards soft scents and cool rooms. He had dallied amongst the commoners enough for one day.

Savina liked the Taliksana. There were several groups of them, nomads that traveled in small bands outside of the few large cities. She didn't need to hide with them, didn't need to pretend. They knew what she did, how she lived and they accepted it at a price she could afford.

Mareta, wise and solemn, with a quick, husky laugh and a surprisingly sharp sense of humour, was all that a ruler should be. Surprisingly, Savina enjoyed her company, perhaps one day long ago, they might have been friends. Perhaps. She kept her gloves on, but drew back the veil from across her face whenever they were together. It was a rare gift, but one that spoke of trust and intimacy between peers.

"I am searching for one who is lost," she told Mareta.

The old woman cocked her head as if listening to something, silver hair shorn to the scalp, black marks of power etched on her forehead. "You search for one who lives among the faki? Your lost one is not Taliksana, not a child of the sands."

"No, the sands are not his home, nor are the faki, though he lives among them. Your people visit the faki sometimes, go into their city?"

"Yes. The young ones walk freely, the faki buy their trinkets, their gifts." The dark eyes glittered. "When you do not have the worth of animals, you are invisible in the faki's eyes."

"It can be valuable, the gift of invisibility." It gave you the element of surprise, allowed you to strike before your enemy was even there, let you study your prey and know his habits before you leapt to kill him.

"Yes. How can my people serve you? Shall I send young ones to flush your lost one from the faki?" The winds were beginning to blow and a silent, black-haired boy with eyes white as the sands drew the canvas of the tent around, keeping the blowing dust off them. She could feel the magic pouring off the boy, raw and wild, a low pulse in her belly.

"I need information of him. Where he lives, who his friends are, his family. What are the names of the people he cares for." She watched the boy move around the tent, licking her lips. "His name, I already know."

Mareta nodded, giving her a sharp, clever look. "This can be done, Lady. Alli and Dinna can go, they are clever and Dinna can search out lies like the goka lizards find eggs."

The boy with his blind eyes moved easily about the tent, body just reaching towards manhood, power peaking, almost shimmering like the sand in sunlight. He would be perfect in a few weeks' time. And she would be ready for him then, her hunger beginning to peak.

He poured two cups of terat, hot and bitter and untouched by honey, strong, thick milk from the boer goats poured in to cut the bite. Silently he offered it, along with the giant green olives and spiced almonds. He trembled as his arm brushed against her robe, backed away like a frightened spider. His fear fed an addiction all its own, but he would be sweeter if he could be seduced to it. Not often, but occasionally, her victims could be convinced to give themselves willingly. She wondered what it would take to turn this boy's fear into desire.

Mareta took a cup, leaned back against the pillows, eyes watching the boy as he scuttled out. "What is the name I should give the girls, Lady? Who should they seek?"

Savena sighed as the boy left, the buzz of energy and magic going with him. "Lord Banshinaree. The crest is a sail with the sign of the wind emblazoned on it. I do not wish him to know he's being watched -- this is important to me."

The old woman nodded, sucking the terat through her long yellowed teeth. "We were born faceless and nameless. Not even the guard dogs bark when we cross the threshold."

"That is why I chose you." She smiled, satisfied, and took a sip of her own cup. The terat was an aquired taste, but she rather enjoyed the bitter flavour as it rolled over her tongue and down her throat.

chapter three

"Wake up, dog. Time to go." The harsh voice was accompanied by the bite of leather against his back.

Kade lifted his head, stretching carefully, feeling the skin pull along the tears. His muscles ached dully from his position, bent over in the stocks, loincloth filthy and sweat-damp around his groin.

Dozens of braids fell around his face, hiding his eyes from the misery around him. His two-month reprieve was up, three of eight girls carrying his seed. Now, after a week of *breaking* with the handler and his gang of boys, Kade was off to the mines. The sun beat down, turning the crystals of sand he could see into tiny jewels, each one shining and iridescent.

A click and Kade was forced upright, swaying slightly as the stocks, now turned yoke, settled on his shoulders. He blinked, widening his stance, finding his center of balance as his head swam.

He would not fall.

Not here.

He opened his eyes, surprised, as he was chained to the back of a small cart filled with foodstuffs and crates.

"To Lord Banshinaree's, boy. Don't touch the slave. Don't untie him. Don't go near him. He's stronger than he seems."

The boy nodded, eyes wide. He walked a wide berth around Kade as he led the horse away from the slave tents. Kade chuckled to himself, feeling the terrified eyes of the young dark boy on him. It was almost more than he could do to keep up with the cart, much less escape.

No. Escape would come later. First, he needed to heal and get this damned yoke off.

The trip was long, moving them further and further into the city, farther and farther from the mines. Soon the sun was beating down with some heat, burning into his skin, a harsh kiss against his lash marks.

At length they stopped in front of a large, rambling house, stark white against the sands. As he stood, muscles trembling, sweat pooling on the ground before him, the boy knocked on the gate and was granted entrance into a busy courtyard, the sounds of curious and worried voices echoing off the walls of the buildings.

"I must take the cart, honored one, I have the keys for the vakla. They told me not to touch him. I didn't."

The voice that answered matched the wrinkled hands that worked at the locks and he managed to look up to see a liveried houseman. The man gave him what seemed like a kind smile, the first he'd seen in far too long. Before he could respond, an impatient voice called out from across the courtyard. The tones sounded dulcet and sweet, almost lilting, certainly a far cry from the voice of the men who'd worked him over the previous day.

"Argent, what is all of this?"

"I'm sorry you were bothered, my Lord. It appears to be a vakla, sir. The papers state he belongs to you." There was kindness in the elderly man, perhaps someone sympathetic. His voice was steady, respectful, but not scared, not cowed. Perhaps this lord was reluctant with the whip.

"Right -- I won him at the races." Kade squinted against the sun as the voice grew nearer, trying to get a glimpse. "I thought I'd see what manner of vakla he was before I sent him back to the auctions. I thought a dancing girl might be entertaining." The voice had grown rueful and Kade still couldn't get a good look at him.

The sun was at the man's back, shining like a halo; his new owner wasn't overly tall -- spare, even slender -- and young if his voice was any indication.

"This does not appear to be a dancing girl." The houseman's voice sounded amused and Kade winced, wondering what manner of punishment the impudence would prompt.

To his surprise the owner chuckled. "I'm not sure how you can be so certain, Argent, between the dirt and that... thing around his shoulders. Unhook him and clean him up, bring him into the kitchen for some food and I'll try and figure out what I'm going to do with him." With that, the voice and its owner -- his owner -- was gone. Kade swayed beneath the weight of the wood, stumbling before he righted himself.

"Come now... what's your name, son?" Dark eyes met his, sympathy shining in them.

"Kade. My name is Kade."

The man nodded. "Well, Kade. I'm Argent, the head of the staff. Let's go to the back of the house and see if we can't get you loose."

The house was vast, white clay sprawling out over the sands, bright succulents and flowers blooming profusely. Clean and bright, arched windows, solid fence all about, twice as high as a man. Guards at the gate. The stables were behind the house, large and well kept. Kade could hear the vague whinnies and stamping, could smell the hay and grain. A tiny paddock lay out beyond.

Argent worked at the lock at Kade's side for a few long moments, muttering beneath his breath. "How long have you had this on, son?"

Kade thought back, four days, maybe five. He was lucky. He hadn't eaten and the boys came by with a bucket twice a day to splash the filth from him. He looked over at the old man. "I do not know."

Finally the lock came free and the yoke was opened, falling to the ground. Kade closed his eyes against the relief and the cramps that would soon take him, seizing his too long still arms. Kade's neck felt loose, unable to support his head, his braids pulling him to one side.

As soon as he could move, he scratched at his chin, his ragged beard wiry and rough upon his fingers.

Argent was shaking his head. "I hope you're not fond of that -- his lordship likes things neat and tidy."

The man turned and called out to someone standing at the back door and in short order a tub was brought out and filled with water. Argent handed him a bunch of soap. "In you go, son. Get yourself cleaned up and then we'll go into the kitchen and get you fed."

Kade stepped into the shallow tub, pulling off his loincloth and rubbing soap into it, then using the rough material to scrub himself. He frowned as he scrubbed, the soap and water stinging his wounds, the sand-encrusted scabs that fell beneath the water coming loose, blood beginning to slowly seep.

He wet his head with his hands before the water was too fouled, rubbing the soap into his braids. A frisson of nervousness took him as he recalled the houseman's words. Neat and clean.

They'd have to kill him before they took his hair. He was still a Naik warrior, slave or no. He wore his scars, blazoned pale against his tanned cheeks and chest, and he wore his braids, grown since he became a man.

He rinsed his hair out, straightening the heavy mass and pushing it back. He could have stayed in for hours, reveling in the slide of water on his flesh, even slept there, squatting and dreaming of nighthawks against the cool moon. Instead he stood and wrapped the loincloth back around him with numb, clumsy fingers and stumbled out of the tub.

Something large and soft was draped over his shoulders and he turned in surprise to find Argent, hand held out. "Give me that rag, son, I've some proper clothes for you. Well, I've a pair of targa at any rate, though they might be a bit tight. We'll need to get you measured and have something made -- you're quite a large fellow."

The kindness in that voice hurt, ached deep inside because it was born of pity, not of honor or respect. Pity for the poor, broken, bleeding barbarian slave.

He forced a grateful look into his eyes and dried himself, wincing as the cloth came away stained. "Sorry."

The trousers were tight, wouldn't have fit at all if he'd eaten well in the last month, but they covered the important parts.

"Just a bit ragged I'd venture." Argent was looking at the bloodied towel with a frown. "Come on then, let's get some food in you and I'll call for Ronin to take a look at your back." Argent led him toward the kitchen. "You see the patterns in the cuffs of those pants? Those are his lordship's colors -- all your clothes will carry them." Argent pointed to the bottoms of Kade's pants and then to his own clothing.

Kade looked down, stumbling as the movement made him dizzy. Blues and roses -- finely worked, even for servant's clothes.

The walk to the kitchen was short, Kade's callused feet sore and clumsy upon the floor as he tried to take in all he saw. The walls were thick, the hallways dim and confusing. Air moved through the windows and open doors, making the rooms bearable, although Kade began to yearn for the sky, to remove the oppressive ceiling from his sight.

He focused on his hands, still and strong against his stomach, as they walked. They would not keep him in this closed place. They would send him back to the slave tents, or to the fields, or, if he was very lucky, to the stables.

A voice, dark and menacing sounded in his head. "...or to the mines, Kadras. Down, swallowed in the earth, no wind, no sun, no sky. Lost inside the body of the mother..."

He almost bumped into Argent as the man came to a halt.

The man didn't seem to notice, putting a hand on his arm and drawing him into a hot, humid room. A rotund

woman with apple red cheeks stood over a large, steaming pot. She turned to them as they came in. "Madrise, this is Kade, his lordship's new vakla."

"Vakla? Since when does himself keep vakli? He'll be beating us next." She bustled forward, taking his arm and pulling him toward the table.

"Heaven's little gods, look at his back. Argent - he needs tending to! When was the last time you ate, dear man? You look like a wind would blow you down, even as tall as you are." She clucked and pushed him down onto the bench at the table, setting a large bowl of hot meal in front of him along with a pitcher of milk and a pot of honey. A glass of juice appeared on his right and a plate of small pies on his left. Madrise never stopped chattering the whole time, though most of her comments seemed to be aimed at Argent rather than himself.

It had been so long, the smell of the food made his stomach cramp, threaten to rebel. With trembling fingers he lifted the juice and drank it down. He swore he could hear it as it slammed into his empty belly.

Kade managed to eat three bites before his stomach seized, refusing more. He sat, still and stiff, curling his toes against the waves of agony.

When the cramps finally passed, he smiled at Madrise. "Thank you. It was very good."

"Surely you're not done! Why, you've hardly eaten any at all! A man your size will wither away."

Argent looked at Kade and nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Madrise, let the man be. He'll get an appetite back, no question. We'll just start small."

The cook harrumphed and took the bowls away. Argent murmured beneath his breath. "Try to keep it down, son. It will tear you up inside, you start bringing up food. Slow and easy, that's the answer."

"Well he's certainly disrupting the household, isn't he?" That voice again, the annoyance in the lilting tones doing little to disguise its melodious qualities.

Turning toward the source of that voice, he got his first good look at his new owner. Dark eyes roamed over him, cold and hard, stones in a pale, smooth face. The man's -- the young man's -- face was all sharp angles and planes. Kade would bet the skin was cool, chill to the touch.

Kade slid from the chair and prostrated himself at the man's feet.

"Sweet Alusius' breath, what happened to his back?"

"I believe he was beaten, sir." Argent's voice was quiet, calm.

"Idiocy. Owned men owe you no loyalty. What in the name of the gods am I going to do with him, Argent?" His new owner sighed heavily. "I should have had him sent straight back to the auctions before I had a chance to see this. I can't very well send him back there for more of the same. By the light of the moon, man, get up off the floor!"

Kade got to his feet, tall and silent, waiting for someone to make a decision. Hilarity hit him hard as he stood there, watching this free man frown over the hardship of owning him. Kade had to fight back a chuckle.

"Well he's certainly big enough. What's his name?"

"Kade, sir. And he does speak, sir."

The man glared at Argent and then turned back to Kade. "What do you do?"

"Breaking, training, grooming, shoeing, mending tack. I sing to horses." Kade forced his voice to remain gentle, not wanting his new owner to believe he was trying to intimidate. There was precious little he could do about its deep rumble, though, so different from the musical sound of the lord's voice.

"Argent? Have you replaced the stable hand? Set him up there." The sieka's eyes slowly traveled the length of his body. "And get the man some clothes that fit him, we can't have him wandering around being mistaken for one of the beasts themselves." Dark green eyes gazed into his own. "Mistreat my ponies and I'll send you back to the stocks and sell you off. Steal from me and I'll do the same. You've a roof over your head, food, and a job here. Do it well and respect what is mine."

With a blink his new owner seemed to dismiss him, turning back to Argent. "I'll take my morning post in the sitting room with my breakfast and then you can explain to me why the girls can't seem to get the silver polished up correctly. Oh, and Argent? Do something about that mess on his face and that mane on his head."

A low voice came from the doorway, a wide, bald man standing there. Kade tilted his head. A warrior like himself, but not Naik and not like the common guards. "Pardon me, my Helan, but those braids hold special significance for these men. They cease to function without them. They are said to hold the life force of the race."

The young man's hand went to his own hair, playing with the dark strands that ended just past his shoulders. The green eyes lost their focus a moment and the pale face looked suddenly sad. When his new owner spoke again, his voice had gone rough. "Fine, but that nest on your face goes and I expect you to do something with the braids, dunk your head under water all day if you have to, repeat the process every day if it's needed. I can't abide filth in my home."

With that the young man turned on his heel and left, the sound of his feet slapping against the plaster floors marking his departure, his shadow of a guard trailing after him. Kade's shoulders slumped, body beginning to tremble. He closed his eyes, reminding himself to breathe.

Argent's hand landed on his shoulder. "Come on, son. Let's get your back seen to and we'll get you shaved."

Struggling to his feet, Kade shook his head with a smile. "No. Just a bit of blood. I will heal. I will work. I can shave."

The old man's mouth opened to protest and Kade leaned down close, looking into sad, old eyes. "No one will know I am here. I am no thief. I want to look after the mounts and see the sky."

"He's a decent man, our Helan. You won't find any more stripes laid across your back and you'll not starve. If you want something you have but to ask me or Madrise and you'll be fine." Argent began to lead him out of the house. "You'll get the hang of it soon enough -- you'll take your meals in the kitchen."

Not if he could help it, he wouldn't. By the four singing winds, he'd lived on the grains and molasses given for the mi't before. He wasn't at all opposed to doing it again.

If it were up to him, he'd stay out the range of the sieka and those irritated dark forest eyes.

When they stepped outside into the blazing heat, something within Kade loosened, released up into the clear

sky. He walked across the courtyard, bare feet sinking into the hot sand. The stables were large, airy, designed to be cooled by the midday winds. Kade looked around at the neat, open stalls.

Liquid brown eyes stared back at him, soft and warm, the mi'it nickering gently. He clucked low in his throat, then gave a trill and watched the stables come to life, noses popping over walls to sniff, whinnies answering his call.

"Oh." Kade moved into the stables, forgetting about Argent. He continued murmuring in his native tongue, laughing as their ears twitched in interest.

Nine mounts -- well kept and cared for, seven chocolate brown bodies complete with ebony manes, with two pure black mounts for good measure. Lovely and fine-boned, Kade could see the spirit flashing in their eyes. His fingers itched for a comb. He eased it by stroking velvet noses and nuzzling against strong cheeks.

The tenth stall was empty, but hadn't been for long, the hay mused and trampled.

"Where is this mi'it?"

"Hrm? Mi'it? Oh, you mean the mount? He's kept in the back stables. He's violent, unstable. He can't be kept with the rest. Our Helan should have him put down, but he's too fond." Argent's voice came from much closer than Kade expected and he started. "You can sleep up in the loft. There's room and it's warm in the night."

Kade nodded, eyes flashing to the open loft even as his mind stayed captured by the thought of a lost steed, trapped in a building, hidden from the sky and field. "Will I care for the other mount?"

"I guess you can at that, though the Helan won't hold it against you if you won't. He's been caring for the beast himself as none will go near it." One of the horses snorted and tossed his head and Argent moved slightly closer to Kade. "I'll make sure some sheets and blankets are brought out for you before nightfall."

"Thank you, Argent. Could you send a razor? I will shave and redo my braids."

Argent nodded. "And a lantern. If you need anything, just come inside. I'm always around, Kade."

He smiled back, already turning back to the mi'it, muttering at them in a low rumble of nonsense.

Kade didn't even notice when Argent closed the stable doors behind him.

chapter four

Kade pushed open the stable doors, a pail with feed in one hand and a bag of currycombs and brushes in the other. The sun shone down, still friendly at this hour, not deadly and fierce, and the warmth felt good against his bare back.

He'd been sleeping deeply, comforted by the familiar, welcome smell of the mi'it and the hay, the grass and the honey. The scent of Madrise's soap was sweet in his braids from the night before. Too long since he'd regularly honored his family, his clan, and the warriors who taught him; it had ached. To whisper those names, to sing their deeds, their lineage, their deaths, it had ached, but the ritual had loosened the anger, eased the impatience. He had slept, waking to the owls seeking their morning beds and the ponies rustling about for food.

The hay he'd slept on had been ruined those first few days, his wounds seeping and raw, but it had taken little to remove it and make himself a fresh bed. Every morning Kade felt stronger, more solid. He was healing, thanks to the good food and the mi'it and the ability to sleep with a minimum of fear.

Dalan called out as the late afternoon sun fell upon her, causing disgruntled snorts and stamps from the other mounts. She was proud, that one, bright-eyed and spirited, demanding attention with her shining dark eyes and glossy coat.

"Poor mi'it, are you aching to run?" Kade chuckled, putting down his burdens and digging around for some sabai root. Treats in hand, he walked up to her, nuzzling Dalan's soft cheek with his own.

Dalan nibbled at his vest, lips searching for her snack. Kade laughed, the feeling warm in his stomach. "Here, Greedy."

He fed Dalan the sweet, dark blue root before moving down the line, caressing and muttering to each animal, checking his charges as though they had not all been brushed and fed and exercised only hours before.

The door opened noisily and a throat cleared. "Kade?" Argent's voice held just the hint of a waver, Argent not fond of the horses.

"Argent." Kade stepped forward into the light, nodded to the older man, making sure not to move too close and tower over him. "What can I do?"

"You haven't come to the house for a meal for days. Madrise is making a masterpiece for evening meal tonight, it would mean a lot to her if you'd come and eat with us."

"A masterpiece?" Kade blinked, not sure he understood.

"The Helan is having guests for dinner. He always wants a huge spread, enough to feed a dozen who haven't eaten in days, and he only ever invites one or two and never eats a bite himself." Argent's tone made it clear he didn't approve.

"Oh." Kade shrugged. "I am used to staying in the stables."

The thin man raised a single gray eyebrow. "You are our first vakla, Kade, you'll have to forgive us if we don't know the proper etiquette." Argent drew himself up with a quiet dignity. "You are *invited* to attend, Kade, not commanded."

Kade flushed, he could feel the heat in his cheeks. "No offense, Argent. This is very different." He shrugged, the welts on his back pulling slightly. "Very different."

Argent's smile was sympathetic and, surprisingly, a little impish. "If you let me know how you are used to being treated, I suppose we could try to accommodate you, if you would prefer."

Kade laughed, the motion unfamiliar but so good. "No. It is my duty to fit in." He winked. "Can someone fetch me? I will never find the kitchen."

Argent nodded and smiled. "I'll send Iana to bring you -- she's my youngest daughter."

"Youngest? You are blessed with many?" Kade came forward, gathering up his buckets.

Argent sighed. "I have been blessed with seven children. Beautiful daughters all of them." He laughed. "And all but three of them have beautiful daughters of their own."

"You have been truly blessed." Kade shook his head. "You must be a very patient man." Which would explain the man's ability to deal with the sieka. Kade shook his head again. "I go to tend to the mount kept alone."

Argent made a face. "I mentioned he was dangerous, yes? You be careful around him, he has a nasty disposition. I don't understand why the Helan insists on keeping him."

"You said." Kade frowned. "Mi'it do not just turn bad. He needs to talk."

"To talk?" Argent laughed and shook his head. "He's never been a very friendly beast. We've lost more than one stable boy through the Helan's stubborn refusal to get rid of him."

Kade smiled over, suddenly itching to see this mi'it, look at him. "I will try all the same." He looked up at the afternoon sky, gauging the time, "When is the evening meal?"

"The Helan's guests will be arriving in short order; they will be done with their first course by nightfall and that is when our feast will begin. You are welcome to join us at any time, but with your permission, I will send Iana when we are ready to start."

"Thank you." Kade looked at the ground for a moment and then back at Argent. "I will watch."

It felt odd, almost uncomfortable, this easy feeling, the way these people attempted to speak with him, befriend him.

"Very well. Be careful with that beast." Argent smiled and headed back to the house, leaving him alone once more.

Kade watched him go, eyes roaming over the white clay of the house. Clean and stark against the bright blue sky, huge windows hoping to capture the breeze, the sands held back by dozens of bushes covered in

brightly hued blossoms. He shook his head. It took hours of work to keep those plants alive in this heat. Hundreds of slaves were dying, begging for water, and this sieka was watering flowers.

The anger that filled him with was comforting, normal, freeing. *Real*.

The back door slammed shut and Kade shook his head, heading for the back stables and the mi'it that was imprisoned within.

The mi'it was at the far end of the back stable and began to snort and toss his head, obviously unhappy at Kade's intrusion. He clicked softly, humming and trilling deep in his throat, assuring the horse that he was harmless, not coming to challenge either territory or broodmares. "Di'ben sud, mi'it."

The horse called out a warning, stamping, eyes rolling. Kade kept his distance, chirruping and acknowledging his respect for the sharp teeth and wicked hooves as he swung himself up on the stall across from the mi'it's. The noises continued and Kade answered each one with a soft voice, waiting the mi'it out.

Dark and sleek, this mi'it was taller than the slender desert mounts, but not stocky and broad like the ones his people rode. The mi'it's hocks were slim, ankles and hooves bred for running in grass, not these sands, and Kade suspected he was ill-fond of the heat of day.

Eventually the horse quieted, refusing to speak, watching Kade with a distrusting eye. Kade pulled a sabai root from his pocket and broke it in half, watching the mi'it's nostrils flare. He hid his grin, sliding off the wall, munching on one half of the sweet vegetable.

The mi'it snorted again as Kade took a step, hand outstretched, sabai resting in the palm. "Kama'asi, mi'it. I mean you no harm."

The horse whinnied and then dipped his head, soft lips sliding against Kade's skin as the root was taken. With a triumphant toss of his mane, the mi'it retreated. Oh, he was lovely -- the spirit and pride of Dalan, with a hint of dark anger. Kade ached to touch him, run his hands along that proud neck and feel the blood pound beneath his palms.

Kade kept his smile hidden, stepped back himself, and pulled out another sabai. The mi'it snorted and stepped forward again, head tossing in warning, but his interest was clear. Casually, Kade broke the sabai in half, offering it. The mi'it took the treat and backed away, returning as soon as the next chunk appeared.

Six chunks of sabai. Six brushes of velvety lips against his palm.

The final time, the mi'it allowed Kade to touch his nose.

The dark eyes watched him as he slid his fingers over the warm, soft skin, a hint of fear, a hint of wildness, and a wealth of mistrust in them. The horse didn't pull away, didn't back up until Kade let his hands drop to his sides and backed up to the wall.

He bent to pick up the bucket of feed, pouring it into the feedbag, speaking all the while. He watched the mi'it move -- the horse seemed healthy, if a bit restless, but Kade didn't see any scars, any obvious wounds. Whatever the problem was, the mi'it was well treated. The straw in his stall was fresh and the water in his trough clean. It made him wonder who had been taking care of him in the time between the former stable hand's dismissal and his own visit this day.

Kade slipped a comb in his pocket and climbed up on the stall beside the mi'it, watching, ready to jump down if the mount reared or tried to bite. The horse seemed content enough to let him close and it soon be-

came apparent that someone had been brushing the mi'it as well, his coat shone with a testament of loving care. Taking a chance, Kade leaned over, running his hand over the mi'it's back. The mount shivered and stilled, but didn't bite, didn't kick, so he pulled out the comb and worked on the hide he could reach, singing softly of winds and running and open meadows.

The mi'it slowly relaxed beneath his touch and song and eventually the big head swung back, nuzzling briefly at his arm. Kade let his smile show, his vocalizations echoing with his pleasure. He brushed for a few more moments and then tucked the comb away. The sun was beginning to fade, his afternoon's work well done.

Kade gave the mi'it one last sabai and slid his hand along the long nose in a soft caress. "Tomorrow," he promised.

A young girl, perhaps fourteen summers with a sweet face, met him at the door.

"Are you Kade? My father sent me to find you." She grinned, black eyes bright and quick. "Ahba said you were tall; he wasn't kidding! Oh, hello. I am called Iana."

With a chuckle, Kade nodded. "Di'ben nor, Iana. I am Kade. Thank you for finding me. Let me wash my hands?" He walked around the stable, heading for the trough, looking back with a grin. "And I am not *that* tall."

She laughed. "You're bigger than even the Helan and he's taller than even Ahba, who used to be the tallest man I know." He could feel her eyes on him as he washed his hands. "Your hair is longer than mine and so many braids."

"Yes. They tell stories, the tano'ka. Each one is different. It is the way of my people." Kade straightened his vest, made sure his braids were firmly fastened. "I started growing my hair when I had less summers than you." Satisfied that he no longer smelled of the stables, Kade nodded towards the main house. "I will follow you."

"You don't have to walk behind me, Kade. We'll go in together -- you're too big to be a dog, anyway." She took his hand and grinned up at him, skipping to keep up with his strides.

Kade chuckled. "A dog? Like me? They would eat camels for snacks. Drink the ocean at latemeal."

Wide-eyed and happy, Iana was a sight for sore eyes. It had been too long since he had seen a child whose voice, whose eyes were not darkened by pain.

"Well, if you're hungry you'll like tonight – Madrise has made the most amazing meal and most of it's come back uneaten. Ahba says it's a waste but I think the Helan knows how much fun we all have when he asks for a special dinner."

She skipped ahead of him and walked backwards across the courtyard, eyes shining. "There's turtle soup and these little cracker things with food of the sea on them and about a million side dishes and the dessert, oh the chocolate. Have you ever had bakachi, Kade? It's the most wonderful thing in the world."

Kade shook his head. "I have not, a'atima. I ate honeyed cakes long ago."

He would not mar the child's joy by admitting that his days of savoring a meal were long past, his eating habit one of sustenance, not enjoyment.

She nodded at him. "The Helan likes honey, but he has Madrise make bakachi stuff when he's got guests. It's from his home."

Kade opened the back door, motioning the child in before him. "Is it? What is it like, this bakachi? And how do you find your way here?"

"Oh, it's sweet and nutty and just the best thing I've ever had." She took his hand. "The house isn't so hard to figure out, you just gotta pay attention. Upstairs is nice -- I help clean and I get to help Ahba serve on nights like tonight. Sieka Surial has all these big windows, it's really nice."

"Is it? I like outside. I like sun." He followed her quick movements, focusing on the floor and carefully ignored the press of walls and ceiling.

"Here we are -- you can sit by me."

"You honor me, a'atima." Kade grinned at her as they entered. The room was full, people milling about, food piled on the massive table. Madrise stood proudly by the door, and Kade greeted her with a smile and a nod. "Di'ben nor."

She beamed back at him. "Oh, I'm so glad you came -- I was starting to think you didn't like my food."

Iana squeezed his hand and led him to the far end of the table. "He just couldn't find the kitchen, Madrise."

"True." He followed her with a grin and settled in a chair, the child sitting next to him and chattering brightly about the food, her sisters, her nieces, her Ahba, her Mam, her best friend Zala.

Kade listened with half an ear, watching the crowd around him. They looked happy, well treated. At least half of them had Argent's curved nose. The other half appeared to call Madrise family and had her warm smile.

"Iana, child, you'll talk the man's ears off his head, and then where will he be?" A soft, musical voice sounded and Kade looked up into a softly lined face. "I'm Daor, you must be Kade. My husband has spoken well of you."

Kade pushed out his chair to stand and greet her, but she waved him down with a mock growl. "T'cha! We stand on little ceremony here, yes? Leave the bowing and scraping to our masters."

Another dark-haired girl, this one older, belly swollen with child, grinned over Daor's shoulder. "Truly, Mam? You bow and scrape to your master? More like lord over the upper floors."

"Someone needs to keep you lot in line or the rooms would never be cleaned."

"I thought that was my job." Argent's quiet tones came from the direction of the door. "Kade, I'm glad you decided to join us. There's more than enough food for everyone."

"Ahba!" The cry went up all around, the silvered head lost for a moment beneath a flurry of arms and smiles and happy squeals. When Argent reappeared, his stern countenance had softened and he had an infant in his arms.

Kade grinned. All grandfathers should wear that expression. "Thank you for the guide." He nodded over to Iana, smiling at her warmly.

A flush covered her face and she smiled, gazing up at him with dancing eyes. "It was my pleasure."

Argent sat beside Kade, shaking his head as he shifted the babe onto his shoulder. "I know better than to invite them all for latemeal, but I knew there would be plenty and I haven't seen Madrise's boys in moons. She has five, all wed, three with children of their own."

"Have you all been here long?" Slowly the crowd was settling, the youngest children given plates on numerous low tables scattered on the floor, mothers and grandmothers fluttering as the men poured tall glasses with milky liquid. When his people had gatherings, there were no tables, no ceramic plates, but the dark faces, the hungry mutterings of the children, those were the same.

"I have been in the employ of the Banshinarees since I was a boy. This homestead has been occupied by many of the elder Helan's factors for many years. Our Helan Surial has been here, what Madrise? Seven years? Eight?"

"Eight. I remember it like it was yesterday. Those big sad eyes in that pale face. He wasn't more than fifteen, sent off on his own to this place. All stiff lips and straight back. I still don't understand how a man could bear to send away a mere slip of a boy like that."

"The ways of the Sandidians are not our own, Madrise." Argent's voice was as calm as always, but Kade recognized the warning tone in it, as Madrise obviously had as well for she inclined her head as if in apology.

Daor looked up from where she was cutting the meat for a curly-haired toddler. "Argent, don't forget, my husband, you need to carve the gilleta."

"Ah, yes. Here, Kade, this is Ania. Hold her for me?" With that, Kade found his hands full with a bundled, sleeping baby.

He blinked, looking down at the babe. She was tiny, cradled in his huge hands. She stretched, mouth puckering and little dark eyebrows frowning for a second before relaxing.

Kade looked over at Iana, eyes wide. "Should you hold her?"

Iana giggled. "She doesn't bite -- no teeth." Then she blushed. "Oh! You want to eat. Of course I'll take her."

Kade leaned forward, smiling, wanting to put the child at ease. "I am more worried for dropping her. It has been seasons since I held a babe."

"I don't think those big hands could possibly drop such a wee baby." She looked up at him again, eyes shining. "I don't think you could."

Daor chuckled as she put a heaping plate in front of Kade. "I think someone's sweet on you, Kade."

"Mam! I...I am not!" Iana's face darkened, her eyes wide and embarrassed.

With a laugh and a smile, Kade looked up at Daor. "Iana? Sweet on an old man? No, she will find the most handsome man in the city. She was just seeing the babe was safe."

Daor chuckled all the harder and tousled her daughter's hair. Iana was beaming up at him. Rescuing the baby, Daor nodded to the plate of food. "Eat, Kade. There's plenty. Maybe even enough to fill you out a bit. Our Madrise is a fabulous cook."

The women shared a fond smile and then both moved back to their tasks, even as Argent found his seat again, full plate in his hands.

"Make sure you save room for the bakachi," Iana pointed toward the counter. "There's fruit custard, too, but it's the chocolate that's really special."

"Let Kade eat, child. He's worked all day." Argent's voice was quiet and firm, but kind and without sting. Iana nodded, digging into her own food. "So, it seems that Mon'keur didn't leave you worse for wear."

Kade swallowed a bite of lentils, then shook his head, pleased to have the mi'it's name. "In a moon he will be with his brothers and sisters."

"You think so? The last stable hand said he would never be fit to be stabled with other horses." Argent ate with neat, economical movements, like raccoons at the river.

"He did not know. The mi'it will return to the main stable." Watching Argent, Kade copied his motions, handling the unfamiliar dishes, eating until he felt he had consumed enough to be gracious.

Voices flowed around him, lively and vigorous debate side by side with story telling and laughter. Beside him, Argent seemed content to simply eat and watch, an indulgent look settled upon his face. Kade sat quietly, letting the memories and regrets pour over him. In another life, another world, these smiling faces, the love and the care, the child, the family -- they might have been his.

His tribe.

As it was, he was an imposter, something less than human and more than animal, dressed and sitting up at the table, pretending to be a free man.

There was the faint sound of a bell and beside him Argent carefully wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and stood. "That'll be the Helan's guests leaving. Manock and Sing -- be ready at the door with their cloaks and parasols and mind the stain on your vest, Sing."

Kade watched the group scuttle at the sound of Argent's steady voice, two dark heads disappearing through the arched door. "Can I help?"

He pushed his chair back, making sure not to bump against any tiny body hidden behind him.

"That's all right, Kade, their groom prefers not to stable the horses for short visits, and he'll take care of getting the carriage 'round to the front of the house." Argent patted him on the shoulder. "You stay and let Iana feed you bakachi. She's wanted to be the one to introduce it to someone who's never had it before ever since she had her first taste."

Shining eyes looked up at him as Iana nodded. "It's ever so much more wonderful than ponies, Kade. I promise!"

As much as he wished to return to the stables, keen his loss into the night sky before falling into dreams, his heart was not yet dead enough to deny the enthusiasm and excitement in the innocent, young face. So Kade sat and nodded. "I cannot wait."

She got up and grabbed his plate along with her own. "You were done, right?" He nodded and she smiled. "Oh, good."

The plates were given to Daor and two bowls procured from Madrise, Iana bringing them back and setting one down in front of Kade.

Something was steadily, gently tugging on one of his braids. Kade turned his head and a little girl, not more than three summers murmured around the thumb in her mouth, "'Re you a giant?"

Kade chuckled and shook his head. "No."

"Can I sit in your lap?" The child's eyes fastened on his bowl for a second and then on his face.

He fought to keep the laughter down, nodding instead, eyes solemn. The little girl scrambled up immediately. "'M Ania and bakachi's my most favored thing." She looked back at his bowl longingly. "Already ate mine."

"Did you?" Kade looking over at Iana who was rolling her eyes wildly. "I am Kade. Would you like to share?"

The child nodded, black curls bobbing. "'M *good* at sharing!"

"He's never had bakachi before, An, so you just make sure you don't eat it all up on him or I'll tell Mam," Iana warned.

"K-giant said share. 'M gonna share."

"Yes. We will share." Kade pretended to study the bowl full of sweets, Daor's chuckle sounding from behind him where she was chatting with Madrise. "Well, Iana, where do I start?"

"Well, I like to have a very big bite right away, so that my whole mouth is full of bakachi and then I make the rest of it last, eating it very slowly until it's all gone." She leaned in close, eyes very serious as she whispered. "And I lick my bowl and Mam pretends not to notice."

"There is an art to it, then." Kade responded with equal weight. "I thank you for your help."

That gentle tugging came at one of his braids again and eyes as solemn as Iana's looked up at him.

"And how do you do it?"

"I eat it as fast as I can. It tastes better like that."

"It does not, Ania," inserted Iana. "You just eat yours fast so you can get seconds from grownups."

"Does, too, I'na."

"Does not."

"Does, too."

"Does not."

"Does-"

"All right, I think that's enough of that." Doer didn't raise her voice but both girls ducked their heads.

"Sorry, Mam." They spoke the words almost simultaneously.

Kade chuckled. "Perhaps I should try Iana's way first and then yours, Ania."

He scooped up a big spoonful of the gooey mess and looked over at Iana. "Is this right, a'atima?"

Iana scooped up her own huge spoonful and nodded happily. "Yes. Now, eat it all up, Kade."

He opened his mouth, eating the entire spoonful. He swallowed the sweet confection, making sure to make the appropriate noises and faces to assure Iana's smile. It had been moons since he had made anyone happy. She watched him eat, her own spoonful dangling precariously over her bowl. Her smile grew as he ate.

"Isn't it the most wonderful thing you've ever eaten?" At his nod she ate her own spoonful, eyes closing with rapturous bliss, a small moan accompanying her smile.

Kade began to share with the little bird on his lap, spooning the food carefully into her mouth, chuckling at the bright eyes. Before he knew it, the bowl was empty.

"Eating fast was the bestest." Ania stood on his thigh and gave him a sticky kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you, Ania." Kade handed her over to Daor with a smile before turning to Iana. "And thank you, a'atima. I am honored."

That earned him another bright smile. "You're welcome, Kade."

"I should go to the stables. The mi'it will be hungry." He winked at Iana. "Dalan is very angry if I miss her snack."

Madrise walked up to him. "Thank you for coming in. Perhaps now that you know where the kitchen is, you'll come for meals? We'd love to have you."

"I will try." Kade forced himself to smile. He was done. He wanted to be outside, with the horses, in the quiet, away from other's eyes. He was done. "The food was very good, Madrise. Thank you."

A small, soft hand slipped into his. Iana smiled up at him. "I'll take you back."

"Thank you, a'atima. That would help."

She skipped along next to him, chattering about dinner and her family and how she helped Mam out with the cleaning, even if she was mostly stuck running errands. Kade hung on grimly; surely the walk to the kitchen hadn't been this long. Then at last a breeze carrying the scent of the moon on it blew past them and he could see an open door ahead, a dark blue sky beckoning. When the night air hit him, the night sky open above him, he breathed deeply, forcing the nascent panic back inside. Even the sand smelled good and open, his tension releasing now that no ceilings threatened him.

He looked down at Iana, smiling down at her. "Thank you."

"You ever need a guide through the house, I'm your woman." She looked down at the ground and then back at him. "Maybe you could show me the horses one day?"

"If your father and the sieka do not mind, I would be honored." He smiled and touched his forehead and lips and heart in the way of his people. "Di'ben nor, young one."

She looked up at him a moment and then bit her lip and carefully repeated the gesture. "Dibby nory to you, too, Kade."

She gave him another smile and turned, skipping back inside. The door slammed closed behind her.

Kade turned and headed for the stables. He made almost halfway before his stomach rebelled, refusing to be so filled after so long. He hid in the shadows, knees shaking, tears streaming down his face, waiting for the attack to pass.

Once he could stand and breathe, he buried the evidence of his weakness in the sand and went to give the mounts their evening treats.

The frenzied screaming had ended at dawn. Savina smiled down at the dark hole that allowed only a beam of sunshine in. How clever, these Taliksana, how considerate to perform their darker magics, their secrets, here in these hidden caves where the winds stole the screams away like valuables or pies left to cool on windowsills.

The girls -- and it was mainly women here, the boys, she suspected, were sold in the towns to unsuspecting arid-wombed things who needed something to hold and were not soothed by housecats -- but the girls proved to be as clever as Mareta promised. First they brought information, then they brought the most fascinating missives from father and brothers, then, best of all, they brought flesh.

The little actor had been, the first few nights at least, quite attractive. She could see what the Banshinaree saw in him -- nicely formed, lovely hair, nice eyes, and he begged quite prettily.

She wondered if Helan Banshinaree would find the boy lovely now.

Now it was time to taste his energy and send him back, see just how much the little Helan loved the boy. Did he have the magic to save the plaything? And if he did, would he use it?

"Get him up," she ordered.

The girls moved into the depths of the cave, black upon ebony into darkness. It was interesting, their fearlessness, their hunger. Not surprising, given their ancestors, but interesting. So few things were, these days. Interesting, that was.

They came back, dragging the boy with them. Oh, he barely needed the push to be at death's door, but she needed to feed and she was saving the taliksana themselves for a real hunger.

The girls were so very good at what they did. Bald now -- every single hair on the boy's body removed one by one -- he looked inhuman, otherworldly. She'd heard the eyelashes were wonderfully painful; she was sorry she'd missed that part. His testicles had been taken on the third day, offered up to some goddess or another, one of his eyes on the sixth. Next and final would be his tongue.

She couldn't possibly have him telling tales, in case Banshinaree was what she hoped he was. She had a choice to make now. Drain most of his life force before his tongue was taken, or after. It wasn't an easy de-

cision to make at all.

She could smell the fear, the agony, the panic, although they were beginning to be replaced by dead resignation and curiosity. She always thought that interesting -- that no matter what the gods or her hands did to them, they always wanted to know why. Not that she ever told them.

She was even less inclined to do so with this one. He'd been precious little help; hardly privy to anything new. Oh, he'd confirmed that Helan Banshinaree carried no personal armament, that he had instead a single bodyguard, a man who liked cream cakes and sweet wines. That last tidbit had kept this from being a totally useless venture.

A rail-thin, doe-eyed girl knelt at her feet, heavy blade shining in the dark hands. Eyes down, still and silent, waiting for her command, her desire. Oh, what a fabulous distraction. What a fabulous place -- where she was worshipped and revered instead of reviled. She would reward such devotion and let them have their tongue before she took the rest, everything that counted at any rate, and they left the boy out as bait.

The question was, would she catch the prey she was after with it?

chapter five

Yamin's jovial laughter announced him before Argent had the chance and Surial stood, arms open to greet his friend. His greeting for Pela was also warm; though Yamin was wont to complain at length regarding her nagging, Surial found her quick-witted and bright.

"My dear Surial, how kind of you to invite us to dinner." Pela's eyes twinkled at him. "Rumor in the market is that you have a new protégé. Will we have the honor of meeting Azize's newest star?"

She removed her gauzy wrap, the glittering material catching the lamplight and leaving bright spots throughout the hall. Pela handed it to the waiting girl and took Surial's arm, leaving Yamin grinning behind her.

"Unfortunately Di'une is quite dedicated to the theatre. He has been quite conspicuously absent for the last few days. He's a lovely lad, but I never see him." He waved his hands dismissively. "He wasn't really my type anyway."

"Not your type? But Surial, I could have sworn you..."

Pela fixed Yamin with an infuriated look and patted his arm sympathetically. "I keep telling you, my dear Surial, that you need to find a lovely girl to settle with. With your eyes and hair, you would have striking sons."

"Little boys with sticky fingers and spilled juice, toys everywhere." Surial shook his head. "I like the place like it is and my father hardly needs any more heirs."

"Ah, yes, but a fine woman on your arm, running your house and warming your bed, assuring you do not squander your life in bordellos and clubs." Another glare at Yamin, this one more pointed. "Does that not sound like heaven?"

Yamin's agreement was immediate, his lips quirking in his chubby face. "Absolutely. We men need wives to show us the errors of our ways and occupy our waking hours."

Surial grinned at his friend. "Well, then, I don't need a wife -- I have my father."

Their laughter followed them into the salle where cocktails waited, bright green liquor in graceful fluted crystal. Surial led Pela to a low sofa, helping her sit before finding his own seat, glass held loosely in his hand. Yamin handed Pela her drink and took one of his own. "Speaking of your father, how goes the business? I heard those damned northern pirates were sinking ships at every opportunity."

Surial nodded. "We were very lucky, we only lost two ships. As soon as the Dagnos was late, I had the captain of the Sunak head back along a different route, with word that something was wrong. It is a system I implemented myself and works quite well. Occasionally the missing ship was merely delayed, but it has averted a crisis on more than one occasion." He took a sip of his drink, tasting the bite beneath the sweetness

of the liquid sliding down his throat.

"These pirates believe they may take what they want, but they find very quickly that most ports are closed to their kind. All our goods carry the Banshinaree mark and none will buy from anyone not authorized to sell for us." He shrugged. "The best deterrent would of course be an official force of some kind that patrolled the seas, keeping the routes safe, but you would need a half dozen ships and it is hard enough to man merchant ships; I cannot imagine trying to round up the numbers needed to mount such a force. And so the pirates continue to terrorize honest seafaring men."

He turned his attention to Yamin's intended. "But surely you'd rather not discuss such boring matters. Tell me, madam, have you managed to pin Yamin down on a date for your wedding?"

"No. My father wishes us married in the next few moons, but I would like to wait until the plants have their blooms." Pela smiled, her plain face almost pretty. "I told Father that a woman only marries once, so it should be something to remember."

Yamin chuckled, stroking her cheek with a finger. "You just want to have fresh blooms at the ceremony so that your sisters burn with jealousy."

"Cad!" Pela slapped his leg, looking over to Surial with raised eyebrows. "See what I must put up with?"

He chuckled and gave her a wink. "At least you are under no illusions as to the character of your husband to be, madam."

Argent's quiet presence filled the doorway and Surial gave him leave to speak. "Dinner is ready, my Helan."

"Thank you, Argent, we shall be along presently." He turned to Pela. "Tonight I have arranged for the traditional Sandide feast to welcome friends."

"How lovely. We hear so many things about the great city of the north; it is a great honor to share in its customs."

"Oh, yes, quite the honor." Yamin winked, grinning outrageously. "Of course, when Pela and I set up house, we expect you to allow us to find unusual foods that you will have to eat."

Pela sighed, shaking her head at Yamin. She stood, arranging her brightly patterned gown, which twined around her in carefully placed folds. "You must excuse my lord, Surial. He is an uncouth boor at best." She held out her hand to Surial, ignoring Yamin's chuckles. "Shall we?"

He took her hand and put it on his arm, walking her to the dining salon. She had a point; Yamin was uncouth, his humor low and common. On the other hand, he knew what humor was, dealt honestly, if inexpertly, with his peers, and Surial considered him the best of his friends among the people of Azize. Despite his own teasing, Surial believed the match to be a good one. Pela, for all Yamin's tales, was a good woman who would do well by him. Most men in Azize married for looks, money, or status and found they had very little in common with their wives and as they grew old they grew further and further apart. Surial suspected that Pela and Yamin would grow to be great friends as they aged and would keep each other young.

They wandered toward the small dining hall, chatting about the latest scandals, the upcoming parties. Yamin and Pela were encouraging him to attend the coming out of the new spate of marriageable virgins when they reached their destination.

"I will agree to attend if you promise not to try to arrange a consummation with any of them." He raised his

hands when both opened their mouths to reply. "That is non-negotiable. Now come, please, eat and enjoy the food of my homeland."

The room was in a corner of the house, with windows on two walls, all open, a breeze billowing the gauzy curtains that lent the room an air of luxury. Candles danced light in each corner and on the table, which was big enough to seat a dozen, but the three of them were all at one end, the result cozy and intimate. A cold soup in dainty bowls and a number of cheeses and breads were already at their places, gleaming silverware at the ready.

Surial sat Pela while Yamin took the seat across from her, waiting for Surial himself to take his place between them before sitting as well.

"This soup is always served cold in honor of one of my ancestors who managed to make a meal for a great king without the benefit of any fire at her hearth. It is said that her culinary expertise so charmed him that he promptly married her and brought her to the cliffs of Sandide where they began the family of Banshinaree."

"How fascinating!" Pela lifted her spoon and delicately scooped up a bit, tasting it gingerly. She sipped, smiling at the taste. "Oh, it's quite delicate and light and lovely."

"Did she truly marry a king? How interesting. I would like to visit Sandide one day, see the grand city." Yamin looked over, spoon halfway to his mouth. "So, tell me, would we stand out in your great homeland?"

Surial chuckled. "You would if you insisted on calling Sandide a city. It is more a series of family holdings, each one a complete entity unto itself. The Banshinaree holdings are in the high cliffs, backed by a great forest, and our family is one of the more respected among the Sandide."

He shrugged. "I don't mean to boast, for certainly I am the forgotten child shunted off to the other side of the sea, but my family's business of trade literally grew out of our backyard and expanded to the corners of the world. The story of our regal ancestor is apocryphal, though it serves my father well in the council of Sandide. We are in many ways, both little and large, different from the natives of Azize."

"Well, as a girl, my governess would tell us stories about the great white buildings that seem to grow from the cliffs and the thatched farmhouses in the valleys." Pela tore off a piece of bread. "My sisters and I would pretend to be adventurers, off to explore the mountains beyond the city and find our fortunes in gold."

Yamin chuckled. "I can just see your sisters, draped head to toe in gauze, Yani sobbing because she stepped on a stone and bruised her foot and Imal demanding a bevy of young men to 'fetch that nasty gold and wash it!'"

The impersonation was eerily accurate, the poisonous tones of Pela's oldest sister easily recognizable. The trio burst out with laughter, Pela's eyes dancing at Yamin's mischief.

Course after course of the special banquet made its way to the table. Surial explained the origin of each dish and though he ate little himself, his guests seemed to enjoy the food thoroughly. Their conversation remained light and jovial, the laughter flowing as quickly as the puns and jabs among them.

"Ah, now here is the crowning glory of any meal served in my homeland." Surial grinned widely as the desert was brought in.

"That bakachi of which you are so very fond?" asked Yamin, tone part hope, part wistful.

"It wouldn't hurt you to abstain from the final course now and then," Pela suggested.

"Perhaps," he granted, patting his belly. "But not this one."

Pela rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I believe he would sell his legs for the right meal. He went on about your homeland's dessert for weeks after the last time you served it. Will you have your cook share the recipe with mine? Perhaps then I can set a date for our marriage."

"I'm afraid Madrise holds her recipes close to her heart. Perhaps as a betrothal gift." Surial smiled, leaning back so he could be served. The dessert was, as always, perfectly prepared, rich and sweet with white clouds of sweet cream on top.

"So, tell us truly, Surial." Yamin winked at him across the table, digging into his dessert. "What's happening between you and that little actor? I expected him to amuse for at least a season. Di'une has the reputation of a scholar."

Surial sighed and ran his spoon through his dessert, mixing the white of the crème with the dark of the custard into a swirl. "Frankly, I'm bored. He has no interests outside the theatre, and though he can discuss plays and playwrights and anything pertaining to the theatre, as soon as one moves into the realm of anything else he grows recalcitrant and boorish."

A long look passed between Pela and Yamin and finally Yamin sighed and nodded. "You disappoint me, friend. My Pela now will have a new wardrobe next season and I will be financing it."

Pela laughed. "I keep telling you, Yamin, these things require a woman's touch. Next time you try to find company for Surial, consult me." She scooped up a bite of chocolate and winked across the table. "I have friends."

"Ah, but he doesn't want marriageable young virgins, my dear," Yamin shot back before going back to his dessert.

"I said my *friends*, not my acquaintances. I would hardly saddle the poor man with someone like Sieki Tinna, not for a dalliance. Though she would certainly make you a good wife." A speculative look entered Pela's eyes and Surial raised his hands to ward her off.

"My friends, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I think perhaps it would be best if you left me to my own devices when it comes to such affairs."

"We just want you to be as happy as we are, right, Yamin?" Pela looked over at her happily oblivious fiancé and cleared her throat. "*Right*, Yamin?"

Surial almost swallowed his laughter as Yamin blinked up from his bowl. "What? Oh, yes. Yes, of course. Whatever you say."

Almost.

Yamin looked sheepish for a moment and then shrugged apologetically and returned to his dessert. Pela rolled her eyes at Surial and he laughed at them both.

They finished their dessert in relative silence, Pela leaving the two men to their obvious relish of the sweet. She ate hers with considerably more delicacy and manners and yet, Surial noted, they were all done around the same time. It was a magic he'd noticed most women of society had and he wondered idly if it was something that they were taught as girls.

"So what did you think of my ancestors true gift to their progeny -- bakachi?"

"It's quite wonderful. Thank you for sharing it with us." Pela grinned, and tilted her head toward her intended. "However, I do have a bone to pick with you, my dear Sieka Banshinaree."

"Oh?" Surial blinked, an answering grin on his own face.

"Yes." She nodded firmly. "I think Yamin may decide to wed you instead of me, just to share your cook and that simply won't do. Why, I've already chosen my wedding gown."

He laughed with delight. "Would it soothe my lady's worries to know that Yamin is just not my type?"

"Oh, I do not remember the invitation for this evening mentioning all abuse would be heaped upon my beleaguered head." Yamin pulled out his pitiful look for them and Pela and Surial's laughter answered him.

"Come, my friends, the evening is just beginning to cool and the view from my balcony is quite lovely. Let's take our drinks out there."

Surial rose and helped Pela from her chair, handing her over to her fiancé with a grin, and then leading the way to the front balcony where all of Azize with its lights awaited to shine for them.

Argent was pouring the dark, rich coffee into the most delicate of cups -- bone china brought from the dark lands, so thin that an indelicate hand could shatter it with a fingertip -- when the scream rang through the house.

It spoke of his years of training, his complete and total devotion to his occupation, that the pot was set down in its burner, not a cup cracked.

He ran up the wide stairs as the uproar grew, the screams becoming panicked, his heart pounding, familiar faces appearing from one hall after another to join him, to protect their Helan and his company.

The dining hall was empty, the balcony door open, the lady Pela stretched upon the ground, her intended fanning her. His Helan stood, whiter than any cloth, staring down into the courtyard.

"Helan?"

A fine, trembling finger pointed to where the Helan stared. "I think it's Di'une," he whispered, eyes unable to tear themselves away from the prone figure.

A fine layer of dread dropped over him, feeling much like what he imagined the bridal veil must feel like to a young girl and he did not step forward to see, allowing the moon to obscure the horror. "Di'une, Helan?"

The Helan nodded, turned horror filled eyes upon him. "At least from what I could see of him. There was... much disfigurement."

"I... Disfigurement? Animals?" No one would defile a body. Jala, the goddess of the underworld, would rise up, teeth flashing, and rend the offender's flesh from his body.

"It must be," the Helan said. "Yamin? Is Pela all right? Someone needs to go down and make sure it is Di'une. Check to see... he couldn't still be alive, could he?"

The Helan shrank against the balcony wall, eyes on the city lights.

"You must call the guard, Surial. They must take the body away." Yamin was gray, doughy face floating above the mercifully silent woman.

He took a step backward. "I will send someone. I will..."

All their words faded as a low, mournful song filled the air. His eyes were drawn outside again, the huge, foreign slave covering the body with sheets from the line, wrapping until the fluids from the boy, the corpse, no longer seeped through the pale cloth.

"Oh, thank the Lady," murmured the Helan, stepping back inside and pouring a large glass of water.

The Helan's Rowan appeared in the courtyard, going to the vakla and questioning him, gesturing to the gates. The vakla spoke quietly, nodding and helping the Rowan carry the body away from the front of the house, hiding the horror from their eyes.

Helan Surial handed him the glass of water and waved him toward Yamin and Pela before sitting heavily. "How could such a thing have happened?"

"Did the boy have a new lover? Perhaps one that was jealous you had taken him before?" Yamin took the water and Argent hurried to get pillows, something to protect the lady's hair from the dust on the floor.

"Then why kill the boy and not me?" Surial shook his head. "I had already grown bored with the boy and haven't seen him in some days -- he could have been seeing someone else, I don't know."

Argent brought pillows over, the lady whimpering, tossing, lines of horror marring her face. "Shall I have your carriage called, Sieka?"

He expected the Helan to offer use of one of the guest rooms, but the Helan remained silent, face almost gray, eyes far away.

Yamin nodded. "Yes. I will stay with your Sieka, but my lady must be escorted home. Can someone do so?"

"Of course, Sieka. I will arrange it."

"Get Rowan to do it. He'll keep her safe." The Helan's voice was thin, as pale as his skin.

"Yes, Sieka." He nodded, heading out the door and down the stairs, each step seeming to take hours.

His breath seemed to wheeze from him as he forced himself to head for the kitchen, for the door, for the courtyard where the Rowan was. One of his granddaughters stopped him, hand on his arm. "Ahba? Ahba, is all well? Are we safe?"

Argent forced himself to nod, his calm veneer as thin as the cups with their cooling coffee. "We are. Go to your mother, child. I have work to do."

Work.

He continued through the kitchen, not looking back.

Surial was quite exhausted and more than a little sick.

He'd emptied his stomach several times while the Magistrate had questioned him. And he'd been made to look upon the body up close. It was truly horrific, a sight that would live with him always.

He'd sent Yamin home with the dawn, the magistrate having left shortly before then with D... with the body.

"You must sleep, Helan, before you take ill." His Rowani stepped in, eyes dark and worried, hand on his sword.

"How can I sleep?" How could he close his eyes without seeing..."The magistrate said he was likely taken by animals and then whoever found him left him here as a prank. A *prank*, Rowan."

He shook his head.

Rowan frowned, then shut the heavy doors to his private quarters, coming close. Surial could see the sweat staining the traditional uniform that his Rowani refused to set aside; there was a dark stain on one sleeve. "I do not believe the boy was killed by animals, Helan."

"What? Surely you're not suggesting..." he couldn't even say it.

"Helan, the boy's tongue was removed. One eye -- not torn or chewed. Removed."

"But who would do such a thing, Rowan?" Surial stood and paced toward the window, looking out over the city. He often complained bitterly about the ill-mannered denizens of Azize, but he could not believe any of them would do this. "For what reason?"

"I do not know, Helan. Someone who wishes you ruin? Someone who wishes your attention?" Rowan closed the curtains against the night sky, against prying eyes. He shivered, cold and horrified and afraid. For the first time he was happy to have Rowan by his side, and not for companionship. For the first time he would not have to be reminded not to leave home without his Rowani. "I believe you should write your father, Helan. See if he will not bring his son home to safer waters."

A surge of hope went through him. "Do you think he would? Perhaps it would be better coming from you -- he will just believe I am exaggerating the situation in order to be allowed home."

Desperate letter after desperate letter had made their way home to his father when he'd first come here. All had been ignored until finally a missive had arrived, forbidding him to ask again, on pain of being cut off completely.

Rowan nodded. "Perhaps. I will send one to the head of the Rowani as well, use his influence."

Surial nodded and sat forward in his chair. That could work; if his father realized the danger his own Rowani believed him to be in, surely clemency would be granted.

"I will not have you in danger, Helan. I will not have you... defiled."

"You have been my constant friend and protector, Rowan. I don't know what I would have done here without you."

Surial sat back again, the exhaustion pulling at his eyelids. "Perhaps I could sleep after all, knowing you protect me."

"I will be at your side always, Surial." For a moment, his childhood friend stood before him, the one who knew him best. "Always."

"Thank you, my friend. I am very lucky."

And despite it all, he thought that truly he was.

chapter six

Kade shouldered Mon'keur out of the way as he cleaned the mi'it's stall, chuckling as Mon'keur pushed back just hard enough to cause Kade to stumble slightly before dancing away, snorting with amusement. Grumbling good-naturedly about hard-headed mi'it who didn't appreciate fresh hay and sabai roots every afternoon, Kade continued working, making sure that he needed to push the horse aside often, encouraging the mount to play with him.

It had taken days of patience before Mon'keur had begun to look for him, calling a greeting as the wide doors swung open every afternoon. It had taken even longer for the mi'it to allow Kade into his stall, to check his feet, move around him, comb out his tail and mane. It had taken time, but Kade was steady and patient and waited to earn Mon'keur's faith, trusting in his knowledge and time to overcome any oddities in temperament.

Once the stall was well and clean, Kade grabbed the flat hoof knife. "Now, mi'it. Let me look at that foot, see if you need it cleaned again."

There had been a bit of old hay packed into the hoof the week before, which Kade had removed. He'd made sure the stall was kept cleaner since, watching for infection. He'd sworn this mount would join his siblings and he wouldn't let something as simple as a sore hoof prevent that.

He'd just begun to clean the hoof when the sound of the stable door opening surprised both him and the horse.

"Here I am at last, Mon'keur. Sorry I'm so late today."

The mi'it jerked and the blade of the knife slipped, pressing into the tender exposed flesh. Mon'keur called out and kicked, the first blow catching Kade's shoulder, the second slamming against his back as he rolled. Mon'keur was rearing and stomping, turning to find him. Kade curled himself up tightly in the corner of the stall, protecting his head and organs from the wicked hooves.

The voice came again, closer this time, and soothing, despite the worry that underscored it. "Hey now, hey there, Mon'keur. What's wrong? You're usually happy to see me. Sh, now. Sh."

The mi'it was pulled away, toward the front of the stall, feet still stamping, but no longer flailing.

Kade unrolled himself, stomach clenching violently at the pain slamming through him. Dazed, he couldn't understand who kept speaking to the mi'it, who had entered the stables. When he finally managed to stand and saw his master's face, Kade thought it out.

The sieka's concerned frown turned to anger when his eyes lit on Kade. "What are you doing in there?"

The stall was opened and his master's hand wrapped around his arm, pulling him out. His lordship hissed. "You've been hurt!"

Slender, warm hands began to slide over his skin, leaving behind a tickle. "How badly? Can you walk? There's no way I can carry you. Argent can send one of the boys for a doctor. Damn it all, what were you doing back there? Weren't you warned that Mon'keur's dangerous?"

The hands pressed against his hurt shoulder, one on either side. Suddenly a jolt went through him as if he'd been hit by lightning. His master shuddered and then the pain was gone.

"Where else does it hurt?" demanded his master, voice raspy, hard.

Kade blinked; utterly confused by both the barrage of questions and the lingering tingle in his shoulder. He shook his head, deciding to focus on answering what seemed the most important question. "Cleaning the hoof. Argent said I could, Sieka. I meant no harm."

"Well, I'd say Mon'keur can't say the same thing -- if you weren't so big you would be dead now. Where else did he get you?"

His owner's hands were moving over his skin, leaving a tingling trail behind them. Kade hissed as the touch brushed over his lower back, sparkling lights flashing before his eyes as a wave of agony poured over him.

"He startled. Meant no..." Kade stepped away from the touch, stumbling drunkenly. "No harm."

The sieka caught him before he could fall, grunting with effort. "Just stand still."

Then the pain swept through him again as the sieka's hands pushed at his back, another jolt, this one harder, almost painful and the pain disappeared like magic. His owner began to buckle beneath his weight.

Kade forced himself upright, shaking his head. A ba'achi. The sieka was a ba'achi blessed by the winds themselves. The pain was gone, nothing but an odd tingling warmth left in its place. "Thank you, Sieka. Thank you."

His master stumbled to a bench and sat down heavily, waving his hands. "I panicked. You won't mention it again. You won't tell anyone what happened -- I'll deny it if you do." The man dropped his head into his hands.

"Yes, my sieka." Kade nodded and backed away. "I say nothing."

Perhaps in these lands the ba'achi were not allowed to heal slaves. The laws were strict -- educating slaves to do more than their jobs, giving a slave a monetary gift or status -- these things all had stiff penalties for an offender. For the slave, they meant death.

"Are you well?" His owner peered up at him and Kade nodded. "Then make sure Mon'keur's all right as well. I just need to... sit for a moment."

His master slumped back against the wall, looking pale, breathing as if he'd just run for miles.

Kade nodded again, turning his back to the sieka. He moved toward Mon'keur, clicking and murmuring soft endearments. He found a sabai root in his pocket and broke it in half.

"So, mi'it, are you calm?" Kade chuckled as Mon'keur's head leaned over the stall, attitude apologetic and hungry, lips stretching for the treat. "Ah, I have something you want, yes?"

Kade held Mon'keur's nose, looking at him firmly. "I have told you I am one you can trust. It would help for you to listen."

He fed the horse another sabai and then pushed the soft nose back so he could enter the stall and check the hoof.

"You are good with horses. Mon'keur doesn't usually let anyone but me touch him." His master's voice was faint, a glance back revealing him still pale and worn.

"I rode before I walked. The mi'it and I are friends." He frowned; it would serve him badly if the lordling was found ill with him. "Shall I find Argent?"

His master shook his head. "I'll go. Tell him I went to visit Mon'keur and fell ill. Too much wine last night or something."

He watched as the sieka pushed himself up with obvious effort and stood, swaying. His master sat down hard. "Perhaps I will wait until you're sure Mon'keur is fine and you can help me out."

Kade checked Mon'keur over, picking up his fallen tools and looking at the mount's hoof, sighing in relief as he found no blood.

"The mi'it is well. Only startled." Kade left the stall, assuring himself it was fastened. "Can I help you to the house?"

His master's answer was a long time in coming, and even when the sieka did speak, those eyes remained closed. "Thank you. And remember, *I* became ill while I was here, too much wine or something last night followed by the smell of the horses. What happened before... I can't... I'm not..." His master's eyes opened and he stared hard up at Kade. "It didn't happen."

"No. Nothing happened." Kade bent to help the man to his feet, the incident pushed far to the back of his mind.

If there was one thing Kade understood, it was the importance of secrets.

Surial lay in his bed, watching the sun make patterns upon the white comforter. There was an entire story told in the pattern of stitching on the comforter, done in the same white. He'd long ago memorized the tale, with eyes and fingers and heart, a small piece of his home that had come to Azize with him.

Home, from where he'd been exiled for doing just what he'd done today in the stables. How many times would it have to be beaten into him before he stopped using the healing ability he'd been cursed with?

He hadn't meant to heal the vakla, he'd meant to fetch Argent and have a physician sent for. Someone who could heal the man without pulling life from everything else around him. He'd panicked, just as he'd told the slave, felt the pain and seriousness of the injuries and suddenly worried that the man might die before a doctor could arrive. He knew that slaves were treated differently than free men, but surely there would be some punishment for causing a man to die? So, without even thinking about it, he'd healed the man. If anyone ever found out -- if his father ever found out...

No one would. He had ordered Kade not to tell anyone and he was the master here, Kade would obey.

Thank the Lady Moon his horse was okay. Luckily, the animal had still been spooked enough not to come near them or he might have accidentally killed the beast. Instead, he'd pulled the energy needed from himself. Now he was stuck in his bed, exhaustion promising to keep him there for several days.

A small bird came and sat on the windowsill, small head turning this way and that. It gave a single trill and then flew off again, leaving him alone once more.

It had been a bird that had started it all, those many years ago.

His Mam didn't like it when he wandered away, but he'd seen five springs and he could take care of himself. He wouldn't get lost. Surial danced through the forest, happy to be free of his brothers and their heavy hands, their mean words, if only for a few minutes.

The sun shone through the trees, making patterns on the ground that had him stopping to look and play. Everything smelled of green and brown. A singing bird caught his attention and he ran to a low branched tree, delighted to find a nest with three baby birds in it. Their mother came swooping down, screaming at him, and he ran, scared she was going to fly into his face.

As he ran away from the tree and its treasure, he shouted out, "I wouldn't have hurt your babies, Mam!"

She didn't seem to care, though, just kept swooping down at him until he couldn't see the nest anymore and then she left him alone. He wandered a bit farther before heading back another way -- he didn't want to upset the Mam bird any more.

More bird noises caught his attention, but these sounds were wrong, little peeps that sounded like hurt. He followed them until he found a little brown bird with a green head, almost as small as the other baby birds had been, lying on the ground. One of its wings was broken, but something else was wrong because the bird was just lying on its side and he could see blood.

"Oh, no!"

The little bird began to peep again and Surial began to cry, a sick feeling inside him like when he was going to throw up. He bent and cupped his hands, picking up the little bird and cradling it against him.

"Oh, pretty birdie, I wish you weren't hurt." He cried as he thought of how the bird wouldn't be able to fly anymore and how it must be hurting because there was an awful lot of blood on his hands now and he'd be scared except it wasn't his blood, so it wasn't so bad.

He petted the wing with one of his fingers and touched the little bird's chest, smoothing back the feathers. It was so soft and its heart was beating so fast. Maybe if he took the bird to his Mam, she would know what to do.

He took off at a run, bird cupped against his chest. The trees thinned and opened up into the clearing where their house sat and he was so happy to see that Mam and Father were sitting in the outside chairs, sipping on tea.

He brought them the bird, tears and words tumbling from him. "It's a sweet little bird and it's hurt and I want you to fix it, please, Mam, can you fix it?"

Father was frowning, but Mam cupped his cheek and wiped away his tears with her fingers. "Sh, my child. Let me see."

He held his cupped hands out to her and opened them.

Then the most amazing thing happened, the bird flew out of his hands, circled above their heads twice, and flew back into the forest.

"Oh!" He laughed.

"What nonsense is this then, Surial?" Father sounded annoyed and Surial showed his hands, covered in blood.

"It was hurt, see, that's its blood!" Father frowned at him, and Surial backed away into Mam. "M not lying!"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, I just carried it home. I thought maybe Mam could do something to make it better like when Lunaril broke his leg and had to have it wrapped in that cast."

Father's face turned to stone. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, Father, I didn't do anything. It was already hurt when I picked it up." Surial started to cry again.

His Mam's arms circled him. "There, there, my child. Arundial, leave him be."

"If the bird's wing was broken, if that's its blood on his hands, how was it able to fly away? We can't just dismiss this -- not if the boy healed it."

"I'm sure there's some other explanation." Now Mam sounded afraid and her arms tightened around him.

Surial watched Father through his tears, sniffing as the man got up and walked back toward the forest. "Look -- there -- his footsteps. The grass is dead where he walked. He did heal that bird."

Father strode back to him and pulled him from his Mam's arms. Surial screamed and dug his heels in, he didn't want to go to his Father, not when Father was yelling and had that mad face on, but Father was stronger and pulled him away from Mam and shook him.

"What were you thinking? Were you thinking about making the bird better? And don't lie to me, boy."

Surial nodded; of course he'd been thinking about making the bird better, that's why he'd brought it to Mam.

Father glared over his head at Mam. "You see?" Surial didn't like it when Father hissed like that, it made him scared.

Father shook him again. "Listen to me, Surial. You will not do that again. Do you understand me? You are never to heal anything again. It's dangerous and evil and I will not have one of those freaks for a son."

Surial just cried; he didn't know what he'd done wrong, all he wanted was for the bird to be better and now Father was yelling and he could hear Mam crying quietly behind him.

"Do you understand me?" His father roared the words this time, hand thumping hard on the table, knocking over Father's teacup. It rolled off the table and shattered against the set stones.

A loud knock sounded on the door, pulling Surial from his reverie with a start. It came again, louder still. "What?"

The door opened, Argent coming in, Rowan following close behind. "I knocked five times, my Helan, are you all right?"

"I'm just tired, Argent. I shall spend the day in bed. I can go through the shipping records from here."

"Yes, tired. Too much wine, I believe it was you said." Argent's face was calm and Surial had to work to keep himself from wriggling under the steady gaze.

"That is what I said, Argent."

"You didn't seem inebriated when you returned home last night."

"What are you getting at, Argent?"

"You were fine until you went to the stables, my Helan, that is all. And Kade looked rather upset, worried, when he brought you out." His Rowani's dark eyes were worried, brow furrowed.

Surial snorted. "He was probably worried you were going to accuse him of hurting me and then he'd get punished. I had too much to drink and I'm still sick over what happened to Di'une. Just leave it, Rowan, Kade didn't do anything wrong."

Rowan frowned. "There has been some talk, my Helan, that Kade has a history of violence. I haven't seen anything to warrant it, but I would hope you would keep yourself safe."

Surial frowned. Kade dangerous? He supposed the man was very big and could cause a lot of damage if he wanted to, but there was something about the big slave that made him feel safe rather than afraid. He didn't say anything to his men; he had learned a long time ago not to try to articulate the instinctive feelings he got about people.

Argent bustled about, picking up clothing and opening drapes, quickly and efficiently freshening the room. "Would you like some coffee, perhaps some food, my Helan?"

"Just some juice, please. And not that dreadful saba fruit. I want something sweet."

"Yes, my Lord. As you wish." With that, Argent was gone, taking Rowan, leaving silence behind.

chapter seven

He smiled as Dalan stamped and tossed her head, protesting as Kade headed out the stable doors. "Going to see your brother, mi'it. I will have one of the boys take you for a run."

The white clay of the house shimmered in the sunlight. So stark, so clean -- growing up in the middle of the sands, windows reaching for the sea. Very much like its master, this house.

Kade's shoulder tinged at the thought of the sieka and his healing powers. Argent had mentioned that the master had stayed in bed for most of a week, sleeping like the dead, wasting and shadowed.

Kade still didn't understand why the sieka had done it.

The door to the back stables slid open, brightening the freshly swept stalls for a brief moment before Kade slid them shut.

He clicked, calling out a cheerful greeting, keeping his voice gentle and low so as not to startle Mon'keur. "Di'ben sud, mi'it."

Once his eyes adjusted, Kade stepped forward, humming and trilling in his throat. Mon'keur called out his own greeting, the dark head bobbing in the sunlight.

"Who's there?" The unmistakable voice startled him, and the horse as well. The beast reared back and swung its head, hitting the side of the stall.

Kade was further surprised when the sieka's voice sounded again, this time soft and lilting, almost singing gentle words, calming the horse. A glare from frosty eyes was shot in his direction by the man in the stall with the horse, but Mon'keur was calm enough, nuzzling his owner's neck.

"Sieka. I came to feed the mount. I did not expect anyone here. My apologies." Kade kept his voice soft, backing away from the pair.

Damn it to the boiling sea, he hadn't expected the master out this early. To be honest, he hadn't expected to be caught by those flashing, angry eyes at all. Best to be invisible and silent and avoid that gaze.

"I don't expect you to take care of him, especially not after his behavior the other day. Most people tend to find Mon'keur too temperamental to deal with more than once or twice." The sieka's voice softened again as he turned back to the beast, one fine, long fingered hand smoothing along the beast's nose, the other held flat against the large mouth, two cubes of sugar disappearing into the toothy maw. "Mon'keur isn't mean, though, are you, lovely?" The master's lips pressed against the beast's nose in a soft kiss. "You're just not fond of people, nasty, smelly beasts on a whole, aren't they?"

Kade chuckled, nodding as he moved toward the door. "We are that."

The sieka looked drawn, almost sad. Slender to begin with, the recent illness had left the man thin and tired. Kade nodded as the horse nuzzled his master again, nickering softly. Perhaps the master understood the peace the animals held, their place within the Whole, steady and pure. Perhaps this mi'it would heal itself and its master.

Kade's hand hit the door and he sighed. Not that it mattered. All he had to do was stay low and heal himself. Then he could run.

"Wait." The voice stopped him in his tracks. "K...Kade, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sieka." Kade stopped, looking down the stalls.

"Argent mentioned you seemed handy with the horses and that you believe Mon'keur could rejoin the main stable. Is he right?" A half smile pulled at the sieka's lips. "Argent's a little ... unfond of the ponies, but he's usually a good judge of ability."

"The mi'it can join his brothers and sisters, Sieka. He has spirit and needs to run often. This one cannot be allowed his head."

The sieka chuckled. "I can think of a number of people who fit that description, Kade. Perhaps Mon'keur is not so unusual after all."

Kade took a single step forward. "I brought some grain mixed with dark honey."

The master nodded and gave the horse another soft kiss before stepping back and then out of the stall to give Kade room.

Kade walked up, chirruping until the mi'it saw him. "Kama'asi mi'it. Di'ben sud."

Liquid brown eyes rolled. Kade continued murmuring, singing to him of the glory of wind in his mane, the fine curve of his jaw, the slender strength of his legs. He sang of running and fields and sweet grasses, interspersing his gentle words with careful trills and increasing longer touches to velvet-soft skin. Finally, when Mon'keur was relaxed, Kade scooped out a handful of sweetened grain, held it out and let the mi'it feed.

"He's never let anyone else hand feed him before." There was a touch of awe in the sieka's voice and a hint of something else, Kade couldn't be sure, but it sounded like wistfulness. A smooth, slender hand came from over Kade's shoulder, petting the horse on his nose. "Are you giving me up for another, Mon'keur? Is that what this has been all about? Time for you to move on?"

Kade looked over into sad eyes, the color of dream-forests, and shook his head. "This mi'it waits for you. I am no threat to the iyossi between you. I want him riding in the morning sun, as it was meant."

The sieka muttered and began running his hands over the horse's flanks.

"I had only four springs when he chose me. He's the only one who's stayed with me through everything..." The sieka's voice was soft, almost as if he was speaking to himself. Kade glanced over at him to find the dream-forest eyes glazed, the pale face containing a peace he had not seen before in the master.

"It is a good thing, to find your mount so early." Kade spoke carefully as he moved around Mon'keur's backside. "You must ride like the wind."

"Not for a very long time." The sadness was back in that soft voice, a sadness that seemed at odds with the

youth of its speaker.

"Mi'it were meant to run beneath the sun. Nothing free can thrive in a box." Kade looked up. "Talk to him? I would look at that hoof."

The sieka slid back into the stall and took Mon'keur's head between his hands, rubbing softly as he began to speak. The words were nothing more than faint whispers, even so, Kade could hear a yearning in them and he was again struck by the sadness that dwelt within the young body. The mi'it remained calm, docile even beneath that gentle touch and voice.

"Imagine it, Mon'keur, running beneath the sun, the sand beneath your hooves, the waters next to you, the wind through our manes. I know it isn't the grassy hills we grew up on, but it was lovely in its own way and it could be ours again. I promise you that this time, once we know you are well, I will not wait so long to run with you."

Kade smiled as the sieka spoke in that loving voice. Focusing on the hope in those tones, Kade lifted the hoof again and began checking for infection. Finally, assured the hoof was healing, he stood. "He'll need quiet for a week more or so, but he will be running after."

"Thank you. I owe you a debt."

Kade nodded. "Bright day, Sieka."

"Bright day." His master's voice was short, closed, and he'd turned his attention back to the horse, his back stiff and unyielding. Kade shook his head and headed back to the main stables, unsure of what offense he'd caused, but sure his absence would ease it.

"I cannot believe you got Mon'keur all settled within a moon." Argent grinned, turning the corner of the house, a pair of mugs in his hands. "I figured I owed you a drink."

Kade laughed from his seat on the low stone bench, hands full of leather and sinew as he repaired tack. "I told you he needed an ear, Argent."

"Move over and put that stuff aside." Argent settled beside him and handed over a mug. "Did you hear I had a new granddaughter?"

Kade grinned and clapped Argent on the shoulder. "Another blessing! Everyone is well?"

"She and her mother are fine." Argent grinned. "She looks like Liean." He took a long swallow from his mug. "Go on, even the best ale in Azize tastes better when it's still cold."

Kade drank, sighing as the brew hit his stomach. "Oh, that is good. Thank you."

He watched the mi'it wander about the paddock, Mon'keur happy and peaceful along with his kin. The day was beginning to fade, the heat easing into comfortable warmth.

"How long has it been, Kade?" Argent's voice interrupted his musing.

"Since I've had an ale? Long." He smiled. "Is it brewed here?"

"No, I meant how long have you been a vakla." Argent blushed. "I don't mean to pry. It's just obvious you weren't born an owned man."

Kade closed his eyes a moment, forcing himself to swallow the mouthful of ale he had. "Twelve cycles."

"I'm sorry." Argent shifted next to him. "I really don't mean to pry. We've just never had vakli here -- the Banshinaree family don't own vakli. The Helan... well, I'm surprised he didn't sell the papers he won to someone else rather than own a vakla, but I daresay I'm glad it worked out this way. I'd hate to think of you under the *care* of some of the sieka here."

"This life is not a hard one. I have been in worse places." Kade kept his voice neutral. His words were true. He was neither abused nor neglected. He also wasn't free to leave.

"But you're still a vakla." Argent seemed to have heard what he didn't say. "I regret that I cannot change that, Kade, but I can treat you as if you were one of the many servants here, who are almost all like family to me."

"I am honored." Kade smiled, beating back the voice inside him that screamed that he once had a family, a home, a name of his own. "Thank you."

A voice, raised in anger, drifted down to them from one of the second story windows. "...said blue, you idiot. This is aqua at best, green at worst. Are you colorblind as well as stupid? Rowan! Explain to this moron what blue is!"

Argent cleared his throat. "I know you probably don't think very well of men who keep vakli, but the Helan is a good man."

Kade's lips twitched and he lifted his mug to his lips to hide a smile. "Any man who earns such trust is worth much."

"Ow! That was my posterior, you ass!"

He couldn't hold in his smile this time. "Tailor?"

Argent nodded. "I've seen the man at work -- he isn't at all careful with his needles. The Helan is bound to be full of pinpricks before he has his new wardrobe. I'm sure the man does it on purpose."

Kade frowned. "Why does he keep him, then?"

Argent shrugged. "He is the best, and a man of the Helan's station is expected to patronize the best."

He cocked an eyebrow. "They have many rules, these sieka. It is good that I am not bound by them."

One of the mounts whinnied, as if in agreement, and Kade and Argent both chuckled.

They sat together as they finished their ale, the occasional offended scream from the window above them or whinny from the horses before them punctuating the silence.

chapter eight

Surial was once again signing papers. The stack was twice as high as usual and the contracts seemed to have all been written in some ancient form of Benar, for all the luck he was having at going through them. His discontent was growing daily, the long hours of boredom and loneliness barely relieved by evenings spent among the nobles of Azize, their petty problems and invented scandals growing more tedious by the day.

He longed for the green hills of his home, the soft breezes and angry sea crashing against the cliffs. There he had a purpose and a place. He was spending more and more of his time with Mon'keur, watching with amazement and the only happiness he was finding these days as the animal improved daily. He told himself he was spending the time in an effort to make up for the days alone that Mon'keur had spent since they'd arrived, cooped up in one stable or another, and for not having found and healed the wound sooner. Some part of him knew that his main reason for returning again and again to the pony's side was the hopes of running into the vakla again.

Perhaps it was time to attend a few more parties and find a suitable bed companion, someone he could drop again in a month or two. No one expected him to mourn Di'une -- by the moon's light, the boy was a peshir, and an actor to boot -- but it would have been ill-done to take another lover before the poor boy's blood was cleaned off the flagstones. And try as he might, he could not be that callous. It still made him sick when he thought on the body they'd found.

Not that anyone else seemed to believe he should wait. At the last party he had attended, the Lady Assuane had spent the entire evening singing the praises of her daughter, as childish an adult as Surial had ever had the misfortune to meet. He'd escaped without promising to attend some private luncheon and had no desire to repeat the performance.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts and he called out, "Come", only turning when Argent didn't say anything. Surial's eyes widened at the sight of Kade, seeming darker and larger than ever as he stood in the doorway, Rowan at his elbow. The man looked utterly incongruous, standing there in his pale leggings, brief vest hugging his chest, braids snaking over one shoulder, huge hands holding a fine silver tray with a pot of thick, rich terat, dainty sweets and finger sandwiches.

Surial smiled; this was a rare sight, his barbarian within the house. Argent had fought for a week before the man would come indoors to grab his plate and take it back out to the stables to eat.

"Turning into a houseboy, Kade?" Surial couldn't resist the jibe; Kade looked so very uncomfortable and out of place.

Kade shook his head and chuckled. "No, Sieka. One of the serving girls took a fall and Madrise needed help."

"Not Edina, I hope?" That girl had always been clumsy, but now that she was pregnant, each fall came with the risk of costing her far more than a sprained ankle or broken wrist.

Kade shook his head again. "Mirsha."

"Badly hurt?" He didn't really care that much; Mirsha was fairly new, with a loud, annoying voice, but she was in his employ.

"I do not know, Sieka."

"She was sitting in the kitchen with her foot upon a chair, my Helan. Complaining loudly, though, so I would guess it is not serious." Rowan's voice was dry and light.

Surial chuckled and tried not to stare. The sunlight from the large windows lit Kade far more brightly than the lamps from the kitchen or the high windows in the stables. He noticed the scars across the top of the man's cheeks and the way the sun made the brown eyes look like melted honey before he forced his attention back to his papers. "Argent usually puts the tray on the low table and pours for me. You're dismissed, Rowan."

"Yes, Sieka." The vakla's voice was thick, dark, and gravely, Surial could feel it in his stomach.

Kade moved with a loose-limbed grace, muscles rippling beneath deeply tanned skin as he set the tray down and knelt. He poured the terat carefully, not spilling a drop, adding the steamed goat's milk to the top. "Do you need honey, Sieka?"

"That depends on what kind of a mood Madrise is in. If she's mad at me, I need two spoonfuls. If she's upset, I need one, and if she's in a good mood, I can take it as it is." He shook his head at himself. He let her get away with so much, but where else would he find a cook who could make small cakes with sour grapes and bayagu like he used to love as a boy in Sandide?

"She was singing before Mirsha fell, so you may be safe, Sieka." Brown eyes twinkled over at him. "Unless the singing sours it..." Kade grinned, shaking his head as his cheeks heated, and stood. "Bright day, Sieka."

Surial looked down at the stack of papers left to deal with and frowned; he was tired of the paperwork. He was tired of being bored, of the loneliness, too. It could hardly hurt to spend a few moments chatting to his slave. He pushed himself up from the desk and wandered toward the couch, waving Kade toward it. "Sit, pour yourself a cup, and have something to eat. You can tell me how my ponies are doing."

Kade blinked, looking up at the ceiling for the briefest second and then moved carefully to the couch. He sat board-stiff, vaguely unbalanced upon the edge of the couch, watching Surial as he sat. "The mi'it are well, though Dalan is jealous of Mon'keur. She is chafing from lack of use."

Once Surial was settled, Kade handed him the terat, held with a stable, steady hand. Surial accepted the cup and saucer with a small smile of thanks and then waited pointedly for the vakla to pour himself his own. The terat was poured with care, no honey or milk. No additions at all. Somehow that suited.

"Thank you, Sieka." It was obvious that Kade couldn't decide where to rest his eyes, the bright glance fluttering about the room.

"Do you think Dalan would be happy if I had someone ride her? She and her rider could join me and Mon'keur on the beach." He had Kade's attention now, honey brown eyes unreadable, but glued to him. "If only I could find someone who could handle her; as you know she's quite spirited."

"Her heart is proud. I... I would..." Kade stopped, took a deep breath. "She needs someone strong, but easy

on the reins, Sieka. She has a fine mouth. It would be a shame to cut her."

Surial hid his smile. "That's quite a list, where will I find someone like that?"

It was interesting, to watch hunger and need run across that marked face. Kade tried to beat it down, tried to deny the compulsion. Surial waited, watched, curious to know which would win -- the need to feel the illusion of freedom or pride. "I could do it, Sieka."

His smile felt rather cynical. "I wondered if that might not be your answer. You sure you can handle her?"

Kade's eyes were oddly still, as if in admitting his need, he had faded. "Yes, Sieka."

Surial stood and wandered back over to the window, the odd restlessness returning. He felt like he'd kicked a puppy or slapped a child. Outside the sun beat down mercilessly, there was no breeze today to relieve the heat, even the waves beyond the city seemed dull and lifeless.

"I am sorry for offending, Sieka. Please forgive." Kade stood and bowed, eyes fastened on the floor. "With permission, I return to my duties."

"Sit down and eat. Finish your terat. We'll go riding at sunset when the heat lets up." He sighed. "You showed no disrespect, Kade. I was baiting you." He gave a short bark of laughter. "My father would beat me if he was here, while the nobles who fill these streets would be so proud."

"Sieka?" Kade looked honestly confused, utterly perplexed by Surial's words. He sat back down on the couch, looking like an oversized child who had been thrust into a soiree. It occurred to Surial that he knew nothing, nothing at all about this man. He had a few wrinkles about his eyes, but his hair was bright. With his skin tanned as leather, the man could have twenty-five or forty summers.

"I do not hail from here." He waved his hand out the window. "These people see cruelty as a social skill." He shrugged. "You become inured to it after awhile. You can become inured to anything... but I guess I don't have to tell you that."

"No, Sieka." Kade shrugged. "I have not been in Azize for very long, but it has a flavor. Would you like another terat?"

"No, but please, finish yours. And eat some of Madrise's cakes so she doesn't think I didn't like them." He returned to his desk and pulled the first of the papers off the stack, skimming the contents, back bowed, head leaning on one hand.

Kade finished his beverage quickly and then sat, still and silent, almost like a statue, even his breath undetectable as Surial worked.

Surial made his way through most of his papers, almost forgetting that Kade was still in the room. Almost. "Are you always this quiet?"

"Often, Sieka." Kade looked over with a grin. "The mi't and I talk, when they foul their water or dump their grain."

"Mi't -- it means horse, doesn't it? What language is that?"

Kade nodded. "It is Naik, the language of my birth."

He signed the last of the cursed papers and rang for Argent, before turning in his seat and allowing himself the luxury of looking at Kade. The man was like a bronze statue; only his hair seemed alive, dancing in the sunlight. "I don't think I've ever heard of it."

"My lands are far away, over the mountains, beyond the dark lakes." Kade's eyes were suddenly soft, a gentle, lost hunger within them. "There are some Naik here, but it is rare to see us beyond the mountains."

Before he could ask any more questions, Argent arrived. If the man was surprised to see Kade, he gave no sign. Surial handed him the sheaf of papers. "I'd like a bath please, Argent, but I won't be going out. I really can't stomach the thought of making conversation while trying to swallow down another grease-laden meal."

"Yes, my Helan. Will there be anything else?"

He shook his head and waved his hand. "No, Argent, that will be all."

Kade watched Argent leave and then turned to Surial. "A long day's work done, Sieka."

"I hate it," he admitted. "And never any thanks for looking out for the family's concerns out here, but if I make one mistake, well..." He shook his head at the bitter note that had crept into his voice; there was something about this man that invited confidences, perhaps it was his silent nature, as if his very quietness meant your secrets were safe with him. "Are you happy working in the stables, Kade?"

"The mi't are my brothers. They are my family."

"Then you are a luckier man than I..." He turned away, loneliness slamming back into him at Kade's words. He had brothers, and sisters. A large, loving family who had sent him away.

"I have duties. The mounts wait on their supper." Kade's voice was low, deep -- almost a growl as he stood. "Shall I take your tray, Sieka?"

"Of course, go be with your family." He waved his hand. "Don't worry about the tray, someone will come for it."

"Yes, Sieka." The growl was more pronounced as Kade stood and moved toward the door. Surial turned to look at him, the slave was almost stalking.

"Just a minute." Kade stopped, but didn't turn toward him, nor did the slave address him. "Is there a problem?"

"No, Sieka."

Surial could see the tremors moving beneath the skin in Kade's arms. "Oh, really? Well I'd say there is if you're lying to me."

Kade took a long, shaky breath and those muscles tensed, shifted beneath the cloth. Surial could hear the fabric begin to tear, the seams pulling tight.

"How can I serve you, Sieka?" The rich voice was strained, tight. Furious.

"You can tell me why you're upset," Surial suggested, voice mild, though he was somewhat taken aback by the completeness of Kade's anger. At the same time... it was fascinating, the way the honey eyes had darkened with his fury, the way the sleek muscles clenched and released. He wondered idly if he pushed Kade

any further if the man would lash out, hit him. He wondered how long it would be before Rowan opened the door.

"Tell me, Sieka." Kade turned, eyes blazing and voice dripping with venom. "Have you ever worked with maggots crawling beneath your skin? Have you watched your family, your home, your life stolen? Watched your mother scream as she burned?" The deep voice rumbled, thick with a fury unlike anything Surial had experienced. Those huge hands clenched, muscles and bone creaking. "Have you ever been nailed to a board, Sieka? Taken by strangers until you bled? How about dragging? Does that not sound lucky to you?" Kade took a step closer and then stopped, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. "I am vakla, bound to your will. I have no home, no family. No freedom, no future. I am less than nothing, Sieka."

He turned and walked to the door, reaching for the doorknob, turning back to look into Surial's stunned eyes. "I am yours."

Surial felt tears gather in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

He felt small and selfish, ashamed.

Kade closed his eyes and took another deep breath and the anger seemed to drain from his face, leaving only a raw sorrow. "Shall I ready Mon'keur and Kelan for you this night?"

He nodded. "Will you still ride Dalan?"

"If the sieka will allow it."

"I will." Kade nodded, jumping out of the way as the door opened, a few boys lugging in a tub. "I will wait after your supper."

With that, Kade was gone.

Surial went through the motions; sitting in the tub and at his table, but very little was washed or consumed as he tried to figure out how he could possibly face Kade. The last thing his father had said to him when he'd been sent to Azize was that he was a self-centered, selfish, stupid brat.

His father was always right.

By the time the Sieka Banshinaree appeared at the stable doors, his guard at his side, Kade's temper was firmly reined, boxed, locked, and controlled.

He was lucky he still had his tongue; lucky he wasn't being strapped to the whipping post, lucky he was still in one piece. Kade had harangued himself all evening, not even able to eat as he waited for the sieka to appear. Yelling at his master, losing his temper at some baby-cheeked, self-centered child whose idea of hard work included drawing and deciding whether or not his drink needed honey.

Ridiculous.

Three mounts were saddled and bridled, ready for riding. Dalan stamped, rolling her eyes at Mon'keur and Kelan and curling her lip.

He chuckled, patting her warm, soft hip as he checked the tack. "Ah, mi'it, you go out tonight. Kama'asi. Soon we feel the wind as we ride."

Riding. Kade closed his eyes, hand clenching around the reins. Eleven years since he'd ridden. Eleven years and he'd almost ruined it by losing his temper.

"Everything all right?" The sieka's voice was carefully neutral.

"Yes, Sieka. Just checking the tack." Kade kept his eyes down, kept his voice soft. He would not ruin this. Not now, with Dalan saddled and the ability to ride so close.

The sieka mounted Mon'keur with ease, the leather creaking as he settled into the saddle.

"Call me Surial." The words were soft, floating down on him from above his head, and then the master clicked to Mon'keur and rode out to the courtyard.

Kade blinked as his master rode off, his armed shadow close.

He reached up for the horn and put a foot in the stirrup and froze, suddenly terrified, so hungry for the experience that he couldn't take it. Dalan snorted, shifting and snorting as the expected weight didn't land on her back.

A moment later he heard the beat of Mon'keur's hooves as the mi'it was walked back to him. "You are capable of riding, yes?"

"Yes. Yes, I am sorry." He swung up into the saddle, his muscles automatically shifting and adjusting to the familiar motion. Dalan danced and Kade leaned down, whispering to her, hands soft against her neck. He could feel her, warm and alive beneath him, heart aching to run. He sat up, looking at Surial. "It has been a very long time."

"Good." Surial looked at him for a long moment and then spoke again. "For a minute there I thought I was going to have to ask you if there was a problem."

Surial's lips quirked and both humor and worry filled the dark eyes.

"No. No problem. Lead on, Sieka." Kade settled into the saddle, leading Dalan along behind. She danced, prancing and restless. "Soon, mi'it laki. We will chase the waves. Patience. Kama'asi."

Surial led them through the back streets at a sedate pace, but soon they reached the sea. Rowan remained at the crest of the hill, but Mon'keur was given his head, the sieka and his mount flowing across the sand like the waves themselves. Dalan rolled her eyes back, looking for his signal. Kade leaned down close and tapped her with his heels. She took off as if possessed, long legs thrumming through the sand. Kade stretched out along her back, breathing with her, body moving in tandem with her. So good, so right, the wind blew and the surf crashed and, if it didn't smell like home when he closed his eyes, he could live with that.

The winds stole his tears as they ran.

At length Surial and Mon'keur slowed and turned, heading back toward Azize at a more leisurely pace. With reluctance, Kade nudged Dalan, turning her and slowing. The sun was setting behind the city, making it shine like a jewel perched on the ocean.

Shadows and light painted the white buildings, making them at once dull and shiny, the roofs reflecting the deep fingers of color spread across the darkening sky. Surial's eyes were on the sea, however, watching it with an intensity Kade hadn't seen before in the young man.

"She is beautiful, Sieka." Kade's fingers stroked Dalan's neck, her ears as they slowed.

The streets were changing; dull colored homespun robes were sliding from large homes, dark hair and faces covered against the night air as they hurried to hovels and tents. Soon, Kade knew, the brightly colored silks accentuating fine, pale skin would fill the streets as the nobles searched out their entertainments.

Surial jerked as he spoke and then the master looked around as if just seeing where they were for the first time. "The city? She's far prettier if you don't know her denizens."

"I meant the sea." Kade shrugged. "I have no love for cities."

"The light on the waves..." Surial turned and looked back out over the sea again. "Yes, I guess she is beautiful." The man sounded surprised, as if he hadn't even seen the sea before despite the direction of his earlier gaze.

Kade nodded, cheeks hot. Silly, to sit and admire the sea when he should be planning his escape. This was the first time he was free from the tangled roads and alleys of Azize and what was he doing? Following along beside his master like a trained dog. His father would be ashamed. Dalan tossed her head as Kade's legs tightened and he forced himself to relax, to not draw the sieka's attention. This wasn't the place to run, not with the city between him and freedom, and he would not take the mount regardless.

He was no thief.

"Can you see the green hills beyond the sea, Kade? And the mountains capped with snow?" Surial turned his face away from the water. "There is a sight that is beautiful."

Kade nodded, remembering the long trek over those ranges, the slave camps, dozens of dark Naik bodies huddled together for warmth and safety, the screams of the people as the ba'achi, their shamans, were delivered into dark caves and they were left alone. "I have lived among those mountains."

"My home is in those mountains." There was sadness in Surial's voice.

"It must be different for you, here in the sand and salt. The water there is sweet. Do you live in the city, the one in the valley beneath the falls?" Kade had seen it once, the largest thing he could imagine, buildings and streets spreading as far as the mountains allowed.

"We had a house there, but my family's home is nestled in the cliffs, a few dozen homes, some barns, and several outbuildings. I can remember playing along the cliffs as a boy, watching the sea. I was so desperate to know what lay beyond it." Surial looked back at Kade again, eyes bitter. "Be careful what you wish for, Kade -- did anyone ever say that to you?"

"Yes, Sieka." Kade smiled automatically, the flash of his mother's eyes, fighting down her laughter as she attempted to scold her beloved son, filling his memory. "Many times."

"It's good advice." Surial looked once more out over the sea and then back to the city whose streets they were beginning to climb. "I should have followed it."

"Yes, Sieka." Kade watched as they rode up to join the guard, looking for weaknesses in the walls they

passed. The drainage holes were too small; his owner could fit them, but he'd be stuck. He could climb over, but he'd be in plain view and vulnera... there. Kade saw it for a split second before they moved on. A split in the wall, wooden boards placed to close it, big enough for a man to slip through.

Big enough for a man to escape through.

He looked over at the guard, but the man appeared oblivious while the sieka was guiding Mon'keur up through the streets by rote, his mind obviously far away.

Kade watched the route they walked, memorizing the way.

Too easy, to fit into this household, care for the horses and eat his supper from a cracked dish before falling to dream upon soft hay. Too easy, to be healed and clothed and safe...

Nothing that was meant to run could live within a closed box. Soon, Kade knew, he would stop dreaming of his trees.

chapter nine

"You do know the rowani are not usually so vulnerable to a pretty face." She ran her finger around the lip of the bottle Dinna had carried in when the Banshinaree's guard dog had been dragged in.

It snagged her skin, cut into the pad of her finger. "Then again, I doubt you're quite the catch around here, yes? Even at home, perhaps, on those cliffs where lesser family means lesser man?"

Banshinaree's man was a tree trunk, something no one here but she could possibly understand. His blood ran thick within him, his passions deep and slow and pure. Loyal, this one. Steady and strong and unbending to the winds.

Which was why she cut at the root.

She walked over, watching the huge, dark eyes -- full of anger that would boil down into a syrup of most delicious fear very soon. Savinia reached out, watched as a drop of her blood fell upon his cheek. "This victim has been blessed. Ungag him, so he may thank me."

Dinna did as she was told, eyes sullen as they watched the bodyguard.

His reaction was immediate, the dog spat at her. He missed of course, the spittle landing at her feet. "Water, the most precious commodity here in the sands -- your sacrifice has been accepted and such generosity noticed."

"Witch." Defiant and strong -- stupid, but defiant and strong and after all, isn't that what the Banshinarees paid him for?

She put her hand to her wild, short hair. Not long and flowing like these children, of course, but surely she was still better than hag? "I assure you, you will give me, quite willingly, exactly what I want."

"You will have to kill me first."

She laughed. Oh, he was adorable. "I will kill you last. That's how it works."

She wandered around the cave, tapping her fingernail on her teeth. "They tell me, Rowan, that you have been with the Banshinaree for many years. Tell me, did you know his mother?"

The silence was expected and she smiled. "Think before you resist. For every question you do not answer, I will have a part of your body removed. Now, toes, fingers, nose, ears, etc -- you've perhaps forty cuts before you die? And if you irritate me, those cuts can be three days apart while the scorpions drink the pus you leak. If I were you, I would choose which questions I did not answer carefully."

"Monster." He spat again.

"Yes. One more chance, dear boy." She smiled, letting her pleasure shine through. "And you should think, how much do you need your toes? Did you know the Banshinaree's mother?"

He glared at her, trying to stare her down. This wasn't some soft, pampered boy the way the little actor had been, this man was the protector of another. Still, he looked away first.

She could almost hear him calculating the advantages of remaining absolutely silent versus answering this one, seemingly harmless question.

At last he answered, so softly, as if his whisper would make his betrayal any less harmful. "Yes."

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" She patted his cheek gently, almost maternally. "The first step is always the hardest."

With a growl, he tried to bite her hand.

"Tsk, ts, ts... careful. I might bite back and you wouldn't want that." She chuckled, the sound gurgling from her.

He glared, anger at his own impotence transferred to her.

Surial lay back in the bath, watching the reflection of the crescent of the moon that shone through the window as it danced in his bathwater.

He felt restless and unsettled, more so than usual. His household was in an uproar. His Rowani had gone missing two nights ago, his mount returning from the marketplace riderless. Rowan, whose entire life was vowed to protect him, watch him, defend him, had simply disappeared, leaving a hole that Argent and his grandsons could not fill. The watch had searched, his staff questioned. The magistrate had wanted Kade whipped, to see if the vakla confessed to wrong-doing.

The vakla.

His vakla.

He owned another human being. The thought sent a shiver through him that his bathwater was not warm enough to dispel and he climbed out of the tub, wrapping himself in a warm robe.

He wandered to the inner window, sitting on the sill, legs stretched out before him, back against the wide casement. The moon was brighter out here, shining down upon his courtyard. All was quiet but for the occasional nicker and whinny from his ponies. He recognized Mon'keur's voice among them and looked down to search out his stall.

Movement from the loft caught his eye, distracted him from the horses.

Kade was sitting cross-legged on a pile of hay, a razor glinting in his hand as he shaved, staring into a flat piece of metal. The lantern was hanging above him, a washtub sitting beside him.

After his cheeks were clean again, Kade began to unfasten the ends of the braids, pulling out dozens of tiny

ties and setting them aside with what looked very much like reverence. Then he began pulling the braids apart, one at a time. Slowly, but surely, the great mass of hair was loosened, falling over Kade's torso and onto the straw. Beneath the lantern's light it seemed to be almost metallic, an odd mixture of coppers and golds. He picked up an old currycomb and began to work it through the strands, the bright waves almost alive as he smoothed them.

Surial fingered his own hair; it had been almost as long as Kade's when he'd cut it. He could still remember the look on his father's face when he'd seen him for the first time with it cut short, but it had never been a flowing, living thing the way Kade's was. For long moments Kade worked through his hair, the motions slow and sensual. Then he placed the comb aside and wet his hands, pulling three strands free.

Kade braided, rocking back and forth slowly, mouth moving as he worked. Surial watched, fascinated, as those large fingers worked delicately, quickly, one braid forming after another, the odd rocking and singing continuous. He strained to hear the singing, but though the night was quiet he couldn't quite make it out. Somehow he knew Kade wouldn't repeat this little performance for him if he asked. There was a vast amount of hair to work into the braids, but Surial watched patiently, quietly, the restlessness he'd been experiencing gone.

Finally, there were two long strands remaining, one on each side of Kade's head. The song faltered as the strong hands lifted and separated the first into three sections. Kade closed his eyes, mouth moving silently as he worked. When he finished the first side, he continued with the second, body hunched over as if in unbearable agony. Surial was stunned by the sorrow, the pain that was held within a single body, not even able to be freed through noise. When the final two braids were fastened, Kade picked up the razor. As Surial watched in horror, the man sliced into his right palm. As the blood pooled, Kade dipped in the ends of both final braids, turning the sun-bleached ends dark.

After a long moment, Kade's rocking ceased. He washed his hands and grabbed a long piece of leather, gathering all the braids at the nape of his neck.

Surial remained absolutely still, waiting to see what Kade would do next, more intrigued by this vakla than he had been by anything else he could remember for a very long time.

Hair neatly bound, its beauty almost hidden in the mass of braids, Kade reached beside him, coming up with a broken piece of shell, something undoubtedly left by one of the servant's children playing in the hayloft.

Surial watched as Kade put in a half handful of grain and sprinkled in some fresh water from a cracked jug. Kade brought the shell to his forehead, to his lips, to his heart, and finally to his groin before setting it down in a corner, away from the piles of blankets which made up his bed. Then Kade ate a few handfuls of grain himself, idly playing with the straw as he chewed, stacking it together, making random patterns. Finally, he finished off the water in the jug, some slipping from a long crack, splashing down his chest, and darkening the waistband of his trousers.

Surial's breath caught in his throat, his body tightening at the sight and the sudden urge to see the rest of Kade's body. He shook his head at himself, climbing out of the windowsill and heading for his bed. He grabbed a book on the way, telling himself he'd read awhile before sleeping.

An hour later the book lay on the bed beside him, he'd barely made it two pages before tossing the book away, mind worrying at the puzzle that was Kade. How did a man like that become a vakla? It seemed... incongruous. Wrong. Kade belonged in the sunlight, in fields and forests. Dancing beneath an open sky.

The ritual of braiding that hair had been oddly moving, a simple, direct emotion in the repetitive motions and the low, chanting song. Kade had the guttural, grumbling tones of the P'lun nomads that were so often

captured as vakla, prized for their animal skills. Some even claimed they held magic, not unlike the monks living deep within the mountains.

The more he thought about Kade, the bigger the puzzle seemed. He shook his head, pushing it resolutely from his mind; little had intrigued him since coming to Azize; this was not the place to start.

From his vantage point on the bed, Surial saw the lantern as it was extinguished in the hayloft. It was somehow comforting, knowing Kade was going to sleep just across the courtyard.

As he settled back against his pillow, a scream went up from the courtyard. In a sudden, sickening wave, Surial knew. He *knew* -- and the smell of death was creeping up through the open window like a fog.

His Rowani.

chapter ten

Several weeks had passed since Rowan's body had been found and the sight of his oldest friend, tortured and mutilated, still haunted Surial. Rowan had crawled through the desert, only to die at the gates, waiting for someone to let him in. To have gone through so much and still lived... he shuddered.

Rowan had been his friend since childhood. The only person who understood what it was like for him here, who shared his homesickness. His friend, his protector... brutally handled.

It made him ill that someone would do such a thing, doubly so that it had been done to someone he knew, someone he cared about.

It felt as if this had been done to him.

First, his lover Di'une, and now his very bodyguard Rowan.

Chedar with the laughing eyes and the quick hand. The boy who loved more than anything to play in the waves, to imagine himself one of the mermen who lured sailors and virgins to the depths. Together, they had run through the huge markets, bare feet slapping on smooth stones, their pockets filled with fruits and nuts and pretty stones. They had learned to read, side by side, learned to write their names in the same hand.

Surial had been there the night Chedar lost his virginity, heard the low groans of pleasure in the night, heard the promises of love and devotion and need. Had watched the girl's eyes dim as Chedar became Rowan, the heavy black braid given to his own hands, the man's very spirit sworn to him.

Surial walked over to a tiny silvered chest, the serpent sigil of the Rowani embossed upon it. The braid rested within, dark and dusty. Dead. Dead, like his Rowan. His Chedar.

His friend.

Surial's fingers slid upon the chest, but did not open it.

Argent's soft knock interrupted his thoughts, the man coming into the room without waiting for his command.

"I'm sorry, my Helan, but Kade has run away!"

"What?"

"He didn't come in for breakfast, my Helan, which isn't unusual, but by midday when he couldn't be found, not even in the stables, I ordered a search and he is well and truly gone."

"You are sure he was not taken?"

Argent nodded. "One of the children saw him go, thought that he was playing a game of hide and seek with them."

A pang went through Surial, which made him angry -- he'd been avoiding the vakla for several days now. He had been at a loss as to what to do about the man; he was loath to sell him to someone. After all Kade had been through, Surial did not want to be the one to put him in the position of having someone else add to his miseries. At the same time he had grown uncomfortable having the man around. Kade's running took the decision from his hands. "Well, I hope he finds whatever he is looking for."

Argent gave him a sharp look. "He's likely to find himself on the whipping post in the town's square, my Helan, once he's caught."

"Let him go, I won't mount up a team to go after him."

"That will not be necessary, Helan. I've had word that Sieka Vanshi had a vakla run away yesterday. One of the servants must have babbled about Kade because Sieka Vanshi informed our house that he will catch your runaway while he goes for his own."

"By Alusius herself! Can't that man leave well enough alone?" Surial fumed. Vanshi's vakli were broken, brutalized creatures, sent to die in the mines as soon as Vanshi and his men were finished with them.

Argent shook his head. "They took off with the dogs a mark ago, my Helan."

Surial looked up. "Kade didn't take one of the mounts?"

"No, Helan. The mounts are all fine and settled, locked tight in the stables."

Surial scribbled a message on a parchment and then handed it to his man. "Take this to Sieka Delavani and wait for his answer. I want you back here in a candlemark, you understand?"

"Yes, my Helan."

Surial sighed. Perhaps Yamin would know something, had heard something. The man had more informants than even the Re'shud, with their night watch and policing squads. Although they had not found his Rowani in time.

He spent the intervening candlemark pacing his study. Damn Vanshi's meddling. Kade's escape had taken a weight off his shoulders, had absolved him of the need to worry what to do about the man, if he was captured and brought back...

He shuddered at the thought of administering a public flogging, but he would have no choice if Kade was brought back; that was the mandatory punishment. He'd accidentally come across one such flogging when he'd first arrived at Azize. He could still remember the sight of the blood flowing from the vakla's back. That had been one of Vanshi's vakli and the man had beaten the boy to death.

At least ten strokes were mandated by law; it had taken nearly forty before Vanshi had been satisfied that day. Surial shuddered again; how could he do that to another human being?

He prayed again that Kade would not be caught.

Argent's knock came, his face pale and drawn. He held Yamin's note crumpled in his hand. "They're setting up three whipping posts in the square, my Helan, and the party is returning."

Surial held out his hand for the note. Yamin's script, wide and flowing, confirmed his fears. "Vanshi's men have found three escaped slaves. If your man counts among them, you will have no choice but to punish him. The alternative is beheading. My man at the Re'shud says the whippings will come at first light, so that the masters may be well rested."

He closed his eyes, crumpling the paper and letting it drop from his hands.

"My Helan?"

"I expect there will be a visitor from the magistrate's office before the evening's out, Argent. I'll need the carriage ready to leave a candlemark before dawn. Tunis can drive and I want you to come with me."

"My Helan-"

"I have no choice. Kade brought this on himself. Now get out -- I want to be alone." He turned his heel on Argent, back stiff and straight, waiting until he heard the door close before letting the weight of what was to come pull his shoulders down.

Surial sat in his silent misery for hours before another knock came, Yamin's head popping through the door. "I told you keeping vakli was more trouble than it was worth, old friend."

He stepped in, a bottle of old brandy in his hand, his family's name along the side. Surial watched him move to the sidebar, too raw and agonized to complain at his lack of manners. "They found him then?"

Yamin nodded, dark hair falling against his face. "They did. He's bound in the square."

Surial shook his head, but kept the wish that Kade had made good his escape to himself. Yamin was his friend, but friendships only took you so far in this city and if push came to shove Surial knew well that Yamin owed him no loyalty. His friend poured him a generous drink and handed him the glass.

"I don't believe in beating man or beast, Yamin."

"I know. More than one house has lost a servant to you when word goes out that you're hiring." Yamin took a long drink of his own brandy and then sat, swirling the liquid in his glass. "It hasn't made you any friends. The people who like you like you despite this weakness and you will have no choice at dawn -- you will beat the vakli or watch him die."

He nodded and downed his brandy, eyes watering as the liquid burned down his throat.

Yamin sighed. "It's the paradox with vakli, isn't it? You beat them too much, they break and run. You don't beat them enough and they begin to believe they're men and run." He leaned forward and poured Surial another drink. "Don't fret, friend. He's a beast of a man and you're unlikely to kill him, even if the whip flies free."

Surial laughed, bitter and more than a little ill. Kill him? Considering what the man had already been through he doubted even the mandatory ten lashes of the whip would be that strong of a bite for more than a day or two. But he was different from the others who had owned Kade, he didn't wish to harm the man, he didn't even want to own Kade. Every lash that he inflicted in the morning would bring him one step closer to the animals who had done such unspeakable things to Kade. Every time the whip hit that scarred back he would be giving Kade justification for running, proving Surial would beat him as readily as the next man. He flung his glass across the room, jumping as it shattered, its contents staining the pristine white walls.

"Alusius!" Yamin shouted, turning surprised eyes on his friend. "Now this is ridiculous, getting yourself all worked up over a barbarian without the sense to stay in the only house in the city where he'll not be beaten."

Yamin leaned forward, concern in his eyes. "You need to get out more. You've been neglecting your box at the theatre; there are dark eyed boys wasting away for your attentions. Even when you attend the parties, you're quiet and gloomy. Perhaps it's time for you to find a wife, have a family, keep your mind off your livestock and your recent losses. Is it because you lost the guard? I have men, Surial."

Surial ground his teeth in the effort not to take Yamin apart for his repeated referral to vakli as livestock. It was not the way he had been brought up and it was one of the few tenets his family held that still meant a great deal to him. "I have seen the ladies paraded before me in an attempt to lure me into marriage, Yamin, and most of them make your Pela seem a diamond and I wish no stranger to be my guard. I cannot replace Rowan." He shook his head. "I realize it is anathema to the way you do things, but I am not from Azize and will not pretend to be so."

"You are a dreamer, my friend. We have positions, caste to uphold, heirs to make." Yamin reached out and patted his hand gently. "You're a good man, not meant for the sands, I think, but a good man. Do you have a deck of cards in here?"

Surial blinked. "Pardon me?"

"Cards. It's not as if you will sleep; we might as well let me win some money from you until dawn."

Yamin smiled and Surial smiled back wanly. He didn't understand and he never would, but a friend was a friend. He opened the carved drawer of the table and removed the deck, dealing out the first hand of the night.

The sun was close. Kade could feel it, feel its heat and light threatening to crest over the mountains. His last sunrise would find him naked, bound, flies crawling upon him, a dog bite already festering on his calf. He didn't open his eyes. He'd been found out too soon, had expected at least another candlemark. The dogs had found him before he'd reached the high desert with its crags and caves -- so many places to hide, to protect himself.

His braids slapped against his face. He wondered idly if they would shave him before the beheading. He wondered if he would be first. He wondered if his mother was waiting for him in the Summerland. If the talik was right and the ponies ran wild and the waters were always pure. If there was no pain.

Slow tears slipped down his cheeks and he slumped against the restraints.

"Barbarian." The whisper hissed across the courtyard. "Barbarian! Listen to me."

Kade opened his eyes, looking into one dark eye, the other long lost. "My woman is coming with a drink. It contains jassik root, you'll fall into sleep before they come. Be in the arms of Cubece before they can send you."

"It is not my way. I will walk to the Land of Summer with my eyes open, looking for my people." Kade smiled, the muscles in his face screaming. "Your woman needs to hurry; the sun is coming."

As if his words had called it down upon them, a ray of light slid over the top of the buildings that surrounded the square, throwing the statue at the far end into brilliant life. With the sun came the first of the spectators, peasants and merchants vying for spots along the rim of the square. The magistrate arrived next, settling on a large, cushioned chair carried in by four vakli, and right behind him was the sieka from before, from the mines, this one flanked by the dogs that had hunted Kade down. The sieka also had four slaves with him, three girls and a boy, all looking cowed and beaten, fear strong on their faces.

His own master only appeared as the sun flooded the square completely. Surial looked drawn and pale, untouchable in his white robes, hair neat beneath his turban. Only Argent accompanied him.

The vakla beside him began to panic, pulling at his restraints, whimpering. Kade could hear the low, pained moans of the man behind him. He was surprised; the dogs had ripped into the man's face. Kade was sure he'd passed on in the night. A bird circled overhead, riding the wind, crying mournfully. Kade looked up. Between his lack of focus and the brightness of the sun, he could imagine it was T'lik, hunting for rabbits in the plains and he was waiting for her to return to his arm.

The magistrate's staff hit the ground three times and the murmurs stilled, leaving the square bathed in an unnatural silence. "Surial Bانشinaree of the Sandide, are you present?"

"I am, Magistrate." His master's tones were clipped, unemotional, hard; the soft lilt that colored Surial's voice was missing.

"This is your vakla?"

"Yes."

"Punishment or death?"

"Punishment."

"Very well. Ten lashes or more with the whip. You may begin."

A murmur went up among the crowd again, a sound of eager anticipation.

Kade closed his eyes again, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. A whipping was a part of life; he would survive. He would be a vakla, but he would survive.

It was fascinating -- how the crack of the whip came first, then the fire, which morphed into a pulsating, throbbing agony, the sweat seeping into the wounds, mixing with the blood. Surial was stronger than he looked, too.

By the fourth blow, he could feel the tears upon his cheeks; taste the blood in his mouth from where he held his tongue silent. The wind blew; Kade imagined it pushing the sharp pieces of sand deep beneath his skin.

He could hear his master's breath, wheezing from him, a pained, angry sound. Kade imagined he could hear wasps buzzing beneath that sound, all stingers and fury and cold, shiny black bodies...

Five, six.

When he was a boy, just becoming a man, they had taken him to the mountains, his father, his ba'chi who apprenticed him, the tribe's talik. They had chanted before the fires, telling the stories of the One who is All.

Telling him of the rights and responsibilities of becoming a man.

The glow of the brands had filled his sight, the smell of flesh sickening in the clear, cold air. His father had wept with pride -- his son, marked as a member of the Naik, son of the tribe and brother of the mi'it.

He had not cried out then. He would not cry out now.

Seven, eight.

The labored breathing behind him held a hint of a sob in it now, like the sound of the wind through the trees.

Nine.

The blood was falling now; he could hear it as it splashed against the sand, like rain, like tears.

The final lash fell and the crowd cheered, roaring for more, hungry and vicious, feeding off his pain. Pain that meant he was still alive. Footsteps walked by him, the sieka's feet coming into view and then passing, disappearing without a single comment. Then gentle hands were at his wrists, undoing his bindings and helping him to stand.

"Come now, man. I'm too old to carry you." Argent's voice held a wealth of sorrow and sympathy in it.

Kade struggled upright and looked at the blood drying on the ground. "I can walk." His voice was rocks and gravel, throat raw with sand. He followed Argent from the square, wincing as he heard the agonized screaming begin. "His wife was late."

"What?" Argent looked over at him and he laughed, the sound wild and broken.

"Just a joke between friends."

"Vanshi will flog him to death; it is hardly something to joke about." Argent looked distressed, unhappy, and older than his years. They arrived at the dark carriage, Argent's hands guiding his to the back and tying him there. "I have no choice about this, it is expected."

"I understand." Kade panted softly, ignoring the blood as it slid down his legs. "I have been here before."

"Then why? Why run? Are you a fool?" Argent snapped, fury flashing in his wrinkled face.

Kade nodded, groaning as his braids slapped against his shoulders. "Yes, Argent. I am." He closed his eyes as the carriage started up, stumbling behind and coughing on the kicked up dust.

He lost track of time, blacking out at one point, only to be wrenched back into consciousness by the forward movement of the carriage yanking his shoulders and pulling at the new tears in his skin. He had no idea how far they'd gone when the carriage stopped. His momentum pushed him into the back of it, smashing his face against it.

He heard the door open and then his owner stumbled from the carriage, rushing to the edge of the street and throwing up, each heave wrenching from the thin body. His master's white clothes were stained with red, the color bright and obscene. Kade watched, blinking almost lazily. So much blood. It must have spurted. He looked at his chest, watching the blood fall from his face in soft drops. He wondered how much blood a man had. Mi'it could bleed for hours.

It occurred to him that he should apologize. After all, the sieka hadn't killed him, hadn't even tried. The master stumbled back by and Kade forced his head up, the taste of blood metallic in his mouth. "Sorry, Sieka."

Surial moved on by as if he hadn't heard, Argent helping him into the carriage as if the master himself were the old man.

Then Argent came over to him, a blanket in his hands. It was wrapped around his back before Argent untied him from the back of the carriage and helped him around to the carriage door. "We're far enough away now and the Helan would like to get home quickly."

Kade looked at Argent, swaying. "In there, with him? I stink. He is ill."

Argent nodded. "Exactly, which is why we need to hurry home. Get in."

With a nod, Kade climbed up, falling hard against the floor once before Argent got him settled. He couldn't see the sieka; the carriage was dark and cool.

"Thank you for sparing my life." He blinked slowly. His head was so very heavy and he was so tired, he wasn't even sure he was speaking aloud. There was no response. As his eyes adjusted to the dark he could see Surial sitting across from him, face blank, eyes fixed on a point beyond his and Argent's heads. Surial's hands were in his lap, fisted and white-knuckled. The face above the blood-splattered tunic was so white it was almost translucent. He looked sad. Kade blinked. Almost broken.

A wave of guilt washed over him and he almost reached out to apologize, to comfort. He stopped, looking down at his hand, wrist rubbed raw, fingers gnarled, one bent and broken. A slave's hands.

Reaching out to comfort his master.

Kade closed his eyes, feeling something deep within him shatter. He thought, perhaps, he would sleep from now on without dreaming.

The carriage slowed, turned, and then lurched to a stop, the doors opening to reveal Tik and Suli waiting to help them out; they were back at the home of his owner. Surial let the boys help him down, one escorting him back into the white house. He never looked back.

It was Argent and Suli who helped Kade down out of the carriage into the warm tub of water that waited in one corner of the courtyard. He hissed as the water stung his wounds.

Argent sent Suli off to the house to get salve and bandages and the old man rounded on him once the boy was out of earshot. "I hope you've learned your lesson. The Helan has never raised a single finger against one of his servants. I heard his prayers that you would escape successfully. If you ever have the urge to run again, you come see me and I will give you the knife to kill yourself with."

Kade nodded absently, watching his braids float in the water. He'd clean out the back stall and feed the mounts and then go finish the back stables before the heat came. Then he would sleep.

He looked at the old man, wondering at the anger in those dark eyes. Oh, yes. The sieka. "I will not run again. You have my word."

Despite his anger, Argent's hands on him were gentle as he was washed and his wounds tended and it was Argent who helped dress him and led him to the stables. He tried to protest when Argent moved him toward the stairs to the loft, but had no energy and climbed obediently.

"You know where I am if you need me." Argent's voice called up to him through a fog of pain.

Kade didn't answer, did nothing but sink into the red haze of agony, the soft straw cold against his burning back.

chapter eleven

He had walked the smooth floors so often his feet knew every crack, each small imperfection. He knew where to hang the tiny delicate wind chimes, where to place the glass vases so the light poured in rainbows over pale walls. He knew which silver his Helan would want put out for every occasion, which invitations to discard without bothering his Helan, which clothes to set out. He knew where each staff member was, what was happening. Who was clumsy, who could make the best beds, who could serve coffee the most gracefully.

Argent knew, without a shadow of a doubt, every single aspect of running Helan Banshinaree's home. At least he had, until Kade appeared -- shackled and wild and beaten -- at the front gate. Damn his Helan's luck.

While his Helan had never had a vakla, as a denizen of Azize, he himself was quite familiar with the practice. On the whole, theirs was a sorry lot and he had more than once uttered a word of gratitude to Areter, who kept servants beneath his wings, that the Banshinarees had never seen fit to own others. Still, Kade had settled, if awkwardly, into the household, Argent leading the way by refusing to treat the man as anything other than another member of the staff. His Helan had more or less ignored the man's presence other than when he was visiting with his horses. That was until Kade had decided to run.

Now it was as if the balance of the household was skewed. His Helan did nothing but blink into empty space and scream out his horrors in the dead of night. Those first few terrible days, Argent had been sure the man would die, wracked with guilt and pains that he could not understand. Coming so quickly upon the heels of the Rowani's death, it was no wonder it had hit the Helan so hard.

Soon the Helan would recover, understanding that he was a good, generous man. Soon the enticements Mardise sent would be more than picked over. Soon the lilting voice would ring through the house again. Surial was a noble. Kade's punishment was his duty. The Helan had been generous, only feeding Kade the necessary blows, and Kade had borne them without comment.

Argent shivered. Helan Banshinaree would heal. Kade would not.

The big man had been truly transformed. He no longer visited the kitchen, no longer responded to either greeting or harshness. Argent had seen him but once or twice in the days after the whipping, trusting that Kade needed space and time to heal. When they had crossed paths again, Argent had felt a dull pain inside. Kade was dissolving, leaving them, slowly morphing into a wraith that haunted the stables and shared what life he still had with the horses.

Perhaps beheading would have been kinder to the vakla; surely a clean death would have been preferable over this slow fading. Though if just the beating had laid the Helan so low, who knew what the beheading might have wrought and if he had to chose between the two men, there was no doubt in Argent's mind that it was Surial Banshinaree who deserved to live.

He walked past a window, catching sight of Kade drawing fresh water for the horses. The vakla was clad only in a pair of loose breeches, his back a mass of scars and welts and open sores. The long braids -- Argent

hadn't noticed how much gray the man had -- acted much like a horse's tail, swishing the flies and gnats away from the broken flesh. The sun glinted off the sores, drawing his attention. He considered calling for a physician, or at least speaking to the Helan about the possibility, but how would Surial react at being reminded of what he had done, to knowing that he'd beaten Kade hard enough that the man required a physician to heal? He decided against it; Kade seemed to be healing, the wounds that a physician could do something about at any rate; there was no reason to upset the Helan with this.

The fool. Hadn't Surial given him a roof, good food? Hadn't he been well-treated and welcomed? Before he'd run, Kade had even been teaching the children about tack and caring for the mounts. The children loved him, or had, before the man had stopped noticing them, stopped seeing them. Kade had been a part of the family. How had he repaid their kindness?

By running.

Argent didn't want to take it personally, tried to put himself in Kade's shoes, to see how running might be better than staying with a kind master, but he just couldn't understand it and couldn't help but feel that Kade had rejected him along with the rest of them. They had offered friendship and caring -- he'd shared the joys of his own family with Kade, only to have it thrown back in his face.

And now? Now there was a silent, dying animal that took the place of the funny, gentle man who had cradled Argent's new granddaughter with tears in the almond-shaped eyes. He wondered idly if Kade felt regret, anger, sorrow. Watching the silent man lift the water buckets onto shoulders that had to be screaming in pain without the slightest grimace, Argent thought that no, perhaps Kade was already dead and simply waiting for his body to figure it out.

He did not know what to do and therein lay his dilemma. Kade didn't fit into the household, hadn't fit in from the moment he'd been there, not neatly, and now, more than ever, Argent didn't know what to do with him.

A bell rang, the sound insistent, and within heartbeats one of Madrise's granddaughters hurried toward him.

"The Master, he says he wants a bath and new towels and good soap and some tea." She was quivering. "He looks rather cross."

Well that was an improvement, he thought.

"You go get the towels and the soap, I'll take care of the rest -- and leave them on the table in the hall. I don't want anyone disturbing him more than necessary."

The girl nodded and hurried off. Argent turned his back on the window. Kade had made his decisions, now the big man was going to have to live -- or die, as the case may be -- with them.

He moved with purpose down the hall. Tea and perhaps a few little sweetcakes to tempt the appetite, served on the nice white china.

It had been weeks since the flogging. Yet all Surial had to do was close his eyes and he could see the blood welling up from skin split open by his hand, could feel it splash on his clothes, his hands, warm and sticky, the smell sharp in his nose. It filled his sleep with nightmares and made his waking hours a misery.

He'd huddled in upon himself in those first days, curled up in bed, refusing food or company, but slowly the horror had begun to recede. He'd begun to eat the small treats that Madrise made for him, let Argent draw him a bath and wash him. It had felt so good to be clean that he spent that day at a window, watching the wind chase the waves to the shore. Slowly, a little more every day, a scab formed, hiding the wound made by harming another.

Of his vakla he saw nothing, and by the coming of the new moon, he had all but convinced himself the entire episode had itself been a nightmare, set aside and buried like the sight of his dear Chedar broken and dead.

The sun was setting, casting rose shadows about the room. He'd finished signing his name to a final contract when a knock came to the door and Argent popped his head in. "Excellent timing, Argent. I've just finished."

"Yes, my Helan. I'm sorry to bother, Helan." Argent's voice was odd, nervous and shaky.

"Argent?" Surial felt a shiver move through him, a vague feeling of dread filling him.

"Your brother, the eldest Helan Banshinaree awaits you in the sitting room."

Erulial. Erulial was here. Now. In his sitting room. His stomach leaped into his throat and he had to fight the urge to run. Instead, he cleared his throat and managed somehow to find his voice. "Very well, Argent. Tell him I will join him shortly."

The urge to flee moved through him again as he straightened his clothing, smoothing his hand again and again over the wrinkles at his knees. Perhaps he should go and change so that Erulial could not find fault with his clothing. But then there would be the problem of having kept Erulial waiting. Fleeing sounded like an excellent plan, except that Erulial was an excellent hunter and it was impossible to hide from him.

Especially with his Rowani dead.

He swept up his hair and covered it with a turban, pushing an errant lock away, and made his way resolutely to the sitting room. Erulial was a guest in *his* home. He would be a gracious host and then send his brother on his way. The door to the sitting room was ajar and Surial could hear the impatient drumming of fingers against wood as he approached. Taking a deep, desperate breath, he pushed the door open and walked through.

"It's about time, brother. Or is it habit here to keep your guests waiting?" Erulial sneered, wrinkling his elegant nose. He looked, as always, perfect -- diamond-hard and fierce, clothes elaborately embroidered, falling along his muscled frame with grace and style.

Surial bowed, hands crossed over his heart, as was his people's custom. It had been so long since he had offered the honorary greeting that he had to fight tears and clear his emotions from his throat before he spoke. "My apologies, brother, you caught me unprepared for your arrival."

Erulial rolled his eyes. "I was traveling from Sandide to Ishmal and Father thought I should see if you'd ruined the family's name here yet, what with killing your rowani and all." He looked around the room, nostrils twitching. "Dirty little place, isn't it? Tell me, how do you stand it?"

"Many baths." Surial heard the words and resisted the urge to clamp his hands across his mouth. He also managed to keep the hysterical laughter under control. Really, he had to calm down, it was wrong to assume that Erulial was here to hurt him; they were no longer boys.

Erulial looked at him. "Yes, well. Have supper brought, brother, and the books for the last year. I will look at them and tell you of the news of home."

"That sounds wonderful, brother."

He rang for Argent and had the books brought, followed closely by supper. Madrise had outdone herself; the meal was a local dish, well prepared and quite perfectly complemented by the wine Argent brought. Surial didn't taste a thing as he forced the food down his throat. Finally, the meal was devoured and the books were gone over. Surial couldn't help but be proud as not a single mistake was found, the figures correct, signatures solid.

Surial rang for Argent, having the books removed and the evening's coffee brought. As Argent poured, Surial asked, "What news of home, brother?"

"Lian is expecting another child, as is my first wife. Mother is well; Father's health is failing, as is to be expected." Erulial shrugged. "Father wishes to know when we might expect to hear of your wedding."

"Perhaps when I return home I shall have news for him, but the women here..." Surial shook his head. "The people of Azize are not our own."

Erulial snorted. "The people of Azize may as well be your own." He looked at Surial disparagingly. "You have the hair of a boy, your clothes are coarse, and you can, quite honestly, not afford to be particular." A toss of his long, thick hair, never touched by shears, and Erulial fastened a glare on Surial. "Face it, in this wasteland, you're actually someone of note. Back home, you may as well be a serving boy. Find yourself a broodmare and make yourself some sons."

"Surely the youngest son of six need not concern himself with producing heirs. I would only be diluting the line." He didn't understand why he was arguing the matter with Erulial. Best to just agree and get the man out of his house as soon as possible.

"You will concern yourself with what you're told to." Erulial leaned forward. "Father is dying, Surial, and if you are not very careful, your life will not be so easy when I am the head of the family. No one would notice if the runt of the litter suddenly fell from the family tree -- you no longer even have a rowani to defend your honor. Once Father is gone, your freakish peculiarities will no longer be so well tolerated."

Fear ate at his belly, and the sudden, certain knowledge that he would never again see his homeland filled him with pain. While Father might be unhappy with him, his eyes had never burned with the simple hatred for him that Erulial's did. His brother thought that he was weak and useless, a freak who did nothing but tarnish the family name.

"I am saddened to hear about Father." He said the words quietly.

"It is time for the family leadership to change, time for our business to grow and expand." Erulial leaned back, crossing his legs with a satisfied smile. "We have been static too long, brother, allowing others to grow while we follow in our ancestors' footsteps."

"Growth is good, brother." Surial swallowed, now more convinced than ever that that his brother was here for something specific. Dread was a heavy weight on his shoulders, but not one he was unaccustomed to when it came to his brother.

To his surprise, Erulial picked up his wine goblet and raised it. "A toast, to a new partnership between us."

"Partnership..." He'd meant to say more, meant to raise his own glass and go along, it was what he did, but somehow he couldn't manage today. Perhaps he had been away from home for long enough that he'd forgotten how to protect himself.

"We should put our differences behind us, Surial. We have the same goals, we're family. I'm here to make a new start with you." Erulial's voice was smooth, but sincere. Hope flared in him. Hope that perhaps there was still a place for him in Sandide, that he could go home again.

He picked up his own glass. "A new partnership. Brother."

Erulial nodded and brought the crystal to his lips, sipping delicately at the local wine. "So, brother, what are the entertainments in this most arid of places? Surely you do not spend your evenings trapped indoors."

"Trapped is a good word for it. The local gentry insist on long dinners and dances at each other's homes. Though there is a theatre, a club, and there are always the races." He took a gulp of his wine, the fruity flavor sliding down his dry throat.

"Horses?" Erulial leaned back in his chair, glass held loosely between two fingers. "Must be damnedably hard for them to gain traction in the sand."

"Dogs, brother. Large mastiffs for the most part, with long, lean bodies and these great big heads full of nasty teeth."

"Dogs? Interesting. How are the odds?" They talked for a moment about the races, the stakes, Erulial's eyes going wide at the mention of the returns of Surial's last win. "Impressive! You'll have to take me, let me see these animals."

"As you wish." He hoped, though, that Erulial would forget about his request; the last thing he needed was his brother's wrath turned on him after a bad loss. Erulial was hopeless at judging horseflesh; Surial had no reason to believe he would be any better when it came to dogs.

"So, races and theatre. That's well enough, but what about the parties, the celebrations, the holidays?" Erulial leaned forward. "Your staff seems competent enough, your cook unlikely to poison the locals -- perhaps you could host a party, something grand and interesting so I can meet what passes for the upper crust around here."

"That sounds delightful, brother." It sounded like a new way for Erulial to torture him. But it was clear his brother was trying and it served his own best interests to meet Erulial half way. A party or two, the races, a few plays and Erulial would be on his way, more warmly disposed toward Surial than he'd ever been before. Who knew what might be next -- the call to return home, to watch the cliffs slowly grow closer instead of further away.

He could certainly cope with a party or two, put up with both his brother and nobles born of Azize, he could do that for a chance to go home.

The house reeked of burned flesh, had since morning. He had made Argent wrap all of his bedding in sandalwood-laced cloths and locked them inside the big wardrobes. The downstairs would need to be white-washed as soon as Erulial left, the curtains given to Madrise and new ones ordered. Not that the smell

seemed to be driving the natives away.

Surial sighed. The house was full of sandy, squawking peacocks; it seemed the entire city had responded to Surial's elegantly worded invitation. Erulial sat in the midst of a small coterie of dotting hangers-on, listening to one tale or another of vanquishing monsters from the deep or hunting some poor dumb creature.

A hand fell on his shoulder. "I never thought I'd see the day there was roast kid served at your table, my friend."

"I wouldn't want to disappoint my brother, now would I, Yamin?" He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but he wasn't sure how successful he'd been. He was truly pleased that Erulial wished for them to become friends, he'd always wanted to feel that he belonged, but in only a couple of days Erulial had already turned his world upside down and inside out and he worried that it was only the beginning. Nor was he entirely sure that he trusted Erulial's motives.

"No, I don't suppose so. We haven't seen you in too long." Yamin's eyes were serious and still. "There were rumors that you'd locked yourself away inside the house and refused to eat. The servants were whispering that you were dying. My heart is glad to see you well."

He shook his head and gave Yamin a fond smile. "The servants like to gossip almost as much as you do, my friend, you should know better than to take credence in anything they say." He gave Yamin's arm a soft squeeze. "I am well, Yamin."

"Good, my friend. I need someone to stand up with me at my wedding and to cheat me at cards." He waved his hand. "You will be the talk of Azize for moons. There has not been a Lover's Night celebration of this magnitude in years. Will there be dancing girls after the old folks and children leave?"

He chuckled. "Only if you arranged for them. And I have it on good authority that Pela has kept you on a very short leash."

Yamin nodded, his familiar hangdog expression making Surial chuckle. "She's amazing. It's like she has some odd magical power and always knows when I'm out getting into trouble."

"That's not a magical power, Yamin, that's just common sense." He patted his friend's wide belly, eyes narrowing as he spotted Vanshi entering. "I tell you what, old friend. You run interference so I don't have to speak to Vanshi and I'll cover for you one evening next week, tell Pela you're here."

Yamin looked over at the man in question. "It's a bargain. I warn you, though, don't go making an enemy there, friend. He's has an overdeveloped sense of vengeance. You've seen it."

"Take him to my brother; I'm sure he and Erulial will get along famously and smooth any feathers my lack of manners might ruffle."

With a nod and a wink, Yamin made a beeline for Vanshi, laughing loudly and leeching onto him, almost dragging the greasy man over to Erulial. Surial chuckled. Yamin was effective -- he had the subtlety of a randy bull -- but he was effective.

He made a retreat to the balcony, heaving a sigh of relief as the fresh night air filled his nose, replacing the wretched smell of burning flesh. His reprieve was short-lived, however, as the Dowager Vinesh cornered him. She would have been an attractive woman if she ever cleaned her teeth or her hair rather than plying herself with wine and perfume to cover any odors, and her voice grated on his ear, making it hard not to wince. "I was just speaking with your brother -- I am so delighted that you are finally succumbing to the tra-

dition of marriage. It's about time you settled down with us here in Azize and took one of our city's lovely daughters as your own."

Surial blinked. "Excuse me, Sieki?"

"Oh, yes. He was speaking with Sieki Onise -- she has a fine daughter. An appointment tomorrow to inspect the girl and to begin negotiations, if I overheard correctly." She smiled smugly at him; Dowager Vinesh always overheard correctly. He felt his heart plummet. He had to get Erulial on his way home again before these negotiations progressed too far; he was miserable enough without being stuck in a marriage as well. "When you decide on a date, dear boy, let me know. I will send my congratulations to Sieki Onise. Perhaps I will throw your engagement party for you. Something festive -- perhaps in tents outdoors. I love dressing my house vakli up and having them fan my guests. It's so exotic."

"Really? I would have thought the fact that everyone seems to do it would take away from the exoticness of it." He softened the words with a smile, noting that she didn't seem to care that it didn't reach his eyes.

She chuckled. "Nonsense. If I do it and tell people to think it's exotic, than exotic it will be."

Surial looked down into the yard. The paddock was full of mounts, grazing and milling about. He could see Kade, moving among the mass easily, moonlight catching in his braids. He tried to imagine the big man submitting to being dressed up as if he was a doll and being made to fan the self-absorbed nobles that flocked to Dowager Vinesh's parties. Even if an outfit big enough could be found for Kade, Surial doubted he'd actually put it on; the man was surprisingly stubborn for a vakla.

The horses seemed to be taking turns visiting with the slave, one after the other coming up to be nuzzled and patted and stroked. It was an oddly mesmerizing sight.

"I understand you've a good eye for horses. You'll do well with joining with Onise then, they breed some of the best Azize has to offer."

"One would believe that you are receiving a fee to broker the deal, my Sieki, given how hard you seem to be selling Sieki Onise's daughter."

"Hardly. You've been here long enough to know our ways, Sieka Banshinaree. A match between your family and the Onise would mean great prosperity for Azize." Sharp old eyes sparkled at him, greedy and cold. "Prosperity for Azize means prosperity for my sons."

And will you be arranging loveless marriages for them as well? He bit the words back, though, for he knew well the answer was yes. It was the way things worked in Azize. He settled for a few meaningless words he hoped would placate her and ease him from the conversation. "The jewel that is Azize shines brighter and brighter."

"Yes. It is our lot in life to sacrifice for the good of our bright city and its people." She patted Surial's hand, before turning to go. "Your brother is quite the politician, my dear boy. He has your best interests at heart."

He smiled and watched her go, wishing he believed her, trying to make himself believe her. At any rate, if he had his own best interests at heart, it wouldn't do to linger too long in the shadows, Erulial would notice if he stayed away from his own party for too long.

Tilting his head, he gazed up at the moon for a long moment and then turned smartly on his heel, heading back into the noise and the smells and the sights.

Kade moved among the mi'it as if he was one of them, feeding and caressing, listening to their songs of running and playing, of their masters and the bit, of sweet hay and clean water.

The house was full. Argent had sent word there was to be a gathering; that the mounts would need to be watched and cared for, that the master didn't want the stables disrupted, that the paddocks would do. He'd mended the fences this morning, hauled hay over on his back and left it in long, neat rows.

The brightly colored people -- gauze and jewels and silks in every hue -- had begun arriving at dusk. The air smelled of flowers and roasted meat and sweet perfumes and mi'it. It should have smelled good, appealing, but somehow it just made him vaguely ill. Noise from the house spilled out of the balcony doors, making the mi'it restless, and he went to each one, talking in soothing tones and rubbing their noses, brushing their manes.

When he looked up at the house he saw the master. The sieka was wearing white and stood out among his glittering guests. The man looked distant, cool, and melancholy -- the reflection of the moon within a pool filled with exotic birds. The master's brother -- not a bird himself, Kade thought, but perhaps a snake or a desert jackal looking for the weak and wounded to prey upon -- seemed to summon the sieka. A foreign, almost pinched, look crossed his owner's face. The man looked up into the sky as if beseeching the moon and then turned and went in, shoulders tight, straight, and rigid.

A soft touch came to his shoulder and Kade looked over. An older mare, red and white, heavy scars marring her coat, nuzzled against him, liquid eyes faded and dim. Her song was low and soft -- memories of grass and rain and foals of her own and grand stallions that reared against the moon and called low across meadows. Their stories were so similar it made him want to cry and he pushed the emotion away, instead sharing with her his own memories of life before. They sang together for long moments -- one tired soul to another. Her time was close; she would not see another full moon. He stroked her long nose. "Soon, mi'it, you will run with your children in the Land of Summer without pain. You will have sweet water and grass and live in joy and beauty."

Her eyes softened. Kade could feel the relief within her, that someone knew, that someone heard her song, that the land of eternal summer was within reach. She nudged his head with her own, scarred cheeks sliding together, before limping off.

He looked up into the moon's face. She was pale, cold, and distant, like the sieka.

Another touch came to his arm, the rumor having spread immediately through the makeshift herd that there was a hi'icha here, one who sang, one who listened, one who knew the secrets.

Kade left thoughts of the moon behind and turned to hear a new song.

chapter twelve

The Onise parlor was close and hot. The air was stagnant and humid. It was in the middle of the house and suffered greatly from its lack of windows. It had no doubt been kept closed up on purpose, not because the family didn't entertain individuals in the parlor, but in a misguided attempt to keep the room sandfree and neat. A failed attempt. Surial shifted, earning himself a glare from his brother, and he stopped, sitting as still as he could, perched on the edge of an elaborate and ugly couch.

They were waiting for Sieki Onise and her daughter to join them to begin negotiations for a union between Surial and the girl.

"Erulial, brother, Sieki Onise's daughter is a lovely girl, but I have no wish to marry."

"It is well past time for you to marry and it is a good match." Erulial looked at him and rolled his eyes. "No one is asking you to do anything more than catch her with a son. You are free to continue your little dalliances with pretty actors and petty nobles. But you will marry."

"Surely you and our brothers will have enough sons to continue the line; why burden our house with more children and a wife who will only spend money?"

"As generous as this horse-faced child's dowry will be? She can spend as much as she wants. It will make little difference." Erulial sounded amused, utterly confident that his wishes would be fulfilled.

Any further argument he might have made was forestalled by the entrance of Sieki Onise and her daughter, Aylia. Surial stood and bowed along with his brother. Onise looked smug and well-pleased as she sat her daughter down on the couch next to Surial. The girl on the other hand looked as if she was as unhappy as he at the prospect of their union.

"I am glad you have shown interest in Aylia, Lord Banshinaree. She is young, but versed in household duties and the responsibilities of her station." The woman's voice was grating, achingly unpleasant. "She is quiet and obedient and knows her place."

"An excellent quality in a wife, yes, Brother?" Erulial was laughing at him, at his discomfort and vague horror.

He managed what he hoped was a smile, aiming it in Erulial and Aylia's general direction; if he could get through this as quickly as possible and without any actual promises made on either side, he could probably put an end to this charade as soon as Erulial was safely aboard a ship out of Azize.

"She is a virgin, of course. She has been closely watched." Aylia's face was purple in her embarrassment, dark eyes fastened onto the floor. The bitch that bore her continued. "Stand up and let Sieka Banshinaree see you, girl."

He wanted to say something to save her the embarrassment, to say that he didn't need to see her, that it didn't

matter because he didn't want to marry, would not marry, but his tongue was caught in his mouth, heavy and unable to move. The girl stood, skinny and unattractive and miserable. Surial refused to look at anything but her face. Surial wondered if Madrise had gotten the stench of flesh from the house, if Argent had men in painting the downstairs walls.

Erulial nodded. "She seems healthy enough. Can we assume she is fertile?"

"Her older sister has been married for four years and has produced three heirs for her husband. I am sure Aylia will be as fruitful."

And if she wasn't, Surial wondered, could they return her and try a different girl? He bit his lip to keep from giggling, the whole affair suddenly too surreal. And yet this was his future they were discussing, his daily existence for the rest of his life. It was time to bring a close to this meeting before Erulial had the deal sealed.

He held his breath until he could feel his lungs screaming in protest and then continued to hold it, a trick he'd learned as a boy when his brothers' torments had become too much. Aylia was about to sit down again, so he stood, as any gentleman would, and finally let breath into his lungs. Everything went quickly gray and then blissfully black.

When he came to, he was sprawled out in his carriage, Argent's eyes vaguely concerned and only slightly amused. "My Helan, are you well?"

"A little lightheaded... all the excitement and the heat, no doubt." He struggled to sit. "Erulial?"

"Rather pinched and frustrated I believe, my Lord. The girl in question was quite panicked and managed a bit of a screaming fit. He went to the club for the afternoon." Argent's eyes were dancing. "I assumed you wished to return home and rest, my Helan?"

"Indeed, Argent." He put his hand over his heart and gave his man his most woebegone expression. "You'll have to help me to my chambers. I'm still feeling rather faint." He made a face as he saw a several men carrying paints and brushes leave. "As long as you've managed to get rid of that infernal stench. Tell me, Argent -- does my home still smell like a charnelhouse?"

"No, my Helan. The curtains have been replaced, the walls painted, the bedding washed and aired, and the downstairs furniture restuffed. The paint does not smell pleasant, but it should fade by this evening."

"Wonderful -- thank you, Argent." He sat a moment longer in the carriage, enjoying the respite from the sun. "I suppose Madrise had better have a meal ready for this evening. Full Sandide courses, in case my brother has calmed down enough to join me. One of the light wines, please, and for the love of the moon, something sweet and light for starters."

"Yes, Helan. Would you like a bath drawn? Perhaps the cool oils to ease the heat of the day?"

"Yes, and then a nap, to combat the faintness." He let Argent help him down from the carriage, leaning on his man more than was necessary, but he knew better than to let Erulial catch him in a pretense.

"Yes, my Helan." Argent led him into his home and up the stairs toward a cool bath.

Erulial appeared for latemeal four days after meeting the Onise girl. Rumor had his brother touring the diamond mines and hunting along the sand with Vanshi and his ilk.

Surial was unsurprised and less concerned. Feigning further illness and delicacy in the hottest season, Surial spent his days in cool water, the evenings eating cold fruit soups and sitting by the open window in the most casual of gauzy robes.

Tonight, however, he was dressed formally, the clothes and company stifling, decimating his appetite. Erulial looked overheated, uncomfortable, his brother's rowani hovering in the doorway, an aching reminder of his own loss.

"Brother, do you remember how we spoke of bringing the family into a new era? Joining into a partnership?"

Surial nodded, swallowed his sigh. "I do, Erulial. I would be honored to further the family's fortune." The words were rote; he did not even hear himself speak.

"I was hoping you'd say that, Surial. You see, I'm very pleased at your progress here; you are more fastidious than your nature would predict." A slow smile bloomed on Erulial's face. "I have a new project for you. A piece of my vision that you will control here in Azize."

"Me? What is it you would like me to do?" He fixed what he hoped was a pleasant expression on his face, bracing himself for what was to come, perfectly sure he wouldn't like it.

Erulial stood and began pacing. "Do you know our family spent two hundred thousand whelani on sailors last year? Those wages are being thrown down an unending well. I have been thinking on the solution for moons. Should I cut salaries, staff, raise prices? All my solutions were flawed. I despaired of finding a solution and then, suddenly, you, dear brother, answered my need." At Surial's questioning look, Erulial's grin widened. "Vakli, brother. Free labor, which will work until it dies. The trade here is active; it wouldn't take much to build up your stock. If you chose carefully -- young, healthy females, we could have a breeding group, raise the young to do the skills we need." His eyes flashed. "Just think, in twenty years we could be fully staffed with vakli, born and branded with the Banshinaree seal. Our profits would soar."

"Sweet Alusius." It was a good thing he was sitting down because if not, he might have fallen. Vakli. Breeding people. Fodder for the whips and chains and the chopping block. He flashed on the sight of Kade's back, red blood pouring from welts, whip heavy in his own hand. It was all he could do not to throw up again. He couldn't do it. There was no way he could allow this to happen. If their father knew what Erulial was planning...

"You haven't told anyone, that's why you want to do it here, where you can hide it from the family."

"I don't have to hide anything. The old man is dying, Surial. Fading more and more every day. I am running the business now." Erulial began gesticulating wildly. "Just because our people had ideas about slavery, years ago, why should that stop us now?" He caught Surial with a glare. "You have proven yourself to have a strong hand, brother, and slavery is common here. You have a presence, of sorts and I spoke to the magistrate this afternoon. We will have lands and buildings and his blessing and protection."

"You're asking me to help you breed people as if they were animals, to birth them knowing they will have nothing but pain in their lives. Just because slavery is common here, doesn't make it right. Please, Erulial, don't ask me to be a party to this." He shook his head, gesturing with his hands, agitated. "Don't do this. It will forever taint the fate of our family."

"Taint our family? You *dare* to speak of tainting our line, you...you abomination?" Erulial stalked up to Surial, glaring down at him, voice vicious. "You will do as you're told, brother. You will do it and do it well or you will suffer."

"You think you can do something worse to me than send me here and make me raise slaves?" He only had to remember Kade's back, open and bleeding by his hand, and he knew he was right, knew there was nothing Erulial could do that would make him be a party to this.

Erulial reached down and lifted Surial by his blouse, shaking him like a dog shakes its prey. "Are you sure you want to know the answer to that question, my sweet, fragile little brother?"

He cringed, making no effort to defend himself; he knew from bitter experience it only made Erulial madder, only made him hit harder. "I can't do it, Erulial. I *cannot* -- it would kill me."

"No, little brother." The first blow came to his jaw, rocking his head back violently.

"You will do as you're told." The second blow fell on his midsection and Surial heard the sickening sound of bone snapping.

The third blow made Surial double over in agony. Erulial grabbed his hair and yanked him upright. "Or I will kill you."

A violent shove sent him flying, slamming into the tiled wall and sliding to the floor. Erulial's rowani stood, pale and silent, beside his brother.

Erulial brushed his hands against his pants. "We will draw up arrangements tomorrow afternoon, brother. I expect you will choose to sleep in and I have made plans with the magistrate. Good evening."

He lay on the floor a long time, panting through the pain. He had to go, had to hide himself so Erulial didn't come across him; experience had taught him his brother would leave him be if he didn't see him, but if he lay there waiting for more, there would be more.

The stables. Erulial was not fond of horses; not afraid of them, he just didn't like the smell and work and mess involved; he would avoid the stables if he could. Surial knew if he could make it there, hide himself in with one of the beasts, one of the more spirited ones, he might escape Erulial's notice for a couple of days.

Gathering his strength, he pushed himself into a sitting position, biting his lips to keep from crying out at the jarring pain. It was going to be a long journey.

He straightened his blankets and turned down the lantern. Another day gone. Another day closer to permanent sleep, a perpetual rest. Kade sighed, his stomach twisting as he stretched. In the weeks since his capture, he had kept to his brothers, whispered only to the mi'it, eaten their grain, sipped at their water. His trousers were fastened at his waist by a rope, his vest loose upon his chest. When he'd redone his braids, hair had fallen all about him, the strands dying and dull.

A slave.

A slave.

A slave.

The word beat within his chest, sharp-edged and brutal.

A single tear slipped down his cheek as he closed his eyes.

He wasn't sure how long he'd slept when he heard the horses whinny, stamping restlessly. Someone spoke, the words quiet and low, and the horses settled. Kade sat up, slowly moving for the stairs, moving silently down, sniffing the air. No liquor, no smoke. The hay was mused by the door, down the center of the stable. Kade looked at Dalan, her eyes rolled, head bobbed nervously. Mon'keur answered, unusually crowded at the front of his stall. "Who is here, mi'it? Something in your stall?"

Mon'keur nickered and whinnied, shifting restlessly from side to side and a soft whisper came from the stall, calming the mi'it almost instantly. Kade followed the trail of mused hay; it ended at Mon'keur's stall. A soft, pained groan confirmed that someone was hiding in his stall.

Opening the stall door, Kade nickered at Mon'keur, moving the trembling horse out of the way. He could just see a dark-haired person, curled up trembling in the corner. "Who is there? Come on out, now. I will not hurt you. You cannot stay with the mi'it. He is ill-tempered."

The form curled tighter around itself, whimpers of pain accompanying the movement.

Kade pushed in closer, reaching out carefully, quietly. Murmuring softly, Kade whispered calming prayers. This one was hurt; Kade could smell his fear, his pain. He stroked along the edge of the clothing, lying damp against the straw. The distinctive Banshinaree pattern was obvious on the cuff of the robe, embroidery fine and familiar. "Sieka?"

A whimper and then breathless and whisper soft, "Go away."

"What happened to you? Is there someone in the house? A robber?" Kade frowned; the sieka was pale, pain showing in his dark eyes. "Should I call the Watch?"

"No!" Panic flared for a moment in the master's eyes and then faded back to pain-laced worry. "Get in the loft. Stay there -- hide, don't come out 'til he leaves." The words were pushed past pain and the sieka flinched, arm wrapping tighter around himself. "He'll go soon."

The words sounded as if they were spoken by a child and were more prayer and hope than fact.

Oh, by the sweet winds, it was the sieka. In the stables, beaten half to death. In the stables. In the stables with him.

They'd hang him this time, or behead him, or worse. If the man died he'd have no one who would believe he wouldn't hurt the sieka.

Hells, the man was harmless. "Come, let me take you in to Argent, let him call a healer, a surgeon."

"No! Kade, no. He'll kill me." Terrified, pain-filled eyes begged him, pleaded. "Please."

Kade nodded. He'd get the sieka upstairs, get him bandaged up and settled and assure he lived through morning. If he was honest, Kade would admit he could no more ignore that pained fear and panic in this man than he could in a mount. "Come with me, Sieka. I have blankets, water, bandages up in the loft."

He also had the lantern, so he could see the injuries the sieka's kin had wrought. Kade's mouth tightened, he knew that man was vicious. His mounts were dull-eyed and skittish.

"I... I can't." A shallow breath interrupted his words and another, the second hitched with pain. "Hurts."

Kade frowned, flinching as Mon'keur stamped, the mount nervous and scared. "Sh. Don't talk. Just..."

Deciding that Surial was safer moved and warm than still and trampled to death by his own mount, Kade reached down and lifted the wounded man gently in his arms, hushing him softly as he moaned. "Quiet now. I cannot help you here, Sieka. Just relax and try to breathe."

"Can't breathe. Heard something...snap."

Kade moved quickly towards the stairs, panting beneath Surial's weight. Taking a breath before he took the stairs, he asked. "Has there been any blood?"

"Blood, so much blood. So sorry, didn't want to. Had to. I won't do it. Kill me first, I won't -- No more blood." Surial shifted, almost frantic in his arms, sharp whimpers filling the air.

"Sh... Sh, now. We do what we have to. No one's going to kill you." Kade started up the stairs, murmuring, letting his voice rumble around the wounded man as they moved.

"I am and I will it do it. Can't make me sign."

"That's right. You don't have to sign anything." Kade made it up the stairs and settled Surial on his blankets. He reached for the lantern, lighting it and turning to assess the damage. What he saw made him growl. The fine skin on Surial's cheek was swollen and bruised, and he held his arms over his chest. No blood stained his lips and when Kade bent to listen to the shallow breaths there was no whistling or wheezing. There was a blessing. Ribs broken, but lungs whole. "You will hurt in the morning."

"Blood payment." Surial's eyes fluttered open, trying to focus on him and trembling fingers brushed his cheek. "Hurt you."

"Hush. Hush now. I knew the price." Kade rummaged through his few things, finding his salve and bandages and a blessedly precious jug of cheap wine. "Going to cut off your blouse, wrap those ribs up, and then we will settle you."

"Have to sleep upright. In case fluid. Ribs break nasty." Surial waved his hand at Kade and tried to push himself up. "I can take care. Done this before."

"Yes, I know. Broken ribs happen often in the pits. Now stay still." He sliced the fabric off quickly, frowning at the dark bruise around the thin stomach, the black swellings along the chest. "You took blows. That man should not be in your house."

Kade wrapped Surial's ribs with as much care as he could, bracing the poor bones. "Can you... I mean, you healed me. Can you help yourself?"

Surial shook his head. "Just makes him madder. Hits harder, hits more next time."

"But you could? You could help yourself?" There was no reason for both of them to be at risk. No reason for the sieka to hurt.

"Little bit, need help." Surial's hand reached toward him, trembling between them, before retreating. "He'll punish me if he knows."

Kade took Surial's hand. "I will not let him hurt you again. Heal yourself."

Closing his eyes, Kade reminded himself that this man saved a mi'it from death, saved *him* from death. This man was a ba'achi, whether the man understood it or not. He had a duty to protect those so touched by the Winds. Kade shook his head; the man's hi'icha, his guardian was lost, and Kade would not give the man's ghost a reason to be unsettled. "Heal yourself and I swear I will protect you."

Surial pulled his hand down, laid it flat against where the bones were broken, his lordship's hand lying over-top his.

"Have to take from you." Surial's other hand hovered over his chest, waiting for permission.

Kade nodded. "Heal yourself."

Surial's hand landed on his chest, pushing against his skin, and then settled over his breastbone, eyes closing, lips beginning to move. He felt a warm tingle wherever they touched, the sensation similar to what he'd felt when Surial had healed him. Then, for just a moment, Kade was flooded with pain. It disappeared almost as quickly as it had come, but in its wake he felt weak, tired, and gasping for breath. Surial's hands fell from his and the man's eyes rolled closed.

"Sieka? Sieka?" Kade felt a moment of panic, then relaxed as he watched the pained lines ease on Surial's face. Kade pressed his ear against Surial's chest; his breath came slow but easy, the heartbeat steady and stable.

Trembling and weak, Kade pulled a blanket over the thin body, leaving the bottle of wine where Surial could reach it when he woke. Kade crawled across the floor, collapsing in front of the steep stairs. If anyone came for Surial, they would have to come through him first.

He had sworn it. He was hi'icha still.

The winds blew the sands into a frenzy, trapping them all in their tents. They had known it was coming; the taliksana were rarely caught unprepared and Savina had hinted that she would like to ride out the storm with the blind boy who was almost a man. Mareka had arranged it so smoothly that the poor boy didn't have a clue. She hadn't anticipated a storm this much in a hundred years.

The boy had come to be less afraid of her. She had cultivated a friendship of sorts with him inbetween plotting and torture. Enough that he was sitting, unsuspecting, by her stool, humming softly to the storm.

The power of his magic was fuller now than it had been, as was his manhood. He was perfect, ripe, like the nadin fruit at its peak: plump and full and shining, so sweet that you could smell how it would taste in your mouth. She could hardly breathe, her anticipation holding her in a tight, eager grip. She loosened her trenai, opening it, exposing her face and neck and breasts to the magic that was filling the air, constrained within the tent by the storm. She leaned down, scenting the boy.

"Tell me," she asked, voice no more than a whisper. "Are you still afraid of me?"

"Yes, honored one." The boy's voice was a husky whisper, his breath sweet and heavy with a hint of wine. "You... your power frightens me."

That fear was an aphrodisiac and she removed her gloves, her hand sliding along his cheek. "Does it excite you as well?" she asked, staring into the sightless eyes.

"Oh..." She could almost see the storm in those white eyes, sand swirling somewhere deep within. The dark cheek flushed heavy beneath her hand. "Yes, honored one."

"Tell me child, have you yet tasted pleasure?"

Those white eyes widened, the boy gasping and shuddering beneath her hand. "Pleasure, my Lady? I... no, honored one."

She'd known the answer -- nothing so pure could have known the corruptions that pleasure brought. She had him hooked now, though, his body was hers. In a moment his mind would follow and then his magic would be hers and she could fill herself with it. "I could bring pleasure to you and let you feast."

"Hon...honored one?" Oh, so tentative, so sweet -- pure innocence. Mareta had raised this one well.

"Sh..." She let her breath touch his lips first, and then her own lips, a touch as tentative as the boy himself. His innocence filled her, pulsing with magic. So long, it had been so long since she'd tasted from a well so deep.

Though her body shook with the urge to swallow him whole, she forced herself to go slowly. She could make him last for hours, pull every iota of magic and energy from him until all that remained was a dried husk. If she took her time, she could have him all.

As she felt the storm build, within and without, she knew she had nothing but hunger and time.

chapter thirteen

Light and heat woke him, warming him. The dull throb across his belly, his side, and along his cheek reminded him of the beating he'd suffered at his brother's hands. Moaning as he shifted, he grimaced as straw scratched at his skin. He could smell horses and grain and the heavy sweetness of hay. He couldn't remember fleeing to the stables, but it made sense; Erulial wouldn't have followed him here. Rough, coarse blankets were tucked around him, keeping him almost swaddled. Pushing the filthy, itchy cloth away, Surial forced himself upright with a groan, looking around the loft.

"Careful, Sieka. You're sure to be sore." Kade's voice came soft and low from the stairs. "I brought you some coffee and some broth. Didn't know what you'd eat."

Kade stepped out of the shadows and set a chipped bowl and cup before him. Surial blinked. The man looked like he'd aged twenty years since the whip...since the last time they'd talked.

At Surial's stare, Kade shrugged. "Did not know what to tell Madrise, so I asked for breakfast for me."

"I'm not sure I can eat, but thank you." He pushed himself until he was leaning back against the wall. He wasn't feeling that bad, considering. He frowned; his rib had been broken, he'd heard it snap, felt the pain filling him; he usually didn't heal himself when Erulial hurt him, often couldn't, not having the energy. It flashed back at him then, his hands on Kade, the warm skin touching him, energy filling him. "Are you all right?"

Kade nodded. "I should ask you that, Sieka."

Surial looked down, fingers playing over the makeshift bandage. "You did a good job. Thank you." He reached out and stopped just short of touching Kade's chest, over the heart. "I didn't hurt you?"

"No. Just a second's sting." The large man shrugged, vest hanging loose around him. With a grimace that passed as a smile, Kade nodded at the food. "Eat, and I'll take you up to the house. Your... guest has gone out."

Surial grimaced. "I'm not hungry."

"No, but you cannot heal empty and dry. I've a bit of wine, or I can fetch some sweet water." Kade set his mouth. "You don't have to eat, but you must drink. The heat of the day closes."

"No wine. The water would be nice." He watched as the vakla disappeared down the ladder; he felt off balance, unused to having anyone except Rowan help him in the aftermath of his brother's violence. It hadn't been something he'd had to think of in a long time; his brother had never deigned to visit him out here before. He supposed Erulial had never had a reason to. He saw Kade's head appear over the top of the stairs. That seemed strangest of all; that the man he'd whipped was taking care of him.

Kade climbed in, his body seeming to fill the open, sun-filled room. He carried a ewer filled with water and

one of Surial's own blouses. At Surial's arched eyebrow, Kade blushed. "Laundry line."

He sipped at the water, the liquid cool and soothing, and he began to drink it more quickly, but it made his stomach hurt, and he pushed the ewer away with a soft moan.

"Easy, easy. The movement will hurt. Give yourself a bit." Kade took the jug and set it aside, his loose braids swinging against his face. "It was lucky you didn't take that blow in the back. You would piss blood for days." Kade frowned over at him, brow creased. "Will you let me look? If there is only bruising, you will ache, but if you are torn, the surgeons should come."

"Those butchers?" He meant to go for a light tone, but the sound came across pained. He nodded. "I guess we'd best know."

"Just lie back. I'll try not to hurt." Kade's hands were warm as they helped him settle onto the straw. "When I was a boy, I was learning about split hooves from my ba'chi and the mi'it startled and kicked me. I walked like an old man in winter. The children called me Piya for days."

The quiet, restless speech was delivered in the same tones Surial had heard Kade use with the mounts when they were spooked. His hands were so careful, gentle as they pressed against the bruised area. "I hid in my mother's tent for a moon. Finally, my father came for me..." Kade finished his examination and sat back with a nod. "It's a nasty bruise, but you're whole inside."

"Nothing new there," Surial said with a wry grin. At least this time he wouldn't have to come up with an excuse for his injuries; there was no one to wonder what had happened. "So what happened then?"

"What happened when?" Kade blinked, a confused look on his face. "Oh, my father!"

Surial watched as Kade colored, eyes rolling as he shrugged. "He explained about my duties to the clan and my ba'chi and told me that hiding was no way to convince anyone to let me near the colts." A grin was flashed at Surial. "I wanted to be with the colts."

"Why?" Surial asked, curious, but also enjoying the way Kade's voice rumbled through him. He was embarrassed to admit, even to himself, that it soothed him, made him feel safe. He colored at the notion and looked down.

"When they run and play, it is watching laughter made flesh." Straightforward and simple, the remembered joy still hid there in that drawn face.

"It's funny, you don't look like a poet."

Kade blinked and paled, eyes suddenly shuttered and hard. He pushed away and picked up Surial's blouse, holding it out. He ignored the blouse, he knew he was only putting off the inevitable, but he didn't want to go back into the house, he didn't want to have to deal with Erulial; it made his lungs hurt just thinking of his brother. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"No offense taken, Sieka." The voice, that only moments before had been alive and rich, was now dead and empty, dust-dry and hollow. "Just long ago silliness."

"Most poets would argue that to be able to see life as a child is a gift that must be not only cherished, but held onto in both hands with all one's might." Surial shifted, mind going back to the book he'd been reading before bed just the day before yesterday... had it really been less than a day since his brother's outburst? It felt so much longer than that. It felt like a lifetime. "Sukrilk spoke of losing that ability and how he spent

years searching to find it again, and most scholars seem to agree that the sudden shift for the worst in the poetry of Ladosian was due to his loss of this ability."

"Poetry is rare in the pens, as are unbroken children." Again, that odd matter-of-factness, even the bitterness seemingly bleached away by experience.

"Of course." He held himself, arms crossing over his ribs protectively. The slave pens. Broken children. How could Erulial ask this of him? How could his brother believe that something so innately cruel could be good for the family and that he could have anything to do with it? Yet Erulial had asked, had asked and had made it clear that he was to do this or suffer grave consequences. With his ribs barely knit from last night's blows, Surial doubted very much he was going to survive Erulial's grave consequences.

He bit his lip, bile rising in his throat; unhappy, bored, lonely, he was all of these things, but that didn't mean he had any wish to be dead. He could still feel the jolt that had gone through his arm as the whip connected with Kade's back, could feel that dark place that had found a home in his soul as he'd meted out the punishment. He would not breed people into such a life. It wasn't right and it would kill him as surely as Erulial would.

Kade frowned, eyes focused on Surial's arms wrapped around his body. "We need to get you inside in bed."

"It doesn't matter." Surial grabbed Kade's arm as he suddenly realized there was something that needed doing before his brother came back to finish what he'd started. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to do it, but they would have killed you if I hadn't, but that still doesn't make it right and I am sorry I did that to you."

"You don't have to say anything, Sieka." Kade's face was serious as he caught Surial's gaze. "I will keep my word to you, I swear it. You don't have to apologize."

Surial sighed, wishing the words made him feel better. "Well, putting it off will only make it harder -- I'd rather not make him come here looking for me. You and the horses don't need to see that kind of thing... nobody does."

Kade sat down before Surial, eyes serious. "This is your home, Sieka... Hel...Helan. If you wish it, your guest will leave."

"You make it sound so easy."

Kade nodded. "It is. This is your home."

"Given to me by my family. It is their business that I conduct. I am here only through their generosity." He barely restrained his bark of laughter at the words. Generosity. He supposed they had been generous; they could have sent him off into the world with nothing to his name. Instead he'd been given a house, a job, a place. Sent away and now, it appeared, never to return, he was doomed whether he agreed to Erulial's proposal or not. The least he could do was go down knowing he'd stood in the right path. "Help me get down."

"Yes, Helan." Kade stood and bent, scooping Surial up in his arms, and headed for the stairs.

Surial gasped, grabbing onto the strong shoulders, feeling like a child in this man's arms.

Once they were down the stairs he demanded to be put down. "I can walk." He would not be seen by his staff or by his brother being carried about like a baby in its mother's arms.

"Yes, Helan." Kade eased him down, making sure he was stable and steady before the strong arms moved

away. The stables were clean, normal. Surial couldn't quite believe they were the same dark, shadowed place he'd crawled to in such agony last night. He moved stiffly to the door, finding even his ribs didn't seem that bad. As he moved into the courtyard, the sun shone off the white walls of his home, bright and clean. Perhaps he was worrying too much; maybe his brother would listen to reason, or at the very least not hurt him too badly.

Kade walked with him, silent as he followed.

When Surial opened the door, Argent was there, eyes shadowed and worried. The gray brows lowered as they took in Surial's condition. "My Helan. Shall I fetch a surgeon?"

The look the old man gave Kade was dark, tinged with anger.

"No, I'm fine." His grimace as he shook his head belied that, but he pushed on, ignoring the pain. "I want a bath drawn and my best suit laid out. You make sure Madrise serves my brother something special, and make sure it has meat in it. The very best wine from the cellar should accompany the meal."

"Yes, my Helan. Right away." Argent looked back at Kade for a moment and then turned toward the kitchen.

Kade trailed along behind Surial, an odd, silent, tall ghost. He was about to dismiss the vakla when he arrived at the stairs. Not nearly as steep as those at the stable, they nonetheless looked daunting. Gritting his teeth, he put one hand on the wall and began to climb. By the third step he had broken into a sweat and by the fifth he whimpered, hand flailing behind him, looking for Kade's support.

Those large, steady arms wrapped around him again, lifting him without a word. At his protest, Kade whispered, "There is no one to see your weakness, except for the man whose eyes you own."

Before Surial could respond, he was set upon his feet at the top of the stairs.

He could see Argent had outdone himself. Ewers full of steaming water were already being carried to his room, the scent of fragrant oils filling the air. He made his way there, finding the bath nearly full and Argent beside his bed, smoothing the brilliant white pants and long tunic that had been put out on the bed. Blue and pink embroidery were so cleverly worked into the material as to be almost invisible, except when caught in just the right light at just the right angle. It was one of the few outfits he had brought with him from Sandide.

"Shall I help you bathe, my Helan?" Argent moved quickly to help him into the room, hands moving to remove Kade's makeshift bandages. "The water will loosen your joints."

"I'm afraid I'm going to need someone stronger than you to get me into the bath, Argent. And then I want to be left alone until my brother comes home."

Argent looked over at the door, "Quit skulking, then, Kade, and come help me."

The old man's voice was sharp and Kade said nothing, simply standing close as Argent helped Surial disrobe. Then he helped Surial into the heated water, lowering him gently, eyes carefully averted.

"What in Alusius' name is your problem, Argent?" Surial asked, eyes closing in pleasure as the heat and the water began immediately to work their magic.

"We were worried about you, my Helan. You --" The man's voice tightened again and he took a deep breath. "You were not well served kept in the stables. You should have been taken care of as is your due."

Opening his eyes, he fixed Argent with a glare. "Where I choose to go is none of your concern."

"Of course not, my Helan." Argent bowed, then bent to retrieve a pot of soft soap. "Shall I do your hair, my Helan?"

Surial could see Kade's profile as he stood near the door, a statue of a man, patient and permanent. Surial sighed and closed his eyes against sudden tears. He wanted to be left alone, but couldn't even wash himself. He remembered the gentleness of the vakla's hands against his ribs and back, touching so lightly. "He can do it. I'm sure you've duties to see to downstairs."

"Kade, my Helan?" Argent's voice was shocked, the tone almost making Surial smile.

Almost.

"Are you questioning me?" He put as much steel as he could muster into the words.

"No, sir. Of course not." Argent left the room, handing Kade the towel, whispering low and fierce at the vakla before disappearing.

Kade crept in, a dark flush on his cheeks. He placed the towel around Surial's neck and, without a word, began wetting Surial's hair, using those gentle, large hands to pour the water.

"What did he say to you?" Surial couldn't figure out why the old man was so upset with the vakla; he'd seemed fond of Kade.

"He's just worried about you, Sieka. He..." Kade sighed and poured a measure of soap into his palm and began to massage it in. "He does not think you should have been kept in the stables. He cares for you very much."

Surial bristled. "You didn't keep me. The stables were my choice. Perhaps he'd have been happier if I'd stayed where Erulial could find me and finish the job before morning."

Kade worked the soap in, rubbing Surial's scalp. "If you tighten, you will make the bruises hurt worse. I will not allow him to hurt you, you have my word."

The words brought back the night before, Kade's voice sincere and serious. Even though he wasn't sure exactly what Kade thought he could do, it was reassuring; the vakla made him feel safe.

Kade's fingers began to ease the tension from him, working with the hot water to help him relax. Surial floated as Kade washed his hair, the touch soft and gentle. The water never touched his face, the soap rinsed away.

"Mmm... You've done this before," murmured Surial, more asleep than not, his aches and pains almost non-existent under the careful ministrations of his vakla.

"A long time ago." Kade finished with his hair, moving back away from the tub, letting Surial float.

The feeling of safety increased as he relaxed, the water warm and comforting around him, and he drifted off, dreaming of rocking in his cradle at the big house in Sandide.

The day moved quickly, the sieka sleeping soundly enough that Kade got him lifted from the tub, dried, and placed on the big bed with barely a murmur. He took a position near the door, sitting quietly a bit down the hall so he could see out a window.

It was odd, the mixture of fear and strength, arrogance and kindness that the sieka held. He spoke so warmly, seemed almost... reasonable, and then would snap at an imagined slight. Then again, it was also odd that he himself was so interested, why he would swear to defend the man who owned him, why he would care if the man was beaten, if he died.

The day passed slowly. Argent did not speak to him, the sieka sound asleep until the sun's rays began to fade. A groan warned him that the sieka was waking, the sound followed by a sharp, indrawn breath and a curse. Kade stayed silent, cloaked in the shadows, watching quietly as Surial sat up, groaning at the motion. Unconcerned about his nudity, Surial went over to the tub and splashed some of the water onto his face, gasping at the cold, grimacing as the movement twisted him. He wandered slowly back over to the bed, standing near the foot of it, looking out the window toward the sea.

Surial's back was a long line of smooth, unmarked skin, fine and graceful. Kade looked away, down at his hand. The muscles along his own back twitched, the dozens upon dozens of thick, ropy scars tight and rough against his clothing. Surial turned then, the bruises on his face and across his side and stomach lurid against the backdrop of white walls. Kade felt a slow, righteous anger building. It was wrong, to mar something so finely made, regardless of circumstance.

"Can I assist you with anything, Sieka?" His voice came as a careful whisper.

Surial flinched. "Kade?"

Kade stood, stretching upright, working out the stiffness. "Yes, Helan."

His lordship seemed to relax a little. "I could probably use some help getting dressed."

"I... I will try. Your clothes are strange to me." Kade looked at the fine white suit that Argent had laid out. "And my hands rough."

Surial chuckled. "I think we'll manage somehow to figure it out together."

Kade smiled back at Surial, swallowing the laughter that wanted to answer. He lifted up the blousy, white pants. "These first?"

"Yes." Surial's hand landed on his shoulder as Kade tried to figure out the easiest way to hold the pants open. "I haven't needed help dressing since I was a boy."

"A boy? In these clothes? They'd be torn and dirtied before noon -- Watch your foot, you'll rip through!" Kade couldn't help the laughter that was creeping out in his voice. Surial was teetering, one foot in the pants, the other knee almost against Kade's nose as he bent, holding the cloth.

"The material's stronger than it looks," Surial told him, breathless.

"It couldn't look weaker." Kade sighed in relief as both of Surial's feet managed to land safely on the floor and he straightened, turning to retrieve an undertunic as Surial fastened the waistband.

"Not everything that appears fragile is. The material is made by Sandide's best weavers, a clan of women who are rumored to be so ugly that no man may look upon them. They wear hoods over their faces; all you can see is their eyes. Frankly, they terrified me as a boy. But they make the most beautiful cloth that appears as light and delicate as a breeze." Surial reached over and grabbed the blouse, taking a fistful of cloth in each hand and yanking on it. "See?"

Kade blinked and reached out, stroking the fabric with a single finger. "A'itama! Are they really so ugly, the women? Did you ever get to see one?"

"Once I almost did, but..." Surial's voice trailed off and he turned away, staring once more out the window at the sea. "I'd better hurry. Erulial will be upset if I'm late for our evening meal."

"Yes. I'm sorry, Sieka." He opened the blouse, helping Surial into it carefully, making sure not to jostle the bruised ribs.

A quietness seemed to settle over Surial, the air becoming heavy with a sense of resignation. Kade finished helping him dress, forcing himself to relax, to breathe, to watch the sun as it set. The roses and purples were lovely against the water and Kade held the sight close. A man who would hit his own brother would have no compunction killing a slave when he kept his word to protect Surial. The thought was comforting, that he would die a man, keeping his honor, protecting someone who could not protect himself.

The ghost of the rowani, the man's sworn guardian, would be able to rest.

Surial's mouth opened, but before anything could be said Argent was at the door. "Your evening meal is about to be served, my Helan, your brother will be through to the dining room shortly."

"I'm on my way." Surial looked down, smoothing his clothing, picking at invisible threads. "Oh, and Argent? You have always served me well, thank you."

"Yes, my Helan. It's been my pleasure." Argent bowed and backed away, allowing Surial to pass.

Kade followed Surial, ignoring Argent's questioning look. There was violence on the air, thick and bitter as bile. He could feel the tension increase as they moved through the house, could see Surial's body growing tenser the closer they came to their destination. At the door, Surial closed his eyes, lips moving silently, before he took a deep breath and pushed through into the dining room.

Kade entered and stood beside the other man's guard, silent and unobtrusive. They shared a long look, one warrior meeting another. It would be a shame to kill this man.

The Helan's guest was already seated, his bulky frame threatening to slip into corpulence, eyes cold and hard, face twisted in a perpetual sneer. Kade didn't like him on sight.

Surial wore a brightly painted, if unconvincing, smile on his abused face. "Good evening, brother, I trust you haven't been waiting long."

"No longer than I expected, brother." The man looked satisfied, eyes lingering on Surial's bruised cheek and bright eyes.

"Then I'm pleased I didn't disappoint your expectations." Surial offered the man a slight bow and then moved to the side table. "Drink?" he asked, glancing at his brother.

"Do they have something that passes for decent wine out here? What we were served at lunch was swill."

Kade watched the stranger's hands move, quick and choppy, like a snake. Quite the intimidator, this one, he thought, studying the motions of face and body as Surial served him a glass of wine. Not used to being denied anything and quite willing to take what wasn't freely offered. Surial stepped away, standing to his brother's side as if he was a servant, waiting for the next order. A sip of the wine and that lip curled again. "It will do. You've always had exquisite taste, little brother. Your mother coming out in you, I suppose. She was quite pointlessly beautiful."

Madrise shouldered the door open at that moment, her hands full with a steaming tureen.

"I've asked my people to make you a traditional Sandide meal. I believe you won't find a better cook outside of Sandide than Madrise." His lordship smiled at the cook.

"So, you have brought civilization out to the sands. It actually smells edible, unlike the commoner's fare the Magistrate's people tried to pass off as food." The stranger's eyes never even glanced at Madrise as she silently filled his bowl.

Madrise looked at Surial and then at the empty spot at the other end of the table. Kade thought that if he lived through tomorrow morning, he would encourage the Helan to stand further away from people who were known to strike out. Surial gave Madrise an awkward smile and moved to take his seat.

"Thank you," he murmured as she filled his bowl.

"Yes, my Helan. You're welcome." She lifted the tureen, smiling her thanks to Kade as he held the door open for her. He turned his attention back to the table, watching as Surial pretended to eat, body stiff, eyes on his soup.

"I finalized our arrangements with the Magistrate this afternoon over that vile, overdone roast they served. Everything is in order. Once Father dies and the business is mine, the new phase of our enterprise will begin."

Kade tensed as Surial paled and swayed. The smell of fear was obvious, made his nerves jangle. He wasn't the only one who could smell it, either. The stranger's eyes were predatory, intense, and excited, ready for the kill.

"Erulial..." Surial stopped, swallowed, and then his shoulders squared and he looked his brother in the eye for the first time since they'd entered the room. "I told you last night -- I won't do it."

"And I told you last night that you will, if you wish to live." Kade slowly moved along the wall, closer to the table, watching carefully. The other warrior echoed his motions. "Make no mistake, people die out here in the desert with stunning regularity. Father will not cut his hair in mourning his freakish son."

Surial paled further, his skin almost transparent, but he didn't drop his gaze. "I won't do it, Erulial. You can't make me."

Kade watched the man blink, watched the dark eyes narrow in fury. He repeated the man's name, learning the name of his enemy, of one who would prey on the weak -- Erulial. Erulial. Erulial.

Surial was shaking as he put down his spoon, abandoning all pretence of eating. He looked scared but determined. "We're not boys any longer and you cannot intimidate me into doing something we both know is wrong."

"Wrong? You own a vakla, whipped the barbarian until he bled before the Magistrate himself." Erulial

sneered. "What's the matter, brother? Did you scare yourself? Did you find you enjoyed it, listening to a man scream for mercy?"

Surial's eyes flickered over to Kade and then back to his brother. "He didn't scream."

"I'm not surprised, you weakling. You can't even punish a vakla correctly." Erulial snarled and pushed his chair back. "Perhaps I should give you a demonstration, perhaps a few stripes would give you incentive to do what you're told."

Surial's eyes flashed. "Just kill me quickly, *brother*, it'll save us both the aggravation of me continuing to say no to you."

Kade moved at the same moment that Erulial lunged, pulling Surial's chair backward with one hand. He met the attack with a growl, absorbing a flying fist with his shoulder and deflecting the tackle so that the other man went stumbling to the floor.

Before Erulial could stand, Kade put himself between the brothers, blocking his Helan completely, coming face to face with the glittering eyes of the rowani, the slide of the man's swords loud in the now silent room. He heard his master's sharp intake of breath, the chair scraping back further as Surial stood.

Fury overtook surprise in cold, dark eyes in mere seconds. Erulial found his feet, snarling beneath his breath. Snake-quick hands moved and a long dagger appeared, flashing bright in the lamplight.

"I will not allow you to hurt the Helan. I have given my word." Kade lifted his chin, heard his father hidden within his own tones and he was filled with comfort.

He could feel Surial's hands grasp his shoulders, tugging slightly. "They'll kill you," was whispered in his ear.

"I have given my word." Kade spared only that much thought to Surial before turning his attention fully to the rowani. "If you retreat, we will have no quarrel."

"I am sworn to protect my Helan."

"As am I."

The bald head ducked in acknowledgement. "May we fight with honor and die with glory."

When the lunge came, swords flashing out toward him, Kade met it with something very near joy.

The blade sliced into his arm, a long, deep gash, but it didn't slow down his other arm as he swung, connecting with the rowani's jaw. His fingers itched for his rahat; the rowani was faster than the asp inked into the man's bare chest. Kade took a solid blow to the chest, another to his shoulder, arm slipping in the joint. His heart pounded with the speed of a bird's, the pangs and agonies of the blows slowly adding. For years and years he had fought in the warrior's circle, rahat in hand, meeting friends and enemies in the challenge.

It was a good thing, this fight. An honorable thing. The rowani was younger, stronger, faster, but Kade was not scared to die, not scared of the blade and so he pressed too close, the blades zinging into him. He took advantage of the opening to bash his head against the rowani's temple, hard enough to make him stumble. All that saved him was his braids.

The other man crumpled to the ground and Kade grabbed one of the blades, delivering another sharp blow to

the rowani's temple. It would not do to have him wake too soon.

Kade stood, staring at Erulial, lip curled. "The winds have spoken. I will protect my Helan."

The man leapt forward with a snarl, knife rising to strike, but before Kade could move, the tureen full of soup sailed at Erulial, breaking across his arm, splashing him with the hot liquid.

Erulial screamed with a mixture of rage and pain, turning toward Surial, eyes rolling wildly. Bits of greens hung from him, one cheek pink, clothes soaked and steaming. He snorted through his nose; Kade was reminded of a large, wet bull in full fury.

Kade shifted and hefted the sword, assuring that the path to Surial was blocked, although the prey was beginning to prove that perhaps he had his own defenses. He wiped his slick hand against his breeches and growled low in his throat as the man began to move. "I will not allow you to hurt my Helan."

Hatred filled Erulial's face. "I will whip you until you bleed to death."

Kade smiled, feeding off the expression. "You will not be the first to try, tatika."

"No." Surial's voice rang out loudly in the room and though it was shaking there was also the sound of steel in it. "I am the master in this house. My house, Erulial. *Mine*. You will not come here and intimidate me, attack me in my own home. I've cowered under your thumb for long enough.

"I am not the boy who cried as his home slid away from view, carried away on turquoise waves. I am a man now. And you are welcome in my home no longer. You will pack your bags and you will go. Tonight. Now. Just get out..."

"You dare..." Erulial's eye narrowed, fingers tightening upon the knife handle.

"Do you really think you can take both of us? Kade just bested your rowani, Erulial. I have lived here for years, brother, the people know me, do you not think I can convince them that you had a fit, some illness of the brain and attacked me? They will roll their eyes and say 'oh, these foreigners' and it will be the talk of the town for ten days and then you will be forgotten again."

As Erulial's eyes flashed to him, Kade grinned. "It is a hard thing, to be lost and wounded in the high desert. There are slavers there. They run in bands with dogs."

"Just get out before I have you thrown out. Preserve your dignity at least."

Kade could feel the tremors that had begun to pass through Surial's body; standing up to this man was putting great strain on his master.

Erulial and Kade stared at each other for a long moment, neither man moving.

The door opened and Argent entered, tray of plates in his hands. Erulial reacted, throwing the dagger toward the older man with a snarl.

Kade's hand shot out, slapping the knife out of the air, the blade biting into his palm. The blade clattered to the ground, spinning in a lazy, lopsided circle.

"We are not finished, brother." Erulial stalked to the door, shoving Argent aside as he stormed out.

He felt Surial collapse behind him, his master throwing up violently. Kade looked over at Argent, the man's face pale and stunned, plates rattling upon the tray. It was a testament to the old man's sense that his burden hadn't fallen. "Put the plates down and help the Helan, now. I'm going to assure his guest leaves quietly. Bind the rowani well."

He bent down carefully and picked up the dagger, ignoring the blood upon the blade, upon his limbs, falling upon the floor. The tray hit the table with a loud crash and then Argent's low voice cut across the noises Surial was making; he knew his master was in good hands.

Kade moved out into the hall. Madrise stood there, hands wringing, tears upon her cheeks. "Kade, what's happening? Was it the soup?"

With a surprised chuckle, Kade shook his head. "Your soup was a help. Take the girls and get to the kitchen and stay until Argent sends for you. Make the master some soft food, something sweet." His arm throbbed, the hand becoming numb and stiff. "Now go. I've work to do."

She looked like she wanted to argue, or to help, but there was fear in her eyes, too, and relief that someone was telling her what to do, and she headed off down the hall in the opposite direction from where he was headed.

He'd never seen the main floor of the house, but Erulial's wet boot prints led him through the maze of corridors. Kade hunted, leaving neither sound nor track. Something inside was whispering, worrying, but his spirit was insisting that there was a coyote, sharp-toothed and hungry, skulking about. Looking to make mischief and nip at ankles. Another predator in his territory.

The path the intruder took was mangled, destroyed. Art torn from walls, pillows sliced, the signs of frustrated fury everywhere. Kade followed them, a mixture of relief and nervousness filling him as he realized Erulial's tracks led out to the courtyard, toward the stables.

Kade moved in the shadows, waiting and watching, until he heard the screams of the mi'it.

He hit the stable doors at a run, growling at the scent of blood in the darkness. Dalan's stall was open, Mon'keur stamping and sounding off in the back, the sound of bodies pushing against wood, attempting to free themselves, was huge.

Kade saw movement, steel and flesh visible in the moonlight as Erulial moved towards Mon'keur.

"Coward. Tatika. If you wish to live, you will remove yourself."

"You!" Erulial turned on him, holding a second knife, a match for the one in Kade's hand. It was wet with blood. "I will kill you and then go and finish off that weakling of a brother." Erulial spat.

"You can try, tatika." Kade backed up, drawing them out of the stables, away from the mi'it. "Come and take me and we will see who the wind favors."

Erulial followed slowly, snarling like a mad dog. As he cleared the stables, the moon hit the angry face, painting it white with fury. Erulial leapt, knife aimed for Kade's heart.

Growling low in his throat, Kade sidestepped as the blow fell, catching the blade with his own, the knife kissing Erulial's forearm as they spun together. Erulial's momentum pushed them apart, assisted by the back of Kade's hand connecting with his shoulder in a hard push.

Erulial screamed as he stumbled forward, fighting to keep his footing. Again and again they clashed, metal glinting in the moonlight, grunts of pain and fury filling the air. Kade felt his spirit singing, the wind boosting his strength as he shed blood for honor.

The tatika grew tired, clumsy, Kade's blade biting deep again and again – cheek and shoulder, thigh and belly. Finally Erulial lost his footing, body slamming into the sands. The blade skittered away, blood seeping through the expensive clothing. His arms went up, protecting his head as he begged, voice whiny and afraid, "Don't kill me, please, don't kill me."

Kade hauled the man up, arm wrapped around Erulial's throat, blood making the contact slick. He brought the knife up to the dark hairline, pressing in enough for a thin line of red to form. "You will remember me, remember that you begged me, when next you move to attack those weaker than you." Then he sliced a hank of dark hair away, the movement returning to him after so many lost years. "Part of your spirit has been vanquished, tatika."

Erulial squealed, wriggling and fighting Kade's hold.

Kade pushed Erulial away, enjoying the dull thump as body again hit sand. He retrieved the fallen dagger, wrapping the strands of hair around his hand as he watched his foe carefully. "Go now. My master has said you are unwelcome."

Erulial stood and fled toward the gate, only stopping when his hand was upon the handle. "You tell your master that this isn't over. I will find a way to make him do my bidding. And you tell him if he ever sets foot in Sandide again I will kill him with my bare hands. He is my brother no longer."

"Take your shame and go, tatika. The winds have chosen the victor." The mi'it were calling to Kade, their upset palpable in the air.

The gate squeaked open and then slammed loudly behind Erulial's form. Kade took off for the stables in a run, ignoring his body's ache. Lantern lit, he saw all but Dalan, Mon'keur's head bobbing, the other mi'it shuffling restlessly. The smell of blood weighted the air.

Kade turned to the open stall, whispering a plea that Dalan had fled, had panicked and run. The sticky-wet mess under his feet whispered the truth before Dalan's form screamed it, still and quiet. Agony flowed through him and he stumbled. Kade sank to his knees, reaching out to stroke the soft fur of her nose. "Kama'asi, mi'it."

He began to sing softly, of the place where they would meet again to test their strength against the wind.

A noise like a sob sounded behind him and turning he found his master, pale, white-knuckled hand holding onto the edge of the stall door.

"I..." Kade looked up, the light from the lantern shattering into a thousand pieces. They had depended upon him, trusted him, these wind-brothers, and he had failed them, sacrificed one to the night, delivered her into the Land of Summer where there was no more pain. He lifted his hand, in penance or support, he didn't know and the light fell upon it -- black with blood, the gash in his arm raw, the palm sliced and swollen. Dalan's blood dripped from him, into him, through him, filling him with the strength of the mi'it.

The hand that reached out to his was trembling, but Surial's grip was surprisingly strong.

Surial drew him out of the stall, away from Dalan; once they were both in the corridor, they sank to their knees and Surial's palm covered his injured one. Power tingled through his hand and then went through him

like a jagged flash of lightning, leaving behind no pain, just the strange sensation of flesh reknitting.

The only sounds in the stables were breathing, scared, noisy snorts from the mi'it and his master's harsh breaths. His ears did not hear the sounds of his own breathing. The smell of blood was mingling with the sweet scent of hay, the mix pungent, sickly.

Without a word Surial's hands moved to cover the wound on his arm.

Kade shook his head, gently moving his arm away. "For the mi'it. The mark of my lacking. Leave it."

His voice was torn, he wanted to throw his head back and howl, scream his raw pain into the faceless moon.

"No, she's my responsibility." Surial's voice was hard and his hands covered the gash on Kade's arm, slipping through the blood. He watched as his master's eyes closed and the power tingled through him again before the lancing flash and then again the odd feeling of his flesh healing.

It took longer this time and Surial's hands dropped from his arm as if they had lead weights attached, his master not moving, breathing shallow.

The wind blew through the stables, and a flap of his master's blouse landed on his hand, stained and dark. Remembering the pristine white, the fine pink and blue stitching, filled him with regret and he had to fight back hot waves of tears. "Your suit, it is stained."

"I will burn it." His master's head lifted, dark eyes looking at him solemnly. "Erulial?"

Kade held up the long strands of hair. "He was tried by the winds and he failed."

Surial's hand reached out and a single finger touched the hair. "I expected to be dead by dawn."

"I will protect you. He will not wound you again while I live." Kade was surprised by the fury, the barely restrained growl held in his voice.

"I believe you." Surial reached past him, taking one of the knives he'd dropped, hefting it in one hand. There was such sadness in his face, in his eyes before he closed them. Slowly, Surial raised the knife to his own head and began to carefully cut his hair, shearing it as close to his scalp as he could.

Kade reached up, touched his braids, the symbols of his history, his clan. To cut them, to be without home or family or clan, to belong nowhere -- his heart broke and he lifted his face to the sky and mourned, wailing for the lost mi'it and the adrift man beside him and his own broken future.

chapter fourteen

Kade and Argent had both insisted he get cleaned up and go to bed for the night; he needed to rest. So he'd gone, too tired, too empty and weak to argue as they dealt with sending Erulial's things and his rowani to the docks.

Surial hadn't slept. He'd lain on his bed, the cool wind at the window blowing over his naked skin. Even when he'd become cold he'd remained still, staring into the darkness. When the sun's rays had made their way onto his bed, he got up and got dressed and now stood at his window, watching as Kade built a pyre.

His vakla had washed as well, was now free of the blood that had covered him last night. A clean pair of loose, white trousers had been found for him, though he wore no vest or blouse; his muscles rippled beneath bronzed skin as he worked, the skin on his right arm pink and tender looking where Surial had healed him.

That was twice he had healed the slave and once that he had healed himself. It scared him, old taboos long ago ingrained made him feel guilty for using it; the last time he had healed someone he'd been sent away...

Surial waited until the nurse left his mother's room to go speak to his father and then he slipped into the dark room. He hated that it was dark and knew his Mam did as well. It was true then, she was really, really sick now, or she would have made them open the curtains.

He crept to the bed and sat beside her, took her hand where it lay on the green quilt he could remember always being on her bed. It was so pale and smaller than his own now. It had never been smaller than his like that before.

*It had been almost a week since he'd last seen her. He used to come in a couple of times a day after she got sick and just hold her hand and wish she was better. It always left him exhausted, but it seemed to make her better. He hadn't **really** been healing her, just... giving her his hope.*

Of course, Father had found out. Realized it or something and then he'd not only been punished and forbidden to ever, ever heal anyone again, but he'd been banned from seeing his mother.

He'd cried and screamed and begged and done anything he could think of to make his father change his mind. He'd even thrown himself into his exercises, showing his father how well he could do with his sword. Though it made him throw up every time he drew blood from the swordmaster, he still did it, determined to win his father's approval and gain his way back to his mother's side.

Then this morning while he ate his bread he heard the servants talking about how his mother was dying and they didn't think she'd live to see another sunrise.

Surial squeezed his mother's hand and she didn't squeeze back. He wiped at the tears on his face; his father hated it when he cried.

He went to the window and opened the curtains, letting in the late afternoon sunlight, and then dared to

push open the window. The fresh breeze swept away the stale and sickly air, giving him hope, and Surial went back to his mother's bed, sitting beside her again.

"Mam? Wake up? Please?"

She didn't say anything, but Surial thought she made a little noise like animals did when they were hurting.

He bit his lip, turning to look at the door. He could help her, he knew he could.

Swallowing and closing his eyes, he pulled the covers back and put one hand over her heart. And then he just thought. He thought about how wonderful she was and how beautiful. How when she wasn't sick she would play with him and always smelled like bread and flowers, the little blue ones that grew on the cliffs that she loved so much.

Surial just kept hoping and wanting and wishing she was well and he pushed all those feelings into his mother.

He was soon shaking with effort, but he could feel her breath coming easier, he could feel that she was better, so he just kept doing it.

"Surial!" His father's furious voice made him jerk and lose concentration. He turned, cringing in the face of his father's anger. "What are you doing?"

He looked back at his mother. Her eyes were open, a soft smile on her lips, there was the smallest hint of color in her cheeks. She was happy to see him.

"Mam!" He sat back down and wrapped her in a hug.

"What have you done?" His father's hands landed on his shoulders, fingers digging in, hurting as he was yanked away from his mother's arms.

"No! She needs me!" He struggled against his father's hold, trying to kick and push and scream, but he was weak from helping his mother and couldn't get away.

"Erulial, come take your brother out of here!" He'd never seen his father look so angry. "What you've done is wrong, Surial. I've warned you again and again. I'm sending you away."

"No, please. Please, I can help her." He struggled as Erulial came and took hold of him, began to drag him from the room.

"She is dying, Surial. She will be dead by sunset."

"No! I made her well again!"

His father turned and strode back to him, snarling at him. "You will never ever do anything like that again or mention it anywhere or anytime or I will do far worse than banish you. Get him out of my sight."

The last thing he saw as Erulial pulled him from the room was his father taking the pillow from beneath his mother's head.

He gasped as Argent's knock startled him out of the memories, blinking and swallowing back the horror of his mother's death. "The pyre is built, Helan."

A glance down at the courtyard confirmed his man's words. Dalan's body lay across the top of the wood, throat sliced open like an insane grin. It hurt. The brutality and meaninglessness of it felt wrong against his nerves.

"I will be down in a moment."

"Very well, Helan."

He picked up his bloody clothes and the hanks of his hair before heading down himself.

Kade stood by the pyre, still and silent as the sun blazed down upon him. The skin on the slave's back was a maze of stripes and Surial couldn't help but look for a pattern in the scars. There was none to be found, even in the new, pink lines his own hand had placed.

The large man's cheeks were streaked with slow tears and regret soaked the air around him.

"I'm sorry." The words were stiff in his mouth, shame and pain coloring them. It was his fault, he was the master here, he was supposed to be in charge, was supposed to keep the things he owned safe and instead he'd let Erulial in. It was different when they'd been boys, but he was a man now and he should have stood up to his brother sooner, not let this happen, not let Kade be hurt or Dalan killed.

"You are not to blame. I was slow and allowed the wolves to feed." Kade's voice was dazed, almost distant. Surial almost chuckled at the state they were in -- himself bruised and shorn, Kade thin and drawn.

"Is there anything you want to... do you have words to say or something?" He got the words out awkwardly, already dreading the stink of burning flesh that he knew was coming. "Before we light it, I mean, is there anything you want to do?"

Kade nodded silently and stepped up to the pyre.

"Mi'it, if we were among the trees, we would drape you with blossoms, the women would mourn your passing, your bones would join the bones of your ancestors. The ba'chi would send you on to the Land of Summer where you would run forever, wind in your mane." Slow tears fell onto Dalan's pelt, leaving dark circles. "You have given me joy, Sister of the Wind. You allowed me to run again, to hope that I will again ride when I reach the eternal land where all is One."

Kade reached into his waistband and pulled out a small knife, slicing the palm of his hand. He then pulled out the long hank of Erulial's hair and raised it the sun. "I ask your forgiveness, Wind Sister, for being too late, and I offer the wind proof of my vengeance."

He smeared his blood along the hair and then rested it upon Dalan's neck. "Di'ben nor, mi'it. A'lo kama'asi."

Surial moved forward and put his bloodied clothes next to the horse, laying his hair over that, and then handed Kade the torch. He stepped back, waiting for the fire to start, waiting for his homelessness to be official. Kade touched the torch to the wood in multiple places, the fire catching quickly. Dalan was surrounded by flames almost immediately. Surial watched, standing still and silent. It was over now. Erulial was gone. He no longer had a family; Azize was his home. It made him feel tired and old and he felt like he was swaying like the heat swayed in the air between the pyre and the sky.

"The fire will burn through the day, Helan. I will attend it until the mi'it's spirit is taken by the winds." Kade's voice was empty, lost. It sounded much like Surial felt.

Surial nodded and turned to Argent who was standing by the door. "Bring out two chairs and an umbrella."

"Yes, my Helan."

He didn't want to be alone, not with the stench of burning flesh just beginning to fill his nostrils.

Kade looked over at Surial, the first time he'd done so all morning. The white scars upon his cheeks seemed ablaze in the mid-morning sun. "I tried to protect them, my Helan."

"That was my job, wasn't it? Your failure is my own, Kade. And you saved my life -- I was so sure that he was going to kill me this time." Argent returned, followed by two boys with the chairs and a large umbrella that was pushed into the ground between the seats. "Come sit with me, Kade. Perhaps we can find some healing if we do this together."

Kade frowned for a moment and then nodded, moving to the chairs and waiting silently for Surial to be seated and settled before adjusting the umbrella so that the shade covered Surial. Then he sat with a soft, exhausted sigh.

They sat in silence for a long time and Surial was surprised by how comfortable the quiet was. Most of the time, silences between people were awkward and one made the effort to fill them quickly. When he did speak, asking Kade a question, it wasn't out of a need to break the stillness between them, but out of a true desire to know.

"How did you become so good with horses?"

Kade looked over with a sad little smile. "I learned from another hi'icha, a great teacher. Pa'achi could speak with the mi'it, knew their language, their heart. I was apprenticed to him before I could walk."

"What happened?"

Kade shrugged. "It was a good life -- trees all around, sweet water to drink, mi'it beneath you, ta'akto upon your wrist. The days were filled with lessons, hunting, work. The nights were filled with drums and songs." He looked at the pyre, face still and aching with sorrow. "Pa'achi was known throughout the tribes. They sang his praises at the great gatherings."

"Ta'akto?"

"Birds, as large as the desert vultures, but golden-winged and bright. They... they are one with the warriors who serve them, the guardians of the plains, the hi'icha." Kade turned and pointed to his chest, where a series of marks were carved, talons piercing the skin. "This is the mark of a guardian."

Surial reached out, hand almost touching the honeyed skin when he stopped. "May I?"

Kade nodded, leaning forward so Surial could trace the raised marks, so deliberate and different than the stripes along his back. Surial ran his fingertips along the marks, testing the way the skin felt compared to the smooth, unmarked skin alongside them. They were a testament to the strength of this man's character; that he would deliberately take such marks, accept the pain of them. That such a man should be taken, shackled, marked by whips and made to serve the whim of men of far less character...

Such as himself. He pulled his hand back, as if his fingers had been burned. Head down, voice low, he apologized again, though surely no words could make a difference. "I'm sorry."

"It is a mark of honor. There is no sorrow in bearing it." Kade's fingers moved over it before they fell to his lap.

"I know..." He looked up, meeting the slave's eyes. "I meant for what came after, for my part in... for the last months and what you have suffered at my hands."

"The Old Ones say that a man can only be what he is and there is so shame in that." Kade sighed softly. "I am a vakla. You are a sieka. We are what we are."

It shamed Surial, that his vakla should be more accepting, should deal more honorably with what life had given him than he himself did. His life was easy compared to Kade's, and yet he had spent a great deal of it wishing he had another, always yearning for something out of reach. He turned his attention back to the pyre, watching the flames as they leapt to the sky, consuming Dalan's body.

After a few long moments of silence, Argent appeared at Surial's shoulder with a glass of cool, clear wine. "Would my Helan wish for some lunch?"

The old man's voice was polite but knowing. The smell of roasting flesh was neither appetizing nor appealing.

Surial choked back a gag at the thought of food and shook his head. He did take the wine, though, the cool, clear liquid soothing his throat.

"Get some for Kade," he said, waving his glass at Argent.

"My Helan, Kade's quite asleep." Argent nodded over, eyes sympathetic. Indeed, Kade's eyes were closed and his breathing was slow and careful. He still sat quite upright; from a distance he would seem to be alert and guarding. Surial couldn't help but wonder how much sleep a man would need to lose before he learned such a skill.

"He's not been to bed since before you slept in the loft, Helan. And I'm afraid he wouldn't take the wine, either. He... he's not eaten from the kitchen since before he escaped."

"Does he believe we would harm him with the food?" Surial asked, puzzled and concerned.

"No, my lord." Argent shook his head and sighed. "Kade... he hasn't come indoors since the escape. Until yesterday, he wouldn't even speak. The last words he had spoken to me were a vow not to run again." The old man looked at Surial. "Once a wild thing knows that it is well and truly trapped, it simply fades, Helan."

Surial looked over at Kade, saw the odd, wasted build, the dull sheen of his braids, the blackened hollows beneath his eyes.

"I broke him," he whispered, shrinking in on himself with a growing sense of horror.

"No, my Helan. Life broke him." Argent's voice was firm, practical. "He's not a young man anymore. He's been a vakla a dozen years; in a dozen more, he would have been dead anyway. He is too old for heavy work, too big for household work. This is a blessing, to let him fade here where he can see the horses."

Surial shook his head. "I am as much a monster as my brother." He reached out a trembling hand, lightly touching the talon scars that Kade wore with pride. Tears filled his eyes and he had to get away, he could not sit here with this man he had beaten and broken and not even noticed was fading away like a ghost. He

swayed as he stood, his own sleeplessness and lack of food wearing on him.

"My Helan!" Surial heard Argent's voice, but it was Kade's hand that caught and steadied him.

"Easy, my Helan. The sun has a harsh kiss." Kade nodded to Argent, who took his arm. "I will attend the mi'it. You rest."

Reaching out, Surial traced one of the scars beneath Kade's eyes and then turned and fled before his tears could fall.

chapter fifteen

"A'chaffa!" The curse mingled with the pained groans bouncing from the walls. Kade paced the back stables restlessly, trying to remember something, some trick that Pa'achi had taught him, that he'd seen. Grandam was struggling, her swollen belly rippling as she fought to rid it of the foal it held. The bright light of the midday sun reflected off the contracting muscles, the black pelt shiny with sweat.

Kade shook his head; the fact that this new mi'it was on its way was often the only thing that brought joy after seeing Dalan's empty stall. Grandam had already been moved to the far stables when the sieka's brother came, to give her too-large belly and late-pregnancy temperament adequate space. That move had probably also saved her life.

In the weeks after Dalan's death, the sieka had not left the house and Kade had not entered, simply continuing with his life, his duties, his silent days and empty nights. The mare had been showing signs of foaling for days, her tailbone high, teats waxy and full, and the veins on her bag dark -- but there was something wrong. The foal wasn't showing and the mare was weakening, her heartbeat fluttering and weak.

A pained scream drew his attention and Kade ran back to the scared animal, murmuring low. "Kama'asi, mi'it. Sh, now."

Blood was pouring from her, her eyes rolling and scared.

Kade rested a hand on her belly and whispered a prayer. Then he looked down into the terrified eyes. "I'm going to get a ba'chi, little mother. Hold on for me."

Then Kade turned and ran for the house.

Eschewing the warren-like maze of kitchens and laundry and servants quarters, he sprinted up the stairs. Not stopping, he let instinct guide his feet back to the room where he'd first served the sieka tea.

Surial sat in the windowsill, arms around his knees, eyes on the sea. He didn't start as Kade rushed in, didn't even seem to realize he was there at all.

"My Helan, please. I need you. The mi'it is dying. The foal's not birthing right. I need your help." Kade fought to catch his breath, desperation flowing through him.

Dull, lifeless eyes turned on him, long, dark lashes blinking. "I can't help you."

Kade blinked, shaking his head in confusion. "You do not understand. She bleeds. I can't stop it. She waits for you." He took another step into the room. "Please."

A glimmer of light filled the green eyes, a sharp, bright stab of pain that faded as quickly as it had come. "I can't. I don't know how."

"You do know. I've seen you." A slow burning fury flared at the pit of his belly, making his voice dark. "She's dying. The foal will die. You must help. She needs you."

"She dies now or she dies later, what's the difference?" Surial held out his hands. "Take it from me -- it only brings pain and death."

Kade strode over to the window, exhaustion and weeks of hunger making his grip upon his own control weak. He grabbed the sieka's hand and hauled the man off the sill. "I have no time. She's hurting and..." His voice trailed off as Grandam's screams came again. "A'chaffa! Can't you hear her?"

Kade turned and began to pull Surial out of the room. His Helan let himself be led, only digging heels in and resisting when they began to cross the courtyard, Grandam's cries growing louder. Kade growled, pulling harder. "I swear to you, you will go."

The cries were horrid, making him ache deep within. He would not lose these mi'it, would not face another empty stall because he was too slow.

Surial stopped resisting, a low moan coming from him as they entered the back stables. "Oh, she hurts..."

"Yes. Yes, now. Hurry. Please." Kade pulled him to the mare, her breath coming quick and shallow. "See, mi'it? I brought him. Easy, Wind Sister. Be strong." Kade looked over at the pale, trembling lord. "She needs you."

The sieka looked at him with helpless eyes. "I don't know what to do. Don't you understand? I made Mon'keur worse, these hands broke you. I'll only make it worse. Don't ask me to do this. I can't do this."

Grabbing Surial's hands, Kade placed them upon Grandam's belly. "Can you not feel her pain? You have a gift and, by the winds, you will use it. You will not let this one die." He shook with a mixture of fury and panic. Grandam's heart was slowing, the contractions of her belly growing weak. "Please. I will give you anything. Anything I have. Help her."

"She hurts." Surial was moaning, leaning his forehead against the mi'it's ribs. "Oh, Grandam, I don't know how to help you."

But the sieka's hands were moving in slow circles, the mi'it's screams quieting. "I don't know what to do," Surial whispered, mouth against the horse's belly.

"That's it. That's right." Kade murmured softly, stroking Grandam's neck. "That's it, girl."

Kade moved down, quiet and careful not to disturb the healer, who was whispering and moaning. The foal's hooves were just visible, the blood flow slowing. Surial's hands were moving along Grandam's belly, smoothing along it. His voice was pained. "So much pain, so much..."

"Come now, Wind Sister. I can see your baby, strong and fine. He is black as midnight, like his strong mother." Kade rattled along, keeping his tones soft and soothing.

The foal began to come, first the front hooves, then the nose becoming visible, wet and dark. Kade whispered his thanks as the thick blood stopped, the birth becoming something much closer to what he recognized and understood.

Surial was rocking now. "Soft and easy, soft and easy, push it out, Grandam, now, please, you have to do it now, Grandam..."

Kade nodded, watching the foal's shoulders appear. "That's right. Listen to him, mi'it. Your foal wants to be born. What a strong girl."

Once the shoulders passed, Kade grabbed the foal's body, waited for another contraction, and then pulled. Grandam lifted her head and grunted, scrambling to her feet as the foal was born. Kade wiped the foal's nose clear, laughing as the tiny chest filled with air. Grandam turned, nosing and licking, nickering softly. The shiny black body forced itself up upon spindly legs, shivering and shaking and alive.

"Oh, it's beautiful." The sieka's voice was shaking almost as much as the foal, weak, but happy.

"Yes. He is a beautiful one, strong and fine." Kade walked over and helped his master up, sitting Surial over upon some dry, clean straw. "Thank you. You saved them."

With a warm smile, Kade quickly moved the soiled hay away and fetched water for Grandam, handing Surial a cracked cup of fresh water for himself. Kade watched as the foal latched onto his mother, feeding hungrily, nodding. He was strong and healthy. Turning his head, he was pleased to see the color, what color there was, had returned to Surial's cheeks. "What will you name him?"

A quiet smile crossed the sieka's features. "You should. He's alive because of you."

Kade opened his mouth, fully intending to refuse, to insist that it was not his place. Instead, the word "lik'ta" fell from his lips.

"Lik'ta." The word sounded strange, but right on the lilting tongue. "What does it mean?"

"Blessed by luck." Kade smiled, a quiet satisfaction filling him.

"It's a good name." Surial lay back, curling into a ball on the straw, watching the foal as it fed hungrily.

Kade finished his cleaning, sobering as the truth of what he'd done filled him. He'd dragged a noble, his *master*, bodily from the house and forced the man to attend a mount. Once his master got his wits back, he would be punished, no question. With a soft sigh, Kade walked over to the clean hay. Better to deal with it immediately than to appear a coward. "I give myself for punishment at your wish, Sieka."

His master looked up at him, eyes blinking. "Punishment?"

"For my insolence, Sieka."

Surial struggled to sit back up, finally reaching a hand out. Kade helped him up, realized the sieka was shaking from the effort. "You're right, you saved Grandam and her colt. How could you? You'll eat the food from my table instead of the horses' grain for a week. If you feel this is insufficient punishment, I can make you eat it *at* my table."

Kade shook his head and blinked, utterly confused. "Sieka?"

"You did the right thing, Kade. Now help me get back inside, I'm not sure I can cross the courtyard on my own."

Kade reached out for his master, frowning as a thought occurred to him. "Can... can I help you, like before? Would it ease you?"

"No!" Surial put an arm around Kade's waist, letting him take most of his Helan's weight. "I've done you enough disservice already, I won't add to it."

"You saved me from having to build another pyre." Kade helped him across the courtyard. "If I can ease your ache, it is my honor."

"It wouldn't be right."

Kade nodded, not agreeing, but not willing to argue. "The foal will be an honor to your stables. He will be beautiful running along the sands."

"He was already pretty beautiful... And I feel as shaky as he looked," Surial admitted as they reached the door to the house and went in out of the sun.

"Where would you like to go?" Kade blinked, forcing his eyes to adjust to the dim light. "Shall I return you to your office?"

He had to force himself to swallow the laughter that threatened. He was returning the sieka, after forcing him out. They were both filthy, exhausted -- Kade was almost positive this was not how his Helan had intended to spend the day.

"I'm thirsty, but," Surial looked down at himself with a grimace, "I'd rather not face Madrise looking like this -- she likes a clean kitchen." His master sighed heavily. "The stairs seem rather daunting, though, don't they? I guess it'll have to be the kitchen -- maybe she'll be out shopping or preoccupied or something."

Kade shook his head. He was tired and all the words the sieka was muttering were making precious little sense. With a grunt, he lifted Surial up into his arms and carried him up the stairs, panting as he made the top step.

"Stop manhandling me!" Kade noted that his master didn't say it until they'd reached the top step, nor did Surial sound particularly adamant about it.

"Yes, my Helan." Kade put Surial down, fighting to catch his breath. He looked down the corridor. All the doors seemed to match, seemed to fade one into the other. "Which door?"

"The one on the end. I've got some drinks in there; we won't have to bother anyone for anything." Surial leaned in and whispered, "We'll save Argent his *look*."

Kade chuckled, the sound threatening to become full-out laughter. "I know that look. I believe he practices it in the glass."

They made it to the room without anyone coming upon them and Surial closed the door behind them. His master collapsed into a large, padded chair, curling up in it like a child. "The stuff in the blue bottle's nice."

"Shall I find you some clean clothes, Sieka?" There was a fine cabinet -- shining, dark wood inset with stones of blues and greens, a dozen bottles within. Crystal cups of a deep, rich red sat atop the cabinet waiting to be filled. Kade looked at his hands, still filthy and raw. With a sigh, he shrugged off his vest and turned it inside out, using it to open the bottle and pour a glass of clear liquid. Holding it in his wrapped hands, he walked the drink over to the Surial.

"We're a fine pair." His lordship took the drink from him, sipping at it. "Help yourself."

Kade considered refusing, just heading back to his bed, but that was one flight of stairs down and then across the courtyard and back up to the loft and he hadn't had a good drink in so long...

"Thank you." The liquor burned all the way down as he sipped it, lowering himself to the floor.

A soft knock sounded on the door, but Argent came in without waiting for the sieka's response. He looked worried. "Are you all right, my Helan?"

"Argent! Yes, yes, we're fine. Just a little problem with Grandam. She's fine, though, and so's her baby. Cute little mite -- wasn't he, Kade?" The sieka's words weren't quite slurring, quite.

"There's a trail of muck and blood all along the hall." Argent was giving them the *look*, sharing it equally between them.

"Yes," agreed Surial. "We're a mess. Bring us a bath."

Kade chuckled at the look on Argent's face. "I can mop up the hallway, Argent." He struggled to his feet, feeling the liquor's effect upon his empty belly, swaying. "Where are the mops?"

Argent looked less than amused. "I'll get one of the boys to do it." Argent's voice was tight. "Are you sure you want your bath here, my lord?"

"I don't want it in the hall." Surial giggled and raised his empty glass in Kade's direction. "More."

"Yes, Sieka."

Kade went to fetch the bottle when Argent pushed past him, clucking beneath his breath. "Let me do it. You're filthy, Kade, and you smell of the stables."

"What else am I supposed to smell of?" Kade frowned and placed his glass upon a table. "I'll head down to the trough and wash up." He walked over to Surial and smiled. "Thank you, Sieka, for your help. I am in your debt."

"Sit down and have a drink with me. Damn it, we reek -- that foal was gorgeous, but that stuff that came out after -- that was truly disgusting, a man shouldn't have to witness that on an empty stomach. Argent -- where's our bath?"

Kade chuckled and bent close to whisper. "You know that look, the one Argent practices? He's giving it to me now. I think he's ready for me to go back to work."

Surial's eyes were green like a forest and the black centers were huge and round and he blinked before turning to look at Argent. "So he is." It made his master giggle again and then Surial was waving him back toward the floor where he'd been sitting. "Well, he might be ready for you to go back to work, but he's not the master here, I am. And I don't," the sieka blinked rapidly, looking near tears. "I don't want to drink alone."

So sad, so lonely, so lost, those forest-eyes... Kade's gaze was drawn to the poor shorn head, the short, dark hair shining softly in the sunlight. Reaching out to pat Surial's shoulder, the slight flesh completely covered by his hand, Kade nodded. "Right. Drinking alone is no fun." He smiled, pleased when a small smile answered him. "Besides, we have something to celebrate. There was a brother of the Wind born today! A lucky little brother!"

Kade settled on the floor before he realized Argent had the bottle and he had no glass. Before he had a

chance to get back up, his master's hand came down heavily on his shoulder. "That's what you named it, wasn't it? Lucky one. Lik... lit..."

"Lik'ta. It is a good name." Kade sighed. "You did a wonderful thing. They would have been lost without your help."

"I've always been told that what I can do is... wrong. I guess as I no longer have a family, their taboos don't need to be my own." Surial's head lifted and he bellowed, "Argent! Where's that drink -- birthing's thirsty work."

"It is." Argent came and filled Surial's glass and then Kade's as Surial glared.

"Thank you." Kade frowned. "I have never met a gift given by the winds that was wrong. In my tribe, the talik who could heal were well-honored with large tents and the best meats."

Surial snorted. "I was locked in my room and told never to do it again."

Blinking, Kade considered that fact. To not use a gift was something beyond his experience, his comprehension. Given the brother, perhaps his Helan's people were broken, evil. Cut off from the winds. Perhaps it was good that the lord had lost himself from them. Perhaps now he would find a better path.

Kade leaned forward. "I was kept in the lodge for two days once because I painted my father's nose with juice. He looked like he had a rat-nose all through the Gathering."

Surial giggled some more at that. "I can only remember my father not being stern once, a very, very long time ago. I would never have had the courage to do something like that to him, better to let Erulial beat me than try something on my father."

"He, that Erulial, will never hurt you again." The words rumbled out of Kade, a wave of anger at the man who came and attacked the herd flooding him. "He is an outsider now."

His master's hand dropped to his shoulder again with a soft caress that he thought maybe was supposed to be a pat. "Thank you, Kade."

Kade nodded, patting Surial's hand. "It is the right thing, to protect the tribe." He smiled, feeling self-satisfied, swaying as he finished off his drink. He looked around, blinking. "Did Argent leave?"

"Went to get the bath because you stink."

"Me?" Kade pointed a finger at Surial's chest, smiling widely. "I am supposed to smell of horses. I live in a stable. What is your excuse?"

"Some giant dragged me down there and insisted I get intimate with a great big smelly horse." There was no accusation in the words, only laughter. Surial's eyes were twinkling at him, over-bright and still dilated, the black pupils nearly swallowing the lovely green.

"No offense, my Helan," Kade cackled. "But somehow I don't think Grandam was that interested in getting intimate with you and besides..." He leaned in close and whispered, "Those foals come out hoof-first. Not a friendly place to seek comfort."

Surial put his head back and laughed, the sound rich and full, like a bell in the night. Kade felt his own laughter answer, the muscles in his stomach cramping up with the unfamiliar motion. He let himself fall

back onto the floor, looking up at Surial's hand, which dangled from the chair.

Soon that hand disappeared and dark eyes peered over the edge of the chair. "Where'd you go?"

"The floor needed me. I'm not a friend of ceilings, I stay far away."

Surial looked up and then back down again. "I don't think it's going to come down," he confided.

"You never know about ceilings. They're tricky." Kade felt another round of giggles forming around his belly. "Argent's going to look at us again when he gets here."

"Maybe if we're really still and really quiet, he won't even see us." Surial held his breath and closed his eyes, ruining it by laughing a moment later.

"Argent's a smart one. 'Sides, he'd smell us." Their joint laughter rang throughout the room.

Argent returned with the massive tub and several boys carrying hot water. The chairs were pushed aside, the stone table removed to another room filled with a large canopied bed. They tried to be serious, but he did indeed give them the look and it was the master who cracked first, soft giggles turning into outright laughter in a matter of moments.

"Your bath is ready, my Helan." Argent was sounding less and less pleased and Kade would have felt guilty if, as Surial fought to get free of the chair, one foot hadn't landed squarely on Kade's stomach, distracting him.

"Careful!"

Surial stumbled and fell directly into Argent's arms. "Good catch."

"Yes, my Helan. Shall I send Kade to his quarters?"

Kade flinched from the look, rubbing his stomach with a frown. He supposed it wasn't the best thing to watch the sieka bathe. Although he'd bathed him before, carried him to bed.

"Why would you do that? The bath is here." His master turned his laughing face back toward Kade, wrinkling his nose. "But I go first because you stink more."

"I am not the one who wanted to get intimate with the mi'it!" The mixture of amusement on Surial's face and sheer outrage on Argent's tickled Kade and he burst out with giggles, bringing his legs up toward his chest.

He watched with bemusement as Argent's fingers tangled with his master's in an attempt to get the man undressed. Surial's giggles and stumbling weren't helping matters any.

"See. I told you your clothes were too..." His grasp on the foreign words faltered and Kade motioned to his trousers. "Easy on and off."

"Show off," Surial informed Kade with a laugh. Finally, Argent had him undressed and he stumbled into the bath, sitting down with a sigh.

Kade stretched out on his side, watching Argent potter about the room. It was quite interesting, this large room, full of books, all neatly stacked, and pretty stones and small pieces of art. Well suited to its inhabitant. He could hear his lordship playing in the bath, splashing and blowing bubbles in the water, soft giggles

punctuating the sounds of water.

"Are you having fun up there, o stinky sieka?" Kade smiled at the laugh that answered him. Those sounds were happy, reminding Kade of better days, lighter moments.

Two bright eyes peered at him from over the side of the bath. "You're the only stinky one left, Kade."

"That's because you are greedy with the tub, Sieka."

"Well, it's my tub."

"Yes." Kade chuckled as he nodded. "Do you know all these tales?"

His master turned to the shelves and drew his brows together in a look of exaggerated concentration. "The ones in the shelves, yes. The ones on the desk are new. Treasures still to be discovered."

"I have never seen so many in one place. So many colors." Kade smiled, turning onto his back with a sigh. The sun was moving across the sky, late afternoon creeping up.

"My family home had so many books that this seems like such a small collection. There were books about anything you could think of." He could hear the smile in his master's voice. "Sometimes after Eru- when I couldn't go out, I would hide away in the library and read all day."

"Library?"

"It's what we called the room where all the books were kept. Bookcases lined the walls and half-sized, double-sided ones were in rows in the middle of the room. There were chairs and couches everywhere. It wasn't for playing or talking, just for reading. It was my favorite room in the whole house."

Kade blinked, closed his eyes, and tried to imagine what Surial spoke of, but all he could see was a maze of shelves, closing a room in ever-shrinking areas. "You did not get nervous, not seeing the sky?"

His master laughed. "Nervous of being in a quiet room of books? Only that I might not be able to read them all."

"My mother had books." Kade could see the scarred chest that they kept the bedding in, the three leather-bound books resting along the bottom like secret treasures.

Surial's head popped up. "Can you read?"

"I could, once. My mother showed me." Kade blushed, looking back out the window. "It was not common, not of the Naik ways, but my mother was different and I was like her."

"Your mother wasn't a Naik? I can't imagine not being able to read. I know what being different is like... would you like me to teach you?" His master's words were beginning to slur together, those eyes somewhat glazed as Surial bounced from subject to subject.

Kade chuckled, feeling the weight of the day fall upon him as well. "She was not, my Helan. And slaves cannot read, but thank you. The offer means much to me."

Argent popped back into the room, startling Kade, who couldn't remember him leaving. "Your supper will be served soon, my Helan. Shall I help you dress?"

"That depends on what's for supper." His master's nose wrinkled and he began to pull himself upright. "I need to get out of the tub, though, so that the stinky one can get clean." Surial shivered as he stood. "Why are you making me bathe in cold water, Argent?"

"I'm not... I'm sorry, my Helan." Argent sighed and looked over at Kade. "I blame this on you, you know? A filthy stable hand, covered in muck, lounging upon the Helan's floor. It...it's undignified."

Kade had the grace to blush. "I didn't mean any harm, Argent. I did not sit on the chair."

"Why are you mad at Kade? He's keeping me company. Nobody ever wants to talk to me about..." The sieka waved his hand in the air and then nearly killed himself as he tried to exit the tub.

Argent caught him as Kade fought to stand. Between them both, they got the slippery, naked lordling out of the tub. Argent wrapped him in a dark robe and settled him back into the overstuffed chair.

Kade grinned. "Comfortable, Helan?"

"Quite, though the room seems to be moving." Surial giggled. "It's quite nice."

"Your supper will fix that." Kade smiled at him. Surial looked so young, so dazed and vulnerable, curled up in the chair. There was a tingling crawling over his skin, the feeling of a storm on the horizon. "I should go work. Check on the mi'it, the new baby."

"You're going?" His master looked disappointed and already seemed to be drawing back into himself.

It seemed wrong, to let that light fade from those eyes, lord or not. "Perhaps after your supper we can check the foal together? Give Mon'keur a firm talking to?"

"What did Mon'keur do?"

Kade grinned down at him. "He misses you. You are his iyossi and he cannot run without you."

"Iyo...iyossi? You've used that word before..."

"It is a...a song between a man and certain mi'it. A need that moves and grows between a Wind Brother and his rider." Kade's hands waved, his words insufficient. "Most do not listen, do not hear, and the mi'it refuse to sing, but your Mon'keur, he sings for you."

"Wind Brother..." His master's eyes grew far away. "It was windy the day he chose me... I can remember the feeling of it. I was scared at first, but then... oh, the feeling of the wind in my hair as I rode him bareback. It was the last time I can remember my father smiling at me..."

"It is a great thing, to be chosen to sing the iyossi. You should be proud." Kade walked over to the tub, washing his hands. "I cannot remember learning to ride. They say I rode before I walked."

"More than your hands are dirty -- strip and get into the tub. And tell me about your iyossi."

Kade shook his head with a grin, pulling off his trousers with a wrinkled nose. He stepped into the tub, shivering at the chill touch. "I should clean my breeches also. If not, there is precious little reason to bathe."

"Argent, get him another pair of pants. Argent?" His master looked around, obviously not having seen Ar-

gent leave to get his supper.

"He has gone for your food, Sieka. Do not worry about the clothes." Kade scrubbed himself, sighing as the dirt and muck washed away.

"All right then, tell me about your iyossi. If you can really talk to the mitts, what's the song like?" His master was curled up in the chair, leaning toward him, dark eyes intent.

"It is like breathing, just as easy. They say it is a mixture of heartbeat and wind, breath and sunshine. I shared the iyossi with Muk. He... he was fine-boned and he wore many tan'oka in his mane. I watched his birth. His mother shared iyossi with my teacher and Muk's birth was the first I was allowed to see." Kade closed his eyes, hundreds of memories crowding, begging attention.

"Maybe you can share iyossi with Lik'ta."

"With all my heart, I pray not." Kade shook his head, bringing a handful of water up to hide his face, to hide the longing and shameful hunger he knew would be visible.

"Why not?" His master sounded confused. "I thought iyossi was a good thing, I thought Lik'ta was special to you."

"It is, he is." Kade shook his head. "I would not have one so free bound to me. I would not hobble him, even for the joy of his song." He looked over with a smile and a wink. "Perhaps he will sing for you, Helan, although your Mon'keur is not the sharing sort, I think."

"It is the mitt that chooses though, isn't it? You may not have a choice, for who else would he bond with?"

"Mi'it," Kade corrected absently. "And yes, they choose, but you can choose not to listen, to ignore them." He stood, wringing out his pants. "I smell no more. Better?"

"Yes. Now you can have supper with me. Eat something more than that crazy grain you feed the horses." Surial's eyes were heavy-lidded, dropping long, slow blinks. "I don't believe that the man who dragged his master down to the stables and made him deal with a dying horse could ignore a mee'it who sang to him."

"Crazy grain? It is not nearly so good as that." Kade chuckled, struggling into his damp trousers. "The supper is for you, and the foal will sing to you, wind willing." He picked up his vest, using it to pull the water from his braids before sitting back on the floor before his master's chair.

"What's wrong with the food on my table that you won't eat it?"

"Nothing!" Kade blinked up at Surial. Was he supposed to tell the sieka that he was tired and broken and ready to die? That he hoped to find the strength to stop breathing? "I am rarely very hungry and you look as if you need all the food you can eat."

His master's hand waved in the air. "They always bring me too much."

"We bring you a reasonable amount, my Helan. You have a delicate palate." Argent's tone was teasing as he opened the door, tray in hand. "I assume that dressing for dinner isn't necessary this evening."

Surial laughed. "We're dressed."

"Ah yes, robe and wet trousers. Very fashionable, my Helan." Argent smiled. "Will you eat there or shall I

have a table brought?"

"This is fine. Something smells good, don't you think, Kade?"

Kade sniffed, his stomach surprising him with a definite twitch of interest as Argent settled the tray beside the lord, balancing it on a tiny side table. Something did smell good and he looked at Surial with surprised eyes. "It does. What is it?"

"One of Madrise's inventions. Some sort of pastry with lentils and honey." Surial leaned in again, his face like a little boy's. "It tastes like dessert."

"It does?" He watched Surial lift the cloth from the plate and nod happily. "I have never heard of it."

"She made it up." Surial winked. "I think she got tired of me sending stuff back to the kitchen untouched."

"Do you not like to eat?" Kade rested his chin on his hands, watching Surial take delicate bites of the pastry. "Madrise seems a good cook."

"She's a wonderful cook, she even managed to figure out how to make my favorite meals from ho... from Sandide. But so many meals are made from killing. I can't eat that, it makes me sick." Surial waved at him. "Eat and find out for yourself how nice it tastes."

Kade reached out and took a tiny morsel, closing his eyes at the sweet, smooth glide of it in his mouth.

"You see?" The plate with the balance of the pastry was pushed into his hands, no more than a quarter of it consumed. "Eat up. My horses need you."

"Only if you eat some more, my Helan. We can share it." Kade smiled over. "You have a household that needs you."

"I'm not sure I can..."

"Well, try and I will, too. Then we check on the foal and see if you can hear him singing yet." Kade nudged softly, not above a bit of bribery if the situation warranted.

"He's going to sing to you. He knows I have Mon'keur." His lordship leaned forward and opened his mouth.

Kade picked up a bit of pastry and placed it on Surial's tongue, chuckling as he snapped it up in a bird-like motion. "He will not sing to me. Mon'keur can share."

His master tore off a large chunk and pushed it into his mouth. "We'll see."

While chewing, Kade pinched off another bite and popped it in his lordship's mouth. The pastry was delicious, sweet and filling, warm and nicely browned.

"Grandam can go back into the main stable in a few days. She'll be happy to be home again."

"What about the colt?" Surial pushed another large chunk at him before lying back and filling a glass from the pitcher of clear liquid on the tray.

"He will stay with his mother for a few moons, then move into a stall of his own." Kade sighed as he remembered why there was an empty stall, and then shook his head. "I have repaired the wall in the paddock,

so they can be let out to play, once Mon'keur's shown he won't hurt the foal."

"Hurry up and finish the pie so we can go see how they're doing."

"I am finished. Do you need Argent to come with some clothes?" It felt good, to see that light of interest back. It lit up that pale face and made it animated.

Suddenly his Helan's face was close again, eyes twinkling. "I don't think the horses will mind - do you?"

Kade shook his head with an amused chuckle and stood, holding out his hand. "No, but if Argent catches you, he will look at you again. Fair warning."

Surial grabbed his hand and pulled himself up, moving ahead of Kade with a rather exaggerated flounce. "He can look all he likes, it won't get him anywhere."

They meandered down the stairs and outside, the moon shining at them. Kade picked up the feed buckets as they passed the feed shed, looking over at the grinning face gathering sugar and sabai.

"Main stables or the foal?"

"The baby. Even just thinking about him makes me feel good."

Kade nodded and added an extra amount of syrup to the oats. At Surial's look, he shrugged. "It will help her milk, help the foal grow."

Together they crossed the courtyard, moving behind the main stables.

His master went to Grandam first, feeding her sabai and sugar and rubbing noses with her. When Surial turned to the foal, his face lit up and he was laughing as he introduced the new one to the sweet wonder of sugar. Kade settled Grandam with her feed, checked her over quickly for problems, and then moved to bring in some fresh hay, removing the soiled. By the time he fetched some water, Grandam had eaten and he could turn his attention to the foal.

Spindly-legged and shaky, the small, black body was glossy and smooth, not a hint of marking upon him. Healthy and strong, Kade could see the spirit in the dancing eyes, hear the sheer joy of living and milk and mother and sunshine and soon there would be jumping and running...

"I think I can hear him singing to you, Kade. You need to come closer, touch him, love him. He's a smart boy, knows a good iyossi when he sees one." His master's face seemed so much younger, laughing and painted with happiness instead of its usual somber expression.

Kade shook his head and forced himself to smile, burying the soft sorrow that filled him like the ache of a too-long empty belly. "I hear nothing, my lord. Nothing at all. I'm going to pour the feed for the others; you'll meet me over there?"

Surial's smile faded. "You don't hear anything?" He turned back to the foal, rubbing its nose with long, gentle fingers. "You'll still take care of him though, right? 'Cause there's time -- Mon'keur was grown when he found me."

"I will care for him as I care for his kin." His voice was steady, the cracks invisible even to his own ears. He focused on the lord's pale hand. "He likes you."

The sieka shrugged and fed a final cube of sugar to the colt. "Easy to love the one with the sweets."

Kade chuckled, "I think it's the kind hand and heart. They know when they are safe."

His master's eyes met his, serious, intent. "Do they?"

"Yes. They do." Kade nodded, holding that gaze.

"Do you?"

"Sieka?" Kade blinked, confused at the question.

"Do you know you're safe here?"

Safe? Kade almost laughed, the feeling bitter and oily within him. It was the safety, the comfort, the ease of daily work and the dissolving need for freedom that was his shame. He looked over at the foal, at its long legs that would run upon the sands, and then down at his own wrists, the scars of dozens of shackles upon them, some fresh and pink. "Yes, Sieka."

"That's all right then." Surial gave the horse a last tickle across the nose and then wandered back toward Kade, still not walking steady.

"I'll go pour up the feed." Kade reached out and steadied Surial as he stumbled over a bucket. "You should go speak to your Mon'keur, tell him to be nice to his kin."

Kade grabbed up the lantern and handed it over to Surial as he shut the stable doors securely, heading toward the feed shed.

Surial slid into a simple pair of white pants and blouse, hands going automatically to his cuffs to do up the fasteners that were not there. A wry smile crossed his lips. It had been his own decision to pack away the formal clothing of his homeland; he was no longer welcome in Sandide and it was high time he started to follow the traditions of his adopted home.

Smoothing his hand along his shorn head, he looked out over Azize, eyes going to the sea. He forced his gaze back to the low white buildings that made up Azize, a white jewel in the sands on this desert peninsula. He'd lived here for seven years and still it didn't feel like home.

A sound from the courtyard caught his attention, Kade with Grandam and her colt, Lik'ta's first chance to play in the yard. Perhaps there was something here that felt like it could be home, after all. Tearing his eyes from the sight, he ran down the stairs and into the sunlight to join Kade and the horses.

Kade was leading Grandam out from the back stable, pants fastened around a thin waist with a long piece of rope, moving slowly so that Lik'ta could follow along, bounding beside his mother, raising dust. The foal began to run toward Surial, stopping short as Grandam whinnied sharply.

Kade turned his head, the man smiling as he caught sight of Surial, scars white on the tanned cheeks. "Di'ben sud, Helan. Bright morning."

"It is, isn't it?" He smiled back, climbing the fence and sitting on it, content for now to watch.

Grandam stomped and tossed her head, knocking Kade on the shoulder, reminding him what he was supposed to be doing.

"Yes, yes, little mother, I hurry. Bring your son." He laughed, propping open the gate and leading her in, Lik'ta bouncing happily behind.

Surial watched as the foal tried to nuzzle against Kade's legs, chirruping softly. Shaking his head, Kade stepped away, unhooking the rope from Grandam and encouraging her on. Surial chuckled, wondering why his vakla, who loved the horses so much, who had mentioned how much he wanted to work with the colts when he was a boy, was refusing to take joy in this one.

Grandam immediately moved to graze on the sparse grass that grew through the sand and Lik'ta began to dance around her, snuffling softly as he explored. Kade moved over to the fence, turning his back to the foal. "He grows well."

Surial watched the way the sun played over the black horse, glinting and sparkling through the black mane. "He really is a beauty, isn't he?"

"Yes, Helan. He is. He'll be faster than the wind when he's grown."

"He'll need a strong rider."

Kade laughed, pushing his braids back from his face. "In a few springs, perhaps. Now he needs love and sunshine and play."

"Like all children. Well, I think I've the right man for that job."

With a smile and a nod, Kade walked over to fetch some water, humming beneath his breath. The foal's eyes brightened as the large man moved, following along, tiny hooves prancing delicately in an intricate dance as he tried to catch Kade's attention. Surial wondered how long Kade would be able to resist the animal's overtures, wondered why he was doing so in the first place when it was obvious he wanted to respond. Already, whether the man would admit it or not, there was a link between them. Even he could see that.

Kade ignored the little foal, filling the trough and whistling to Grandam. Lik'ta stomped his foot, trilling. Kade's eyes flashed over to him and then flashed away. The big man's cheeks flushed slightly as he turned to straighten a few stones holding the fence post up. Lik'ta's head bowed as Kade's back turned and he moved to his mother, nudging her belly for a moment before he began to nurse.

Surial felt the colt's disappointment. "How long do you think you can keep ignoring him?"

"Ignoring who, Helan?" Kade stood as he finished, catching up his trousers as they slipped, tightening the makeshift belt that held them up.

Surial snorted. "The colt."

"I ignore no one. They play much at this age." Kade grinned over, the smile not reaching his eyes. "You should talk with him. He would respond to your voice."

Surial slid off the fence and went over to where the vakla stood, leaning casually against the bolstered fence post. "Why?"

"You have a very musical voice."

Surial chuckled. "I know you're not a stupid man, Kade. Why are you ignoring him? Why won't you accept his overtures?"

"I told you before, Sieka. I have no wish to bind myself to him." Kade's eyes flicked over to Lik'ta before shifting away. "He will find another. It is the way of things."

"Why not?" Surial knew he was being rude, but it was obvious that Kade wanted the colt. "Why would you deny yourself? And more -- why deny the colt? I've seen you care for these animals to the detriment of your own health, why would you deny this one?"

Kade looked over, met his eyes with a flat, dead look. "When you care for something, you do what is best for it, even if it causes pain. A bit of pain now will prevent agony later. The Wind Brother will survive this little ache and be better for it."

"You think I'm going to get rid of the colt?"

"Sieka?" Kade looked about as confused as Surial felt.

"I don't understand why you think bonding with the colt will bring it agony later." Surial reached out and put his hand on Kade's shoulder. "You're safe here, I won't hurt you and I won't sell you, that isn't my way. I would be happy to see you and the colt have iyossi."

Surial frowned; something felt... off. He let his hand slide down Kade's chest, but the feeling didn't change until he took his hand away from the man and the slight hitch he'd felt disappeared. He wrapped his arms around himself, eyes narrowed as he watched Kade, waiting for a reply.

"I am sorry, Sieka. That is something I cannot do." Kade shook his head, eyes hooded. "He will have the best care I can give him."

"There's something wrong with you."

Kade chuckled, moving away, putting the trough between himself and Surial before answering, "I feel fine, Sieka. Perhaps it is bad temper you sense."

"I don't think so." Surial's gaze moved from Kade to the colt and back again. "I'm responsible for you and I think you should stop lying to me."

"I know not what you mean, Sieka." Kade turned to run his hand down Grandam's flank, his braids concealing his face.

"Look at yourself!" Surial berated himself for only noticing now, but the man was skeletal, gaunt. "You don't look like you've had a decent meal in months. And when I touch you..." Surial reached out, touching Kade's back this time, his whole hand flat against the hot, tanned skin. This time the wrongness of it was easier to detect; he wasn't sure if it was because he was looking for it now, but it was clearer, less murky and restless, just a sure sense of something off.

"I am fine. I ate with you only a day or two ago." Kade moved away again, the sun casting dark shadows beneath shoulder blades that were simply skin-covered bones. "I will be fine, Sieka."

Lik'ta peered around Grandam's legs, nosing softly at a huge hand that found a bit of sugar, feeding and ca-

ressing his dark face unconsciously.

Surial snorted. "You barely ate as much as I did and you've a great deal more body to keep going. And what have you eaten since? Horses' fare?" Surial narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't be trying to steal from me, would you?"

Furious eyes met his. "Steal from you? I have taken nothing from you." The words were spat out, tremors visible in the thin arms and shoulders. Lik'ta chirruped, backing away.

"No? Vakli are quite valuable, you know -- your marker was set at a thousand units. And are you not starving yourself to death? You've run away once, why shouldn't I believe you aren't doing it again, in a far more subtle manner?"

Kade's shoulders slumped, the fury draining from the gaunt face and leaving nothing behind but a vague sorrow. "I gave my word. I will not run again."

"But you are running away," Surial insisted, pushing the man. He had a hunch Kade would not take kindly to being held down and force-fed, but if the man wouldn't take the hint... "You aren't eating. You're already fading; soon you will be dead and there will be no one to look after my horses, my vakla will have been stolen from me by himself."

"I will not take what is yours, Sieka." Kade looked vaguely gray around the edges, as if he would be ill, if he was a weaker man. "I need to see to the stalls, ensure they are ready for Grandam and the foal."

"You will take your midday meal with me. On the balcony. There." He turned and pointed, making sure that Kade was looking. "Today and every day from now on unless I have sent word that you are excused."

"As you command." Kade moved through the gate, closing it behind himself, refusing to meet Surial's eyes. "I shall return for the mi'it in a moment."

Surial sighed as he watched the vakla go. He felt almost as bad as he had the day he'd whipped the man, but as on that day, he did what he did to save Kade's life. He could close his eyes and still feel the sensation of wrongness under his hand as it rested on Kade's back. Oily, slick, almost but not quite a smell, it made him curl his lips. He wondered what other things the healing power within him made him capable of, but he quickly pushed it away; it had led him to nothing but death and unhappiness, he knew better than to cultivate it, to trust it. By the time Kade returned he probably wouldn't even be able to duplicate the sensation of feeling the man's sickness.

The foal wandered over, tilting his head and nodding, nickering softly. Just days old and already begging for treats. Surial chuckled, stroking the baby's face. He was beautiful and already you could tell that he would be strong and fast. In many ways the colt reminded him of the vakla: strong, focused, and yet there was something fragile about them both as well.

Snorting as he didn't get his treat, Lik'ta danced away, gamboling around his mother and nudging her with happy, quick movements. Grandam wandered farther out into the paddock, grazing and stretching her legs as her foal played around her. Surial watched them for long moments, taking his joy from the innocent, playful actions; the funny snorts and starts Lik'ta gave as he discovered new things.

It was a silent, dull-eyed vakla that rounded the stables and headed for the gate. Kade didn't speak, simply took up the rope and whistled. Lik'ta lifted his head at the sound, ears perking and a happy whinny sounding as he sighted Kade. The baby took off like a shot, running full tilt toward Kade and the fence posts. Surial winced as he and Kade realized at the same moment that the foal wouldn't stop in time.

Kade held his ground, letting his body absorb the shock of the foal slamming into him and then the answering blow of his body hitting the post. Lik'ta snorted, shaking his head as Kade slowly sat down. Lit'ka came up and nuzzled Kade's shoulders as the big man shook his head to clear it. "Next time, mi'it, you should stop before the fence."

Surial's hands itched to touch Kade, to take the big man's head between his hands and assess the damage himself. The urge scared him, frightened him, almost as if he expected to find his father behind him, ready to scream and scold. He turned his attentions instead to the foal, checking if he was okay under the guise of slowly petting him.

"Are you all right?" he asked Kade, voice rough, brusque.

"I will live. Is the mi'it injured?" Kade winced as he stood, balancing himself on the fence post for a moment.

"He's fine." Unable to stop himself this time, Surial turned and slid his hand through Kade's braids, intent on checking his head.

Kade went immediately, perfectly still, the only sign of life was his nostrils flaring as he fought for breath. "Please."

"Where does it hurt?" Surial asked, closing his eyes and bringing his other hand up to the other side of Kade's head. The wrongness was still there, the same as before, with a hint of something gray, which his gut told him was insignificant damage from the impact with horse and post, but the sharp pain he was expecting was missing. Huge hands gently took Surial by the waist and lifted him, moving him to one side. Then those same trembling hands removed his fingers from Kade's head.

When Surial opened his eyes, their gaze met and held for a long moment. Finally, a single tear slid down Kade's scarred cheek. Then Kade turned and walked out the gate without a word.

"Wait!" Surial called out, but the word had no effect. He trotted after the big man, grabbing onto Kade's arm, turning him. "Please, let me help you. Please."

"There are some aches that no healer can fix. It is the way of things." Kade looked at Surial, eyes serious and sad. "If you wish to help me, allow me to die."

Surial recoiled from the words, from the man who spoke them; though he couldn't escape the vile taste of the words inside him, oily and black like the wrongness he'd felt in Kade. He moved forward again, standing close to Kade, looking into his face. "I can't do that. You insist that what I can do is a gift, you're the one who has woken it back up in me -- you're going to have to accept the consequences of that and let me help you."

"I am a slave. There is no help you can give me." Kade stepped away, hands gesticulating. "Would you heal a mi'it with a broken leg though it could never run again?"

Surial stepped closer again, hands needing to stay in contact with the wounded man. He didn't know what he was doing, he was just running on instinct, but it had served him well with the horses and he would trust it now, his father and brothers be damned. "I would heal it so it could run again!"

"I will never run again!" The words were almost sobbed, Kade's hands fisted in his braids. He turned, stumbling toward the stables where he fell to his knees, vomiting violently.

Surial followed, sinking down behind Kade, leaning his forehead against the broad back as his hands moved over the scarred skin. Over Kade's heart, against his stomach, everywhere he touched he poured his healing. He still didn't know what he was doing, but it felt right and so he did it until his hands were weak and trembling, his breath coming in as if he'd been running for miles.

"You are my vakla no longer." The words slipped from between his lips, unbidden, but as soon as he spoke them, he knew they were right. Faint, weak, and empty, he sat back, landing hard on his backside.

"So, you will not allow me to die, but you would sell me to another?"

"No. No. No." Surial shook his head. The sun beat down; the sand was rough even through his clothing, abrading his palms. "I am setting you free, Kade. Stay, eat and grow well and then take Lik'ta with you and run, both of you, run with the wind. It is what you were made for, I can feel it in my hands."

Kade blinked at Surial, breath coming quick and fast. His head began to shake, eyes rolling in their sockets as his mouth moved, no sounds emitting. As Surial watched, Kade reached out his hand as if to beg for help and then simply toppled over onto the sands.

Surial pressed his hand against Kade's chest, assuring himself the man wasn't seriously hurt, and then yelled for Argent.

chapter sixteen

Cool and soft -- Kade frowned, shifting. It was what he imagined clouds felt like, like swimming but not wet. Swimming should be wet. He wanted to slip back into his dream; he had been riding through lush forests, the rain upon his face, the wind dancing and singing his name. Another rider had been with him, hidden by the trees. He had not been frightened or threatened. The stranger was a friend, someone waiting for him. Someone leading him to blue pools of fresh water.

Something was trying to pull him up, though -- a voice? A scent? He wasn't sure and he didn't care. There were mi'it in his dream. Mi'it and trees and sweet freedom. The voice continued to tickle at his consciousness, becoming harder and harder to ignore. Then the tenor of it changed, became sharp, angry.

"...Said I wasn't hungry."

"You should still come out from here, my Helan. It isn't right for you to hover over the bed of a vakla like this."

"I told you -- he isn't a slave anymore. He's a guest in my home now and you will treat him as such."

"Nevertheless he *was* a vakla. This will not sit well with the nobles, my Helan."

"Just go, Argent. I'll ring if I need you." The voice had become tired, and now was silent.

The words didn't make sense, jostling around in his brain in confusion. Vakla. Helan. Argent. Slave. Not a slave. Kade forced his eyes open, blinking dazed into the sunlight.

"You're awake!" Soft hands slid along his cheek and then the sunlight was blocked, his master's face in shadow, the sun shining through the shorn hair like a halo.

"I... I am?" His voice was raw and hoarse, his throat dry. The room swam and he closed his eyes again, swallowing.

The soft hand on his cheek was joined by another on his chest and then a warm tingle moved between them, filling him with the sensation of health. The touch disappeared. "I'll ring for Argent, have him bring you up some broth."

"Sieka?" Kade opened his eyes again, focusing more easily now. He was confused, mind content to dream and float upon waves of clouds. The sieka was pale, cheeks drawn, but his eyes looked calm, almost happy.

"You need to eat. I don't know when the last time you ate was, but you've been unconscious for three days." The sieka pulled the rope that would bring Argent and returned to the chair at his bedside. "I've been feeding you energy -- at least I think that's what I was doing -- at any rate, the bad feeling in you is gone and I was pretty sure you'd eventually wake up on your own, but I have to admit I was beginning to think I was wrong and that I'd somehow killed you."

"I do not understand." He slipped unconsciously into his native language, words pouring from him. "Where am I? I have not eaten in so many days. I dreamed that I was free and that I rode and what is this I am on? It is clouds. Did someone feed the horses and check on Lik'ta? He was singing to me. Singing to me inside my head."

"Sh, sh, it's all right. Is that your birth language? I'm sorry, but I don't understand it." His master's hands returned to his face, stroking gently, leaving behind a feeling of peace and well-being.

Kade smiled. He must be dreaming. He stretched his shoulders, the persistent ache gone, nothing but ease left behind. Dreaming, then. Stranger things had happened in dreams than this. "You look much like the Helan Banshinaree. Have you been sent by the winds to lead me into the Land of Summer? I must be close, for I have no pain."

"You can call me Surial and I guess I'm doing something right if you're not in pain." The voice was soft and gentle like the hands that stroked him.

"My Helan!" Argent's voice sounded shocked and the hands that were soothing him disappeared.

"Did you bring some broth?"

"Of course, my Helan, but you shouldn't..."

"Argent?" Kade blinked and shook his head, trying to force himself upright. This was no dream. "I'm sorry. I... I... I'm sorry."

"Sh... it's all right, Kade. Just lie back down and relax." His master's hands pushed him back into the clouds. "Do you know what he's going on about, Argent? He seems terribly confused. Help me get the pillows piled up behind him and we'll see if some food helps."

"I shall do that, my Helan." Argent's voice was tight, upset.

Kade decided to simply close his eyes instead of trying to understand. His head was raised, shoulders balanced on cool softness. He felt light -- as if he was floating.

Once he had become a man, his father would bring him into the sweatlodge with the other warriors. The smoke and the heat and the drumming and the chanting would last for days. There would be visions, visitations. Then, when the talik spoke the words, the roof would be torn off and cold, sweet water poured over them, leaving them shaky and light.

"You should go and take your rest, my Helan. I can care for him."

His clouds shifted slightly, dipping on one side and then something warm and pungent waved below his nose. "Come on, Kade, open up. You need to eat."

Kade opened his mouth, the broth falling upon his dry tongue. He kept his eyes closed through a few more bites and then his stomach began to cramp, unsure what to do with the sustenance suddenly forced upon it. He opened his eyes and looked at Argent. "No more."

Argent's eyes were cold and angry. Kade wasn't sure what he'd done, but he was too busy fighting off waves of nausea to worry about it.

There was movement and a soft sound at the door and he turned his head, finding the master coming to stand beside him. One of the sieka's hands settled on his belly and suddenly the nausea was gone. "Try some more." The sieka's eyes were soft, implacable, like his voice. "You have to eat or you won't get well."

Kade blinked and nodded, reaching with shaky hands for the spoon.

Argent batted his hand away. "Just open your mouth. No reason to make messes if we don't have to."

As the soup hit his stomach and the nutrients hit his brain, things began to swing back into focus. He was... well, he must be in the Helan's house in a room. The last thing he remembered was Lik'ta running into him and then the master and he had fought and then... He looked over at his lord, breath catching in his chest. "You... you said. I remember that you said... outside..."

His mas- the sieka nodded. "I said that that you are my vakla no longer. And that when you are strong enough to go you shall take Lik'ta with you."

The light dimmed slightly, everything going fuzzy. Free. Not a slave. Free. Free. He was free.

He could see that Argent and Surial's mouths were moving, but all Kade could hear was that he was free.

Surial was curled up in the wide chair he'd had Argent move into the guestroom where Kade was staying. There was a book in his hands, but he wasn't really reading; his mind was replaying the argument he'd had with Argent just that morning. It was the same argument they'd had since he'd freed Kade.

Argent wasn't upset that Kade was no longer a vakla, but he was upset by the way Surial was treating the big man as an equal. Surial thought it was the least he could do -- he knew better than to believe he could own another man. He should have freed Kade the moment he won the man.

Then there was this healing issue. Argent hadn't seen most of it and he'd sworn the man to silence on the whole topic. Meanwhile, he was scared, the specter of his father hanging over his shoulder, telling him he was going to be sorry he'd started this again after all the suffering and misery the whole family had been through trying to make him fit in, be normal.

He hadn't really even consciously tried to heal Kade, he just had. He laid his hands on the man and willed him to be well and Kade was.

Something caught his attention and he looked up into the pair of unfocused eyes that were watching him. "Is it a good book, my Helan?"

"I thought I asked you to call me Surial," he chided Kade gently and then stood and made his way to the side of the bed, sitting next to Kade. He reached out with his hand, laying it on Kade's chest. There was a little tiredness still there, Kade's body needing food more than anything else. Nonetheless he wished health and peace for Kade, felt the tingle in his palm, felt the drain on his own energy.

"You will make yourself ill and Argent will have me beheaded in the courtyard." Kade's smile was tentative, but honest, brown eyes warm in the sunshine. "Surial."

"He doesn't know. Nobody must know, Kade. Our secret. He just thinks I've exhausted myself with worry."

Kade nodded, eyes quiet and serious. "Our secret. I will tell no one, you have my word, but you must not make yourself ill for me. I feel very whole." The large man looked down at the sheets and then up again. "Thank you, my Helan. Surial."

"It was the least I could do." It was his turn to look away now, shame filling him. "I should have freed you from the start. I know it isn't right to keep slaves -- I have no excuse."

"It is the way of things." Kade's voice held no anger, no resentment. "You have given me a great gift. I am in your debt."

Surial shook his head. "No. I will allow you to erase my debt, but only if yours is also erased and we are even. No debts."

He smiled tentatively at Kade. Kade smiled back, the same smile he'd seen the day Lik'ta was born -- honest, warm, easy. "No debts."

Surial nodded. "Good. Good." Getting up he went to the pull and called for Argent. "Madrise has something light but nutritious for you for breakfast. You have to eat now -- no more starving yourself."

The big man had the good grace to blush as he nodded. He sat up, hands trailing over the mattress, braids falling about him in disarray. "I have never felt anything as soft as this."

"Really?" Surial pinked and returned to his chair. "No, I guess you wouldn't have."

"My people sleep in furs. They are slick, but not puffy." Kade smiled again, the corners of his eyes wrinkling. "And they're closer to the ground."

His reply was forestalled by Argent's arrival, his man bearing a large, silver tray. "I took the liberty of bringing your breakfast as well, my Helan."

"Thank you, Argent." He wasn't feeling very hungry, but he'd requested the light flour cakes and fruit, and if he didn't want another lecture from Argent regarding his treatment of Kade, he'd have to at least make the effort.

"Thank you, Argent." Kade's voice was careful, low. He tried to stand, to help pull over the side table. Surial winced and Argent gasped as the sheets slipped away from his body, leaving him bare for a heartbeat before the big hands retrieved the material.

"Maybe you should just stay put until you're feeling stronger," Surial suggested, trying to keep his amusement at Argent from his voice.

"Yes. Or at least until I find my pants." Kade sat back down, and Surial could almost see the laughter fighting to break free as Argent fixed them both with the *look*.

He plucked his plate from the tray, bringing it to his lap and hiding his own smile behind a piece of fruit. The juices were bright in his mouth and he speared a second piece. "Make sure you try the peach - these must be fresh from this morning's market -- tell Madrise she's outdone herself, Argent."

"Yes, my Helan. I will." Argent's voice was tight, strained. "Will there be anything else?" Surial hid a sigh. Argent was showing no evidence of thawing in his displeasure. The head man's position in society was determined by his employer's position and the presence of a former vakla barbarian in the main house was sure to cause an uproar with the rumor mills.

However, he owed the man, no matter that Kade did not hold him accountable, and he would not turn him out. Kade would stay until he was ready to go and Argent was just going to have to learn how to deal with it.

As Argent left, Kade looked over at Surial, face somber. "I do not mean to upset him, to upset things. Perhaps I should go. Leave your household in peace."

Surial shook his head. "Lik'ta's not ready to be on his own yet, and neither are you."

Kade had been reaching for a piece of fruit when he stopped short, eyes widening. "Lik'ta? The foal?"

"There's another Lik'ta?" he teased.

"No... no. But, what does he have to do with my leaving?" The cautious hope in those eyes was fascinating to watch.

"Well, either I've totally misunderstood the concept, or it's rather hard to share iyossi if you're not together."

"Iyo... oh!" Kade shivered, eyes growing shiny. "Oh. I... I don't..." He stopped, took a deep breath and visibly calmed himself. "A'chaffa! The winds blow in mysterious ways, do they not?"

"At least you aren't denying it anymore." Surial snagged another piece of the pale fruit and ate it, licking the juices from his fingers. "I was hoping that you'd be willing to stay on as my stable hand until Lik'ta was ready to go. I believe you will find me to be a fair employer -- I imagine Argent will vouch for me, even as annoyed as he is."

Kade nodded. "That would be a fair trade for the mi'it, also. It is often so with my people."

"As long as you will also accept food, water, and shelter as a part of your wages, it's a deal."

A quick grin flashed over the big man's face. "Can I have baths in the courtyard, too?"

Surial laughed. "All right, baths in the courtyard. And if there's anything else you should get me to agree to it now, while I'm in a good mood."

"I would like to ride with you once, as a free man." The admission, bald and simple and plain, fell between them.

"Oh..." Surial felt something curl in his belly, the words warming him. "Once Lik'ta is grown, we shall ride together. In the meantime one of your duties as stable hand will be to make sure the horses are properly exercised. Most of them can't keep up with Mon'keur, but I would be honored if you would join me on the beach with them."

"Perhaps the mi'it simply need encouragement to fly." Kade reached out and took a piece of fruit, looking at it and then putting it in his mouth and chewing.

"Not even out of your sickbed and you're challenging me and Mon'keur to races?"

Kade's eyes lowered and then shot back up. "Yes, my... Surial. I suppose I am."

Another piece of fruit was chosen and devoured.

Surial chuckled. "Good. When you are well enough we shall see how good you are with your mi'it. See if you can coax any of them into outracing my stallion."

"Your book -- is it about this place?"

Surial blinked at the change of topic. "No, actually it's an old book of legends from my h- from Sandide."

"The white city on the far side of the sea." Kade nodded. "My home is on the far side of that same sea."

"Is that where you'll go?"

Kade nodded. "I must avenge my people, my tribe. Do you have books that tell of the Naik?"

"No, I don't. I don't think there are any books about them -- I've never heard of them before."

"Oh." Kade looked slightly disappointed, but then shrugged and smiled. "I suppose that is right. We do not have books, so I suppose books should not have us."

"You said you used to read?"

"My mother could, and draw words, too. She taught me to sing her three books and to draw her name and my name and my father's name." Kade nodded to him, long legs crossing upon the bed. Surial got the feeling that somehow he was suddenly meeting someone, someone new, but strangely familiar. "It was a great magic."

"Reading and writing is magic. I love books. Well, I think I already mentioned that -- I told you about the library." Surial nodded his head at Kade's plate. "You should eat the flour cakes, too."

"My mother's books were about the sea and about food. My father was a holy man and did not think that magic should be drawn upon bookskin." Kade reached for a cake, inspecting it before eating it. "She taught me in the tents, when my father was not there to see. I have not seen that the drawing of sounds on bookskin brings evil. I think, perhaps, it reminded my father that my mother was a gift from the winds."

"A gift from the... oh, you mean she wasn't Na... Naik like you?"

Kade frowned. "She was not born of the Naik, but she was Naik when the winds took her. She was a gift, blown in from the seas."

Surial smiled. "She was special. My mother was special, too."

Kade's eyes smiled, watching him closely. "I would be honored to carry her tale."

"She was my father's second wife. Her voice was like moonlight and laughter and her eyes were never unkind." He looked down at his hands, remembering holding them against her, trying to make her stay alive. It had been the last time he'd used his magic and he'd been sent away because of it. He sighed. "I miss her."

"Does she live in the white city?"

"She's dead."

Kade nodded. "Then in that we are brothers. It is my wish your mother runs and laughs in the Land of Summer."

He smiled at that. "Maybe our mothers are friends in your Land of Summer."

"That may be. The old ones say that it is a place with no pain and only laughter. It is good to think of those who have gone singing there." Kade looked at him very seriously. "Thank you for sharing your tales. When I return to my people, I will sing them and then your mother's moon eyes will live forever."

He made sure he returned Kade's seriousness. "Thank you, Kade."

Kade motioned to the book again. "Will you draw words of my mother, for your people?"

"I can write about her, Kade, but I'm not a writer that other people read. Our ways are... different from yours."

Kade nodded, the movement definitive and enthusiastic. "Yes."

Surial chuckled. "There are differences even between the people of Sandide and Azize, though they are more similar than your Naik seem to be." He tilted his head. "Perhaps one day I will travel to see you and write about your people."

Kade nodded. "I have been gone for many moons, many seasons. It will be a hard journey. I do not know the way I came. I was hoping one of your books told the way home to the tribelands."

"Well, I have maps -- you said your tribal lands were on the other side of the sea -- I'm sure we can figure out where they are based on what you do know." Surial got up and put his plate on the tray Argent had left. "We'll find it, Kade."

Kade added his half-full plate to the tray and scooted to the edge of the bed. "Are my pants nearby?"

"I'll have Argent bring you up a couple of clean pairs. In the meantime you're supposed to be staying in bed until you're strong enough."

"Yes, but if I stay here I will foul the bedding and Argent would not thank me for waving myself before the serving girls." Kade's grin was wicked, playful, fierce.

Startled, Surial laughed merrily. "There's a chamber pot at the foot of the bed. Leave it there when you're done with it -- it will be emptied when the tray is collected. And I'll go, so you don't wave at me either."

He gave Kade a wink, still chuckling as he left.

He prowled the halls, the ceiling growing heavier and more ominous with every passing moment. He'd wanted to go see the mi'it -- he'd looked out the large glass in his room and seen Lik'ta in the paddock playing. He'd called out to him and Lik'ta had stopped, shivered, looked up, and whinnied. He'd made the foal wait long enough.

Kade thought he knew which way the doors were, which way the sun was, but Surial's house was like a warren -- hallways leading into hallways. Every door looked the same and there were no stairs and no windows. When he'd turned to find his way back to the room he'd left, he'd ended up somehow deeper into the house than when he'd started. He chuckled, the sound dripping with panic. After all this time, he was a free man

and he was going to die lost in this house.

A door ahead of him opened and Surial came out, shorn head bent as he read, two more books tucked under one arm. He turned without looking up, walking slowly down the hall in the opposite direction.

"There's no way out that direction. I've been looking." His voice sounded nervous and just slightly desperate to his own ears.

Surial started, dropping the two books under his arm and nearly losing the one he was reading. He turned, surprise turning into a smile on the thin face. "Kade. Good morning. What are you doing up and about?"

"Trying to find the stairs." He felt his cheeks heat, but he refused to drop Surial's gaze. Warriors did not get embarrassed. "I saw the mi'it from the window and wanted to go see them. This house did not agree that my idea was a good one."

Surial chuckled. "It is a bit of a maze -- they're all built like this here, though, something about keeping the heat out." Surial bent and picked up the books he'd dropped. "I guess if you're well enough to be wandering around, you might as well go see the horses. Not that I'm asking you to go back to work until you feel up to it, but the horses haven't been the same without you. Lik'ta especially has been unhappy -- I don't think I've ever seen an unhappy colt before." Surial went to the first door on the left and opened it. "Here's your room, so why don't we start from here and then next time you'll know how to get there on your own."

Kade shook his head in utter disgust at himself. His tribe had children who could track better than that. "I believe I should return to the stables. At least there I can find my own head and the sun."

"It's easy enough once you know -- you were unconscious when we brought you in so you never got a chance to notice the landmarks." Surial pointed to the painting across the hall from Kade's room. There was water in the foreground, crashing against cliffs that rose to the top of the painting. "Those are the cliffs of my childhood. I can remember climbing them as long as I can remember being able to walk."

Kade wandered over, looking at the painting. It was as if someone had stolen part of the sea and land and forced it into stillness -- like a memory, but without sound or smell. "Are they still there, these cliffs?"

"They were the last things I saw when I left my home eight years ago. The wind carried my tears and my hair to them." Surial spoke softly, almost as if to himself. "Yes, they're still there. When I look out over the sea, I can almost see them."

Kade looked at the cliffs, trying to understand the sorrow here. This man was not a vakla, not a prisoner. Why did he not return to this place, to these cliffs where the water was still and silent? Suddenly the ceiling seemed so heavy, pressing down and keeping them close and caught. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps once you become used to ceilings and sand and still, you no longer know how to find your way back. The thought made him shudder.

"Can you show me the way outside?"

"Are you sure you're feeling up to it?" Surial must have read his answer in his eyes, for his former master nodded and then pointed to the painting again. "All right, so the cliffs are across from your bedroom and you take a right and you want the second door on your left -- see here's this ugly little table -- I tell you the people of Azize are into all this gaudy, awful stuff."

The sieka placed his books upon the table, chatter continuing unabated. "Anyway, so this table's just beside the door to the back stairs, which will take you to the kitchen, or, if you go straight at the bottom of them,

out to the courtyard." Surial pushed open the door. "You can also tell which doors lead to stairs because they don't have handles -- they can be pushed open from either side, so if you have things in your hands, you don't have to put them down."

The scent of something warm and yeasty filled the stairwell and there was a set of stairs leading upward as well as down. Surial headed down ahead of him. Kade followed, filing away the hints and signs that the sieka shared with him. He was slightly shaky by the time they reached the bottom, legs that had spent many days abed protesting their use.

"Something smells good. Madrise must be smiling."

Surial chuckled. "She does have a way of baking her moods into her food, doesn't she?" Surial looked at him closely. "Are you sure you are well enough for this?"

"Yes." Kade nodded, forced himself to straighten and still. "After all, we cannot leave an unhappy colt. The winds would blow ill."

Surial grinned, the look pleased. "Ah, yes. Lik'ta. Now that you've accepted the iyossi, you're anxious for it, eh?"

The sieka drew near and placed his hand on Kade's chest and Kade could feel the tingle of energy and strength passing to him.

"Oh." Kade closed his eyes, his heart, his legs, he felt so strong, so young. "Oh, thank you. Do not tire yourself, yes? Remember?" He opened his eyes with a grin. "And yes, Lik'ta sings to me."

Surial smiled and stepped back. "Well, all I'm going to do is sit and watch; you need your strength to avoid a repeat of the other day."

Surial began to walk down the corridor. "The kitchen is back that way." They turned a corner. "And now you should recognize where we are -- that's the door to the courtyard just ahead."

"Oh, yes." Kade nodded. "This door I know."

He followed Surial. He was going outside. Outside. As a free man. Outside in the sun as a free man. He'd never been so scared and so ready to open a door in his life. Surial's hand was on the handle, turning it, pulling the door open, and the sun shone in, throwing a rectangle of light onto the floor. He could see Surial's lips moving, but couldn't hear what the man was saying, but an 'after you' hand gesture made it clear Surial was waiting for him to go out first.

Kade took a deep breath and stepped forward. He would not lose this; he would not become a prisoner to ceilings and sand. He would not lose the sun and wind and Lik'ta. He was a Guardian, a warrior, a free man. The sun felt warm and good upon his face, his chest.

"Always the same -- it will be too hot in an hour, good thing I ran into you when I did, eh?" Surial walked past him, heading toward the stables. "Ay! That water is for the flowers, not the wall behind them," Surial called out, chastising two boys with buckets.

Kade wandered through the courtyard behind Surial. The sand on his feet was slick and hot, the air smelled of plants and the sea. He could hear people talking on the street, past the gate -- chattering and laughing and bartering. The wind was blowing.

They came to the paddock, Surial climbing up and sitting on the fence. "I've let Grandam and Lik'ta have the run of the yard for the last few days. Argent's had a boy in to curry and feed the rest of them, but your knowing hand is missed."

Kade nodded absently, moving through the gate. Lik'ta and Grandam were across the field, grazing, the little colt prancing and playing. Kade called to the foal, heart stopping as the liquid dark eyes saw him. Lik'ta whinnied and reared, hooves shining in the sunlight before barreling across the pasture. Kade shook his head and reached out his hand, calling out. "Kama'asi, mi'it. Kama'asi."

Lik'ta stopped short before Kade, stomping and snorting. His song was hurt and angry, full of whys and grass and tired of waiting and knowing they shared a song and whywhywhy. Kade knelt and ran his hand over the baby's nose, crooning, whispering apologies and simple explanations of pain and loss and fear. Then, as Lik'ta relaxed, Kade began to sing of the foal's fine coat and slender legs and so-bright eyes. He sang of the wind in Lik'ta's mane and how they would travel far into the mountains and the trees. The colt was pleased, beginning to press his muzzle into Kade's neck, nose and lips soft and cool against his skin. Soft snorts and neighs filled the air, joining his song, the hurt and anger gone as their songs joined together.

He lost himself within Lik'ta songs, the baby pushing inside his mind and playing there, easing aches he had held since Muk fell. It was so familiar and yet different, this baby full of laughter and mischief, where Muk was born from a hunter's line, silent and focused. Lik'ta finally backed away, eyes bright and happy. He danced away toward his mother, running a distance and then stopping short, turning and running back to Kade and nuzzling close. The foal repeated himself a half-dozen times before he managed to reach Grandam to nurse.

"He's not going to want to let you out of his sight."

"He has been very patient and very sure." Kade stood, brushing off his knees, eyes on the smooth shine of Lik'ta's coat. "He is beautiful, is he not?"

Surial chuckled. "You don't think you're a little biased about that, do you?" Another chuckle. "Yes, he's beautiful."

"He is here because of your hand, because of your kindness." Kade smiled as the wind blew his braids across his face. "He deserves his name."

The chuckle turned into a laugh. "He's here because of your stubbornness, Kade. Your perseverance and insistence that he be saved."

"It seems I have not forgotten how to listen to the winds, after all." Kade smiled and lifted his face to the sun.

"My Helan?" Argent's voice interrupted the quiet.

"Yes, Argent?"

"I've brought you a chair to sit in -- the fence cannot be comfortable." The censure was clear in the servant's tone and Surial's chuckle told Kade that the master had heard it as well.

"You take such good care of me, Argent."

Kade looked over at Argent with a smile. "Di'ben sud, Argent. Bright blessings."

"Yes. Well it's good to see you're better." Argent was fussing over Surial, putting a turban over his head, hiding the short, uneven hair and draping the overlap over Surial's neck, protecting him from the sun, handing him a glass of pale liquid. "If you want something to drink, Madrise will be happy to serve you in the kitchen, Kade."

"Don't be rude, Argent."

"I'm sorry, my Helan. Maybe you can clear up for me whether Kade is your stable hand or your guest, so the other servants and I know what behavior is expected."

Kade flushed hot. The clouds were moving quick along the sky, the winds blowing the sands over his feet. "I require no one to serve me, Argent."

Lik'ta called to him, hurrying over and nickering, the sound worried. "Kama'asi, Lik'ta. All is well."

"Kade has agreed to become my stable hand until he and Lik'ta are ready to leave. He's in charge of the stables and the horses. I still expect you to be polite to him, Argent."

"Yes, my Helan. Will he be dining in the kitchen with the rest of the staff?"

Kade shook his head, heart sinking between his ankles.

"As opposed to what, in the stables?" Surial snorted. "That worked so well before, didn't it? He can eat in the kitchens or in his room. I thought you liked Kade, Argent. I don't understand this sudden hostility toward him now that he's no longer a vakla."

Argent stood silent and Kade patted Lik'ta on the flank. "I should go and see to the mi'it, my Helan."

"Fine." Surial's voice was short and clipped as he stood, the fine accent all but hidden. "You two have your little melodrama, I've got places to be."

"Thank you for showing me the way to Lik'ta." Surial didn't answer, already on his way back to the house, back rigid. "I will not bother you, Argent. I will leave the house and stay in the stables." Kade turned and looked at Argent. "I have not intended any harm, to you or to the sieka."

"I don't mean to be rude, Kade. You're a good man and I myself have wished you were not a vakla. But by freeing you and bringing you into the house, the Helan has turned the order of things on its head." Argent sighed. "You are welcome to take your meals in the house and the Helan has granted you a room -- do not be so quick to turn away his hospitality."

Lik'ta nudged his hand, looking for treats and comfort. Kade rubbed the velvety nose and looked toward the stables. Mon'keur and the others would be hungry and needing grooming. "I will attempt to not disturb things any further, Argent."

"Thank you. And I hope you don't make yourself a stranger -- the girls are quite taken with you." Argent took a step back and then stopped. "There is juice and water in the kitchen, both nice and cold and anytime you are hungry, Madrise always has food available. But you know this. I hope you will be more willing to partake of it now; the Helan will be upset if you continue not to eat."

"Thank you. I should get to the stables and work. I have spent too long abed." Kade patted his hip and whistled for Grandam. Lik'ta bounced along beside him, trilling, little voice happy.

chapter seventeen

It had been several days since Kade had returned to the stables and Surial was trying not to take it personally that the man preferred the stables to his hospitality. *He was your vakla; of course he doesn't want to live under your roof.*

Still, he'd been thinking perhaps they could be friends, but it looked like the man had more in common with Argent, who was put out and upset over the whole freeing thing, than with Surial himself.

He was lonely. The house seemed overlarge and he was rattling around in it with very little to do. Waiting for word from Sandide. Would Erulial cut him off completely or try to wear him down? Or was he to be ignored until an apology came from him? If that was the case, Erulial would have a long time to wait. Surial was no longer the boy who'd huddled behind his mother's skirts and mumbled the apology demanded by Father for whatever perceived slight he'd inflicted upon his brutish brother.

His angry musings were interrupted by Argent, the man's soft knock heralding his presence. "Sieki Osine wishes to speak with you."

Surial sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Is she alone?"

"Yes, my Helan."

"Put her in the front room and offer her a beverage. I'll be with her shortly." At least with the break between himself and Erulial, his older brother would not be forcing him to marry. It had been a close call; luckily the negotiations had not begun in earnest before his fainting spell had put an end to their last meeting.

He smoothed down his clothing, wishing for his simple, loose Sandide whites; he felt more exposed in the close-fitting breeches and bright silk blouse. At least his turban was plain and he slid it atop his head, making sure his shorn hair was hidden.

Entering the bright room, he offered Sieki Osine a bow, noting that his own clothing was quite plain in comparison to her gilded lily. "My lady, I am at your service."

"My Sieka Banshinaree." Her voice was cool and calm, but still irritating where it landed against his skin. "I am sorry for intruding unannounced, but rumor is that you have recovered from your illness and I wanted to assure that my future son was being well-cared for by his staff."

"I thank you for your concern, Sieki, misplaced though it is." He kept his smile polite, his words distant. He sat, leaning casually against the back of the chair as if he hadn't a care in the world; it would be too easy to let her get the upper hand, he had to play it cool.

"Misplaced? Oh, I think not. Your brother mentioned that your constitution was weak. Aylia is, even as we speak, training with one of the healers to learn to care for you." Her smile widened. Surial imagined she was trying for concern, but the effect was greedy. "Many men have found marriage good for their health."

There was no delicate way to put it, and Sieki Osine would interpret anything but the bald truth to her own advantage. He took a deep breath and plunged in. "I'm afraid that it is in the matter of marriage that you are mistaken. I will not be your son-in-law. Erulial did not realize that I was earnest in my wish not to marry. He has been corrected. It is not Aylia, I am sure she will make someone a wonderful bride, but I will not be marrying."

Her smile faded. "Sieka, there have been promises, arrangements. My daughter will be shamed. Perhaps your illness has affected you more strongly than you imagine."

"No promises were made, Sieki. A few negotiations had begun and certainly neither I nor my brother advertised this fact, the Banshinaree are nothing if not discreet."

"Regardless, arrangements have been made, and my daughter is preparing for her life as your wife." It was amazing -- Osine's cheeks turned almost purple in her fury.

"Then she is preparing for a life that is not hers and you would both be better served finding another suitor." He kept his voice flat, hard; he had stood up to his brother, believing he would die, he was not going to let this petty noblewoman force him into a life he could not live.

"My dear Sieka Banshinaree, it is a dangerous and ignoble thing to cause a young girl and her family such disgrace. Perhaps I should allow you more rest, time to recover so that you might avoid such a misstep."

It was tempting, to put this off, to let her believe that his answer would be different tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that, but it would weigh heavily, knowing that this confrontation was eventually going to rear its head once again. "Madame, I assure you that I am quite well. And I remind you that neither my brother nor I have mentioned this to anyone -- any disgrace that might come to you or your daughter is surely of your own doing. No promises were made. Nothing but the flimsiest of negotiations took place and you certainly bided your time, coming to me." He drew himself together and stood. "There is nothing to be gained by continuing this conversation. There will be no marriage."

The woman stood, mouth working, hands clenched at her sides. "You... you will be sorry for this insult. I am not without ability."

"I do not mean it to be an insult, Sieki Osine. Believe me -- while a marriage to me might appear to be a boon to your family, it would not be a good thing for your daughter. I don't fit into this world, Sieki -- not in the ways that your daughter deserves."

"I will allow you time to reconsider, or you will come to understand how little an outsider can fit into the sands of Azize. Good day." With a sniff, she stormed out, Argent only just able to open the door before her.

He took in a deep breath and held it for a moent before letting it out and sinking back onto the chair. He was shaking, as much from the confrontation as from the threat. Her perfume lingered in the air, cloying and falsely sweet, like the woman herself. He stood and strode from the room, heading quickly outside.

The sun was bright, but the wind felt good upon his skin, the flowers around the house clearing his head. He heard warm laughter coming from the paddock, Kade's deep voice sounding happy and pleased and more relaxed than Surial had heard it before. He headed toward the sound, breathing in deep breaths of the hot air in an effort to control his shaking.

Kade was dressed only in breeches, draped over Y'lis back as she trotted. Lik'ta was gamboling behind, looking for all the world like he was trying to snag Kade's braids. Laughter and happy whinnies filled the

air. Both Grandam and Mon'keur were watching and nodding their heads.

He smiled and made his way over to Mon'keur, burying his face in the horse's mane, his hands stroking over the big, warm muscles. Mon'keur nickered happily, butting Surial with his huge head. The horse lifted his nose towards Kade and Y'lis and the colt, as if to share his amusement.

"Yes, Mon'keur. I see." He closed his eyes, burying his face again, wishing the complications of his life away. If he had the strength he would walk away from it all right now, but he could not abandon Argent, or Madrise, or Kade. They needed him. Mon'keur began making a soft, trilling noise. It was familiar and comforting and relaxing. Surial rested against Mon'keur for a long moment, gradually realizing that the noise and laughter had faded into silence.

Kade was brushing Y'lis and Grandam, Lik'ta nursing. They were all quite obviously giving him his privacy. He let the quiet and the peace fill him. At length he shifted, petting Mon'keur instead of clinging to the big horse.

"Everything well in the stables?" he asked, going for a casual tone.

"Yes, my Helan. One of your mares is in cycle and visiting a neighboring stud and both three-year-olds are taking well to the saddle." Kade smiled at him, the expression honest and seeming pleased. "We have missed your company."

"I've missed yours." The words were true. He was surrounded by people in the house, but there was a space between himself and them, the other's taking their lead from Argent; one did not mix with one's 'betters'. Kade seemed to have no such inhibitions. Perhaps it was just that Kade had not been brought up in a world where one man was held up higher than another.

"Well, then, it is a blessing that the winds drove you from the house." Kade's fingers braided a dark mane into an intricate pattern of hair, carefully working tiny colored beads into the weave.

"It was no blessing that drove me from the house." He shook his head, blinking and turning his attention from the wide hands and thick fingers that were far more graceful than they should have been.

"Oh. That woman seemed... ill-sent." Kade moved to Grandam, working another pattern in her mane.

"You could say that, yes. For some reason she wants me to marry her daughter. Have you ever been married, Kade? Before..." His voice faded away, unsure of how Kade would feel about calling up his past.

"I had a mate, a wife. She lived within my hearth." Kade smiled over. "The Naik ways are different than your ways, I believe."

He grinned in return. "I should think so -- I have a whole passel of servants living in my hearth and I am not married to any of them."

Kade chuckled as he nodded. "No, you are not. For the Naik, only the warriors' hearths take a share of the food, so the warriors take in the others -- my hearth held my mother, my father, my mate, and a keeper of the ta'akto."

"Ta ak... ta ak to?" He spoke the word carefully, trying to capture the guttural sounds and pronounce them correctly.

"Yes, ta'akto." Kade absently handed Lik'ta a sieba piece, moving to perch upon the fence. Surial noticed the

long braids were now fastened by multicolored ties instead of beige string. "Birds of prey -- wings of gold and black. My Windbrother raised them, gentled them."

"Why would you raise birds of prey? For hunting?" A soft shudder went through Surial.

"They can hunt, but they usually eat their own kills. They are tribal guards. They ride with Guardians and watch the tribelands from the skies." Kade looked up toward the sun. "They are loyal to their nesting grounds, to their hi'icha."

"Hi-i-cha?" He chuckled. "You're going to wind up teaching me your language at this rate. It isn't like anything I've ever heard before."

"Oh. I... there are words that seem so much more simple in my tongue. A hi'icha is a Guardian warrior." He pointed to the talon scars on his chest. "They live to protect their tribe."

What happened? The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he held them back. He had a hunch Kade wasn't ready to share that with him yet. He doubted he was worthy of the knowledge; he hadn't exactly treated the man with honor. He sighed. From guardian warrior who lived to protect his tribe to slave. It was a wonder that Kade had survived. Another question he couldn't ask.

Kade chuckled as Lik'ta wandered up to him, nudging and nickering. The big man reached down, stroking the dark muzzle with a gentle hand. "All is well, mi'it. The winds blow fierce and sweet."

Surial felt soft longing going through him again. He didn't wish for this man's pain, but to find pleasure in such simple things, to be allowed that... "So the iyossi seems to be going well."

"Yes. Lik'ta is a fine mi'it." Kade's gaze flashed over at him. "We should ride. Leave the weights of duty here where they will wait to be reclaimed."

Surial looked at Mon'keur whose head nodded, nostrils flaring, as if he could taste the sea air already. "All right. It has been too long since I've raced the waves."

"It is not the waves that he will have to keep up with, eh, Y'lis?" Kade jumped down, a wide grin upon his scarred face. "Shall I saddle Mon'keur for you?"

"Yes, though I will be checking your work -- if we're to race." Excitement flowed through him. "I'm going to go change this blouse for something less likely to catch the wind and slow us down."

"Skin catches least of all, my friend. Although, I do not believe the sun is as easy upon yours as it is on mine." Kade winked. "I will await your pleasure in the barn. Mon'keur, Y'lis! Come now, let us prepare to meet the winds."

A soft smile quirked his lips as he watched them go, Kade's good mood infectious.

Perhaps he would exchange his blouse for skin at that.

chapter eighteen

Kade chuckled as a tiny, dark-haired girl ran screaming around the corner, hands full of silver and blue ribbons, chased by her older brother who appeared to have become very good friends with Madrise's berry tarts.

The threat of stains imminent, he rescued the stack of linens that he was carrying in for Aza -- the poor girl looked as if the full moon had come to live in her belly. Kade had a ten whelani bet with Argent as to whether she whelped twins.

The entire household was in an uproar, children and staff spilling over, decorating and cooking and planning and gift-hiding on the tongues of everyone. It reminded him of a Gathering of the Tribes -- families and laughter and music and anticipation filling every corner he visited.

"Silva, young one. You will fall if you run so." Kade grinned, shaking his head at her happy grin and nodding as the tiny feet pattered off again, running her directly into Aza.

"Child, you knock this baby free before the festival and our Helan will have your head." Aza grinned down, Silva patting Aza's swollen belly and hurrying off.

"Babies, Aza. Mark me, there will be more than one to bless the world."

"Oh, bless us, Kade, I hope not. I love babies, but one at a time is more than enough." She chuckled and gave him a conspiratorial grin. "Now if you've an in with anyone -- a boy would be a blessing -- for my old father, yes?" She laughed, hand rubbing along the side of her belly. "One or two babies, girl or boy, this one's going to be a real runner -- kicking their mother day and night."

"It is a blessing to have active children. I look forward to meeting them." Kade grinned, waiting until the voice traveling down the hall took form and Argent appeared to continue. "Both of them."

Argent chuckled and shook his head. "I should be ashamed, taking money from a man who has very little. Aza has always had large babies. One at a time." The smile was replaced by a stern face, though the blue eyes twinkled. "Now get back to work -- if we aren't ready in time I will blame the two of you for dawdling."

"No. There should be none of this 'dawdling.'" Kade shook his head and grinned. Over the past weeks, Argent had thawed, due in equal parts to Kade's patience and the rather loud insistence of a certain mate, who made her position on Kade exceedingly clear. If Kade remembered correctly, there had even been a rather dangerous three-night period where Argent was reported sleeping on the divan in one of the small sitting rooms.

"Are you all ready, then?" Argent asked him. "Stables and horses cleaned and polished and shining? All your gifts in order?" Argent shook his head and he raised his voice loud enough that the children rushing along might hear him. "Not that you had to get gifts, certainly none of these young thugs deserve any!"

Kade snorted and tossed his head. "The mi'it and their home are clean and settled as always, my friend Argent. And the gifts are in order." Hidden in the stables were dozens of tiny toys -- animals and bird and fish -- carved from the low, thick, woody trees. For the women there were beads and mead for the men. For Argent he had traded a handful of figurines for a new woven bag. Surial's gift was up in the loft, carefully wrapped and hidden.

Argent smiled and put a hand on his arm, taking him aside and speaking in low tones. "I know I explained that this is a special celebration for the household. I do hope I emphasized what it means to the Helan. I can help if you have not been able to find something for him..." Argent managed to look anxious and apologetic at once.

"I have a fitting gift for the Helan. We, my people, too have gatherings, sharings. Helan Surial has given me Lik'ta, my freedom. My gift is one that will bring him honor."

Argent patted his arm and smiled. "Thank you, Kade. The Helan was quite young when he came to us. When it comes to the Lunas Festival he becomes again that boy. He would never demand gifts, but I have never seen him smile as much as when he receives as many as he gives out."

"I will not give him cause to frown, you have my word." Kade arched an eyebrow as Argent's name was screeched, Madrise's voice carrying from the kitchen. "You are being summoned yet again, my friend." Another name, in another exasperated voice came from upstairs. "As am I. Fresh linens cannot wait for man or talk."

Kade winked and headed up the dark stairs, forcing himself not to look up, the ceiling close. Something barreled into him, sending the top half of the linens flying; he managed to keep the other half in one arm, even as his hand shot out to steady whatever urchin had run into him. The teasing remark died on his lips as he looked into forest green eyes. "Helan! Pardon me, I did not see you."

"Nor I you." Surial's eyes held amusement and no small amount of excitement. It occurred to Kade that the man looked younger than he'd ever seen him, the hard edges worn off by excitement.

Kade smiled and bent to retrieve the linens. "You look toward the celebration, Helan Surial? The preparations please you?"

"The preparations are simply torture. I always think there's absolutely no way I'll make it to the day of the feast, but somehow I always do."

Kade chuckled. "What is your favorite part of the feast? I have heard the children telling me about the pastries for days."

"Oh, yes, the food is wonderful -- so many sweet things! But there's also presents and dancing and singing." Surial tilted his head and his eyes grew faraway, dreamy. "When I was a boy my mother would dance with me and then my father would laugh and say I was doing it all wrong and I would put my feet on his and he would walk me through the steps."

"I danced once or twice, many moons ago." Kade smiled, remembering years of Gatherings -- drums and feathered costumes and dancing with the other warriors, the stories of their battles and victories painted into their skin.

"Then it is well past time that you danced again. I am sure you will not be lacking in partners."

"Partners?" Kade frowned, still lost inside firelit memories. "Oh, no. I do not think I will dance. I am old and leave those things for younger men, my friend."

Surial looked wistful. "It has been a long time since I have danced. I suppose I too am too old, though Argent still manages to impress his grandchildren."

"You? You are still a very young man, Helan. You cannot fool me with your frowns and your grumbles. I can see your eyes." He waited for the indignant gasp and then winked, winning a laugh from the young sieka.

"It must be that I am not old enough. Madrise will dance with me, as will Argent's wife, but otherwise I am the Helan and am relegated to simply watching the dancers." Surial gave another small laugh and waved his hands. "Still, I get presents from everyone so I suppose that makes up for it!"

"From everyone? Even the little ones? What? Sweet kisses and paintings of mi'it in the grass?"

"Oh, they make me the most wonderful things. Crowns and ribbons and moon faces." Surial's face grew wistful once more. "I used to make the most elaborate moon faces for my mother..."

"You hand me those fallen linens, my friend, and I'll guarantee the children give you more moon faces than any man could want."

Surial handed the linens over with a small smile. "And will you make me one yourself?"

"How could I refuse, my friend?" He nodded, face serious. "A moon face to better the brightest three-year-old at the feast."

Surial chuckled. Kade couldn't help but notice that the man seemed happy and carefree. "I shall hold you to that," he warned.

"I would be disappointed if you did not." Kade gave a slight half-bow, balancing the linens carefully. "I am most grateful, my friend. For the help and the invitation to the feast."

"It is the feast for my lady the moon. My entire household is invited to celebrate her day with me." Surial grinned and nodded his head up the stairs. "You'd best get those to Aza before she comes looking for you."

He let his eyes widen dramatically. "Anything but that. Not even a Guardian would risk the wrath of a woman about to whelp."

Surial laughed and petted his arm. His Helan's hand was gentle, sliding warmly against his skin. "I need to check in with Argent myself; the man is relentless until the feast is upon us."

"And what do you call it after the feast?"

Surial's answer was forestalled by the sound of Argent's raised voice. They couldn't make out the words, but he didn't sound happy. Surial laughed again, hand sliding a final time against his arm, and then the man was heading down the stairs.

Kade watched for a moment, noting that pleasure dissolved the stiffness and dissatisfaction in the lines of the lord's spine. Then Aza called for her linens and Kade hurried off.

Argent never let them start before sundown. Surial could remember the first year he'd been here. They had never heard of the Moon Festival. He had just assumed that everyone celebrated it and had been devastated, at fifteen, to learn that it did not exist in Azize. Well, it did now, even if just in the Banshinaree home.

It had been Argent who had written to his father and asked what this moon festival might be. If he had realized that the manservant was going to hold the celebration here, he would have told Argent all about it himself. Then they would have started mid-afternoon at the latest. Possibly even before noon. Of course sundown made sense for a moon festival, but this was one event that never failed to turn him into a child again, full of warm memories of dancing with his mother and father, the gifts, celebrating the moon's sweet light.

The waiting always made him crazed.

All of the children were dressed in whites and silvers, the adults in grays and pale rose. Ribbons and feathers and bows and laces were all touted and worn with pride -- from the oldest grandmother to the tiny, smiling face of Argent's newest granddaughter. With the addition of fat, pale lanterns in the courtyard, everything looked as if it was glowing. The long tables were dipping with the weight of the food, heavy white linens embroidered with silver thread. The moon faces were pasted everywhere, shining and sparkling -- the face of his lady was all around.

Finally, best of all, the Lady Moon herself appeared, full and bright, blessing the courtyard with her cool light.

He sat at the head of the long table Argent had set up in the courtyard, knocking his spoon against his plate to get everyone's attention. When everyone went quiet, turning to look at him, he smiled. This was his family, had been for years now, though it had taken Erulial's visit to really make him aware of it.

"I know you're all eager to begin the feast, so I will not be long. It is hard to believe a full year has passed since we last celebrated the Lady's presence among us, but here we are again, feasting in her honor.

"There are new faces at my table. Mostly little ones, but one or two older ones as well. Welcome."

He made a point of looking at each one. Argent had two new granddaughters and Madrise a grandson. Madrise's daughter had married a man who worked for another noble, but he would celebrate with them this night. And there was Kade.

Kade's bright copper braids were tied back with a silver cord, dozens and dozens of white beads worked at the end of each one. The huge man was dressed simply in pale trousers and white vest. The tan skin made the cloth glow, brought out the pale scars on chest and cheeks. He looked like a warrior meant to stand guard for the Lady.

He let the welcome linger a moment longer than he'd meant and then he pulled himself back, arms up and opening. "Later there will be gifts and games and dancing. Now there is food. Eat."

The happy crow from the children almost drowned out the clatter of silver against china as the adults served up the treats. Bowl after bowl of delicacies -- greens and legumes and sweet tubers, honeyed grains and spicy concoctions and waxy, chopped fruits -- were enjoyed by all. There was no complaint about the lack of meat, only honest enjoyment. Each person had their favorite and Madrise prepared them all. Only Kade seemed somewhat unenthusiastic, eating slow and steady.

Surial was too excited to eat himself and he nibbled at a bowl of berries, his eyes returning again and again to Kade. He hoped the festival didn't violate some rule or ritual of Kade's origins. Kade's eyes met his and

the big man smiled, nodded at him. The honeyed gaze held his until a tiny girl tugged hard on the big man's braids, demanding to be picked up and held. It made him smile to watch the former vakla pick the girl up, giving her his full attention as she gave him a moon-face, chattering just as quickly as she could.

Silently, he wished he'd freed the man right away. It was proof he had spent too many years among the people of Azize that it had taken him so long to make it right.

One of Argent's daughters, still young and fresh-faced, came to stand beside Kade, speaking animatedly to the big man. As Surial watched, the children came and each took their turn on the wide lap, playing with the long braids, each taking comfort and peace from Kade's smile.

"He is a good man, my Helan." Daor smiled at him, offering a crystal decanter of wine. "The children adore him."

"My mother always said that you could tell a man's true colors by how children and horses reacted to him. I would say that he is a very good man."

He poured himself a glass of the light wine and snagged a honeyed cake from a tray as it went by, smiling at the child who giggled at him as she took one for herself. She was one of Argent's grandbabies. The man certainly had surrounded himself with women. The food was eaten and enjoyed all around, laughter filling the air. The children were sharing huge bowls of pudding, spoons waving through the air, soft maternal eyes letting them play on this special night.

It had been years since he had been disappointed that the nobles of Azize did not share this celebration, for it had allowed it to become the family festival it had been as he was growing up. This year, as never before, this was made apparent to him. These people were his family now, more than ever, but not just now, they had been all along, taking a lonely, scared boy under their wings and looking out for him.

He took a long drink of his wine and shook his head at himself. He was as sentimental as an old grandmother.

Kade and Argent had pushed away from the table, Argent smoking his thin pipe. The older man offered Kade a puff, but he wrinkled his nose and shook his head. They were discussing something animatedly, Argent laughing and waving his hands.

A sudden sadness filled him as he realized that they had all broken into little groups, talking and laughing together as they nibbled just a little bit more or drank the last of their wine or juice. He alone sat without a companion, the lord at the head of the table.

"My Helan Surial?" A low voice carried in the wind. When he looked up, Kade's eyes were focused on him, smiling and friendly. "Come and settle an argument for us?"

His melancholy fled, leaving behind his earlier happiness and excitement and the sense of belonging, of being with his family. He stood and went to them, smiling as the young girl sitting next to Kade slipped into the big lap, freeing her chair for him. "And what is it the two of you are arguing about?"

"The strength of these tiny desert mi'it compared to the stronger horses across the sea." Kade tucked the child into the crook of his arm easily, eyes smiling over.

He smiled back, warmth filling him. "You should know where I will lie on this one. I challenge any desert horse to outlast my Mon'keur."

Argent's snorted. "You cannot base your argument on a single mount, my Helan."

"The Helan's Mon'keur is a fine specimen, but not uncommon." Kade winked and grinned. "I have seen many mi'it that can leap streams."

Surial leapt to the defense of his horse. "My Mon'keur is the finest mount on this or any other side of the sea!"

"My Muk would have made Mon'keur hang his head in shame, my friend."

"You have proven yourself to be an honest man, Kade, but I believe you are in error. Our memories have a habit of playing tricks on us, making those who are no longer with us more than they were."

Kade snorted, hand moving through the long braids. "You have never seen the great tribal herds, my friend. They would steal your breath with their beauty."

"I would like to see them, compare them to the wild horses I saw run in the valley the year I was four and was found by Mon'keur. He was young then."

"He traveled here in a boat, then?" The child in Kade's arms had fallen asleep, one little hand curled in one of the bright braids.

Surial nodded. "My only companion. Well, and my Rowan." He grew sad at the thought of Chedar who had enjoyed this festival almost as much as he himself did. This was the first year he was not here to celebrate the festival with them.

Argent took a long puff of his pipe. "Until he arrived here. We were waiting for our Helan."

Kade smiled at Argent. "It is a lucky man who is wanted."

Surial chuckled, melancholy fading as quickly as it had come. "I don't believe you were quite expecting the boy you got, though, were you?"

"I don't believe anyone has ever quite expected you, my friend." Kade's words were met by a gasp from Argent, but the eyes that met his were laughing and warm.

He found himself responding to the warm look with a smile of his own. "Even my mother wasn't expecting me," he admitted.

"Some of the most wonderful parts of life are surprises."

He nodded his agreement. "Like the Moon Festival presents."

Kade chuckled and Argent laughed straight out. "Yes, my Helan. Just like."

He grinned at the two men. "I think we've made the children wait long enough, don't you? It would be cruel to continue to hold the presents out of their reach."

"Ah, you are a most generous man, Helan Surial." Kade's eyes laughed as the whispers of 'presents' zipped through the crowd, the entire group settling around.

"Oh, I am." He found himself grinning at Kade, happy to smile at the man rather than look for the presents.

The rumbling of the children didn't let him forget, though. "Would you like to play moon's consort this night and give out the gifts?" he asked Kade.

The scarred cheeks darkened. "I would be honored, my Helan."

"Then let's get you set up in the chair by the mountain of gifts." Surial nodded toward the area where they had each brought their gifts for the others.

He couldn't help the bounce in his step as he led the way to the chair where Kade would sit. It was decorated with silver ribbons and was quite comfortable, he knew as he usually sat in it. The advantage to not giving out the gifts was that he would not have to wait until the end of the evening to open his own.

"Helan?" Kade's voice was low. "I... How do I know where the gifts go?"

He remembered, belatedly, that Kade could not read. "We could both be the moon's consorts. I'll sit and read the tags, you can distribute the gifts to their rightful owners," he answered, for Kade's ears alone.

Kade's eyes met his, filled with a quiet gratitude. "Thank you. Yes, please."

"It will be good to share the task. There are so many gifts." He looked around at the milling children and the parents that shooed them to the ground. "My household is indeed blessed."

Kade nodded. "Yes, my friend. The Winds gift those who deserve it. Where do we start?"

Surial pointed to the silver-wrapped boxes right next to the chair. "There's one for each child. It keeps them occupied during the slower passing out of the gifts."

"One for each. That's easy enough." Kade scooped up an armful, doling them out with twinkling eyes and a warm smile upon his face. His wide, bare feet moved through the sand, the hems of Kade's trousers painted with odd, dark figures which seemed to be running or leaping along the cloth. The children were laughing as they opened their boxes, finding small, simple birds carved from wood and two pieces of candy each along with a spicy ogajin fruit.

When Kade came back to the chair, Surial settled on the bench that Argent and one of his son-in-laws brought over.

"You mean for me to sit in the chair, then?" At Surial's nod, the big man settled, making the heavy seat seem suddenly and oddly small, Kade's bulk filling it, silver ribbons curling over broad shoulders.

Surial grabbed the closest gift and read the tag. "Madrise," he said softly as he passed it to Kade.

Kade took the package and called to Madrise. The dear woman squealed and grinned and fussed as much as if she'd been a maiden, receiving her very first festival gift ever. It set the tone for the evening and slowly the mountain of gifts got smaller and smaller until all that was left were those for Kade and himself.

Kade reached down, picking up a flat package wrapped in a simple piece of linen, the black designs painted along the fabric in a fine hand. "This is for you, my friend."

"From you." He smiled, the night's pleasure growing. He unwrapped it, finding a weapon made of a heavy bone, curved into a sleek S-shape, leather and copper wrapped around the center for a grip. Images were painted on the blades -- a hawk, a horse, a sun, a moon, a hand, an eye. There were long strands of leather drawn through a hole in a middle of the grip, beautiful glass beads threaded along the string.

He was at once horrified and intrigued by it. It was quite beautiful and Kade had obviously made it himself - there was nothing like this for sale in Azize. He stared at it for a long moment, deciding that if he never used it for more than decoration, then it was not a weapon and he could accept it with grace and honor.

"It is beautiful, Kade. Thank you."

Kade simply beamed, eyes pleased and cheeks glowing. "It is a rahat. A mark of honor for my people. The marks tell a story, the beads tell of your status."

With all the other gifts distributed, the music had begun, but Surial ignored it in favor of spending more time with Kade. Plus, there were other gifts to unwrap, including Kade's own.

"I would very much like to hear the story and know the meaning of the beads you chose, but first, open my gift to you." Surial pointed to the rather large package at Kade's feet, anticipation making him bounce.

"Oh! This is mine?" Kade picked up the gift, looking at the tag. "What does this say? Does this say my name?"

"This says Kade." He pointed to the last word. "The rest says 'to my friend'."

"Kade." Kade traced the letters carefully, then he looked up at Surial with intent eyes. He leaned forward, speaking so softly that Surial strained to hear. "Could you show me how to draw my true name? Can you draw 'Kadras'?"

"Kadras... It is a lovely name. Strong and proud." He smiled and nodded. "I will teach you to write, your name and more."

Kade smiled back. "I would like that." Then Kade opened the box, looking inside with a childlike excitement painted upon the tanned face. The box held a saddle made by the finest leatherworker in Azize. Lik'ta's name was carved along one girth, Kade's along the other. Surial waited breathlessly, eager for Kade's reaction.

The brown eyes widened impossibly, Kade's mouth falling open with a gasp. Huge, callused hands roamed over the saddle, fingers searching and tracing each pattern, each stitch. "Oh... Oh, my Helan! Such a fine thing! Such beauty!"

"You and Lik'ta deserve it." He smiled, pleased the last of his gifts had gone over as well as the rest.

"Oh, thank you." Kade's hand reached out, grasping his own and shaking it thoroughly. "Thank you, my friend. So much."

"Use it in good health." He looked out over the courtyard. The servants were dancing, wives with their husbands, grandparents with their grandchildren, brothers and sisters together. The atmosphere was joyous and light. Surial sighed, feeling better than he had in a long time.

Kade had leaned forward, thick fingers pointing as he explained each mark painted upon the rahat when the child's scream split the air. Ania, one of the littlest ones, all dark hair and laughing eyes, had fallen against a lantern, flames still covering her little hand and arm as Kade sprang from the chair and smothered the fire.

"Argent! Send one of the boys for the physician!" Surial bit his lip, wishing he could do more. "Water, fetch a bowl of cold water to pull out the heat."

Kade lifted the child, eyes fastening upon Surial, begging. "Please, Helan."

The child's mother began to moan, the child's screams escalating. Surial leaned away, hands going behind his back. There wasn't anything he could do. "The physician is coming. Here's Argent now with the bowl of water."

The square jaw hardened and Kade stood, walked closer. "The physician will be too late to save the hand. She's only a babe, a child. She hurts. Hold her. Take her."

Kade thrust the child at him and Surial had no choice but to take the girl. He held her awkwardly, tears filling his eyes. "What do you expect me to do?"

His vision was obscured by long braids, Kade's breath hot upon his ear. "I swore I would not spill your secret, but I will not let you deny the Winds. You healed me, you healed Grandam. She is a *babe*, Surial, an innocent. Can you not feel her pain?" His hand was taken, pressed against the hot, raw, already-blistered skin. "Please. Please. Please."

He shook his head, he could not do this. It was wrong. It was forbidden, his father would... His father was not here, nor were Erulial or any of his brothers. Kade's request sang in his ears, a promise that he could help.

Leaning forward, he rested his head against the broad shoulder, eyes closing. He could feel Kade, strong and well against him, and he could feel the girl, her pain like a knife going through him. He squeezed his hand over hers, willing the pain to leave, willing the flesh to knit and heal and grow anew. The child's wails died away into soft, sobbing breaths, the pain fading and then disappearing altogether. Surial let her hand go with a gasp. She would have dropped from his lap had Kade not been there to catch her.

Kade handed the child over to her mother, his arm moving to circle Surial's shoulders. When Argent's mouth opened, a low, threatening growl sounded. "No questions. Not yet. Not now, Argent. See to your family. I'll get the Helan settled with some wine."

Then Surial found himself half-dragged, half-carried over to a dim corner, settled into a chair, a cool glass pressed in his hand. He felt weak and scared, his hands trembling as he clasped the wine glass to his chest. At the same time he was exhilarated. He'd healed the girl, as surely as he'd healed Kade and made Lik'ta's birth right. He grabbed onto Kade's arm, holding tightly. "Is she...?"

"Yes. All well." Kade's hand covered his, patting and gentle. "Saw her move the fingers myself. You healed her, my Lord. Listen, the crying's all stopped. That is her laughing."

"I did it." It didn't seem real. It had to be, though, because he was shaking and exhausted and the only thing keeping him from keeling over was Kade, the man's arm warm and solid beneath his clutching hand.

"You did." Kade reached over for another chair, sitting beside him, staying close. "You're looking less ill than last time, too. You must be getting stronger."

"If my father wasn't on his deathbed, he would kill me. It is forbidden. It is why I was sent away." Surial shook his head, barely realizing that he was still clinging to Kade's arm.

"Forbidden? To use the gifts the Winds offer?" Kade shook his head. "Perhaps your father does not understand. To fight the Winds is a futile thing; it brings only agony and loss."

"He was trying to protect me, though I did not understand that at the time." Surial nodded toward the cluster of adults gathered around Argent. They were pointing at him, and gesturing, arguing by the looks of it. "Now I am the freak my father feared I would become."

Kade tsked at him. "Now you are a hero. That child would have been scarred forever, hand lost, and she is whole. You have startled them and they simply need to know you are still their Helan." The big man stood, reaching for him with a soft smile. "Ease their fears, Helan. Do not allow your father's fear to become your own."

He put his hand in Kade's and had the strange feeling that at that moment he would follow Kade anywhere, do anything the man asked. "I don't know what to tell them."

"The truth. That it is a blessing when a man is gifted by the Winds and the moon chose her night to assure that her children were safe." Honey brown eyes grinned at him. "They are the family of your heart. They will understand."

Nodding, he let Kade pull him up. He dropped the big man's hand with reluctance, loath to lose the comforting contact, but he was still master of this house and would stand alone. Kade's eyes never left him. The big man simply stood aside, heat strong near his back. With Kade behind him, he went to face his family.

They hurried through the still-quiet stalls, Argent nodding at different people as he handled the day's shopping. He liked shopping in the first light of dawn, before the heat and press of people, when the fruits and vegetables were freshest and dew-kissed, when the pickpockets and thieves and beggars were still unconscious or awaiting punishment in the square and the pleasure-shopping nobles were still abed.

He'd brought Kade along to play packhorse. He enjoyed the man's company, the quiet jokes and simple tales, and lately, the good-natured ribbing that came from the belated appearance of new granddaughters -- two of them.

He checked his list -- lentils, a round of fine cheese, honey, meal, currents, a bolt of cloth for his Helan's wedding finery, a present for the betrothed, a silver hairbrush -- the last item made him smile. The last brush had been tossed into the fire after the senior Helan Banshinaree had gone. There must be enough hair regrown that Lord Surial felt the need for better grooming.

Excellent.

A little girl came barreling around a stall, running into him. She glanced up at him, her dark eyes wide, mumbled an apology, and continued on her way. She looked like his little Ania, all dark curls and wide eyes. Ania, who his Helan had healed with nothing more than his hands. "Kade, I wanted to ask you about what happened at the moon's festival..."

Kade rumbled softly and nodded. "What would you know, my friend? I will tell you what I am able."

"His lordship said it was a gift, but... it just seems so sudden, so strange. Why has he never used this gift before?"

"Perhaps he needed reason. Perhaps he needed to remove himself from his brother's shadow." Kade shrugged. "Perhaps that was the time the Winds chose for him."

Argent shook his head. "The Helan is a good and kind man, if a bit temperamental. I cannot fathom why he would not use his gift before now. Not when his people were hurt, and badly. Rowan..."

"Perhaps he could not. The ba'chi, the healers of my tribe often had a ritual to unlock their gifts. The Helan is young; perhaps it was his time, his place. And the rowani was gone to the Land of Summer before the Helan reached him."

"So such magic is familiar to you, to your people?" Argent shook his head. "It seems to be a wonderful gift, but terrifying as well. Such powers are meant for the gods, not for man."

"The Winds give what they will, men simply follow the path they are given. It is the way of things." Kade's voice was steady, almost satisfied as he spoke the words, as if great comfort and great honor dwelt within them.

"He would be celebrated among your people," Argent noted. "I fear it will not be so here. He already stands apart from his peers. This will only aggravate that."

Argent bit the inside of his lips. This was not something the nobility of Azize would understand or accept.

"Then no one will hear of it from my lips, nor from yours. I will do the Helan no harm." Kade straightened his simple vest, the edges decorated with tiny seeds and markings. Slowly but surely, the visage of slave had slipped away, leaving behind a barbarian, a foreigner, yes -- but also a brave, honest, good man.

"I wish it was that simple. There were many at the festival and people talk. Not on purpose, not maliciously, but they do talk. I fear it'll be known among the servants of many houses before the week is out." He straightened. "I will impress among everyone the importance of keeping it to themselves."

"Your voice holds much weight, my friend. Surely they will hear your words." Kade followed him as they turned a corner, the sand still cool beneath their feet, the brightly colored awnings just beginning to glow. "Tell me, how are the new babies -- both healthy? Both happy? Both still girls?"

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Yes. I love all my daughters and their daughters dearly, but I must admit that I pray for a grandson every time one of them is with child."

Kade chuckled. "Perhaps the Winds are playing a game with you. Did you anger a god when you were young, perhaps?"

The banter continued through the marketplace, Argent stopping every now and again to barter. The crowds grew, the streets becoming bogged down and congested. He noticed Kade becoming restless as people began to press close and he headed them toward the streets that would take them home. Kade carried the bags and parcels, chatter dying as the sun rose higher, his size and height and copper braids making him stand out, a bright spot in a sea of dark hair and eyes.

"That's him there, walking as if he was one of us."

"They say Banshinaree freed him."

"Bah, once a vakla, always a vakla."

The conversation came from behind them, the women's voices high and shrill. Argent was torn between holding his head high and pretending he hadn't heard, or turning to see who was speaking.

"The problem is if the other beasts get wind of it. The Magistrate should do something or the vakli might riot. Banshinaree should know better. Filthy animals, walking on two legs and pretending to be men."

Kade walked, never flinching or acknowledging that he could hear the conversation. Argent imagined it wasn't the first such filth the big man had heard, nor would it be the last. Argent glanced back as they rounded a corner, spying Sieka Vanshi's wife with several of her cronies. At least it was not the more moderate nobles who were espousing such thoughts, then it would have been quite worrisome.

He searched about for something to say to ease Kade, but could not. His own first reaction to the news had been selfish worry about what repercussions the act of freeing the man, however right and deserved, would have on him and his family, on the Banshinaree name.

Kade never said a word, didn't complain or comment, simply walked, bore the weight of assorted packages, and shouldered his way through the crowd.

"The girls were hoping that I would bring you home for dinner one day soon. They are all quite taken with your tales of your people. We all are." Argent spoke quietly. There was nothing he could say to make up for what others might say to and about Kade, but he hoped that his own renewed trust and friendship could help soothe the man.

"I would be honored." Kade turned and smiled, and if the smile was a bit forced and a bit weak, Argent pretended not to notice. "After all, you have new granddaughters that I should meet."

"More girls for you to charm. Perhaps I should ask you to spend time with my sons-in-law. You look as if you would father many sons, perhaps it would rub off on the husbands of my many daughters."

Kade laughed, eyes twinkling. "I am too old to be fathering sons. Perhaps your wife has whispered secrets to your daughters to prevent them capturing boy children?"

"I shall have to have a word with her if that is the case." Argent chuckled, relief flooding him as they left the market and its nasty gossips behind them.

chapter nineteen

The ceremony had been short and sweet and obviously touched by Pela's deft hand at every level. The clothing, the flowers, the food; they were arranged to perfection -- even the linens and curtains were dyed in golds and rubies to match her betrothal band, the carpets a rich sapphire to match her dress.

Surial had stood beside Yamin, offering moral support. Yamin had been calm, settled, almost eager to enter the ceremonial hall and bind his life with Pela. Now, Surial lounged, comfortable and, as he well knew, quite handsome in the green fabric that matched his eyes exactly. He had a seat of honor beside the groom, a honeyed pastry filled with fresh berries and floating in cream before him, a crystal glass of sparkling wine in his hand, and the dulcet tones of Azize's finest vocalist serenading the new couple.

He smiled as Pela and Yamin waltzed along the long hallway. Pela's hair was done in dozens and dozens of tiny braids seeded with pearls. They reminded him, surprisingly, of Kade.

Kade had sat with him only the night before, the large man slowly sounding out words in a simple book, brow furrowed, finger tracing along the spiky words. Surial had searched for books about the Naik, Kade's people, but most of the references were to keeping vakli, controlling vakli, buying vakli, judging vakli's worth. It made him nauseous, made him cold inside. That he had been a part, for however short a time, of the selling and owning of flesh, made him itch.

He took a long drink of the wine and shook his head, watching the brightly dressed and bejeweled crowd flock from table to table, chattering and curious, food and gossip consumed in equal measure.

Sieki Onise, dressed garishly in bright pinks and oranges, fastened her beady, piggy eyes on Surial from beyond the table loaded with sweets. There was a piece of icing upon her lip, white and glistening, beading with the heat. He whispered a silent prayer to the Moon herself that the woman be too hungry or too hot or too busy or too anything to want to speak with him.

He looked away and turned to engage Sieki Sina, seated on his right, in conversation before Onise could corner him, but the woman was turned away, speaking with her companion. A glance back in Onise's direction proved that he was indeed trapped; she was making a beeline straight for him. It seemed he had offended the Moon somehow, or already spent his coin with her on some previous occasion.

A small entourage of the region's most powerful women followed Onise, seeming almost like a pack of rabid dogs, dripping with sharp jewels and garish fabrics. He managed not to flinch when she stopped before him. "Ladies, congratulate my future son-in-law. He is lucky enough to have been snagged by Aylia's heart."

The icing was still upon her lip, dangling.

The stupid cow. Did she really think he would not snub her, would not deny her in public? He had never been that much of a slave to the politics of this place; he wasn't about to start now.

"Really, Sieki Onise, I was under the impression we had settled this matter of your mistaken assumptions weeks ago." He turned and addressed the rest of his remarks in the general direction of her coterie. "One visit by a member of my family, made purely out of a wish not to snub the dear lady's family, and suddenly a match has been made. Or so the good lady would have me, and you, believe." He tsked and shook his head.

Picking up his napkin from the table, he wiped the piece of icing from Onise's lip. "If you'll excuse me." With a half bow he took his escape.

The surprised twittering started before he even left the raised dais where the wedding party had been seated. There was no doubt that their exchange had been noted and noticed by the entire crowd. Even Yamin and Pela had stopped their dancing.

He felt a small twinge of guilt when he saw Aylia sitting with a group of young girls, her eyes on the floor. He dismissed it quickly; her mother was responsible for the scene -- he had made his position more than clear. Sieki Onise had brought the situation on herself.

Pela and Yamin met him as he skirted the dance floor. Yamin's eyes twinkled, amusement obvious. "You can't even allow me a wedding without causing an uproar, can you, my friend?"

"Just taking the pressure off you and your lovely wife for a few moments. No need to thank me -- consider it another gift."

"You are most generous, Helan." Pela tilted her head, looking at him with steady eyes. "She is a wounded dog, that one, and I fear she will bite. Step gently, friend."

"Wise advice, my friend. Unfortunately, she gave me no choice -- any sign of weakness on my part would have found me wed to her daughter before your nuptials were a week old." He gave them a warm smile and patted their joined hands fondly. "And though you two make a good show of it, I do not wish to be wed myself. Certainly not to anyone related to the Sieki Onise."

"In that, I will not blame you, my friend." His friends smiled at him, Pela's dark head resting against Yamin's ample shoulder. "Will you stay and dance? Enjoy the wine?"

"For you, my friends, I will endure even the waspish glare of Sieki Onise."

"Brave and generous, what more could a bride ask for?" Pela patted his cheek. "Come, Sieka Banshinaree, dance with me so that my beloved can save his strength."

He gave her a bow. "It would be my pleasure, Sieki."

With a chuckle and a curtsy, she took his hand, leading him away from the hot, angry eyes that watched him.

The sand beneath his bare feet was slick and hot -- almost too hot for comfort, and Kade couldn't help wondering how the nobles wore the thin shoes that would trap the sand against their feet and rub.

Argent had asked him to come out; the Helan had ordered a sack of special grain from his homeland and the weight was not enough to warrant a carriage, but more than the older man could bear. He disliked the mar-

ketplace, especially in the full of day, but the thought of his friend carrying the heavy weight was distasteful and lacked honor.

These people were strange to him -- even after so many years of surviving in this desert, weathering the heat and sun, the casual cruelty mixed within the gentle care of family. He didn't understand. He wasn't sure he ever would. He had watched Surial leave for a wedding, dressed in forest greens, glowing amber and deep garnet jewels at his throat and wrists. The young man had looked perfect, had every reason to rejoice, and yet -- Kade could hear the sadness within Surial, as clear as if one of the mi'it was singing of spring fresh meadows.

He was thinking about tempting Surial out onto the beach. Iyla hadn't run in days and Mon'keur was unhappy and bored. The winds and sea salt and setting sun made for laughter and good sleeping and...

He didn't notice the man running at him until it was too late to move, the heavy grain sapping his grace.

"Mind your vakla, peshir, else he's taken to the stocks and whipped like the animal he is."

"I beg your pardon, sir." Argent's tones were at once ingratiating and imperious. "My friend was not watching where he was going."

Kade fought the instinct to challenge, to meet the man's eyes and face him as a warrior. He had learned many things as a slave -- how to sew, how to turn when the lash hit, how to clean wounds with sand and salt, and how to keep his silence.

"Careful, peshir, it is not wise to make friends with vakli or you will find they will rise against you and murder you in your sleep."

Kade thought he recognized the sneering, nasal tone now as belonging to the man who had owned him before the Helan. Kade's shoulders rippled, fury rising and twisting inside him. He held onto the sack of grain, fingers tearing the burlap cloth.

"... Banshinaree freed him, Sieka Vanshi. He meant no harm. You have our apologies." Argent's voice held an edge now. Kade could smell battle upon the air.

"You are saying that this animal walks the streets of our jewel of a town as if he was a free man?"

"He has been freed, Sieka. Allow me to take him home and he will be removed from your sight."

"Once a vakla, always a vakla. For a vakla to walk in a man's shoes is a crime!" Vanshi's voice grew shriller as he spoke, drawing a crowd around them. "I shall take this beast to the square for punishment myself!"

The bag tore, grain spilling everywhere, as Kade straightened, a bright mixture of fury and fear filling him. "No. I will not go. I am no slave."

"Defying me! Ten more lashes!" Vanshi's voice held triumph now as well, cruel pleasure making his smile predatory, ugly. He hoped to be hit so that he could make the punishment death, Kade could read the wish in Vanshi's dark eyes.

"I am a free man." Kade read the warning in Argent's eyes, but could not heed it. He was no slave. "I am a Guardian. A warrior. A free man."

"Guards! Take him!" Vanshi shoved Argent aside, the old man stumbling, falling to the ground, becoming

lost as the crowd surged forward.

He turned, eyes searching for an exit, an escape. The crowd pressed close and his heart fell. With a low growl, Kade turned to face Vanshi, fists clenched. He would die here, but he would not die alone. He took a single step toward Vanshi, intending to tear the flesh from the man's throat, when a dull thud sounded, echoing within his head, and his world went black.

He awoke to a familiar sight: sand, bright and shining in the sunlight. He was on his knees, hands above his head, tied to a pole. The sun beat down upon him, burning and bright. His head throbbed, his shoulders complaining. He was tempted, for a moment, to simply close his eyes and wait for death to find him. Then his pride took hold of him, lifting his chin and opening his eyes.

He was no man's slave.

Vanshi was standing at a table that held all manner of whips, canes, and ropes. He was slowly making his way along the table, testing each implement, playing to the crowd that had gathered, their faces blurring in the heat of the sun.

He looked, eyes searching for a familiar face, a friend. His eyes met the quiet brown of a mi'it, a young mare who sang of stallions and the sea. Slowly, softly Kade spoke to her, giving her his secrets, his past -- trusting that another heard and knew and he would not be forgotten.

Weapon chosen, Vanshi approached, letting the whip crack against the sands again and again, the sound promising pain.

The noise of the crowd was as the wind, a murmur that ran together, one voice indistinguishable from another. He could feel the anticipation, hear it in the rise and fall of the sound. He was suddenly cast into shadow and a gasp went up among the crowd. Golden shoes appeared at his side, topped by dark, cool green silk.

Vanshi snarled. "Stand aside, Banshinaree."

Kade took a breath, body shuddering. He looked up into a furious, white face with flashing eyes. "By the Moon, I will not!"

The whip snapped against the ground, sand bouncing up in a tiny cloud. "I will have this animal punished, if I have to whip you to get to him. You're little more than an animal yourself, setting this thing loose upon our streets."

"The only animal I see is the one standing in front of me." Surial's voice was hard with anger and something that sounded close to hatred. "Lay one stripe on me or my friend and I will have you up on charges. You should be thanking your luck that I have not already placed charges upon you for the injury to my manservant and to the false arrest of my stable hand."

"I am punishing a recalcitrant vakla, *Sieka* Banshinaree. He has been on this rack before."

"And I tell you that he is no vakla and you will have to kill me before you lay one stripe on him."

"Enough." The Magistrate's voice was clipped and short. "Sieka Banshinaree, do you hold papers on this man?"

"He is not a vakla!" He could feel the anger and frustration flowing from Lord Surial.

"But he was brought here as one, Sieka Banshinaree. You whipped him for escaping in these very sands. If he belongs to you, or if he has been freed, it must be proven." Kade watched as the heavily turbaned man turned to Vanshi's sweat-slicked face. "Unless you have papers on him?"

"My Helan." The new voice was Argent's. "I have brought Kade's papers for you." Argent was pale and breathless, a long tear in his tunic, though he did not appear to be in pain despite the show of blood on the white material.

Relief began to sink into his bones. They would not leave him here to die as a slave. He was a free man. He was a Guardian, hi'icha. No man's slave.

"Ownership papers, properly rescinded with the Banshinaree's seal, and here are the papers showing the contract between the sieka and Kade for payment in regards to duties as stable hand." Argent's voice was steady. Kade could hear the papers fluttering in the wind.

"You see." Surial's voice again, calmer now, and a slender hand rested on his back. "He is not a vakla and has been wrongfully detained. It is past time to let him up."

The Magistrate looked over the papers and nodded. "The barbarian is no one's vakla. Were there blows thrown at the marketplace, Sieka Vanshi?"

"No." The word was flat and furious and Kade found himself focused on the peace and ease moving through him, driven by the touch of Surial's hand.

"My man was knocked down. I've already said that charges would not be brought, but I would like the matter recorded." Surial's hand rubbed slow, gentle circles in his back. The Helan couldn't be aware of what he was doing, he was busy discussing matters with the Magistrate, nonetheless, it felt so good, easing the aches in his shoulders.

The voices faded. Kade closed his eyes and waited, soaking up the song that the healing sang to him. He was almost disappointed when the ropes were cut, freeing him. Almost.

Kade stumbled to his feet, head held high. His braids were matted with sand, hands swollen and stiff, but he was free.

"Let's go home." One of Surial's hands slipped beneath his elbow, leading him from the square. Argent brought up the rear, still clutching Kade's papers in his hands.

"Home. Yes." His throat was raw, voice a growl. "Thank you. Thank you both."

"You're welcome."

"It was the least we could do," added Argent.

"Spilled your grain, my friend." The carriage was waiting, Grandam stomping furiously. "Sorry."

"Better grain than blood." Surial handed him up into the carriage and turned to Argent. "Can you drive?"

The manservant nodded and held out his arm. "Good as new, my Helan. Thank you."

Surial nodded awkwardly and climbed into the carriage. The door was closed, leaving them in cool dark-

ness.

Kade leaned back into the seat. "One day, I will be on the inside of this thing without having to be tied to that pole first."

Surial gave a short bark of surprised laughter, his hand moving to rest on Kade's thigh, petting. "No one else will try that again. Not with Vanshi failing so publicly."

He relaxed beneath the touch, sighing. "You did not make a friend in him this day, I think."

"It seems to be my day for making enemies, or perhaps just cementing the ones I already had."

Kade looked up, serious. "You did not make an enemy of me, Helan."

Surial smiled at him. "I am glad -- I value your friendship, Kadras."

The words echoed within him, filling him inside and resonating.

Surial sighed and shifted, lying back against the plump carriage pillows. "I wish we had met in Sandide. These Azize dogs have nothing on my people. Though I fear they are embracing the 'modern' ways far too eagerly."

Kade shifted, stretching slowly. "Or in the forests of my people, perhaps. The open sky, the deep ponds. There is drumming and dancing during the Gatherings that is amazing to see."

He could remember being younger and just branded a man, wearing the ta'akto wings and flying with the men, the warriors, for the first time. His spirit had flown, soaring among the smoke and flames.

Surial's hand slid against his arm, touching him again and then sliding away, as if the man couldn't help himself. "Are you all right?"

"Just a bit stiff. Those poles are not as comfortable as they appear."

Surial chuckled again and his hand slid once more along Kade's arm and then moved back into his lap. "I imagine you are more than ready to leave the dubious hospitality of this jewel of the sands. Will you wait for Lik'ta to be grown?"

"That is my thought, yes. He is still young, easily hurt, and I would have him strong and ready before we ride." Kade frowned, looking over at his friend, eyes serious. "The slavers will hunt me, either here or elsewhere, and Lik'ta should be able to run."

He had been taken in the lands he knew best, the lands which were his to defend. If they could take him then, at his prime, then there was nowhere that they could not take him. He would simply ensure they could not take him alive or easily.

"I'm sorry, Kade. I wish I could say that you were wrong, but I fear that you are all too right."

"It is the way of things. One day the wind will tell why it has chosen my people to travel this path." He shrugged and tried to grin. "Today will not be that day, I think."

"No, I fear not." There was silence awhile as they rode and then, as they neared the Banshinaree home and the streets around them grew quiet, Surial spoke again. "I am ashamed of my role in the whole thing."

"If you had not found me, then I would be dead now and I am alive. The Winds blow us where we need to go, my friend." He let his fingers trail down one thick braid -- his mother's, now dusty and frayed, but still holding the memory of her sweet eyes. "It does no use to cry against them, you simply gag upon your own voice."

"I should take your example to heart. I have far less to cry over and yet indulge far more often in the practice."

Kade winked. "Perhaps you should spend less time captured beneath heavy ceilings and more time with the wind against your cheeks, a mi'it beneath you."

Surial gave him a sad smile. "Perhaps I should at that."

"You could start now," Kade offered. "Mon'keur has been complaining that he needs to feels the sands beneath his hooves."

"Would you ride with me, my friend?"

He chuckled and nodded. "I would. Today has been long and deserves a fine end in good company. Perhaps Grandam and I will allow Mon'keur to win a race."

"Allow?" Surial sat forward, a glint making the dark eyes sparkle. "You still believe that Mon'keur can be beaten? Perhaps when your Lik'ta is ready Mon'keur will finally have a worthy opponent."

"Oh, that will be a challenge that will be sung about for seasons. It almost makes me wish he was ready to ride this night."

"All in good time. I would have the pleasure of your company a few moons more before we have our race and you take leave of us."

"Yes. I still need to learn to sing the words on paper and you must learn the songs told by your rahat." He reached to open the carriage door as the motion stopped, the smell of the homestead familiar. "We have many races before our last, my friend. The Winds have whispered it to me."

Surial chuckled, the smile showing his even, white teeth. "You're just trying to give your mi'it an advantage -- waiting until Mon'keur grows even older."

"Ah, but you are young and do not weigh Mon'keur down." He stepped out, flexing his muscles with a grin. "Lik'ta will need to be strong to carry me."

Surial followed him out and wrapped a hand around his bicep, testing the muscle. "I'm not sure what my age has to do with it -- but I'll never boast muscles like this. But Lik'ta himself is young and strong."

Kade snorted, the idea of the young ba'chi bounded with heavy muscles and warrior's marks amusing him. "Yes, Surial, Lik'ta is a fine mi'it and will carry me well and your Mon'keur will learn to be the second fastest mount upon the sands."

Surial chuckled. "We shall see, Kade. We shall see." Surial gave him another smile and patted his arm before turning his attention to Argent. "Let Kade take care of the horse, I need a bath drawn. And a glass of something cool and light."

Kade turned to unhook Grandam from the harness, laughing beneath his breath. "Shall I have Mon'keur saddled for you after latemeal, Helan?"

"As long as you have Grandam saddled as well -- I want my race."

"Yes, Helan. As you will." He met Surial's arched eyebrow with a grin and led the mi'it back to the stables. There was at least one person in Azize he was beginning to understand.

Pela leaned back against the cushions, eyes closed as she floated in the sweet, smoky air. Sweet resins burned in the attended censers, soft laughter sounded amongst the splash of water, her mouth tingled with the spice of tea and delicacies delivered by sloe-eyed vakli, silent and ever-present.

Shinah brushed out her long hair, while Rinoa searched her bared legs for spare hairs, strings held tightly between the long, skilled fingers to remove each one discovered. Once the bandandazi was complete, her feet and hands would be massaged and well-oiled and her stomach and breasts decorated with fertility symbols.

Oh, there were benefits to being a married woman.

Not too long ago, she had stood in the place of Aylia, kneeling beside her mother in attendance, wilted from the heat, covered in heavy fabric so as not to tempt her maiden body into womanhood.

Shinah began to plait strings of pearls within her dark hair, humming a song from the deep deserts, something low and rhythmic and soothing. The song mingled with a dozen others in the whitewashed room, melodies twining with wisps of steam and dancing over the low serving tables and lounging women like gjinni, searching for their bottle.

Pela let herself doze, resting without worry, without duty or husband or servants or slave to watch. Here there was only cool water and relaxation, flavored by chunks of sweet fruit and honey-soaked pastries. Pela felt her hands placed into bowls of warmed oils, soaking out imperfections and readying for their massage. Yes, the bath houses made marriage a worthwhile experience. Even if it meant sleeping in the same room with Yamin's endless snoring.

Her quiet slumber was interrupted by Sieki Onise's grating voice as she greeted Sieka Vanshi's young wife, Sarina. The girl was appropriately ingratiating, clinging to the show of acceptance. Only last season she had been shunned and gossiped about, Vanshi having married such a young thing so quickly after the death of his first wife. Pela could imagine the porcine Onise's expression, the malicious smile as she watched the shapely and slender girl slide into the water. Pela was thankful that she herself was old enough not to be put to the bottom of the pecking order. While her age as a maiden had been fodder for the occasional jibe, it protected her now.

Onise began to hold forth on a wide variety of topics, Sarina's softly murmured agreement sounding now and then. As the massage on her hands began, Pela found she was able to tune out even the waspish tones of Onise's voice. Until she heard the name of Yamin's fondest friend, Surial Banshinaree.

"...thinks he can get away with insulting my daughter, besmirching her good name. He thinks he can treat the Onise family with disrespect and hide behind his family's money..." Pela was careful not to open her eyes, to appear interested. Onise was like a snake -- vindictive and poisonous, but the cold attention was easily avoided. "He will not be so smug when accusations are made, charges brought against him. He will be

begging me to let Aylia marry him."

"But, Sieki Onise... did he, honestly..." Sarina's horrified voice dropped to a whisper. "...violate her?"

"In spirit and intent if not in actual deed. Look at the girl! She positively cowers there like she's waiting to be beaten!"

Pela had to work hard to keep her snort quiet; the poor girl always looked like that, moreso in her own mother's presence than at any other time. She couldn't help but think that it was a pity that Surial had no interest in the girl; it would do her a world of good to be out from under her mother's thumb. Aylia would no doubt have blossomed within Surial's house. Perhaps she would still have a chance -- there was no way that her husband's friend could withstand the beating he would be given if he were to contest the charges.

Rinoa's hands began working her feet, clucking at the tension there. Onise's thin, gray hair was being woven with a heavy, dark wig, filling it out and making it appear less old. Aylia just stared at the floor, pale face miserable, tears running down the drawn cheeks. She hoped, for both Surial and the girl's sake that Onise had her way with this -- if the charges were denied, the girl would not even have the luxury of death to save her from being ostracized from polite company and marriage to an undesirable. Once the poor girl's virginity was called into question, she would become less of a catch than she was already.

When Pela had reached eleven summers, her father had taken her and her brothers to the square, telling them that they were about to learn an important lesson. She had worried and shivered; important lessons with Father were never pleasant and often made her vomit. A young man, very handsome, long black hair flowing free, skin fine, had been lashed to the pole, stripped bare to the world. A girl -- one of the girls Pela had seen at parties for her brothers, wealthy and pretty and clever -- stood screaming, her hands clasped over her swelling belly.

She hadn't understood the entire truth until the boy's skin began to split, blood falling with a horrid plopping sound upon the sand. He had lived through thirty-six lashes, the girl screaming hysterically the entire time.

Her father had glared at each of the boys. "This is what happens when you touch what is not yours." Then he had turned to her. "His whore will be sent with her bastard child out into the sands. You will not shame me, daughter."

"No, Father. I will not."

They had let him hang in the square for three whole days, until the vultures and night animals had picked his soft parts clean. She had never seen the girl again.

"...Pela." The sound of her name spoken by Sieki Onise brought her out of the memories, though she kept her eyes closed, the desire to snub this woman strong. "I say, Pela! Wake up, I'm talking to you."

Self-preservation came to the fore and she let her eyes open slowly, blinking as if just waking. "Sieki Onise?"

"Your husband is friends with Banshinaree. Can he not talk some sense into the man before this thing with my daughter turns ugly?"

"It is not a woman's place to interfere in her husband's business." She let her eyes open, guilelessly blinking up into the old hag's face.

"No, it is our place to meddle behind the scenes."

The ladies all giggled and tittered, the noise grating Pela's nerves almost as badly as Onise's voice.

"Oh, I apologize, my dear Lady, but I am only a very new wife and have not learned all of the methods and secrets of my station." She forced herself to sound peaceful and harmless, but not ingratiating.

"Oh, yes, you only just married. It's so easy to forget how recently that happened; after all you aren't a young girl like my Aylia."

No, and she didn't have to be sold to an unwilling foreigner, either.

Pela forced her smile to widen. "No, when the gods have a mate in mind, the priests says it is best to wait and find them, rather than make a lesser choice."

"Your hair is finished, my Lady." Shinah's voice was quiet, firm. "You must go see the priestess now, let her beg the goddess for your sons to come to you. It is time." Pela nodded, standing gracefully. Another benefit to her married status. Not even Onise could argue against the call of the priestesses.

"You speak to your husband, Pela. Tell him to warn his friend or the price will be harsh."

Pela arched an eyebrow. "I will do as the Lady Moon bids me. Good day."

"One way or another -- it will be," Onise called out after her.

Somehow, Pela doubted it. She kept walking as if she had not heard, eager to be away from the cloying air and false, sweet voices.

chapter twenty

The wooden comb had thick, wide teeth, perfect for pulling through the thick waves of his hair. Unbound and wet, it reached his lap, one or two white hairs peeking through the copper every now and again. He had worn the braids for so long -- more than twenty autumns -- that even loose the hair separated into strands ready to be plaited. Kade -- Kadras, Kadras here and now in this place -- looked around the room, the moon shining into the loft, sage burning in a tiny bowl, a basket full of trinkets that he'd bartered or worked for.

Pieces of malachite from the trader that stopped to sell copper wares and needed a carriage wheel repaired. Feathers and shells gathered along the beach. Shiny scales from the giant fish captured in the sea that Doan cooked in her kitchen and served with pomegranates. Dozens of little colored strings, collected and saved from a hundred of tunics and blankets and turbans. Colored glass beads -- red and gold and blue -- given to him by the children out of love.

Kadras closed his eyes, reaching back with everything he was. He was a hi'icha, a Guardian. One who rode for the Tribe. One who defended. One who fought. He was made by the winds, breathed into his mother's womb with a fierce beating heart and hands made for wielding the rahat.

He could see the plains, the trees reaching up to embrace the sun, roots sinking deep to drink from the mother earth. The tents stood in widening circles, the larger ones standing strong in the center, close to the homefire, the meeting lodge, the tent of Elders. The ta'akto flew overhead, wings made molten gold by the sun's kiss, sharp eyes hunting, watching, guarding. The mi'it roamed the paddock, dun-colored coats painted black and gray and red by the wind's hand. The stallions reared and called, the colts played, calling to their Wind Brothers, begging to share iyossi with the one meant for them.

He could hear the drums, smell the smoke, floating up and forming spirit dreams. The Elders chanted, singing the ancient songs, the songs of traveling far, over mountains and streams to find the land that loved them, nurtured them.

Home.

He could smell it; he ached deep within for the touch of rain upon his cheeks, the sound of his true name upon the lips of his people.

His lost people.

Tears gathered in his eyes and Kade began to sing, the words low and guttural. He picked up a single golden stone, separated out some hair and wove it in. As he worked he sang of iyossi, strong and true, of a warrior in the form of mi'it, fierce and proud to the end, screaming defiance even as he burned.

Slowly, beads and feathers were worked into hair, some braids ancient -- his first lover, taken by the claws of a bear, the different ba'achi who had helped him understand the mi'it's call, their song.

Then his hands began to remember his tribe, the song growing sorrowful and throbbing. The slavers had come out of the eastern mists, hurling burning stones and firing arrows. He had been riding to the north, looking over the ponds and paddocks, when the alarms sounded. He and Muk had flown, rahat drawn. By the time he had reached the village, the warriors had been outnumbered six to one, the fires raging, the world alight.

Twenty men had fallen before the arrow felled him.

One braid for the lost warriors, another for the mi'it, for the Elders.

One decorated with a shiny pink stone for his lost Hassi with the laughing eyes. One tiny braid for Hassi's son with only two teeth and almost walking.

"Kade?" Soft and lilting, Surial's voice interrupted him. "May I come up?"

He looked at the mass of undone hair, the smoke slowly curling up. He took a deep breath and nodded. It would be an honor to share this with Surial, to share his ways. "Please, my friend. Be welcome."

Surial's head appeared above the edge of the loft, the green eyes dark in the light of the small lamp, the rest of him followed, clad in a loose, plain suit. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

Kade waved him toward a pile of clean blankets, smiling, long hair falling all around him. "All right? I am well. My braids needed to be sung."

Surial sat cross-legged and put his chin in his hands, looking at him intently. "Your braids needed to be sung?"

"Yes. Each braid is a memory, a prayer, a promise, a song to the winds. They keep my family close to my heart." His hands slid over the braids, so long, so many. "It is our way."

"You have so many..."

He nodded. "I believed once that it was a burden, the weight of the braids. Now I know it is a gift that so many memories rest within me."

"Will you tell me of them? Or am I interrupting -- I could go?"

"You may stay. I... I will sing them in your words as best I can." He smiled and picked up a piece of topaz, taking up a piece of hair in his hands. "My father rode like the winds, was a great warrior and one morn the One who is All came in the form of a great snake, startling the mi'it and throwing him. His legs were crushed, but he pulled himself back to the healers, where they saw the mark of the Winds upon him. He became the greatest of ba'chi, singing to the spirits and advising those with torn souls."

He tied the end with a black thread. He could almost hear his father's voice, husky and warm and so proud. "He never cried out, never looked away as he was sent to the Land of Summer. He went with courage and bravery in his eyes. He was a great warrior."

He could feel Surial's eyes on him, watching.

He set the braid aside, reaching for another hank of hair and a bright blue stone. "My mother -- she was not born of the Naik, but delivered by the Winds. A boat crashed upon the shore and the warriors found her, wet and lost and scared and gave her over to the hands of my father. Her laugh could be heard over the hills,

throughout the skies. She awoke with a smile every day, waiting for her family to embrace her."

Sorrow filled him, bittersweet and aching. Her only son, her light, her pride -- her smile had directed his childhood with joy. "She was... she was one of the last to enter the fire. They thought to enslave her, but her mind and soul had followed her beloved, leaving her body behind her. She screamed as she burned, the sound carrying up into the trees, like smoke."

A soft noise came from Surial, but Kade didn't look up, he had to finish, to honor them as was right.

"They run together in the green grasses, make love and sing and laugh and call to their son who was left behind to avenge them, to assure their sacrifice held meaning." He pulled his rahat, slicing his palm deep, dipping the end of the braids in the thick blood. "I swear I will avenge this wrong. I will come to the Land of Summer with my debt to you paid."

Surial made another noise, this one sharper and his hand was taken in Surial's. Slender fingers moved over his palm, the touch tingling, delicate, sending cool healing to his flesh, knitting the torn skin.

"Oh." Kade blinked away his tears. "I... thank you." Surely the winds would still accept his sacrifice, even if healed.

Surial's fingers stroked over the scar that sat in his palm and Kade could feel the healing tingles with each time they passed over his flesh, but Surial shook his head. "I can't heal it more than that -- you've opened it too often."

The green eyes looked up at him. "I'm sorry, Kade. That must have been horrible to watch."

"It tore my heart." He fought back the tears, palm itching and drawing his attention. "The scar is old, almost... thirteen springs. Not even a healer can erase it."

Despite his words, Surial's fingers stroked several more times over his skin, the healing pulses making Kade's hand feel good. "Something tells me that's the way you want it."

"It is an honor, to bear marks." He motioned to his cheeks with his free hand. "These are a mark of manhood, of pride."

"And these?" asked Surial, letting go of his hand and pointing toward the talon marks on his chest. "Are these deliberate as well? I think you told me once."

"Given to me when I became hi'icha. They mark me as a Guardian."

Surial nodded. "We do not do such things where I come from. It is... " Surial frowned. "Strange to me."

"The marks allow those from other tribes to know you, to show your strength and to prove the Winds bless you." Kade looked down at the thick scars, eyes moving down to the whip scars below. "The marks are meaningless here in the sands."

"The people of Azize have their own way of marking such things -- their finery and baubles show their rank and their riches. In Sandide, the farther up the cliff you lived, the higher your standing."

"So, the more your rank, the more steps you climb?" He grinned, softening the tease. "Did you live atop the cliffs?"

"I did." Surial looked away. "And now I live in the sands at the water's edge."

Kade waited until the pang of sorrow faded and those eyes met his again, the sage smoke filling his mind. "As do I, my friend."

Surial blinked and smiled. "Indeed, you do."

Kade reached for the last strands of hair, braiding in the malachite stone quickly and tying the end with a white string. "There. All finished. All my duties and memories addressed."

"Thank you for sharing them with me."

"It was my honor."

They sat quietly together for a moment, the only sounds those made by the horses below them, and then Surial cleared his throat. "I should go."

Kade nodded. "Thank you for hearing my song. It pleases me that my memories will live on within you."

Surial looked surprised, but he smiled softly and nodded. "I'm glad we met."

"Yes. The Winds willed it." He had no doubt.

Looking skeptical, Surial stood. "Well, hopefully your winds will have better things for you in the future."

He didn't know how to answer that, unsure whether he'd insulted or overstepped his bounds, so he simply stood, touching his forehead and chest and nodding. "May the moon shine bright upon you."

Surial smiled again and repeated the motions. "And on you, Kadrass." Then he turned and went.

Kade gathered his things, putting them away, letting the sage burn away to ash. His braids clicked as they swung together, comforting and familiar as breathing. He stretched, watching the moon as it crested over the dunes. The stone in his newest braid glowed softly in the light and he pushed it back to join the others. The Winds blew with purpose and it was not his place to question, only to follow.

A nighthawk's feather, white with black at the tip caught on an eddy and fluttered up. Kade grabbed it with a smile, setting it aside for the next ritual.

With the mi'it making soft noises below and the moon overhead, the scent of sage lingering on the air, he could almost imagine he was out on the plains. He had a feeling his dreams this night would not be of his losses, but of the riches the Winds had given him, even if only for a short while.

Lying back amongst the straw, he stared up at the stars, singing softly of the Winds' blessings.

chapter twenty one

"The sands take you! You may be the single most stubborn person alive, Banshinaree!" Yamin's voice was furious, winging through the open room of his office, the edge of desperation sharp enough to slice. "This vanity of yours will find you stripped in the square and bled out, left for the vultures. Marry the little bitch and have it done with, Surial."

Yamin had come with the news only a few hours before, interrupting his coffee, interrupting his life.

"So you would have me die slowly instead of quickly? I will not spend the rest of my days hating my life. I will not." His hands were clasped in his lap, held so tightly one to the other that his knuckles had grown white. "I have no wish to die, Yamin, but I cannot marry the poor girl. I assure you we would both be quite miserable."

"Sands scour it! You don't have to touch her; don't even have to live with her! Marry her and put her in a little house in the center of town." Yamin paced, hands waving, sweating in his agitation. "You wouldn't be the first man to have a trophy wife, to have a quiet, loveless, pointless marriage."

"So I should accept a lie in order to live a lie? Where is the honor in that?" Surial chuckled as he heard his own words; he had heard a lot about honor in the last few months.

A heavy hand slammed down upon the low table, upsetting the cups. "This is no laughing matter, Surial!" Yamin pointed to the window, with the stables beyond. "Do you remember the blood when you beat the barbarian? Do you remember the groans? He was made to be beaten, you are a noble! You will suffer and bleed and die and your lands, your people, your name will be forfeit!"

Surial nodded, panic and inevitability mingling together, becoming a hard fist in his belly. "How long do you think before they come? There are things I must take care of. The papers for Lik'ta are already in Kade's name, I should make sure Mon'keur's are as well. And Argent has always been particularly fond of the glasswork. He should take that home with him now so there is no confusion later that it is his."

Yamin stopped short, looking at him with wide eyes. "Are you mad?"

He looked away, out the window, watching the heat rise from the sand, the midday sun strong and hot. "I would very much like to be. I think it would make the next few hours far, far better, but I fear that I am not."

"Please. Please do not throw your life away for nothing more than an inconvenience." Yamin's voice was thick, raw. "Your life need not change, Surial. You need never see the child. Please, think about what you do."

"All my life I have allowed others to dictate what I will do. It is time I grew up and took my fate into my own hands. I stood up to my brother, I will not allow Onise and her ilk to bully me in his stead." He stood, back straight, head held high. "I will deny the charges brought against me and either my word is enough in

this place or it is not."

"It will not be enough. Your word does not hold the weight of her money. You will die, Surial, and it will be for nothing."

Surial shook his head. Not for nothing. There was one man at least who would understand, who believed that honor was important, and Surial had found more to admire in that man in the months they had shared together than he'd found in any of Azize's denizens in all the years he had lived among them. "I will not be bullied by people with more money than brains and more greed than honor."

"No, you will be put to death by them." Yamin stiffened, hands clenching at his sides. "They come, Surial. Please, please reconsider. Do not throw your life away."

"I fear that I did so when I was fifteen, long before this day was even dreamed of." He clapped Yamin on the shoulder. "You have been a good friend to me, Yamin. I will understand if you feel you need to distance yourself from me now."

Yamin's tight-lipped silence answered him. The air seemed so dense, the white-washed walls suddenly thick and heavy, pressing in against him.

There was a knock on the door, the rap familiar. "Come, Argent."

The man entered, pale beneath the silver hair, face more solemn than usual, which for Argent was a feat. "My Helan..."

"Yes?"

"One of Madrise's nephews just arrived, out of breath -- he ran all the way from the town square. He says Sieki Onise and the Magistrate are on their way -- they are coming to arrest you, my Helan!"

Surial nodded. "Thank you, Argent. Show them to the formal sitting room when they arrive. Have lemonade ready." He turned to Yamin, with a twisted smile. "Onise hates lemonade."

Yamin shook his head. "Will you make jokes all the way to the whipping post?"

Argent gave a short, pained noise. "Whipping post? My Helan, no! I... shall I send a boat for your father? A messenger?"

"My father no longer runs the Banshinaree lands and I would imagine Erulial's reply would be to ask whether I had died on the fifth whip or the tenth. No, Argent, I think perhaps the best would be to send home anyone who doesn't need to be here and keep everyone else out of the way of the Magistrate's party." He turned his attention again to Yamin. "Would you have me run, Yamin. Or cry? Bemoan my fate? Have I not already said I would not lower myself for the dog Onise?"

"I would have you live, you stubborn goat! I would have you tease me for being nervous when Pela is heavy with child and celebrate the moon." Yamin shooed Argent away. "Do as your master says and send a runner to my wife, tell her I need her."

"But that only paints half the picture, my friend. And I cannot live with the half you did not paint, the woman I do not want as my wife, heavy with the child I have no wish for." Sighing he sat heavily in the light chair. "I should go change. This suit is too warm for such matters. I will be sweating in a matter of moments."

Yamin shook his head. "Go then, and hurry. They're here. I will speak with them while you dress." Yamin's hand fell on his shoulder. "Please my friend. Think before you come down. You have only one life and it is growing short." Then the man disappeared, large frame moving through the door, steps heavy on the stairs.

Surial closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to capture the peace that had filled this room just short hours ago, before Yamin's visit. But now he was hot and sticky and hours of arguing and Yamin's yelling had taken their toll. The heavy weight of the charges about to be made were no small matter either. Why couldn't they all just let him be? Why must there always be an Erulial or an Onise ready to turn every happiness he found into a bitter draught?

It scared him, the thought of the pain and the shame and the blood, the idea of being torn and broken, of being lost and left for the vultures. The idea of living beneath the thumb of Onise scared him even more deeply. It had not been that long ago that he stood up to his brother, fully expecting to die for his troubles. That he had not still amazed him. He would not sell that new-won freedom to Onise; he had a feeling she could crush his spirit more surely than his brother ever had.

Sharp voices sounded downstairs, followed by Yamin's furious tones. He needed to move, to change clothes, to go downstairs and meet his fate.

He didn't run, walking at a normal pace to his bedroom. There he undressed and splashed water on his face, beneath his arms, and at his groin. He dried and powdered and then got dressed. A crisp white suit, cut in the Azize style, fitted to perfection. Neither the traditional dress of his homeland, nor the showy colors of his adopted city, it proclaimed his loyalty to only himself. His hair had grown nearly to his shoulders and he brushed the wavy length and left it unfettered and uncovered. With the same careful and unhurried strides, he made his way to the front room.

To his surprise, Yamin had stopped them in the courtyard, large body blocking the door, snapping and snarling as seriously as he'd ever heard his friend. "You will not foul this house with your lies, Onise. Lord Bانشinaree has violated no one!"

"I have witnesses! One who saw the rape with his own eyes! My poor child! Ruined and desecrated by this outsider!" By the volume of her shrieks, the entire neighborhood would have heard, cementing his reputation.

"Who is this witness who comes forward to spread lies? Who claims to have spied a man raping a defenseless girl but does nothing to stop it?" Yamin's voice carried as well. Surial could see the servants that remained coming around to the courtyard. Even Kade was out, the big man standing at Argent's shoulder.

His heart sank as Vanshi's oily tones sounded. "It is well-known that Bانشinaree is one of little control, perverse tastes. Until I spoke with the Sieki Onise I believed it one of his little actor sluts, playing a role."

"So you did not actually see who it was he was supposedly raping -- how could you even be sure it was him?" Yamin was still on the offensive, attempting to halt the entire production before it even started. Surial feared it was far too late for that. He had stood up to Erulial a day too late.

"Enough." The Magistrate's voice cut across the clamor of voices, tones flat and dry as the high desert sands. "The charge has been made, witnesses presented, the girl interrogated. I will speak to Sieka Bانشinaree."

Surial stepped forward, raising his hand to Yamin's arm, forestalling the protest he knew was coming. "Your friendship and loyalty are most gratifying, my friend, but it is now time for me to deny the charges for myself."

He turned to Onise and gave her a mocking bow, offering the same to Vanshi. For the magistrate and the poor girl in the center of this little tempest, he offered deeper bows of respect. "I am Surial Banshinaree. Speak your business, Magistrate."

"A most serious charge has been made, Sieka Banshinaree. Sieki Onise and her daughter claim you violated her, took that which was not yours to take. The Lord Vanshi speaks as her witness." The dark eyes stared at him, emotionless and serious. "How do you answer?"

"They lie." He looked Onise in the eye. "You lie, Madam."

Onise burst into tears, pointing and screaming. "Violator! Raped my daughter and then accuses me of lying! Magistrate! I demand justice! I demand that he face the whip! I have provided witnesses and voting quorum!"

"And enough money to ease any problems." Yamin's voice was dry, quiet. "Please, Surial. Please."

"Unlike some," he said, looking pointedly at the red-faced Onise, "I have my dignity and my pride. And I have the truth. I did not rape this poor girl and I beseech you, Madam Onise, not to continue with this, take pity on her and let this untruth lie."

"Where were you the night of the last horned moon, Sieka Banshinaree?" Surial almost groaned; he had been riding with Kade, racing along the beach, Mon'keur warm beneath him.

The trap had been well-laid. Someone must have been watching his movements to be sure he had no witness to his own whereabouts other than Kade. His own championing of the man against Vanshi would make Kade's testimony suspect, even if the Magistrate would allow a former slave to speak. "Riding with my groomsmen." He let none of his thoughts show in his face or voice.

Yamin's groan was almost hidden by Vanshi's triumphant cry. "You expect these wise men to accept the word of a vakla over mine, Foreigner? Your ways are not our own. Perhaps in Sandide, you can rape noblewomen and wallow amongst the peshir without consequence, but it is not so here!"

The Magistrate spoke again. "You have no nobleman to vouch for your whereabouts?"

"I have never judged the worth of a man by the money he holds or the man who fathered him. Such things do not make a man honest. I have my own word."

"Yes, Sieka, but the Sieki Onise has not only her word, but the word of Sieka Vanshi, her daughter, and the support of many. If you do not accept guilt and penance, then you or your proxy must prove your word beneath the lash. It is the law." The Magistrate spoke simply, without heat.

His heart sank, his last hope crumbling away like a sandcastle beneath the waves. He hadn't realized he'd been holding on to it until it was gone. Nonetheless he held his chin high, his back straight, proud. "I will not lie and accept guilt that is not mine, even to save myself."

In the resulting silence a single, guttural voice spoke. "I will stand as the sieka's proxy."

The courtyard erupted with voices, angry and unpleasant, both Onise and Vanshi attempting to refute the offer. The Magistrate was attempting to bring the impromptu court back to order.

Time seemed to slow for Surial himself, the strident voices little more than the angry buzz of insects. His

eyes found Kade, the man standing as straight and proud as Surial, face calm, determined. Surial felt his heart leap, relief making him weak, but he pushed those emotions away. He could not let Kade take the lashes in his stead; it would not be right.

"Thank you, but I cannot accept." Once again, his words brought silence.

Yamin snarled, low and angry. "Don't be a fool, Surial!"

Before he could respond the Magistrate spoke, "The choice does not belong to you, Sieka Banshinaree. It belongs to the one wronged. Lady Aylia, will you accept the barbarian as proxy in this matter?"

The watery brown eyes looked up at him, full of shame and quiet fear. He shook his head and her jaw firmed, lifting. He could see Onise's hand upon her upper arm, the girl's dark skin white where it was being pinched. "Yes, Magistrate. The barbarian chooses to vouch for the accused's honor, let the barbarian prove the truth before the gods."

"No!" Onise's screech split the air. "Banshinaree has to take the lashes himself if he won't marry the girl and make it right!"

The Magistrate shook his head. "The choice is hers and hers alone."

"She misspoke." Onise smiled at the man, her sudden attempt at charm almost enough to make Surial laugh.

He watched the by-play, stomach in his throat, unsure which outcome to be hoping for. He had no wish to die, but at the same time, it would be wrong to ask another to take the lashes in his stead. He could remember whipping Kade. Everything about that day was burned into his memory. The early sun making the sands shine. The feel of the whip in his hand, the sound it made as it flew through the air. The sound it made as it hit flesh. Kade's skin tearing open. The blood.

He felt faint suddenly.

The Magistrate repeated his question and the girl took a step away from her mother, eyes unwavering. "I accept the barbarian as proxy."

"It is done then. At dawn, Lord Banshinaree, you and your proxy will be escorted to the square to meet your judgment. If he still breathes at the fall of the seventieth lash, your name is cleared. If he is dead when the final lash falls, you will pay restitution to the family in the sum of two million whelani. You will remain here this night. I will leave guards posted to assure you are not... attacked."

Surial grew fainter at the magistrate's words and he wavered where he stood, grateful for Yamin's sudden support. Seventy lashes. Seventy. Ten had been hard enough, Kade's back had been open and raw, bloody. But, seventy. He was filled with gratitude and horror. Yamin had been right, he probably would not have lasted ten himself, but seventy -- no man could survive seventy lashes. He found Kade's eyes, but could not hold the gaze, sorrow and shame filling him.

He should have accepted the bitch's offer to marry the girl.

The death of a man settled and the drama prevented until dawn, the crowd began to dissipate, Onise and Vanshi were forced to leave and allow the household one last night of normalcy. Argent stood, blank and pale, in the courtyard, Kade a few steps behind, watching the people leave. Yamin clapped his shoulder, smiling widely. "Thank the gods your man stepped forth! It is a glorious day and I will sacrifice a bull in your honor, my friend."

Surial shrugged Yamin's arm off, rounding on his friend. "Save your bull and your celebrations. I take no joy in knowing another dies in my stead." He glared at all of them: Yamin, Argent, Kade, and back to Yamin again. "If I could figure out a way to negate the offer I would."

Kade's eyes fell upon him, steady and still. "You cannot fight the ways the Winds blow, my friend. No one can."

"And you!" He walked up to Kade, glaring up at the big man. "Do you think it pleases me that you offer to die for me? Do you value your own life so little?"

"I value my life highly, Surial." Eyes the color of sunlit honey looked down at him, more at peace than Surial could remember them being. "I simply value your life more."

Surial chuckled suddenly. "You are determined to make me a better man than I am." He took one of Kade's hands in his own, their flesh tingling where it met as he sent healing and well-being into the man. "I shall endeavor to deserve your sacrifice."

"I am a strong man, my friend. Do not discount me. I will clear your name." Sure and steady, no fear in his face. "I need to make arrangements, honor the Winds, speak with the mi'it."

"Thank you, Kade." The words were simple, almost inadequate, but he would not cloud his gratitude with perfumed words that meant little in his heart. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Assure that my songs are remembered, that my name is not lost."

"I will devote my life to it." He sent more healing energy into Kade, hoping to help buoy the man's strength; if he could do anything to prevent Kade's death, he would -- not because it would clear his own name, but because this man, of all men, did not deserve to die. "My household and I are at your service -- name only what you need, no matter how large or small."

"I will need to bathe and straighten my braids, settle my things. I..." Kade stopped and took a deep breath. "I would listen to you read before the morning, after my business is done. Would you sing one of your books for me again?"

"It will be my honor to do so. I shall await your pleasure in the library."

Yamin was still there when he turned, the joy on his friend's face almost obscene. "I should go, my friend, tell Pela the news. I will, of course, be at your service if you need me tomorrow."

He tried to find the words to be polite, to offer Yamin thanks for his words, but he could not. He was not thankful, he was saddened. Yamin was really no different than the other nobles he shared the city with. He managed a tight nod. "Give your wife my best."

Yamin clapped him on the arm again. "Forgive me, my friend, but I am happy to know that you will live. Even your dour moods cannot quench the happiness in my heart." Yamin laughed and gave him a short bow, turning and performing another in Kade's direction. "Thank you."

Then he was gone, leaving the courtyard deserted but for Argent, Kade, and Surial himself.

Surial turned to his man. "Argent, please make sure that Kade has whatever he needs. I will be in the library."

As he made his way into his home, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was meant to spend the night under the stars.

It had taken little time to bathe, to redo his braids. He had pulled all the decorations strung from the ceiling, found his cup and bowl, gathered the beads and feathers and shells up and put them all in a small box and placed them on the folded blankets that he had slept upon. His spare pants and vest, his saddle, his rahat -- they all slept beside the hay. No one would ever know from looking that a warrior had lived here.

The sun was well set, the smell of food wafting out into the night air as he climbed down the ladder to tend the mi'it. Each one was brushed and caressed, fed and watered. To Mon'keur he sang of song of pride and strength, to Grandam one of foals and easy tempers. Noka was most beautiful, Srawa was fine-boned and graceful. One by one, he sang their gifts, letting his pride and joy fill the stables, honoring them one last time. Then he came to Lik'ta's stall, looking into the soft brown eyes.

"And you, my Lik'ta? What song would you hear from me?" He reached out, rubbing the velvet ears, the sleek, strong neck and shoulder. This was the hardest part, to make one so young understand the price of duty, the price of being a man. The colt, just beginning to show his adult musculature, nuzzled against his hands, his chest. The liquid eyes were concerned, worry evident in the restless snorts and nickers.

"Kama'asi, mi'it." He continued the soft touches, singing soft and low, letting his love and joy ring through the stables. "One day, Lik'ta, I know you will run through the tall grasses, dance upon the snow, eat the tiny spring apples from the trees. You will feel the Winds in your mane and your songs will be sung over many fires, the drummers chanting your name."

Lik'ta answered him, singing to him of careful hands and warm eyes that always had seiba and sugar and knew just where the itches were. Grandam called, gentle and sweet, telling of the one who listened, who eased her pain. Mon'keur's voice added a tale of a warrior, one whose heart beat with the freedom of a mi'it itself. One by one, the songs honored him as no one had in a dozen years, filling him with pride. He would enter his Land of Summer and his people would await him, this song ringing upon the Winds themselves.

He left the stables with his heart at peace, eyes searching out the moon and the open sky. Argent awaited him in the courtyard, tray in hand, eyes solemn and sad. "Would you eat, Kade?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No. I will need to face tomorrow clean and pure."

"I... Thank you, Kade. His lordship would not have survived the punishment, of that I am sure. Seventy lashes is a harsh trial, but if there is any man who can take it..."

"Let us not have lies between us, my friend. I will die tomorrow and save the life of one with great gifts to give the world." He walked over to the bench where he and Argent had shared many tales and songs and sat down with a sigh. "My things are in the loft. I wish them to be given to the Helan once I am gone. Will you see to it?"

Argent put the tray down by the door and joined him. He looked old suddenly, back slightly bowed, wrinkles standing out on his face. "I will give them to the Helan, you have my word."

"Be at ease, Argent. I am free man, a hi'icha. There is no greater honor among my people than this." He looked down at his braids, decorated simply, a mark of his manhood, his status.

"Is there anything I can do for you? Anything I can get you?"

He shook his head. "Go home to your family, Argent. I will count the stars, I will hear the Helan sing one of his books, and I will watch the dawn. I need nothing." The guards walked along the gateway path, assuring that he did not run. "Do you remember when I came here? You removed my chains and dunked me in a tub. You were good to me."

Argent smiled and nodded. "I remember. You were quite a sight to behold, a great, bearded, braided man. I am still surprised the Helan brought you in."

"The Winds blow you where they will, my friend." He stood, their laughter ringing through the courtyard. "Go home, Argent. Tomorrow will come soon enough, with all the problems of dawn."

"You are a great man, Kade." Argent patted his shoulder and turned away, headed silently back into the house.

He looked up, catching sight of Surial sitting silent in an upstairs window. The angled face was pale, staring across the sea at the white cliffs where the waves crashed. It was not a great thing, to follow the song in your heart.

It was, however, a hard thing to silence it.

Usually, spending time in the library relaxed him. The scent of leather and paper and ink was soothing, holding the promise of adventure, escape. But this night he couldn't settle, neither in the comfortable high-backed chair, nor with any book. Surial poked aimlessly through the tomes, reading a paragraph from this one and a page from that one. Ostensibly he was searching out a book to read to Kade, but the truth was that he couldn't focus. Not with the morning's whipping growing closer with every passing moment.

He was still both terribly glad and terribly sad that Kade had offered himself as proxy, and the duality was making him uncomfortable, like he had an itch beneath his skin.

"My friend?" Kade's voice sounded, low and steady. "Are you busy? Should I return later?"

He was almost startled, though he'd been waiting for Kade's arrival. He managed an almost normal smile for his friend, once vakla and now savior. "I was just choosing a book to read to you. Come in and have a seat."

Kade nodded, smiling back. Without a word, he took the heavy chair beside the fire. The big man seemed to enjoy it, his girth filling it easily, the callused fingers searching out the carvings in the armrests automatically.

"I thought maybe one of the books from my childhood. This one is the history of Sandide -- more or less. Told as a story. It works on many levels and it's always fascinated me to see what I notice upon reading it again."

He brought the book over to show Kade the worn, leather bound pages, to let the big man hold it, flip the pages, smell the musty ink rising. For Surial, reading was so much more than just words. Kade's fingers stroked the pages carefully, tracing the gilt work along the edges with fascination. He looked through quietly, taking in the illustrations, the calligraphy with his still eyes. "It looks well-sung, as a story should be. I

would be honored to hear it."

"Would you like to watch the words as I read?" Surial asked, hovering. He wasn't quite sure where to sit.

Kade looked up with a nod. "I would like that. Very much."

That Kade could still find the simple act of listening to a story pleasurable, that this would be Kade's request for this most important night, filled Surial with honor. Without thought of protocol or position or place, he sat on the floor by the chair, book open in his lap so Kade could see it over his shoulder. He had learned to read this way, though then it had been his mother's heat behind him, reassuring and familiar. It seemed fitting that he should again sit this way with someone else protecting him at his back.

Kade leaned forward, watching. One long braid fell over his shoulder, laced with a single dark green stone and tied with a red silk. Long enough to just kiss the pages of the beloved book, it seemed almost metallic in the lamplight -- copper wire plaited together.

The book was long and Surial read, Kade quiet and attentive behind him, until dawn's light began to pink the room. Kade sat back with a smile, warm and genuine. "Thank you, my friend. You have given me a great gift. I will carry your song within me on my journey."

"I... I want to thank you but I don't know how." Surial looked at the fire that had long since died, not even the embers still burning to be blown back into life. "How do you thank someone who will die in your stead?"

"You live, my friend. You live." Kade stood with a sigh. "They will be coming for us soon. I regret that you will have to see this."

Surial shook his head. Even if he'd had a choice he would not have abandoned Kade to go through it alone. He touched Kade's knee, closing his eyes and letting the healing energy flow from himself to his friend, giving him as much strength as he could.

Something brushed over the top of his head, the touch so soft, so fast, he might have imagined it. "I will clear your name, my friend. I will survive the final stroke."

"And I will heal you when you do," he vowed. He turned suddenly as it occurred to him that Kade had never questioned his innocence. "You believe me when I say I didn't do it."

"Of course. You are a good man. Only a blind man would see otherwise." Kade looked at him, not so much as a hint of doubt in those eyes.

"Thank you, Kadras." He spoke the words, using the name Kade had told him was the man's 'true' name. It was important to Surial that Kade knew that he was risking his life for a just reason.

"It is my honor, Surial."

Argent's knock came, the man looking as if he'd aged thirty years overnight. "They say it is time, my Helan, Kade. Dawn has come."

"Thank you, Argent, please tell them we are on our way." He turned back to Kade and clasped the man's hand, letting more of his healing flow into the man. He could not have held it back if he'd wanted to, and he did not want to. "It has been an honor knowing you, Kade. An honor I hope to continue to have."

Kade nodded, fingers tightening around his for a mere moment and then he moved away, jaw set. "Shall we face the Winds, my friend? See how we are judged?"

Taking a deep breath and straightening his back, Surial nodded and led the way to the courtyard.

chapter twenty two

Dawn crept across the sky like a shy virgin as Savina stepped into the town square, blending in with the servants and merchants gathered to watch. The nobles were gathered along the shady side of the square, as eager as vultures at the kill.

She was still high from the boy. His magic was raw and untamed, not exactly pure, but the boy himself was pure enough to make the difference and it had been so long since she tasted pure magic that she was beginning to forget what it felt like. That should be rectified soon unless the recent reports of small, inexplicable healings among the servants were wrong.

The crowd was eager, a living thing made up of many people. She could smell the hint of blood; soon the air would be dripping with it. Her own anticipation was like a snake around her ribs, coiled and tightening, robbing her of her breath. The blood would be good, the magic, if it happened, far better.

When they brought the victim, her eyes widened. Huge, proud, carrying the scars of a warrior, braids past his waist and no fear -- a Naik going to the slaughter. However, it was the man who followed that she was really interested in. Flanked by two of the Magistrate's guard's, he was led to stand with the Magistrate and his accuser.

She felt her breath growing faint as she took a good look. If she had only come to see him herself at the start she would have needed to search no further. He was the image of his grandfather before... well, before. The fury, born of something deep and rich and thick, ran through her veins at the sight. It slowed her heartbeat, burning away the pleasure the boy had given her, burning away everything but the face of the man she'd searched for. She watched the Banshinaree watch the Naik, she saw the pain there and she willed the braided man to die.

As the first stroke of the whip fell her thirst for the Naik's blood increased. She imagined she could smell Banshinaree's pain from across the square, imagined she could see the look in his eyes as he watched the braided man beneath the kiss of the whip.

She would taste it, up close and personal, this familiar pain. It was an acquired taste, but once under the tongue, quite addictive. He was looking rather pale and horrified. In time he would come to believe the whip a kind death, she would see to that.

It was hot. The sun shone into the square, reflecting off the sand and he couldn't get away from it. It felt like it was noon rather than just past dawn. The flies were buzzing about, hordes of them, gathering, waiting for the sands to clear so they could lay their eggs in the blood left behind. They reminded Surial of the crowds that had come to watch, buzzing, the noise increasing with every strike of whip to skin.

The rhythm of the blows was inescapable, one after another, leather slicing into skin. The sounds were becoming wet, heavy, almost thudding into Kade's body. Kade was still standing, still silent, although his eyes had closed by the thirtieth stroke, the big head falling forward at the forty-fifth.

Surial's body jerked with the sound of every blow and slow tears leaked from his eyes, burning against his cheeks. Each blow that fell was meant for him; that knowledge burned to his core.

The sixtieth time the whip fell, Surial no longer felt the heat or heard the buzzing of flies or crowd. The sound of the whip through the air, the sound of it landing on torn and bloody flesh filled his head, was everything. Kade's knees buckled at sixty-five, the huge body dangling now, pulling against the bonds. The final five blows literally moved Kade against the pole, the bloodied, broken man no longer resisting.

The silence when the blows stopped was huge, obscene, heavy.

The Magistrate's voice sounded. "Is the barbarian dead?"

To Surial's surprise, Kade's head tilted up, tear-stained, scarred cheeks lifting to the sun. "I... I live."

"Then the gods have spoken. The Sieka Banshinaree is innocent." There were more words spoken, but Surial didn't hear them. As he watched, Kade convulsed, body jerking hard against the pole for a moment. Then the man fell still, limp, eyes rolling up into his head as he hung there, unbreathing.

No! He didn't know if he spoke the word aloud, if he shouted it or whispered it or didn't utter it at all, but it echoed through his head as he ran to Kade's side.

"No." He put his hands against Kade's back, his palms sliding slickly through the blood.

"No," he said it again. "By the moon's fair face, you will not die, Kade. I could not bear it."

He fed healing into his friend and savior until his legs began to shake and his knees buckled. Someone -- Argent -- was there, trying to help him up and he grabbed his manservant's arm, pulling the energy from Argent, from the air, from the plants forced to grow about the ring, and feeding more healing into Kade.

Argent gasped but didn't pull away, though he finally whispered softly that he was growing faint and Surial let his arm go and collapsed against Kade's back, the scent of blood strong in his nose. It took a moment before he realized that the body he was leaning against was moving, slow, unsteady breaths making Kade's back rise and fall.

"He lives, my Helan." Argent's voice was stunned. "Kade lives."

"Cut him down," he rasped, letting Argent help him stand. He became aware of the crowd again, the buzzing of them, some cheering, some booing, the Magistrate's men keeping them back. Onise was shrieking and complaining, Yamin trying to shout her down, and Surial realized only moments must have passed, although it had felt like an eternity.

"I said cut him down," he snarled at the whip master. "Yamin! Stop your yammering and help me get him to the carriage."

The whip master sliced the bonds, Kade slumping with a thud to the sands. The big man gave a soft moan, eyelids fluttering.

Surial leaned over him. "Kade! Kade!" He shook the broad shoulders. "Kadras."

Kade's eyes opened, blood-red and unfocused, blinking against the sun. When Surial leaned forward, shading his face, Kade smiled. One trembling hand reached up and touched his cheek, sliding through the blood. "Isna chaffa ki'ita. My One."

Kade gave him another warm, dazed smile and then those eyes closed again, the smile remaining. The chest beneath his hand rose and fell, assuring him that Kade still breathed. He stroked the big man's cheek, fingers bloodied, trembling.

"Come, my friend! Off the ground as if you were one of the peasants! You're causing a scene, just adding gossip for them to chew on for days!" He looked up into Yamin's smiling face, his friend jovial, seeming unable to focus beyond the proof of Surial's innocence.

"Then help me get him to the carriage and we will be away from here."

Savina fell to her knees. She couldn't see, couldn't hear, could do nothing but kneel there, the magic screaming at her, blinding and deafening her. So pure. So pure.

She had not felt its like since she had been banished by her One, her mate, her husband, her tormentor and abuser.

The magic filled the air, filled every breath she took. For long moments there was nothing but its pure call, its sweet taste all she knew.

Someone touched her, helped her stand, and she looked about at these animals that made their home in the sands -- how could they be unaware of the power around them, the magic that floated on the air? Fools.

She whimpered as the magic faded, as the source moved, grew dimmer as Banshinaree hid away in a carriage and left the square.

Gasping, pulling her veil around her face, she stood beneath the sun's harsh rays, the sand hot and gritty beneath her feet. The stench of these Azize dogs was all around her, sweat and perfume mixing to noxious fumes, trying to drive the simple purity of the magic from her.

She fled, holding tightly to the sweet sensations pouring through her. She had forgotten -- oh, sweet Lady Moon! How could she have forgotten something so pure, so sweet, so essential? She knew suddenly that she could not go back to the half-breeds that littered the sands. She would feed from the pure magic or starve.

Banshinaree would be hers.

The first thing he noticed when he woke was the steady song within him, the healing that poured into him, keeping the pain at bay.

The second thing was the smell of honey and cinnamon and spice.

Kade moved on the unnatural softness of the feather mattress, struggling to sit up, to move. His body ached,

exposed back complaining. "A'chaffa!"

"Kade?" The voice was weak. "Argent! He wakes."

"Yes, ki'ita." He nodded, shaking his head to clear his vision. He remembered the whip falling, remembered falling and falling toward a great sun-drenched land, remembered Surial's voice calling him away from the arms of his lost.

He remembered answering that call.

"Kita? Kade, it's Surial -- you're in the house at Azize. You took the whipping for me -- do you remember?" Surial's voice was so soft, as if the very words were costing him energy.

"Yes. Yes, I remember." He reached a hand out, trying to keep Surial from tiring himself further. "You must rest. Heal yourself."

Surial chuckled softly, eyes seeming huge in his pale face. "As soon as you're all right, I'm planning on sleeping for three moons straight. Maybe four."

"Well, I see that you're both awake. Maybe now you'll both eat." Argent's voice interrupted them, the man standing at the door with a tray. "Madrise will come up and spoon-feed you herself if these bowls are not emptied."

Kade pushed himself upright, forcing back the wince as his newly-healed skin tugged and pulled. "I could eat four bowls of anything right now, Argent." His friend looked pale and tired, but the horror and panic that had aged Argent so had faded, was lost. "Bright blessings, my friend."

Argent nodded. "Yes, my friend. It is good to have you back. Quite a show you and the Helan put on." Argent shook his head. "I am not sure that the Helan will ever be accepted in society again without suspicion, but he is alive and his name cleared, thanks to you, Kade."

"You're assuming the Helan wants to be accepted by society," said Surial, voice sardonic despite his obvious weariness. "And stop talking about me like I'm not in the room."

"The Helan's temper has returned, all must be well." Kade chuckled as he teased, eagerly accepting the bowl of meal and honey with surprisingly shaky hands. His stomach growled like a spring bear's, loud and sharp.

Argent gave him a smile and then placed the second bowl in front of Surial. "Eat, my Helan. You need your strength."

Surial took the spoon Argent offered and then waved the man away. "You'd better get Kade a couple more bowls."

He smiled at Argent and then turned slowly to face Surial. The ba'chi looked exhausted, eyes swollen and bruised, cheeks drawn. It ached inside, to know that the pain came to help him, heal him.

"Thank you."

"It is I who thank you, Kade. If you had not stepped forward, I would be dead, my servants and goods scattered." Surial sighed. "A little bit of tiredness seems a small price to pay."

"It was my honor." His duty. His gift from the Winds themselves.

"Yes, almost dying, how wonderful for you."

Kade looked over, watching Surial carefully. "I knew you were innocent. It is my duty to protect."

Surial shook his head. "You are my groomsman, not my rowani. I will not have anyone dying for me." He was fixed with a sharp look. "You will not do such a thing again."

Surial collapsed back into his chair, eyes closing.

"I will do as I must." Simple, serious -- the healer would understand or he wouldn't. It made no difference. The Winds had blown the defenseless before the warrior, the ba'chi before the hi'icha, and Kade would not allow Surial to be hurt.

Surial opened the forest eyes to glare at him. He met the look without a blink. In this he would never falter. Surial dropped his gaze first. "Stubborn fool."

"Perhaps." He smiled and reached to touch Surial's shoulder. "But still your friend, yes?"

That earned him a warm smile. "Yes, Kade. Most assuredly."

Kade grinned, taking another bite of meal. "You will not heal, if you do not eat. Are you not hungry? Did it hurt you, to heal me?"

"It didn't hurt, it just tired me -- you were dead for a few moments, I believe." Surial stared down at his food. "I was banished once for trying what I did yesterday."

"Why?" Kade was utterly confused. The ba'chi were honored, battled over, Tribal leaders for his people. None were so honored.

"Healing had been forbidden to me and I tried, I really did, not to use it. Then my mother... she was dying and they were just letting her go!"

"Forbidden? Surial, you can not deny the Winds. It was wrong that you were asked to." Kade kept his hand on the thin arm, trying to comfort. "Did you heal her then? I know she has gone to the Land of Summer with my mother."

Surial shook his head, the look in his eyes pained. "I tried but my father stopped me and then..." Surial looked away. "She died."

"And I live." He waited until Surial looked at him again. "The gift is yours. They cannot deny it."

Surial gave him a small smile. "Eat, Kade. You need your strength."

He nodded over to Surial's bowl. "Join me?"

Surial waved his hand. "I'm afraid that hunger eludes me."

"Perhaps I can share mine with you." He reached out took Surial's hands. "Please, the next days will bring consequences and we will need our wits. It is the way of things. Heal yourself, my friend."

"I have not spent the last days healing you only to take your strength again. I just need to sleep. I'm so tired."

"Then sleep." Kade blinked. "Days? How... how many days?"

"Four," murmured Surial, eyes blinking slowly, almost closing and then opening again. "It seems like a lifetime."

"It seems like only a moment..." He shook his head, watching as the blinks grew longer and slower, the healer fading quickly.

Surial's hand reached out toward him and then dropped into his lap, the Helan fast asleep.

Kade watched for a long time, thinking, feeling his new skin throb with a newly-born heartbeat. Then he stood and gathered Surial in his arms, placing the exhausted man in the bed and covering him.

Dizzy, his strength fading, Kade took up residence in the padded chair and watched the Helan sleep until his own dreams took him.

Argent carefully poured fresh water into the ewer and added several springs of the sweet tassi leaf. Madrise passed him two bowls of soup, one only broth, the other full of lentils and kase balls and raba roots. Steaming rolls dripping with butter were set on a plate and still warm honey cakes on another. He had few illusions -- the tray would come back nearly empty, but only one man would have eaten anything of substance. Kade's brown eyes would look sadly at him and the big man would shake his head, worried gaze searching out the Helan, still and sleeping on the bed.

In the five days since Kade had awoken, Argent had seen the Helan's eyes open three times. A healer had been sent for, the man having nothing of use to offer; in fact he'd said Seika Banshinaree was going to die. Kade had growled, making the man flee. Argent had been unsympathetic to the man's fears. They would tend the Helan until he was well.

He carried the tray up the stairs, quietly opening the door. To his surprise, Kade had the Helan wrapped in a blanket, held close in strong arms. Kade's face looked haunted, desperate. "He is fading away. He does not want to stay, to live."

Argent looked at the pale face, which almost looked happy, almost at peace.

"What can we do?" He refused to just give up; in the eight years since the Helan had come to Azize he had become as a son to Argent.

"I am going to make him stay. My will is as great, my need greater." Kade looked up. "Have a bath drawn. Fresh clothes and bedding brought. It is time for him to come home."

Argent looked at the man before him. A foreigner like the Helan, Kade was also a barbarian, a former vakla, but Kade had been nothing but faithful, loyal to the point of sacrificing his own life. And Kade more than any of them, understood and accepted the strange and wonderful magic the Helan had.

He nodded. "We need him, Kade."

"Yes. A bath, Argent." Kade brushed the dark hair from the Helan's face, murmuring in a foreign tongue.

He watched for a moment longer, wondering at the devotion that Kade held for Seika Banshinaree, wondering if it grew entirely out of gratitude at being rescued. He shook himself and called for Madrise's boys to bring a bath, got Aya moving on the bed linens and clothes.

They had need of their Helan. Azize was still sitting in stunned shock over the events surrounding Seiki Onise's accusations, but it would leap soon, strike at them like a snake.

And when the serpent bit...

He shuddered, feeling ill and old, trusting Kade with their hope.

It was almost two weeks after the trial before Surial felt well enough to leave his bed.

He'd actually been feeling fairly good the last couple of days, but Argent's constant nagging about dealing with the 'serious ramifications' regarding the trial had him playing the invalid a little longer than was strictly necessary.

There was a limit to how long a man could lie about, though, and he had reached his this morning.

Bathed, fed, and dressed, he wandered down to the paddock to watch Kade play with Lik'ta.

It was amazing, the changes that had been wrought in the man. The long braids shone in the sun, as did the dark skin. No longer thin, Kade seemed massive, heavily muscled as he ran beside the yearling, encouraging Lik'ta to jump and follow.

Even the new whip marks were only pink lines in a mass of white scars covering every part of the man's back. It made him angry, those marks. His part in adding to them, in being a part of the world of slavery, if only for a short while, made him even madder. Human beings were not beasts to be owned and whipped and bought and sold.

He tried to push the anger away, though, lest Kade believe it was directed at him. Instead, he sat in one of the chairs that now made their home out here, Argent making sure that there would be no repeat of him sitting on the fence. It made him chuckle -- poor Argent, so worried about how things looked, that they should be proper.

Mon'keur ambled up to him, velvet nose nuzzling and nickering at him. The sounds were almost chiding, worried, and Kade chuckled as he walked up beside. "Your mi'it has worried long for you, friend Surial."

He petted the big animal, finding solace with the beast as he always did. Mon'keur was his longest standing friend and the only one from Sandide who was with him still. He allowed himself a moment's sorrow for his rowani. The man had been honest and true and had missed Sandide as much as he himself did, understood his yearnings for the waters and the cliffs.

Kade watched for a heartbeat, then Lik'ta shoved the big man hard, recapturing Kade's attention and focus. "Oh, but you are a demanding mi'it! Jealous and spoiled!"

Surial laughed at their antics, at the way the big man pretended to be gruff and angry and ill-tempered with the colt, who didn't believe any of it for a second. Kade shoved back, winking at Surial, making Lik'ta dance and whinny, fine head swaying.

Laughing some more, Surial dug a sabai out of his pocket and gave it to Mon'keur, rubbing the big horse's nose as he watched Kade and Lik'ta continue to play.

"It is good to see you awake, laughing." Kade pulled a treat from his waistband, feeding it to Lik'ta, stroking the dark mane. "I was afraid you were lost."

He shook his head. "I don't remember much after the whipping -- just the heat. It is so interminably hot in this place and no way to escape it."

Kade nodded, then gave him a long, curious look. "How long will you stay in this place? In the sands?"

He returned the look. "What do you mean? This is my home now -- I have nowhere else to go."

"I do not understand. You are a free man." Kade looked honestly confused, the heavy brow low and furrowed.

"I cannot return to Sandide -- where else would I go? I know nobody in any other lands."

"But if you are unhappy here, why would you not take your mi'it and leave? Find another land?"

He blinked up at Kade. "But I can't. I have responsibilities here. A household to look after."

He could still hear his father's words. "You are getting a second chance, Surial, do not make a mess of it for there will be no others."

"Oh." Kade still looked confused, shaking his head. "Can you not move your tribe? Is that not done?"

"Their homes are here, Kade -- I could not ask them to leave."

He sighed and shook his head. It was appealing, the thought of just getting on Mon'keur's back and leaving. But he did have responsibilities here; what would they do without him?

Kade's shoulders seemed to slump a bit, eyes looking toward the sea with a sudden hunger. Then the strong chin was lifted, shoulders straightening. "The Winds blow as they will."

Any answer he might have given was forestalled by the arrival of Argent. "Helan, there is someone here to see you. Someone from far away who says they know your family. I have already turned her away twice in the last week as you were not well."

Someone from home? Could it be? "Show her to the sitting room, Argent, I will be there in a moment."

Kade backed away, clicking his tongue for the mounts. "Bright blessings in your day, Helan. It was good to see you smiling again." He smiled as he stood to go, watching Kade and the horses for a moment longer; the man made him smile with his honest enjoyment of life and the horses. His eyes were caught by a worried, golden gaze. "If you have need of me, I will be close."

"You are not my rowani, Kade -- I would not put you in any more danger than I already have." He shuddered. "No more pain. No more death."

Kade flushed. "I will do as I must, Helan."

He shook his head. Stubborn man.

Picking up his turban as he went, he tucked his hair beneath it as he made his way to the sitting room. His mind turned toward his home as he wondered who it was who waited for him.

A regal looking woman waited for him in the formal sitting room, dressed simply and formally in the most expensive cloth. One snow-white eyebrow rose as he entered. "Helan Banshinaree, it is good to see you well."

He gave a low bow. "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, Helana."

She stood with a smile. "I am Savina, a long-time friend of your grandfather, the Talik Pendele. I was told you lived in this fine city, and came to pay my respects." Her voice was rich, pleasant, and low.

He bowed again. "Helana Savina." He gestured for her to sit and then sat in his own chair with a frown. "My grandfather, you say? My mother told me that her parents were both dead."

"Oh, I assure you, the Talik Pendele lives. He is quite well and heads the council of Elders upon the great Mountain. Your mother was the Helana Asiana, was she not?"

"Indeed she was -- I cannot fathom why I would have been told my grandfather was dead." He tilted his head. "Perhaps you would know?"

"If I understand it correctly, your father bargained quite fiercely for your mother's hand and, given her lack of gifts valued upon the Mountain, was allowed to leave." Bright, hawk-like eyes caught his gaze, seemed to sink inside him like hooks. "Of course, your grandfather did not know of you, your gifts, or you would have been brought home. The Talik keep their own close."

"I would not want to have been removed from my mother's care," Surial pointed out, unsure whether or not to trust this woman. He had never heard of any living relatives outside of Sandide. As far as he knew, his mother was without family entirely when she had come to his father's household.

"Perhaps your mother felt the same. It is hard to lose a child, to send them away."

"So she was sent away because she had no gifts? What kind of parent would do that to a child?" He shivered as he realized suddenly that she knew about his healing powers. This stranger knew him. It was unnerving.

"Perhaps she was sent so she did not feel different, Helan. It would be hard to marry, a silent bird amongst singers." She reached out, patted his hand, the touch tingling and odd. "Perhaps she wished to go."

"So why are you here?" he asked, pulling his hand away. He didn't mean to be rude, but since his mother's death he had had little luck with 'family'.

"As I said, I am a friend of your grandfather's and wished to introduce myself, pay my respects." She smiled, tilted her head and blinked, the effect birdlike. "He will be quite interested to hear of your existence."

He frowned. "And how are you so sure that I am your friend's grandson if he does not even know that I exist?"

A short, sharp, somehow pained noise sounded. "Because I knew your mother and because you could not look more like the Talik if you were his twin."

"Ah, I see. And you have come to Azize to establish a house here? You think perhaps I can introduce you to the nobility? I warn you that I am not in very good graces amongst the people here right now."

The laughter that filled the room was pointed. "I assure you, I do not need your introduction, Helan. I am simply following the trade routes, returning from the Dark Lands, and saw your display when healing your manservant the other day."

His cheeks went hot, both at the rebuke, which he probably deserved, as well as the reminder that all in Azize now knew of his abilities. Argent had been telling him for days that there would be rumors and half-truths flying about the city in the wake of the trial and his display. He would not be able to ignore it indefinitely. It was, perhaps, time to seek out Yamin. Find out if the man was still his friend and, if so, what Yamin could tell him of the mood of the city.

He inclined his head to the Helana. "My apologies, you have arrived at a difficult time for my household."

"Of course." She stood, looking down upon him. "I will leave you to rest and will, with your permission of course, call at a later date." The Helana smiled at him. "I do hope your household's difficulties ease, Helan Banshinaree."

He did not understand what the woman wanted with him, but he could see no reason to be impolite and, perhaps, he could use all the allies he could get. "Thank you, Helana, I appreciate your kindness."

Her hand brushed his cheek. "I would do no less for the Pendele line."

His eyes widened in surprise. Perhaps a very strong ally indeed.

Kade worried, walking the stables with an aimless and disconnected gait, sand and straw blowing up and tickling his ankles. The Helan was young -- foreign and unaware of the Winds, of the One Who is All -- and did not understand, did not easily hear the calling of ba'chi within.

The call of the Winds roared within Kadrass, however.

Kadrass heard and understood and followed their demands. When he was a child, he had followed his father's uneven stride up to the black steppes, had felt the True Wind brush his unscarred cheeks. His father, the holiest of men, had asked him what he heard, what song the Winds blessed him with.

The Winds had whispered 'hi'icha' to his ears, had dropped a single copper-tipped feather into his open, still-small hands.

They had known then that Kadrass was meant to protect and defend, to be the most feared and honored of warriors, to be hi'icha. He had failed in his duty, his Tribe had fallen to the outsiders, had burned, had been made slaves. Now, for reasons he did not know, the Winds had given him another Tribe to protect, a ba'chi. The Helan.

Kadrass would not leave Surial behind, could not leave the healer defenseless in these hideous sands. He had sworn it as the healer magics filled him, knit his flesh, dragged him from the Land of Summer where his family waited.

Now his ki'ita, his Tribe was with a stranger, another, one who felt like a desperate, wild dog skulking near

the ta'akto.

Lik'ta nodded, snorting, the mi'it restless and worried. Mon'keur's nicker was filled with unhappiness -- there was a predator here, disguised as friend.

Grandam rustled. One who brings fire.

The worried commentary continued, filling the barn -- Fire. Pain. Hunter. Wolf. Coyote. Death.

Death.

The Lady Death.

He turned toward the house, intending to interrupt, when he saw the woman leave, traveling upon a white mount.

Her mi'it's mind was silent.

chapter twenty three

The club was quiet tonight, what patrons there were speaking in hushed tones, and even a blind man couldn't have missed the sideways glances aimed at himself and Yamin. As Yamin had done nothing to earn a spot in the center of rumors and gossip, Surial could only presume they were looking at him.

He picked at his bread as Yamin quickly put away some soup.

"Hungry?" he asked with a raised eyebrow as Yamin finally put down his spoon and sat back with a sigh.

"Always." Yamin smiled at him, but the look was shuttered, worried. "Pela prefers that I dine at home more and more these days and our cook is not your Madrise, to be sure."

"You see, you got married and already she has a tight rein on your leash, my friend."

"It is a little bother. The... atmosphere in Azize has been less than welcoming, Surial."

He let his other eyebrow go up. "In general, or just to those who still call me friend, my friend?"

"There have been many people saying you are cursed, Surial. That you are a taliksana come to spread illness." Yamin shrugged. "You must admit, your... concern for your former vakla is unusual."

Anger swept through him. "Yes, the Lady Moon forbid that I should care whether another human being lives or dies. One who saved my life and proved my innocence, Yamin -- one who believed in me when none other did."

"One who was worth sacrificing your name and status for?" Yamin's voice was low. "The taliksana are below dogs, Surial. Should your business partners hear of this, should it be proved true..." His friend shuddered. "You would have no easy time of it."

"What is being said of what transpired in the square?"

"Some are saying your vak... your groomsman died and you magicked him to life. Some are saying it was an act. Some are saying you are cursed, that you are not a man, but a demon called from the sands."

Surial sighed, hearing again his father's admonitions, only now understanding what must have motivated them. "And you, Yamin? What are you saying?"

Yamin smiled at him, setting him somewhat at ease. "I am saying that, given your temper, if you were a demon, there would be no building left standing in the city."

He stared for a moment at Yamin, and then chuckled. "Thank you, my friend."

His stomach growled and he frowned, looking around for the servants. "It seems to be taking an inordinate amount of time for our meal to arrive."

Yamin nodded, motioning over a waiter, who stood, nervous and shaking. "Fetch our food, now, Peshir, or have someone here to explain why they are growing the grain from seed."

The man nodded, shooting a wary glance at Surial.

"Mine had better not have meat." The man nodded again and disappeared as quickly as he could.

Surial sighed and gave Yamin a wry look. "Perhaps next time I should invite you to partake of Madrise's cooking with me rather than risking the dubious service of The Seven Swords."

"I would like that." Yamin gave him a long look. "Perhaps Pela and I should have a soiree, allow the nobles to see you have not grown fangs and claws."

Surial chuckled. "Aside from the ones I already had?"

"But of course. Those had a reputation of their own."

He thought about it for a moment. A part of him wanted to leave things as they were, to hide in his home and not have to deal with the nobles of Azize and their petty comings and goings. But as he'd explained to Kade, he had a responsibility to Argent and Madrise and all those who worked for him. They needed their jobs and so he couldn't just be an island in this desert, much as he wanted to. "Thank you very much, Yamin. I greatly appreciate the continuing support of you and your lovely wife."

Yamin's face grew serious. "We are friends. You would not desert my household in time of need; I will not leave you to the dogs."

"And how many of Pela's maiden cousins will I have to entertain in return for this soiree?" Surial asked, eager to leave the serious subjects and return to their usual banter.

"Cousins? Oh, no, Surial! You will be surrounded by Pela's most choice virgin aunts."

He shuddered for Yamin. "Not... not Sophia? Please, Yamin, anything but that."

"Now, now. She finally had those blackened teeth fully removed, so the smell is much more tolerable."

Surial laughed and then stopped suddenly, giving Yamin a sharp look. "You are joking, yes?"

Grandam stamped impatiently, ready to run, ready to fly across the sand, her song insistent in his ears. Kade threw back his braids, stretched beneath the sun. "Patience, mi'it. We must wait until the Helan is ready to fly behind us."

"I heard that." Surial came up behind him and tsked. "And Mon'keur is not so infirm yet that he cannot stay ahead of Grandam."

He chuckled, grinning back at the Helan. "You were intended to, friend Surial, and you have shirked your practice with your socializing and entertainments. Perhaps Mon'keur has forgotten how to run."

Surial rubbed Mon'keur's nose, the two of them snorting in a similar manner. "I may have forgotten how to ride, but Mon'keur knows how to run -- it is what he does."

Kade grinned, nodded. "As it should be, my friend. Let us fly and ride the Winds."

The Helan laughed, smiling warmly at him. There was also the glint of competition in the forest eyes.

Kade stroked Grandam's neck. "Come, little mother. Let us show them your beauty, your strength." Grandam's head bobbed and then they took off, racing across the sands.

Surial's laughter followed him and then the thunder of hooves as Mon'keur overtook Grandam, the Helan grinning, pressed low against Mon'keur's back. Kade chuckled, dropping to lie against Grandam's side, seeing the sands and water from her eyes, offering her his strength and encouragement. His heart swelled, pounding with the mi'it's, blood rushing through his veins. They drew near the Helan and Mon'keur several times, but it seemed that each time they got close it spurred the stallion on and Mon'keur remained ahead of them.

Finally, Kade lost track of the race, focused only on the wind and the riding and the bond between those who loved the Wind. He could live his life right here, lost in the calling of speed and joy, bound by only the sand beneath him and his own honor.

It was the Helan's voice that called him back. "Come, Kade. The sun begins to set and we must return home. The streets of Azize are not safe at night."

He nodded, breath coming hard and deep, sweat pouring over his back. The streets were of no consequence. The Winds intended him to protect this ba'chi and so he would. "Yes, Helan. Did you enjoy your ride?"

He received an almost carefree smile from the Helan, Surial looking suddenly younger than his twenty-three summers. "Very much!"

He smiled back, nodding. "As it should be."

"Come on, Kade. Home. We will ride again another day."

"Yes, Helan." He spent a heartbeat looking at the ocean, noting that Surial no longer looked toward the white city on the cliffs. Then he turned Grandam's muzzle and headed toward the wide road that led the way to Surial's home.

chapter twenty four

He was still in his sleep clothes, sitting in the window with his sweetened coffee, watching as Kade and Lik'ta played in the paddock. A couple of Argent's grandchildren were hanging off the fence, watching and laughing, while two of the boys were carrying buckets of water over to his flowers.

It was early enough that the heat was not yet oppressive and the city only just waking and mostly quiet.

He could almost like Azize like this, could almost forget its infernal sands and bitter nobles.

In fact it was almost perfect. His brother and Onise were both off his back, the people he cared about were still talking to him, the rest were talking and gossiping and pointing, but well out of his earshot.

One of Argent's granddaughters barreled pell-mell through the paddock, heading straight for Kade with a happy squeal. Kade bent and scooped her up, settling her on his wide shoulders, not missing so much as a beat as he worked with Lik'ta.

Surial smiled, enjoying the peace and happiness within his walls.

Argent's knock interrupted him, the look on the man's face promising trouble.

"My Helan, you have a visitor who is most insistent upon seeing you." Argent looked miserable, perhaps even a bit ill. "The Lady Savina says it is a matter of the highest urgency."

What was it that he'd been thinking about peace and quiet and perfection? Nothing rattled Argent like this.

"Show her to the sitting room."

At Argent's nod he headed for his own room, changing into simple, but elegant clothes and fixing his turban over his hair. He took a last look down into the courtyard, drawing strength from the idyllic nature of the goings on down there, and before going to see what had Argent so upset. Kade looked up and met his gaze with an unusual intensity, the relaxation and laughter fading into a sharp, questioning look, even the mounts gone silent and still. He managed a smile for the man and then went to confront the Helana, to demand what she was doing, interrupting his household this early in the morning.

The Helana was standing, still and somehow formidable in the arched doorway of the sitting room. Her eyes met his and he shivered. "Helan. I have come to offer you my assistance."

"I do not mean to be rude, but I do not remember asking for it, Helana."

"Given the things which have come to light this morning, you have need of it." The lady blinked, voice quiet. "Assuming, of course, you intend to keep your head."

He frowned at her. He had done nothing wrong. He gestured her into the sitting room proper, closing the door behind him before she disrupted his entire household. "What, may I ask, are you talking about?"

"Your friends and servants do not serve you well, Helan, if I am the first to bring you bad tidings." She settled upon a settee, layers of dark cloth billowing. "The Helana Onise found her daughter, Aylia, strangled in her bed this morning, along with a handkerchief bearing your monogram, Helan. The magistrate is with Onise now and it is a matter of hours before you are taken to trial."

The world went dark and tilted, the Helana helping him to a seat. "Sweet Lady Moon, not that poor girl. Dead?" He shook his head. Surely Onise would not have gone so far to exact revenge for him not marrying the girl.

"Yes, and you will follow in her footsteps if you do not quit yourself of this city. Your groomsmen will not survive a beheading for you, not even your gift can fix that." Stern and sure, the Helana's voice worried him, perhaps even more than the Magistrate's during his trial.

"I have nowhere to go." Panic set in, worse than when he had been accused of the girl's rape. Then he had believed his innocence would carry him through and once it had proved not to, Kade had saved him. Now he knew that it mattered little if he had done this thing or not, there was evidence enough that he had and the wretched dogs would tear out his throat with glee.

"Your family in Sandide will surely take their son home, will they not?"

He shook his head. "I have burned that bridge fairly spectacularly, I'm afraid."

He had, though he could always throw himself on his brother's mercy. A shudder went through him. Erulial would kill him with his bare hands. Or force him to be a part of the slave trade and he would rather die than have a hand in that.

"Friends? Do you have significant private funds to set up your own household, perhaps in the south or the dark lands?" With each of his answers to the negative, the Helana's frown deepened. Then she stopped moving, seemed to consider. "Your grandfather, then. No one would dare question his authority in his stronghold. Come with me and I will deliver you to him."

He stood and paced to the window, unhappy with the suggestion. He had done nothing wrong, why should he flee like a dog? It was then that he noticed it. There was a furor near the town center, heading slowly toward his home where his own courtyard was in an uproar, several horses saddled, bags being thrown on them.

He frowned, searching for Argent, ready to demand what was going on, when the man's voice came from behind, his perfect and unflappable house man interrupting without knocking, voice shaken. "My Helan, you must go. Now. Before they have you."

"Your man is right. They will have your head." The Helana smoothed her clothes. "I will intercept them. You will meet me tonight south of the city, behind the cliffs, and I will bring a boat."

"I cannot just go -- there are arrangements to make and my things..."

Argent's hands were on him, pushing him toward the door. "We have packed what we can, Helan. You must go now. I am sending everyone home so they are not involved. I will meet them when they come."

"But..." Argent was walking him unrelentingly down to the paddock. "I haven't done anything -- would run-

ning not prove my guilt?"

"They already believe you guilty, my Helan. You must go and you must never return."

He shook his head as the heat of the sun hit him. This was his home now and he was being forced from it, just as he had been forced from Sandide eight years ago. Was he destined to never know peace and happiness and a true home?

Kade stood, pushing a few foodstuffs into Grandam's saddle, Lik'ta tied behind her. Mon'keur was stamping, eyes flashing. Kade took his arm from Argent's and suddenly he could see Kade was a fierce warrior, scars so white, fully dressed in leathers, braids heavy with adornment. "Come, my friend. We ride."

"Kade! You do not need to go with me. This is my problem, not yours." He would not drag this man into his problems again.

"I will do as I must, Surial. Come, the mob nears and I cannot fight them all. Mount." Kade's voice was sure, guttural, almost growling.

He looked at the Helana Savina, who looked as if she expected him to go, and beside her Argent and Madrise, with miserable faces.

Once again he was that fifteen-year-old boy fighting back tears. He was being driven from his home, from the people he loved, and he had done nothing wrong.

Breaking tradition and the taboos between servants and masters, he hugged Argent and Madrise to him. "I will never forget you -- either of you. And if you come to harm because of my leaving I will never forgive you."

"We will be well, Helan."

He let Kade help him mount and would have taken a last look at the bright white building that was no longer his home, but Kade had them moving at a quick pace. The horses followed Kade without question, carrying them through back roads and alleys until they faced the city wall. So much of this city was strange to him, so dark and unfriendly and terrifying -- it was as if he had never known Azize.

Kade slid down off Grandam and knocked at a door of a dilapidated shack. A wizened face peered out -- Surial couldn't tell if the person was male or female -- and smiled. "Kade? What brings you here?"

"I need to go outside the gates now, little mother." Kade's voice was gentle, respectful. "I cannot explain, but I need your assistance. Will you lend me your stables?"

She nodded, disappearing for a heartbeat and then scuttling outside and motioning them toward a building that was literally falling in upon itself. She clutched a loaf of bread and a hank of cheese wrapped in oilcloth in her clawed fingers, handing it over to Kade as she pulled the chains away from the broken doors. "Go, Kade. Bright blessings."

"May the Winds bless you, little mother." Kade nodded and smiled, and then led them into the black, dusty barn.

Fear clawed at him. It had all happened so quickly, too quickly. Where was he being led? He would go back, would face the magistrate with the truth. He turned Mon'keur's head.

Kade's hand stopped him, Mon'keur moving immediately to follow the groomsman. "You will not go back. Come, we must move forward."

"To what? There is nowhere to go!"

"This is a single city upon the sands. Trust in me. I will not allow them to take you. Come."

He considered that Kade had stood up against Erulial for him. Kade had taken his trial when he was accused of raping Aylia. Kade would help him now, he would have faith.

He gave Mon'keur his head, letting Kade lead them.

The walk was long and dark, but finally the tunnel lightened, the sun bright ahead. Kade stopped, leaving them in shadow. "We will stay here. Argent will send word and means for us to travel when the sun is low in the sky."

He shivered, cold inside and out. The walls of the tunnel seemed slimy and cold. "The Helana offered a boat; she said something about the cliffs to the south of the city."

"How long is the ride?" Kade began sorting through saddlebags, organizing his haphazardly packed things. His things. A book, some traveling clothes. Jewels. Foodstuffs. His family seal. All shoved into packs.

"I don't know," he replied absently, sliding off Mon'keur and reaching for a second book that Kade found. It was a book of tales told to children. Fairy tales about men and women with magical powers who ruled the world. He hugged it to him. He'd brought it with him from Sandide. So many things left behind...

"The Winds blow where they will, my friend, and I will not leave you for the dogs." He caught a glimpse of Kade's face, scars so white. "You will not be alone."

"Thank you, my friend." He sat down, legs suddenly unable to support him, and watched the light at the end of their tunnel.

Kade paced, footsteps echoing in the bowels of the ship. He did not like this. Not at all. From the moment one of Argent's son-in-laws had appeared at the tunnel mouth, bearing jewels and coin and news of a ship awaiting them after dark, his heart had been unhappy, warning him that this was not what the Winds wished.

The woman had met them at the shore, frowning and snarling ineffectually when she saw that Surial was not alone. She had argued and complained, wheedled and whined, but Kade would not be left behind. He had taken it as a victory, the Helan nodding as he insisted he would board the ship. Of course, that victory was short-lived, Surial agreeing with the Helana's suggestion that the best place for him was in the hull with the mi'it.

'Just in case the crew is frightened.'

A'Chaffa! The witch is the one who should be frightened, should any harm come to the healer.

As if thinking of him had conjured him, Surial came carefully down the ramp into the hold. The Helan looked rather pale.

"Helan!" Kade walked over, frowning. "Are you well?"

Mon'keur rustled, calling to his Windbrother, pulling at the iyossi he shared with Surial. Surial nodded. "Just the motion of the boat doesn't seem to agree with me. I can't remember it being so bad when I left Sandide, but I was younger then and this is a smaller boat." He got a wan smile. "And you should call me Surial. There is no Helan anymore."

Kade nodded, slowly walking Surial over to Mon'keur, one hand on the healer's elbow. He had no words, no advice, nothing but his friendship and presence, so that was what he offered.

Surial leaned against the horse's flank, petting the beast, both of them looking happier for the touch.

"It shouldn't be much longer," Surial assured him quietly, voice absorbed by the wood of the hull.

"Do you know where we will land? Are we going to your city on the white cliffs?"

Kade wandered over to pet and soothe the other mi'it, hands stroking over Lik'ta's velvet nose.

"No. Not Sandide -- I am no longer welcome there, Kade. We are going to a city in the mountains. The Helana is taking me to meet my grandfather. I did not even know the man existed."

"Your grandfather?" He frowned; the witch was family? "Are you sure she speaks the truth? She is known to you?"

Surial shrugged. "What harm can come of meeting the man? I have no home."

"What if she leads you toward danger? Azize is not the only dangerous place beneath the winds." Lik'ta whinnied and stamped, catching his worry.

"Azize is, however, the only place where I am wanted for murder." He had not seen that look of dry humor on the Helan's face in quite some time.

Kade chuckled. "You have to start somewhere, yes?"

Surial gave him a startled look and then laughed, face lighting, making the man look younger. That laugh eased Kade, the healer was young and easily broken and the winds were not sweet here.

Much of Surial's color seemed to have come back. "How are the horses, Kade? And you?"

"The horses are worried and they do not like the boat." Kade understood. The last time he was on a ship, he was torn and bleeding, cradling a dying child in his arms, spirit stolen. The smell of fear and urine and death had haunted him for years, the memory still burning coal-red when the right breath blew across it. "I look forward to seeing the sun again."

"I look forward to having unmoving land under my feet again." The Helan shook his head. "I do not remember being sick at all on my journey to Azize."

Kade nodded. "I am not fond of boats. Although this trip is easier than the last, thanks to you, my friend."

Surial petted his arm. "Good. Good. I'm glad."

The witch's voice sounded, calling Surial's name, and Kade frowned. "She is a curious woman, Surial."

"What do you mean?" Surial asked with a frown.

"I mean she arrived exactly when she was needed and had help before you needed it." Kade did not drop his gaze. "That is a strange talent."

"If she had not arrived when she did, Kade -- I would have been arrested and killed. Perhaps you would have preferred that? Then you would have been free without being stuck with me."

Kade blinked and took a step back, fists clenching, the blow to his honor sharp and piercing. "I believe your traveling companion is calling for you, Sieka," he growled. "It would not do to be found in the hull where the animals sleep."

"I'm sorry," Surial told him. "But I have nowhere else to turn."

Looking almost as pale as he'd been when he'd first come, Surial slowly made his way back up to the door.

Kade watched the ba'chi go and then moved to the bed he'd made for himself in the straw. He pulled out his rahat and began to sharpen the curved blades with a stone. Kade would let Surial believe what he must. The winds blew ill and they would not catch him unaware again, witch or no.

Surial watched the shore of Bedal as it grew closer. He was neither gladdened nor disheartened to see it, this journey so different from the last he had taken over the sea.

Then he had been leaving his beloved cliff home of Sandide and going toward the unknown, banished and alone, still only a boy struggling to pick up the mantle of a man.

Now he was a man of no place, a nomad, and he was, quite frankly, finding it hard to muster any sort of enthusiasm for the journey they were about to embark upon. He was all but convinced that Savina was a little insane -- her mask of civility had dropped once or twice on the ten-day journey. He had no idea if his grandfather existed, if he was a figment of her imagination, a ghost of an old friend, or a real flesh and blood man who would welcome him in. He supposed they would find out. At least it was a destination.

He hadn't returned to the hull since his last visit, ashamed at the way he had snapped at Kade. The truth was that he was lonely and frightened and felt again like a boy. And tired and waspish and wanting, more than a little, to just sit down and cry. He couldn't, though -- he was the Helan, even out here, banished from one city, outlawed from another, he had a role to play.

He was just so tired.

"It is only a fortnight's ride, Helan, and then we will be at the Mountain." Savina's voice sounded at his elbow, thin body draped in heavy cloaks. "That is, of course, if you leave the barbarian and his yearling behind. He will slow our travel."

The woman's insistence on leaving Kade behind was becoming an irritation.

"I have nothing but time, Helana. It matters not if it takes a day, a month, or a year."

Those odd eyes flashed with frustration. "You feel no eagerness to meet your fate? Your family?"

"So far my fate has not dealt me a hand I have been happy with, Helana. I am no longer so eager to rush into her arms."

The captain of the ship came up to them. Surial suspected he was a pirate, a smuggler, someone who perhaps tried to take the shipments his own fleet carried -- and nodded. "Th' coast is close. You'll be taking the mounts and slave off my boat now? I need th' space."

Surial drew himself up. "He is not a slave, and yes, we will be taking our leave of you as soon as we put in." He turned to glare at the Helana as she made noise. "And I will not hear another word about how we must leave Kade behind. The man is my friend."

"You are," she ground out, "as stubborn as your grandfather. There is no question there."

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a cool look, temper calming as she lost hers. "You would not be the first to accuse me of being stubborn, Helana. Nor, I imagine, will you be the last."

"Not so." Kade's chuckle sounded, the huge man appearing from the hull. "The mi'it whisper that the journey is at an end, friend Surial, and the smell of forests is near." Kade's eyes smiled at him, steadfastly ignoring the presence of the Helana beside him.

"Yes, the captain was just saying it wouldn't be long." He pointed, turning to look out at the coastline once more. "You can see the shore now."

He got a nod, a fierce hunger showing on his friend's face for a moment, an intense satisfaction and need being met by the sight of those huge trees beyond the small city.

"I remember forests, too, from my youth. My mother would take me for long walks in the woods up past the last of the houses. And as I got older they were my playground. So many living things in a forest."

"Yes. And rain. Your mi'it will be as a colt again, fresh water so close." Kade gave Savina a cold glare when she snorted, then dismissed her again. "It may ease many old wounds."

Surial chuckled. "But then you would have to put an end to this silly notion you have that you might one day beat me and Mon'keur in a race."

"Ah, but my Lik'ta is still young and will only grow faster beneath the blessings of the trees." He got a grin, fierce and wild. "The day will come, my friend, and then Lik'ta will dance."

"He will have to be a strong horse indeed to beat my Mon'keur; perhaps he will learn from his iyossi?"

He realized now that he had missed this, the teasing and the talking, mixing lighthearted matters with more serious ones. Kade was one of the few people he had ever been just himself with and for the past tenday, he had ignored both himself and his friend. It was no wonder he was tired all the time, forced into the strictures of formality and nobility all day with the Helana.

He looked back out toward the shore with a renewed vigor, looking forward to this journey far more than he had moments ago.

chapter twenty five

Oh! Trees! Trees and tall grasses and the rain was heavy in the air, the Winds singing with it.

Kadras would have found it difficult to focus as it was, with the desert far behind him and the forests so close. He would have been distracted and lost and half-giddy with joy regardless, but then there were the mi'it.

Grandam murmured happily, the sweet grasses getting one song after another. Lik'ta chased butterflies and danced in fields where grasses tickled his belly, making him leap and run. And Mon'keur...

Mon'keur's hymns were overwhelming, pleasure and relief and bliss enough to weaken Kadras' knees, to bring tears to his eyes.

homehomehomehomehomehomehome

He didn't know if the healer could hear it, but he thought perhaps the witch could, she and her dead-mi'it keeping a slight distance from the mi'it, a look of pain crossing her face when she moved too close. They had decided not to stay in the small town where the boat pulled in; the smell of rotting fish had left Surial making faces and looking rather ill.

The healer was smiling now, though, looking relaxed and comfortable on Mon'keur's back.

The witch insisted they head north, up toward the mountains, toward the always-green trees and the cooler air. Kade worried about the healer, whether the thin frame could brave the chill, but he also rejoiced.

North was nearer to his people. Nearer to home.

Perhaps, once the witch showed her true face, he could convince Surial to travel farther, to draw the stories of his tribe.

They were on a less traveled path, most of the trade happening on the coast or using the bigger roads that connected larger centers like Sandide to the smaller towns. The horses were happily picking their way through, Surial content to more or less give them their heads. The witch seemed displeased with the pace, but then there seemed to be very little that made her happy.

"Is that a redberry bush?" asked Surial, pointing, voice excited.

Kade looked, nodded. The bushes thrived on the rain and grew everywhere. His mother had gathered the berries from first thaw to first snow, drying and baking and juicing...

He slid off Grandam's back, grabbing a sack and heading over to harvest some. "Would you like some? There are plenty."

"I would!" Surial laughed softly and slid from Mon'keur's back, hurrying to join him. The slender fingers picked berries from the bushes, Surial eating them as fast as he could pick them. "Oh, I used to eat them until I was sick."

Kade moved quickly, bagging them, laughing as he as Surial fought over the last few batches of the deep red shining berries. "Now, now, Surial! It would not do to become ill as you ride."

He began to strip a few leaves, adding them to another pack, their spiciness scenting the air.

Surial grinned at him, still laughing. The healer's mouth and fingers were stained dark red. "What a wonderful find! Oh, maybe this being forced to leave thing isn't so bad this time around."

"There are many surprises awaiting you in the forests, Helan." The witch's voice grated and Mon'keur stamped, baring his teeth just slightly.

Kade snorted alongside the mi'it, braids shaking. "Just wait until the wild helarn berries peer through the snow."

"Well, the berries sound like more fun than the snow," chuckled Surial with a shiver. "I'm afraid Azize has made me soft for colder weather." Surial aimed a grin at the witch. "And here you are leading me into snow-topped mountains!"

"The Mountain is warm and beautiful, you will never need to leave and deal with the weather and world."

Kade looked over at the witch in horror, frowning. "Never go outside? What a horrible thing!"

Surial grinned. "Kade doesn't like houses much."

He chuckled. "No. I was made to sleep beneath the sky and sun. Houses are for other men."

"Well, I do believe you shall get your wish, Kade. Helana Savina assures me that it will be at least two ten-days travel before we are there. And I did not get the impression that we would be staying in luxury along the way."

Kade arched an eyebrow and smiled. "After a dozen years bedding in the sands, I assure you, my friend, there is no greater luxury than this."

A branch broke and Kade stopped, nostrils flaring. A mi'it and rider, close by, attempting to follow. His hand reached for his rahat. "Quiet."

Surial looked at him, eyes wide.

He whistled, quick and low, light as a summer bird, listening for a response that signaled understanding, friendship, another warrior. Even as he made the sound, he slid his blade from its sheath. Another whistle sounded, not the same, not from his tribe, but the meaning was the same: here was another warrior, someone from the same people as him.

A shudder rocked through him and he called out, voice low and firm. "Am'ai o nem'iste?"

"Am'ai." A horse and rider appeared on the path, moving slowly toward them. A woman sat upon a roan stallion, tall and muscular, braids in her hair and her hand on the rahat she wore at her side. Kade stood tall,

eyes filled with tears, lifting his face to the sun so she could see his marks.

So long. It had been so long since he had been free, seen one of his own free.

She dismounted and came slowly closer, standing as proud as he. Taller than Surial even, she was only a little shorter than he himself, marks of her own across her cheeks. "Achaffa! Hi'icha. Could it be?"

"It is." He stepped forward, offering a smile. "I have been lost for countless moons and have found the trees. Di'ben sud."

"Di'ben sud, brother." She came forward and put her arms around him, hugging hard -- a warrior's greeting. "I have not seen another of our people in all my travels."

"You are the first free warrior I have seen in a dozen springs." He lifted his head, meeting her eyes. "I am Kadras of the Bear and Hawk Clan at the Foot of the Fish-Tail Water Beyond the Blue Hills."

"Aline of the Wolf and Falcon Clan at the Forest of Many Streams Beyond the Blue Hills."

Surial cleared his throat. "Surial, formerly Banshinaree of Sandide, formerly of Azize, now just Surial."

Sharp eyes caught Kade's, Aline asking. "Ba'chi?"

Kade nodded. "Yes."

"Bach... Bachi?" asked Surial.

"Well, Kade," interrupted the witch, voice like a wasp. "Now that you've found one of your own, I guess you'll be leaving us."

"Leaving?" Not without the ba'chi. Not a chance beneath the Winds.

Kade shook his head. He turned to Aline, touched his hand to his forehead, his chin, his chest. "I go where the Winds lead me, Aline. Would you travel a while, share your songs?"

She returned his greeting. "I search for the men who destroyed my tribe, but as the trail has become cold, it would be an honor to share the road with you, Kadras."

The witch made an unhappy noise. "Surely, Helan, we will not burden ourselves with two barbarians. If they wish to travel together, let them."

"I have asked you time and again, Helana, to call me Surial -- I am Helan no longer. And I fail to see how traveling with two such... large people, could be anything but good. Any bandits and murderers will think twice when confronted with two such intimidating individuals."

Mon'keur made a triumphant noise and Lik'ta walked up to touch noses with Aline's windbrother. Kade's eyes met Aline's, a strength and honor and surety filling him that he had forgotten. "You honor us. Let us ride."

Surial mounted back up on Mon'keur and gave the witch an unrepentant grin. "I'm starting to enjoy this adventure," Surial said and, with a click of his tongue and a squeeze of his knees, the healer and his mount were off, going down the path at speed.

"It appears the ba'chi has caught his second wind." Kade looked directly into the witch's eyes, the challenge clear. "As it should be."

She glared at him, real hatred in her eyes.

She was, he was sure, a very dangerous enemy. He would not leave the healer alone with her.

Now he would not have to. She was outnumbered by warriors of honor. Aline's warrior cry sounded and he answered, following Surial, leaving Savina behind in their dust.

They were as strange a group as any Aline had come across. The ba'chi and the witch were strange enough companions and she would have given them a wide berth were it not for the warrior who traveled with them. An honorable man, with the scars of a Guardian of the Tribe and of the tak'to that flew overhead.

She had not met another of her kind since her tribe had been massacred.

He wore many braids in his hair -- she was eager to make camp and hear his songs, find out why he traveled with such strange companions instead of protecting his tribe. Perhaps he could help her with her own quest; perhaps he had information about the ones who stole people. There was a time when meeting a warrior from another Clan was a reason for caution and wariness. Now it was a cause for celebration, the clans having all disappeared.

The witch didn't like him, shooting long, baleful glares at Kadrass every time his back was turned and she thought herself unobserved. Though the warrior did not outwardly show it, Aline imagined the feeling was mutual. The ba'chi appeared unaware.

Kadrass pulled up beside her, nodding first to her and then to her mi'it. "Your Bokki sings a mournful song. If my Muk were not in the Land of Summer, he would sing the same."

"Achaffa! You sing with the mi'it? You are indeed blessed to share their songs." She smiled for a moment and then let the sorrow of the song she shared with her mount return. "I search for the killers of my family. I will find them and wreak my vengeance."

Kadrass nodded, face bleak and hard. "I have sworn vengeance on the a'apoa, the stealers of people." She received a long, careful look. "The stealers of warriors."

"And have you had any luck in your search for them? I followed their trail for many moons, but it disappeared at the big waters." She would be honored to have one such as Kadrass share the search with her.

"I have only begun my search." Kade sighed, turning to shrug off his vest, exposing the mass of scars that had destroyed the skin of his back. "There are worse things than death and I have only just found my way free of them."

"Achaffa! These dogs that walk like men did this to you?" She had heard of the practice, but had not believed that even the dogs that had decimated her people could do such a thing.

"Twelve summers." Kadrass' voice was flat, dead. "The ba'chi healed me."

"The Winds have demanded a high price of you, friend."

"They blow where they will." He looked at her braids, growling low. "The winds are testing their children, I believe, but their spirits will be avenged. Blood will flow."

"Yes. I swear it on the lives of my children." Her tone was hard, her face harder, and she did not thank the Winds for this test.

The huge warrior nodded, hand tucking a tiny braid behind his ear. "Yes."

Her Bokki snorted, stamping and dancing, and Kade's eyes fell to the mi'it. "Yes, we will avenge them all, windbrother, and the herds and Tribes will live free again."

She nodded, her own will to find the dogs who had murdered her people renewed. It was good to be in the company of another warrior again. It reminded her of her duty and her honor and the honor of those that were dead. "We are well met, Kadras."

"As it should be." Kadras grinned suddenly, the look surprising and boyish. "Since we are met, I would see your rahat. The curve of blade is unknown to me."

She grinned back at him, taking her weapon from its home by her hip and holding it out to him. "It's a change I made myself. I have seen many different blades in the last four years."

They moved through the trees, mounts side by side. The ba'chi and the witch were silent as they shared songs of their travels, their battles, their families.

For the first time in four years, Aline had a place, she had hope. Perhaps there were still reasons beyond her vow of vengeance to continue on.

The barbarians called a halt in a small clearing just as the sun began to set, leaving long shadows everywhere. There was nothing wrong with their choice, but it grated Savina that it was they who made it. Surial seemed content to let the two warriors dictate their movements and it maddened her. The fact was that Surial was enjoying this leisurely jaunt through the forest and what was more, was enjoying the company of the two overgrown barbarians as well.

She had orchestrated this escape for him in order to bring him close enough to Pendele that his lifeless body would quickly be discovered. She was supposed to be his sole support, the one he turned to as he grew weaker every day, assailed by some illness he couldn't fathom. She smiled, lips drawing back from her teeth, his very soul under attack from her.

Instead, she was left to sneak about after the others were asleep and siphon his magic from him slowly enough that it would not alert Surial or Kade to his weakening.

It left her hungry, the claws in her belly, in her head, tearing her up with her need for his magic. If they did not move at least a little faster, he would be too weak before she was ready. She needed him to expire as close to the gates of the great mountain keep as she could get without being discovered.

She slid off her horse, not bothering to stake it as she went to Surial; the horse would not wander. "I noticed we are not too far from a stream. Come with me, Surial. Let us clean ourselves in its cool waters."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. I don't think we've had a day this hot since leaving Azize." His warm smile made it obvious that Surial still had no inkling of what she was doing, of what her true nature and intentions were.

"Berries and reeds often grow near a stream and we will need water for our meal." The damned warrior grabbed two buckets, giving the female a grin as he headed toward the stream, looking back to encourage Surial to follow. "Come. The water awaits you, friend Surial."

Surial's smile grew warmer. Damn the man for trusting the stupid barbarian more than her. "I do like those berries, Kade. I could easily live on them."

She had little choice but to follow and she did so, taking her time to pick her way through the overgrown forest floor. Her slippers had grown threadbare and did little to protect her from the branches and prickles. Surial was stripped down to his breeches, the barbarian close by sorting through weeds and sticks. She stepped close enough that Surial's energy poured into her, healing each little scratch and sore.

She heard the barbarian snort, saw the sun flash in the long, copper braids the heartbeat before the scarred body stood between her and her prey, blocking the flow of energy between them. She held back her screams, her desire to fly at the barbarian and take the life from him. He was too large, though, and would kill her before she had him. Not to mention it would tip her hand with Surial.

However, the arrival of another member in their party might serve her well. If she used her small knife to kill the barbarian tonight as he slept, the blame could be placed at the woman warrior's door. That would take care of both of them with but a single act, leaving her free to continue her journey with Surial unhindered.

She smiled up at the barbarian, laughed. "One would think he is your lover, the way you guard your master."

"He is more than a lover could ever be." The lack of honorific was pointed, intentional, the man's eyes sharp and distrustful.

For his part, Surial seemed oblivious to their words and the tension between them. The young talik was dunking himself in the water, playing. Mischevious laughter was their only warning before both she and the barbarian were splashed.

She gasped, stepping back toward the bank as the cool water hit her.

The barbarian retaliated immediately, the focus seeming to leave her, ignore her as the two men played. Still, she never seemed to find an unheeded view of Surial, never found him close enough to touch, to speak with.

It was utterly maddening and her resolve to be rid of the annoying barbarian firmed.

She would end his life this night.

There were rarely perfect days in a man's life.

Most had pains and angers and disappointments. Many had loss and agony.

Kade leaned against the trunk of a katava tree, a hot brew of gurdock and reed with honey in his hands. The

Helan was snoring in the tent. Aline was baking flatbread and whistling, the fire making patterns in her braids. The mi'it were grazing. The moon was high. There had been berries and honey and swimming and old songs sung by the fire.

Best of all?

The bitch was glowering from her tent, eyes shining and dark with rage. He had not enjoyed a hunt in too long.

Aline left her flatbread baking on the stones and joined him. "We should share the guard, Kadras. Two shifts each would allow us to guard and to take our rest equally."

He nodded, offering her a drink, eyes shooting over to the wicked one. "Chaffa e'tatofi, ney?"

Unlucky and unfriendly and wrong.

Aline nodded. "Ney."

Aline's look did not linger on the witch, instead her eyes found the stars. "N'il'it eotfi."

No, that one would meet a turned back with a sharp knife between the shoulders. It was wise to watch. Wait.

Even the witch's mi'it was wrong, contaminated, the others avoiding it, stamping and snorting when it came too close.

Aline continued their conversation in the language they shared. "And what about these tents they use? Why would anyone not wish to lie beneath the stars on a night such as this? It is unnatural."

"In the lands they come from? There is no grass, no trees, and they have monsters that crawl the ground as the sun sets -- black and shiny with curved tails filled with poison. If they sting a man, he will go mad and scream against the winds." Kade nodded. It was good that his ki'ita had been rescued from those barren lands.

"A'chaffa! No trees? No grass? How can one live in a place like that?" She shuddered. "It is no wonder there are men who steal others -- how can they know any better, coming from a place like that?" Her face became stern, anger making her eyes fierce. "I am not making excuses for them. They still deserve the lowest death I can give them."

He nodded, a low growl bubbling in his belly. "They will scream, their skin flayed from their bones, their eyes empty of all but the sight of hi'icha, come for vengeance."

A dozen summers he had been a slave and even more had passed since his family burned and still the fury weighed inside him, a lump of endless pain.

A fire burned in Aline's eyes to match his own. "It shall be so."

He knew that she had lived his pain, that her will for revenge was as strong as his own. Aline wore her marks and her braids with pride that he recognized in a fellow warrior.

He nodded, fingers touching his forehead, his chin, his chest, his groin, the actions a vow, a sign of promise and respect between one hi'icha and another. "Our ancestors will find their peace."

She also touched her forehead, chin, chest, and groin. "They will."

The night grew brighter as the moon came out, shone high above them, and the witch gave them one last glare before closing her tent flaps and retreating. He could almost hear her screams of frustration. She was up to nothing good, he could feel it, but so far they seemed to have thwarted her.

He and Aline shared some bread, then Aline stretched out between the tents, face lifted to the stars. No one would move without him seeing, her hearing. It was a good thing, to have another warrior close.

He took out his whetstone and began sharpening his rahat, humming a soft song his mother taught him, listening to it echo through the trees.

chapter twenty six

Surial had found his riding legs, enough so that he was able to sleep slumped over Mon'keur's back, as along as they weren't moving too fast.

He was enjoying their adventure, enjoying being out under the blue sky with a sun that didn't burn everything in its sight to sand. He had no responsibilities and he liked that. Savina wished them to go faster, to get to this mountain of hers and his supposed grandfather. He was in no hurry, though; he hadn't exactly been blessed in his dealings with his relatives in the past.

There was also the growing weariness he was experiencing. He didn't understand it - he was enjoying the ride through the deep forest, they weren't pushing, why was he growing more and more tired as the days continued?

He spent a great deal of time talking with Savina, disussing all manner of things in a way that Kade and Aline could not, but their discussions seemed to leave him taxed, in need of a nap. He was worried he was losing his ability to reason, to hold a discussion -- was that a muscle as much as any others in his body and fading away through ill use? So he spent more time with Savina, their horses side by side as they talked.

Of course, everytime he got involved with Savina, Kade or his terrifying companion would interfere, manage to separate them, draw him to see this flower or taste this berry. It was quite irritating. Not that he didn't enjoy the things Kade wanted to share with him. Aline, too, was interesting in a strange way, but Surial worried his mind would grow dull.

"I'm not hungry, Kade. Save the berries for later." He tried not to snap, but really, it was enough.

"Not hungry? Are you ill? Should we camp?" He couldn't decide if those eyes were worried or teasing or belligerent or all three.

"I'm fine. Well, no, I'm not -- I'm trying to have a conversation with Savina. Go ride with Aline."

There was a flash of hurt and anger in Kade's eyes and those heavy braids were tossed. "As you wish it, Helan."

Kade clucked softly and moved up to ride with his companion, but not before the black tail of his mount slapped Savina's horse in the face, causing her to rear and stumble.

"Kade!" He reprimanded his friend, sure it had been done on purpose.

He turned to Savina, who seemed to have survived the stumbling. "Let him go, Helan, he is a simple man."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." He huffed, defending his friend.

"He is a barbarian and jealous that his mind cannot grasp the things ours can." Savina motioned to the warri-

ors ahead, both tall and strong, their braids heavy and shining as they rode. "I am surprised he does not tumble her from her mount and fill her womb like an animal."

His annoyance moved from Kade with his constant interruptions to Savina. "He is not a stupid man, nor is he an animal. Next you'll be telling me he deserves no better than to be chained and working in the mines!"

One pale eyebrow rose. "I mean no offense, Helan, but I have never owned a man. Can you say the same?"

Shame filled him and he dipped his head. "I cannot."

He looked over at Kade, wishing again that he'd let the man go as soon as the papers had come to him. He himself would no doubt be dead now, but Kade would be free and his own soul would not carry the stain of having owned another man.

Kade's head turned, eyes meeting his, and a low whistle sounded, Mon'keur dancing and pushing ahead as if called. "There is a meadow ahead, my friend. We have not raced in too long."

He grinned. "And you think there will be a different outcome than usual? You are not yet riding Lik'ta."

"Ah, but this mi'it tells me she is strong today." He got a playful wink, a grin. "And she says your Mon'keur has been wanting to chase her tail..."

He and Mon'keur snorted together and he gave Mon'keur his head, letting his stallion push ahead of the others. "It is his tail he wants chased."

"But there are no foals in that chase, my friend." Another grin and Kade and the mare were flying, running beside him. The grasses were green and sweet-smelling, the wind warm and good on his cheeks.

He lay flat along Mon'keur's back, holding on as his horse ran like the wind itself, soon catching up with Kade. His exhaustion seemed to ease, energy and laughter and happiness suddenly coming faster, easier with every stride.

All too soon they were across the meadow, horses wheeling to head back the way they came. He caught Kade's eyes, his own laughter and happiness echoed there.

"There are times, my friend, when the winds are better than words, and a man must run."

"Yes." He could do no more than agree, Kade's words simple truth.

"I would run with you often." Kade looked at him, eyes serious. "We must heed the Winds."

"And your Winds tell us to run, do they?"

"Yes, my friend." Kade nodded, eyes sliding across the pasture toward their companions. "They do."

"Well, it's early in the day, but if we set up camp here, we could spend the rest of the day racing." He grinned. "If you and your mi'it can stand losing again and again to Mon'keur and me."

Lik'ta ran over, tail bobbing, snorting and tossing his head. "This is a good plan. Perhaps my iyossi might run alongside and we might admire his speed and beauty."

He laughed. Kade was quite in love and more so every day. It was charming, his friend's happiness making

him happy. "I would like that."

Kade nodded and chuckled, a long, low string of guttural words floating over to the women. The warrior answered with a call like an owl, one hand held in the air. "We will camp and listen to the Winds, friend."

"You'll have to teach me your language, Kade, now that we have days together without other commitments. In the meantime..." He urged Mon'keur on, flying ahead of Kade and his mount.

The sun was warm on his face without being harsh, the grasses trampled beneath Mon'keur's hooves releasing their scent and their seeds. He laughed as they flew across the ground, heart light as they ran.

chapter twenty seven

Aline watched as Kadras and the witch danced around each other, each trying to stake their claim on the ba'chi Surial.

What was funny was that the ba'chi himself remained oblivious to the increasing animosity between the two. What wasn't funny was the way the ba'chi totally lacked instincts to protect himself. The witch *was* dangerous -- she walked as if on the arm of death. How could Surial not see that?

By day they traveled through the woods and meadows, picking out a path that slowly took them toward the tall, snow-capped mountains to the West. By night Surial slept while she and Kade took turns keeping watch.

She had yet to see the witch actually sleep, the woman's baleful eyes always open, waiting for the chance to... well, Aline knew not what, but it was clear there was something the woman wanted and that something had to do with the ba'chi.

She rode up to Kadras and spoke to him in their language. "She grows more desperate. Whatever she wants, she will make her move soon."

Kadras nodded, growling low. "It would be a good thing, if the Winds showed us what she intends to steal."

She nodded. "There is something else as well. The winds are blowing from all directions. I have not had my hand far from my rahat for two days now."

"I dreamed of fire in the night. My ancestors call out in warning."

"I hear the voices of my children in the winds, crying out for their revenge." She growled. "I am ready to avenge them, Kadras. The forests are no longer green to my eyes, I see only red."

Kadras nodded, scars stark white in those flushed cheeks. "I would hear their songs, Aline, that I may add their names to those of my people, call to their spirits if you fall."

"You honor me and mine. And I would give you that same honor." She grinned fiercely. "As I will not fall. Not until the blood of those who took my children have been spilled."

"Nor mine." Kadras reached in and showed her a tiny braid with a single blue stone. "I will not fall, but I will share my songs, so our families may become as one."

"Yes. Our tribes have grown small; we will unite and make them strong again." She brought her own braids for her children out, three braids held together with a bone and leather clasp. "They would run with the wind. Such troublemakers. My heart is empty without them."

"They would have been warriors? Did they sing to the mi'it?"

"My daughter would have followed in my footsteps, born to be a great warrior. One son also claimed he would be a Guardian." She smiled, looking up into the sun. "He had a gentle soul, though, and I believe would have been happier teaching and caring for the other children. My last son would fly with the birds. They filled my heart with joy. They filled the Tribe's heart with joy."

"I rode with a tatako and it was a beauty second only to iyossi and..." Kadras' eyes shot over toward Surial. "The bond of ki'ita."

She followed his gaze, surprised and yet not. It would explain why Kadras traveled with a foreigner, one who could frustrate Kadras as much as bring him pleasure. The ba'chi did not seem entirely reasonable, though, and she did not envy Kadras his bond.

"I had a warrior as my husband, who could find the sweetest berries and fight the fiercest bears," she said, continuing to share her songs.

"My Hassi had eyes as bright as a moonlit night. She bore our son without a single cry. The yobi were blooming on the hillside and my father blessed them as the dawn came."

"My mother made the best bread in the entire tribe. I learned at her feet. My son also had the gift."

Kadras chuckled. "You learned well. My mother came from the northlands. Her ship crashed upon the stones and she was given to my father. Her hair was the color of straw and she sang songs of mountains made of ice and great winged lizards called dratans."

"Like the mountain we travel toward? Do you believe we will see winged lizards?"

Kadras had great songs.

"It would not surprise me. My mother had many books that she sang with drawings inside them. She had three in a chest and she sang of them often."

"My father was a great hunter. He would have liked to have hunted one of your mother's dratans." It felt good, to sing her songs, to hear Kade's, to share in a way she had not since her tribe had been taken.

"Mine was a ba'chi. His legs were ruined in a fall from a mi'it. The Winds blessed him as he crawled home, recognized his strength." Kade's chin lifted. "He gave me my scars."

"A'chaffa, they have a lot to answer for, those dogs. I will spill their blood for your tribe as well as for mine, Kadras. I swear it."

"Together we will free them all."

She took out her rahat and sliced open her palm, holding it out to Kadras. "Blood is a bond, too."

Kadras nodded, holding open a badly scarred hand, running his rahat along the flesh. "It is, hi'icha."

She grasped his hand, making the warrior's bond with him. They were family now, part of the same tribe. They would protect each other, fight for each other. It was good to have a warrior's bond again, to know another of her kind. They would not be destroyed, not as long as one of them remained.

Fortunately for her, two of them did.

She gave Kadrass a firm nod and clicked to her mi'it, riding hard with the wind.

There was smoke upon the winds, acrid and bitter, twining into his dreams, into his braids, into him. They all knew it, even the witch, though she seemed to thrive on it, skin almost glowing with health. If she made a single misstep, he would have her throat slit and take the consequences.

At first Kadrass thought the smoke was a dream, an omen, but as they traveled up over a series of steep hills he could see a line of greasy, black smoke rising up into the air from the west.

Slavers.

A'Chaffa!

Aline whooped, rahat going to her hand. "Vengeance is at hand, brother!"

Surial startled as the horses sped. "What?"

His heart pounded, eyes fastened on the horizon. "You stay here with Lik'ta and the woman, Surial. Aline and I have business together in the west. We will return at dusk."

Aline and her mi'it were both chomping at the bit, already several paces ahead.

Surial was frowning. "What's going on?"

"Slavers." His rahat was burning in his hand, his blood afire.

Surial gasped, turned to Savina. "Can we get to the mountain before we run into them? Is there a shortcut?"

"I don't believe your friend is looking for a shortcut, Surial. Or a way to escape them."

Kade began to speak when Aline called, "Brother!" and he growled, horse wheeling as he rode toward the fire. "I will return for you, ki'ita."

"Kade!" Surial called after him, but Aline was ahead of him, riding hard, going into battle for their Tribes.

The bloodlust settled inside him, his mother and father and wife and son screaming in the winds for their vengeance. Then Aline's children's voices joined in and the voices of every man and woman and child he saw fall, every spirit burned, every drop of blood tore at him. "Vengeance!"

Aline's cry joined his, their voices rising to the sky for the winds to carry their loved ones to the Land of Summer.

They rode hard, surprising the slavers as they cleared the forest and came into a narrow meadow. The first man fell under the hooves of Aline's mi'it, the second's throat slid by his rahat. It was sweet, the scent of blood and smoke, sweeter than any flower. "Vengeance!"

He and Aline cut a swath through the men and the blood flowed like a river. He could hear his father's cries

of triumph ringing in his ears and he leapt from his mi'it, wallowing in the screams of agony, in the howls of fury from the bound and bloodied slaves.

Aline fought at his back, the two of them moving together as if they were born to it, taking down man after man. They took down thirteen men in all, both of them bloodied and torn, sweat pouring from them. There were twice that many slaves bound and the sound of their chains falling on the blood-soaked ground was music.

He heard the mi'it first, the frightened whiny of Lik'ta, unused to such blood, the low sounds of Mon'keur. Despite all the noise and the moans and the chaos, Surial's gasp seemed loud.

Kade helped a pregnant woman to her feet, dried her tears. "Kamasi, iki. I tatika maakachate rahat isna."

He showed her his blade, painted by the blood of their enemies, and her eyes filled. "Hi'icha."

He nodded. "Ney. Hi'icha Kadras y Aline."

"What is that fool doing?" growled Aline, and he turned to see Surial, having slid off Mon'keur, moving from body to body, sobbing. The ba'chi's hands and clothes were soon covered in blood. The witch was still mounted, riding slowly in Surial's wake, smiling. Smiling.

He rumbled and stood in front of Surial, barring the way to the rest of the dead. If the healer wished to use his powers, he could heal the slaves. "I told you to wait."

"You've killed all these people! How could you?" Surial shook his head, looking gray, tears flowing down his face. "Let me pass -- some of them may not be dead."

"These are not people. They are slavers, dogs. They deserved their deaths. The ones who have been beaten, starved -- spend your energy on them." Every word was a growl, his eyes watching the stiff, broken forms of his kin as their shackles fell away.

"Then let me at them, murderer. Let me *heal*."

He snarled, eyes flashing, and he grabbed Surial, dragging him bodily to a yet unopened cage filled with dead and dying children, naked and bloody and covered in filth. "Murderer? Look at these babes!" He shook Surial, furious. "The tatika that did this died quickly, died an honorable death. Look at them! Look at their pain, their agony! I will kill each and every slaver I find in their names!"

Surial hung limply in his hands. "Let me go. Let me at them. Get away from me." The words were quiet, tired, hurting.

Aline's hand stopped his arm, stopped his shaking. "Let the ba'chi go. Help me open the cage so he can heal the little ones. Let the healer work."

He looked into eyes that understood his fury, his pain. Understood and heard and drew him from the edge of madness. "Yes. Yes. I will help you." He could no longer remember the words of his captors, only his father's tongue.

The ba'chi landed in the mud as he let go and moved toward the cage, moaning at the sorrow they found there. Those slaves without injuries came to help them and between them they pulled apart the cage.

"Bring the children to the ba'chi," directed Aline, cradling two youngsters and leading the way back to

Surial.

The first child was placed in front of Surial and he closed his eyes, hands moving slowly over the broken body.

One by one the children were taken to Surial, the wails of the women sounding as they reached the bodies of the lost at the bottom of the pile. The sun was heavy in the sky, his braids stiff with gore as he and Aline began the business of binding and burying and building a fire.

The slumped and gray form of the ba'chi called to him, the need to go and touch, speak, strong, but the man pulled away from him as if he was the monster here, as if his actions had no honor. "Just bring me the injured and leave me be."

The grass around Surial was stiff and dead, the circle of death growing wider as the man continued to heal those he could.

Finally he stopped watching, stopped heeding the dull, wavering call, pouring his attention into the warriors and hunters they had freed, on the basics of camp and defense and tribe. He found himself working alongside a short man, broad shoulders as scarred as his own. "Do you come from beyond the mountains?"

He got a short, sharp nod. "Our tribe belongs at the foot of the Snake River, beyond the great mountain. Yours?"

"My tribe belongs at the mouth of the sea of ice, at the edge of the trees that touch the sky."

Aline joined them. "You must not return to your home. It is no longer safe. I have heard... those who have escaped the slavers' hand have gone into the lands beyond the cliffs, hidden away until they can be strong again and face their enemies.

"It is not our way to hide, but so many of our people have been taken, even at our prime. We must come together, gather our strength, and wait as the snake for our opportunity to strike."

Kade nodded, even as it broke his heart. "We are the children of the Wind and must heed its warnings. Together we rise up and defeat our enemies, paint the world with their blood."

"Will you travel with us?" asked the warrior they worked with. "Lead us?"

Aline shook her head. "I cannot speak for my brother, Kadras, but I have too much anger still in my heart. I cannot hold it back. I would send any of our brothers that I meet to join with you, though."

"And you, brother Kadras?" the warrior asked him.

"I am bound to my ki'ita, to my sister in the Winds, to the voices of my family." He looked up to the skies, watching the clouds. "The winds tell me it is not yet my time to lead my brothers into battle. Not yet. First we must grow strong."

"Then we will go and have many sons and wait for the time for us to spill the blood of our enemies as you have begun to slaughter them here today."

He clasped hands with the man, and then Aline did.

"Our Elders fell when we were first taken. I shall call a meeting of the tribe tonight and we will make our

plans."

The witch, still on her horse, rode by, making the warrior shudder. "She is not of the Winds, brother. Take care."

Kade nodded. "It is an ill wind that fills her lungs. Would that she had fallen with the tatika."

As if she knew he was speaking of her, the witch turned her attention to him, eyes hard and cruel, smile equally so. She seemed to be revelling in the aftermath of the slaughter. A cry went up just as her smile grew wider, the group around the ba'chi beginning to wail as Surial slumped onto his side, several people still waiting for his healing touch. He met her gaze for only a heartbeat. "Watch your step, witch. He is mine, bound by the Winds."

Then he was wrapping Surial up in his arms, stalking away from the death and chaos and toward the water. The ba'chi was limp and pale, breathing shallow.

Water. He would get them to the water and get them clean and then...

Then.

Then he would pray to his father for guidance, for he was surely lost in this.

Savina rode slowly through the carnage, lingering at the dead bodies, at the places where people wept and wailed. The pain, the death, the blood, it rose to her in waves, feeding her, bathing her with energy.

Better even than all that was the magic. Banshinaree's ability was pure, shining and true. Untutored, the magic was nonetheless at its peak, Surial pouring himself into each touch. The talik would not last long if he continued this way, but while he lasted... oh so sweet.

She would have him now. Weakened as he was making himself, it would take nothing to steal the rest of his magic and his mind. All she needed was a bit of privacy and it would be done.

She met the barbarian's eyes, smiling at him, thanking him silently for his part in this delicious carnage.

She had thought him nothing but an obstacle, but it seemed the Winds did indeed blow as they would. She laughed as he threatened her and 'rescued' Surial. He would be horrified to hear her admiring the workings of his Winds.

Still laughing, she turned and looked up at the mountain that loomed over them.

I'm coming for you, my darling. To lay a dead gift at your feet.

Surial felt as if he was drowning in darkness. Exhaustion filled him, body and mind, his heart hurting, pain everywhere he turned.

Death. Death was everywhere, colored everything, filled his nose. He could feel its crumbling touch beneath

his fingertips.

He was still crying as he managed to open his eyes, water lapping at him; he was being cleaned. What was the point? He would only become dirty again when he had enough energy to heal the others. A soft rumbling sound filled his ears, water pouring over him again and again.

He leaned toward the rumble, drawn to the soothing sound. It seemed to surround him, hold him, ease the aches and agonies that plagued him, ease his soul.

Though how his soul could be eased he did not know. So many dead. Massacred, murdered, the murderers themselves massacred and murdered. It wasn't right.

What energy he had went into being sick. He couldn't even lean over to make sure he didn't throw up on himself. He just opened his mouth and let the horror out. The sounds never stopped, the water continuing to wash the foul smell from his skin, his lips, cleansing him.

He opened his eyes, cringing when he saw it was Kade. He and Savina had arrived only at the end of the slaughter, but it had been enough, the sight of Kade slicing open the throat of another man burned into his eyes.

"Shh... You must rest, ki'ita. You must rest and heal yourself." How? How could a voice so warm, so fine, live inside a murderer?

"You killed them," he whispered, shrinking away from the man who had been his friend.

"Yes. They deserved to die." Kade's eyes were still, cold. An animal. The man was an animal. "They burned the tribelands, they throw infants and elders into the flames while they live. They violate the woman, cut the tongue from those who cry out. They deserve to die."

"You did no better by cutting them down where they stood." He dragged himself over, moving away, shaking.

"What would you have me do? Allow them to kill my people, enslave them? Sell them to families such as your own?"

Surial shook his head. No, that wasn't what he wanted at all.

"You must rest, my friend. Heal yourself."

"I need to get back to work." He would not be ordered around by this murderer. Tears pricked at his eyes. Kade was his friend, was a good man, he'd touched the man, healed the man. How could Kade have done this and not feel remorse, not be horrified by himself?

"There is not enough of you left to work. The others will heal or die. It is the way of things. People die."

"You don't need to help them along, but I can slow their passing." He forced himself to stand, swaying. He stumbled, falling into the water as he tried to reach the shore.

"Why? When the Land of Summer waits to ease their sorrows? They die free, my friend, they die in honor." The sun was setting, turning Kade's braids to copper.

"I am glad death is such an honorable thing for you, Kade. It is anathema to me. Free or not, it is still death."

He crawled to the shore and pulled himself up.

Those huge hands helped him up. "You cannot heal more this night, Surial. There is not enough of you left behind."

"I cannot stand by and watch them die." He rounded on the man. "You did this. You awoke this inside me and then you... you killed those men. It hurts me to have you touch me. It hurts to look at you and know what you have done."

Kade's hands fell away from him and the man stepped away, leaving him to stand on his own. Kade's face was hidden in the gathering dusk, the huge man still and steady, the shadows gathering around. "Then I will touch you no longer."

Surial nodded, his heart breaking for their friendship. He was truly all alone now. He dropped down to the ground and curled up around himself, cold and tired and heartsore.

Kade walked over to Mon'keur and Lit'ka, pulled a blanket down and placed it around him, careful not to let the heavy fingers come in contact with him. Then Kade moved to sit and watch, silent and still beneath the huge trees. He wanted to yell, to tell Kade to leave him, or to bring him to the children, let him heal them until there was nothing left and he could leave this place that had nothing but pain for him.

He was too tired to do anything more than lie there and feel sorry for himself.

And so that is what he did until he fell into an uneasy sleep colored with blood.

It was late. The moon was traveling across the sky, the winds blowing gently, singing of peace for her children. Aline knew that she would not sleep this night -- she was too keyed up still from the battle. She roamed the makeshift camp, the smell of fires burning for warmth and cooking slowly replacing the stench of captivity and burning flesh.

The dead were buried, the slavers burned. All that remained was for the few caught between life and death to either be healed or die.

Aline was searching for the ba'chi. He'd had his rest, let him heal the rest now so that they could quit this place before they were the ones taken by surprise. When she couldn't find the ba'chi, even after checking the witch's tent, she began to search for Kadrass. The man would know where his ki'ita was.

When she found her friend, sitting against the trunk of a tree, she thought for a moment one of the slavers had taken him, a hidden wound stealing his life away.

Then those dead, empty eyes moved, focused on her. "Aline."

"Are you hurt?" she asked, kneeling on her haunches next to him.

"The Winds test those that follow them and only those that believe may endlessly follow." The saying was familiar, a prayer offered when hope was lost and a warrior needed strength.

"Oh, Kadrass. You have not lost your ba'chi to the Land of Summer?" It was the only thing she could think of, given they had just won a great battle, spilled the blood of their enemies.

"In heart if not in body, my sister." Kadras nodded to the thin man sleeping restlessly beneath a rough blanket. "He does not accept my touch. To him, I am tatika now. Without honor."

"A'chaffa! How is such a thing possible?"

"His ways are not our own."

Aline shook her head. "I do not pretend to understand the ways of the ba'chi to begin with. And this one is not born of the Tribes." A cry floated on the night air, the pained noise of a child, reminded her why she was here. "Wake him. There are more to be healed."

Kadras shook his head. "I cannot. I will protect him, as is my duty, that is all."

"Then I will wake him and he will do what he is meant to do." A'chaffa, the ba'chi was here to heal; then let him heal. She stepped to Surial and shook his arm.

Kadras stood and called for the mi'it, ignoring them, moving as one broken and lost. Men. There was a reason the winds did not gift them with childbirth.

The ba'chi was hard to wake, eyes looking as if they were sunken into the pale face. "The children need you, healer."

Surial nodded but did not speak, leaning on her heavily as he stood. The green eyes searched out Kadras and she shook her head again.

Kadras brought the ba'chi's mi'it close. "Here. Mon'keur waits for you."

Surial slipped one arm around the mi'it's neck and leaned against the beast. "I can't..."

She stepped back and folded her arms. Kadras sighed softly, moving over to offer help. Surial stiffened and then sighed. "Please. I cannot do it on my own."

A'chaffa, she was going to beat them both herself.

Kadras lifted the ba'chi, hands gentle and sure, helping him mount. Surial lay against the beast's back, holding on with his arms as Kadras slowly walked the beast back toward the makeshift camp.

"Aline, I think the healing would work better if I could share the energy of the parents. If they are well. The grasses in the meadow were all used up and bloodied. I do not have enough in me to heal without help."

Kadras' head hung down farther, the big man hiding within himself.

She gritted her teeth, growling softly as she held back the urge to knock their heads together. There was work to be done; they had no time for such silliness.

Surial and Kadras seemed oblivious to her ire and soon enough they were with the children who needed help, the ba'chi sliding from the back of the horse and beginning his work. She explained the need to the parents who sat with their little ones and soon the ba'chi was healing. She glared at Kadras. He could be facilitating this. He met her eyes, fierce, quiet, stubborn as stone.

"You could help him. I have seen ba'chi do amazing, impossible things with their ki'ita at their sides." She

pitched her voice low as the witch approached.

The quiet calm slipped from his face as the witch neared Surial and Kade moved, quick as any snake, sliding between Savina and the ba'chi, blocking her without excuse.

Then Kadrass sat, meeting Surial's eyes with his own, determined, unafraid. "I must do as the Winds call me."

Surial nodded. "I can't do it alone and then they will die. I can't let more die."

Finally. She shifted her glower to the witch, who seemed almost to glow in the fire and moonlight. Some trick of the light made her seem younger this night. Savina seemed oblivious, entire focus on the pair as the ba'chi healed the children.

At some point, Kadrass lifted his head and met the witch's gaze, holding it, baring his teeth until she tilted her head and moved away, the children cringing away from her skirts. Perhaps they had not sent enough people into the shadows this night.

chapter twenty eight

They had turned from a tribe of two to three to thirty.

He could no more leave the children defenseless than Aline could, so they traveled, moving slowly now, the summer heat and lack of mi'it keeping the mountain range before them, distant. They seemed to gather the people who had run as they moved, hunters and scouts moving ahead, stopping each afternoon to rest and make rahat. Aline was masterful, truly blessed by the Winds as she worked and Kade owed her his sanity, his sense.

His ki'ita was dying.

He did not know why or how and the few women who knew the herbs just shook their heads and sighed. Every night the same thing happened. He would sit outside the tent, refusing to let the witch near, and offer his hand. "Please. Heal yourself."

Every night Surial turned away from him and slept a little harder, faded a little more.

Throughout, his sister in the Winds included him, drew the circle of warriors so that there was a ring of scarred cheeks barring Savina from Surial. Again and again the urge came to simply kill her, slit her throat where she sat, but something inside him knew that his ki'ita would never forgive that, would slide into the Land of Summer without another word, so he stayed his hand.

Today he could not even feel Surial's presence and when Aline came toward him, a dread feeling settled in his belly.

"Di'ben nor, Aline." He forced himself to take one breath, then another. "All is well?"

"Di'ben nor, Kadrass." She shook her head. "No, my brother, it is not. Surial is missing. As is the witch."

A low growl built within him, fury and desperation twining in his belly like a bitter fire. "When? Did they take the mi'it?"

"No one can remember seeing them since we stopped to camp and, yes, their mi'it are missing." She laid a hand on his arm. "I will go with you, brother. The tribe is ready to continue on its own."

He whistled low, Lik'ta and Grandam coming immediately. "I will not lose this one, Aline. The witch must die."

Together they were packed and riding in heartbeats, hoping to get a trail before the night fell. They had not gone far before they found the trail, Savina obviously having trouble keeping it hidden with Surial in the condition he was in. There was a branch broken here, a hoofprint there, the signs far enough apart to be a challenge, close enough to build their hope. The witch was taking Surial to the mountain, not heeding the

terrain or the thick woods. Furious, Kade pushed the mi'it deeper and harder, following as long as they could.

"Do you really share the bond with him, Kadras?" Aline asked him as they led their horses up a steep incline.

He couldn't figure out how Savina could have gotten Surial up here on her own, but the trail was clear.

"I do. I hear him, he sings within me." He met Aline's eyes, heart a stone in his chest. "I died for him and he retrieved me, drew me away from my ancestors to avenge them."

"Forgive me, brother, I just have never seen the bond work as it does between you two. It seems strange."

"It is not as others I have seen. I... his gift feeds from him in a way I do not understand and he feels no need for me, nothing but disgust, and yet... I cannot let him go." He tilted his head, one long braid showing. "I wear his ki'ita braid and he will never know it. It is hard, trusting the ways the Winds blow."

"It did not look as if he had no need of you. He was dying before she took him, refusing you was killing him." She shook her head, braids sliding over her shoulders in the fading light. "Does he understand the bond?"

He laughed, the bitterness in the sound surprising him. "He owned me, Aline. He owned me like a dog and yet he is my ki'ita. How does one explain such a thing?"

"A'chaffa! Strange winds are blowing." She looked him in the eye. "Are you sure he is your ki'ita? Perhaps you are mistaken."

"I loved Hassi, mated with her before my tribe, she bore my son, and when she died, I lived." He swallowed hard. "I would die for him knowing that he cared nothing for me." If that was not a bond, he did not know what one was.

"I am sorry, brother. Perhaps once he is no longer under the influence of the witch he will recognize his ki'ita."

He tilted his head, nodded. "Perhaps."

He looked around, eyes straining for another clue. Damn the fading light.

"It grows dark. We are better off making camp. If we miss a mark we could lose more time than stopping would cost."

Aline's hand landed on his arm. "Kadras. You cannot change the past, only make it right through your actions now."

"You are a wise woman, Aline. I will find him and protect him. I swear it." He took a deep breath. "Come, let us find a quiet place to rest."

She had waited patiently for so long and in the end it had paid off. The barbarian watched Surial like a hawk, but she'd found her chance and snatched the dear boy. It had been simple, really. Surial was in no

shape to fight her, and with the power she'd absorbed from the massacre of the slavers and the magic Surial had performed there, she was strong.

She'd helped Surial onto his horse, the beast easy to lead once she had its master on it. They rode until night-fall, going straight up the mountain regardless of obstacles, but she didn't dare risk the horses' legs before they were closer to the Mountain and Pendele.

Surial fell from his horse, right into her arms.

She crooned. "That's right, Surial, come to me."

"Where... where are we going?"

"To see your grandfather. He's waiting for you up on the Mountain, Surial." The poor boy stumbled, not even able to keep himself up. She sat, bringing him down with her, his head in her lap. "Yes, that's it, close your eyes."

She pushed the hair off his face, fingers stroking gently.

"It's cold."

"No. No, it's warm. You're just tired. You can warm yourself."

Warm yourself, dear boy, let me feel you use the magic.

They were up with first hint of dawn, searching for the next sign. It was growing easier to find them. The witch was taking the ba'chi straight up the mountain.

"What's up there?" Aline asked.

"She told Surial his grandfather lived there. That there is a school of ba'chi, a hidden place." He itched, skin filthy and cracked, needing to bathe, to wash. He was as much a slave to this need as he had been to the slavers.

"Ba'chi hiding?" Aline shook head. "Ba'chi owning slaves? Tribes being devastated? I do not like the times we live in." She growled. "You should have killed the witch when you first saw her. I should have done so. I will not need to learn this lesson again."

Kadras gave her a look, rumbling softly. "Things were different. I lived in a land with only sand. A hi'icha could not tell friend from foe."

"You are in the forests now and will not make the same mistake again." She had fought next to Kadras, knew he had honor, wore his marks proudly.

She prayed to the Winds that they found his ba'chi before it was too late. The signs came more often now, the witch pressing the animals.

"The witch will not be given a chance to breathe a single word."

"My lady's petticoats had fallen down about her knees..." They both stopped short as a song filtered through

the trees, a man's voice accompanied by jingling bells and a soft strumming.

She met Kade's eyes and the two of them dropped off the mi'it, creeping slowly toward the noise. The song continued, becoming bawdier, the man obviously enjoying himself. They crept over a rise and saw him. Not that any being within a league couldn't have seen him.

Kadras looked over at her, eyes wide. "He is not of the Tribes."

Aline nodded, one eyebrow lifting. She wasn't sure the dyers of her tribe could make that particular shade of purple. She checked the trees surrounding them, but there seemed to be no one else. "He appears to be alone."

"Who would ride with him? He would scare the game and all would starve."

"Do you think he would have seen the witch?" Perhaps they could just return to the path they were following and leave this peacock to his plumage.

Kadras shook his head, then those eyes narrowed, a growl sounding. The man had the ba'chi's mi'it, the dark one, Mon'keur, hobbled together with a smaller mare.

"We go."

Together they leapt down, and she tackled him while Kade took the horses. He went down easily beneath her.

"I vow, Lady, if you have bent my lute, I shall be quite put out." Gray eyes blinked up at her, amazed and stunned and surprisingly free of fear.

She growled down at him. "I never touched your lute." She got up and grabbed hold of his blouse, hauling him up after her. "I have him, Kadras. How are the mi'it?"

"They are well, unharmed." Kadras drew his rahat, advancing on the stranger. "Where did you get the stallion?"

"At the drop off. I am Va'talik Mirran, from the Sudentalles. The other bards leave fresh mounts and we leave ours that need rest. My Vallan was about to foal."

"Are the mi'it well?" she asked Kadras again, sending him back toward the stallion. Then she turned back to her captive. "Where is this drop off? Is it far from here?"

If the witch and the ba'chi were on foot now, it would give them the advantage; two able-bodied hi'icha could cover far more ground than a witch with a half-dead man. Unless Surial was dead and the witch now traveled alone. There was no reason, however, to worry Kadras with such thoughts.

"A half day's ride, maybe more." The gray eyes grew suspicious, cool. "I will not expose our ways to thieves and rogues. The talik are strong and ask no trouble, lady."

"We are chasing a witch who has stolen the man who shared iyossi with that stallion. He would not have given the mi'it up easily. We have no quarrel with anyone else. We have no quarrel with you -- do not give us a reason to change our minds." This dandy would show them what he knew.

One brown eyebrow lifted. "A witch? Honestly? Are you sure? They're very rare."

"Are you questioning my word?" The nerve of the man. That this... this... fop would... She glared. "My companion wants his stolen one back. If you are not careful I will leave you to him."

"He can't have the horse, I need it. I'm supposed to test children in the south." The fop sighed, frowned. "Do you know where they were going?"

She snorted. She'd like to see this one try to keep Kadrass from taking Surial's mi'it.

"The witch called it 'the Va'Sude...."

The man's head tilted, eyes lighting up. "And he did not go willingly?"

"He was sick. He could barely walk. He did not go willingly." Kadrass believed it. She believed for her brother in the Wind.

"Sick? With a witch? Heading there?" Those eyes showed every emotion, bright and sharp and... concerned. The man pulled away from her grip and began digging through saddlebags, completely unafraid of them. "What did your witch look like? I know I have a paper here, damn it to Havid's lowest ring of hell..."

"Thin, short, white hair, eyelashes and everything. She looked wrong."

Aline looked over at Kadrass, sharing a shrug with him at the strangeness of this man. "Can you help us or not -- we are losing daylight."

"Savina."

Kadrass growled low and tackled the man. "Yes."

She made no move to stop Kadrass or pull him back. Let this Mirran know that they were deadly serious.

Mirran rolled as they hit the ground, surprisingly quick and light-footed, a long, thin blade appearing in his hand as he found his feet. "I am not your enemy in this. If it is Savina that has your friend, he is dead, or will be soon if you continue playing with me."

Kadrass made a broken, lost sound, hurtling toward the gaudy singer, rahat in hand. Aline lunged, taking him down before he could kill the man. She backed off immediately, not wanting to fight her brother warrior. "If you kill him now he can't help us at all."

To her surprise, it was the stranger that nodded. "Savina is no friend of my kind. She seeks to destroy the strongest and oldest of us all. I know these woods, every inch. She will kill her prey at the foot of the mountain. I can lead you there."

"Stay your hand, Kadrass. If he leads us false you'll have time enough to kill him then." She put her hand on Kadrass' shoulder as the big man stood, hand clenching his rahat, and then she turned back to the dandy. "Lead us to them now."

Kadrass rumbled. "If you lead us astray, I will make you wish you had died sooner."

The dandy shrugged, moving to pack his saddlebags. "Save your threats and your energy, barbarian. Savina is quite powerful and will require your complete focus."

Aline went back and got their mi'it, leading them to where Mirran readied Mon'keur. "Perhaps you should ride the ba'chi's mi'it, Kadrass. And let this one ride your mount."

Kadrass could sing to the horses and she hoped Mon'keur might have news of the ba'chi for him.

Mirran nodded. "If you wish. It matters not to me."

Kadrass went to Mon'keur, singing softly, huge hands stroking Mon'keur's face, The mi'it stamped and whinnied, fury and sorrow ringing through the trees, the sound purely heartbroken. "We will find him."

"By the Winds, we will." And they would, she heard the truth of it in Kadrass' words, in her own echo of them. But would the ba'chi still be whole when they did?

chapter twenty nine

It was becoming harder and harder to open his eyes.

It was becoming harder and harder to breathe, let alone put one foot in front of the other. Still, he did it, a small but strong arm around his waist, forcing him forward.

Surial did not know who urged him on, who kept him moving, where they were going. He cared little to know. There was death everywhere. So much death, he could smell and taste it, feel it sunk deep inside his skin. He was tired and heartsore and there was something deeply wrong, though he couldn't quite figure out what. Each step jarred him, kept him off balance and unable to think clearly. Of course, it was better than when they stopped.

Stopping meant... emptiness, loneliness that made his past pale in comparison. Stopping meant a pain that was not physical, but that filled him completely.

He stumbled, feeling his skin bruise as he fell, rocks breaking his fall. He couldn't get up, even when the cold hands tried to help.

"All right, Surial. We can stop here, spend the night."

No. No, no stopping.

He struggled to regain his feet, but those cold hands pulled him down, slid over his face, his head, his shoulders, and their coldness slid into him.

No. Please, no.

The mi'it screamed beneath him as they rode, tearing through the forest at breakneck speeds. The tension in the beast terrified him; the iyossi bond was true, Mon'keur hurtling toward his rider. The stranger pushed them hard, riding as if born to the saddle, seemingly unconcerned as his fancy clothes were rent by brambles and branches. Kade rode low, head next to Mon'keur's, constantly whispering words of encouragement, of hope.

He would not lose the ba'chi to the witch. He swore, defying the Winds themselves. He could not lose another person, not now, not so soon.

His braids slapped against his back, heavy, sharp, bouncing against layer after layer of scars. Slavers' marks. Owners' marks. Surial's marks.

Aline brought up the rear, a solid presence at his back. The mi'it were all breathing heavily, working hard as

the way grew harder still. The trees seemed to be pulling at them, trying to keep them back, and the farther they went, the farther ahead the stranger slipped, as if less hindered. It was as if the mountain fought to keep its secrets, to keep those it considered its own.

Well, it could not have Surial, and neither could the witch.

To the stranger's credit, he slowed whenever he drew too far ahead, whispering some odd, low song that seemed to float on the air, tingle against his skin. The urge to hurry was everywhere, tugging at his heart.

"Careful, brother. This mountain is full of strange magicks," Aline called to him.

Kadras nodded, Mon'keur's heart slamming against his thighs. "The Winds blow dark songs here."

Mirran turned, hair dark in the faded light. "Savina is strong this night. She comes to fulfill a prophecy. These are songs of death and eternal pain. Hurry now, we must end it."

"A'chaffa, we are hurrying!" Aline grumbled, but her mi'it pushed at Mon'keur, keeping him focussed, fast.

The singer stopped suddenly, one hand held up. He and Aline slid off the mi'it, rahat drawn, creeping close. The witch was there in the clearing below, seeming to glow with health. As she turned to face them, he gasped.

Young.

The witch was young.

She stood, letting Surial's limp form fall to the forest floor. The ba'chi, his ki'ita, lay there, unmoving, face gray and aged far beyond his years.

Kade screamed, leaping from the clearing, rahat drawn. A blow of pure pain tore at his midsection, seeming to come from nowhere, and he rolled with it, refusing to allow it to stop him. His ki'ita would be avenged. Aline passed him, running toward the witch. She went down for a moment, as if felled by an unseen blow. She would not stay down, though, and they made their next attack together.

The blows came faster, stronger, harder, each one driving them to their knees and still they advanced. He could see his ki'ita -- silent, still, gray, waiting.

Aline pushed in front of him, taking the next blows directly on her own body, shielding him so that he could reach the witch.

He stumbled, tripping over Surial's body and landing hard, covering the cold, still form with his body. He lifted his head, braids flying in the fury of the wind. "T'isna anilo!" He belongs to me!

His roar seemed to shake the witch and he felt Surial gasp. "A'chaffa! Ki'ita, t'isna anilo! "

Dark green eyes slowly opened, Surial's hand briefly touching his cheek before falling back.

Aline gave a whoop, landing a blow across the witch's back while she was distracted.

His rahat burned in his hand, hot and sharp, and he screamed again, letting the blade fly. "T'isna anilo!"

The witch regrouped, surprise allowing them the advantage for just those two blows before she repelled

them again. The icy eyes were hot as if with fire, rage shooting from her as the invisible blows hit him and Aline.

"Masters! I need you!" A cry rang through the valley, louder than anything he'd ever heard, anything he'd ever imagined. "MASTERS!"

Even the witch stilled, stunned as the mountain itself trembled.

Aline recovered first, taking advantage of the stillness among them and knocking the witch off her feet. The witch shrieked, focus turning to the strange man who had led them here, but Aline put herself in front of Savina, falling like a stone before the witch's ire.

He roared, rahat thrown harder this time, sinking deep into the witch's belly, a dark stain blooming in the pale skin.

She screamed at him and another one of her blows hit him, knocking him back to the ground. He curled over Surial, defending his ki'ita, refusing to let her win.

One blow after another landed on him, sharper and deeper than any whip. Still Kadrass would not budge, would not release his prize. He was hi'icha, blessed of Winds and a true warrior.

"Kade..." Surial's voice was soft, faint, but there, his ki'ita still alive.

"Isna anili, ki'ita. Kama'asi." He pulled the cord that kept the rahat attached to him, trying to tug it from her belly. Bright lights, brighter than the noon light, began to creep down the side of the mountain, coming for them.

The witch shrieked, redoubling her efforts, but Aline had landed several blows herself and the strange power the witch was wielding was growing slowly weaker.

The lights coalesced around the witch, flickering and painfully bright. "You have returned home, Savina?"

"Master! Lover! Help me. Help me!" The witch lay curled on the ground, hand reaching out to the lights.

"Va'talik Mirran. Bring the outsiders to the healers and await me." The white lights flashed a dull red, surrounding Savina, engulfing her. "You will not escape again to cause such chaos."

She screamed, pushing at bonds Kade could not see. "I have brought you gifts and this is how you treat me? Let me go!"

"Never again, beloved. Never." The lights began to rise, sliding up the side of the mountain like a mist. A'chaffa! The Winds blew strangely here.

As the lights and the witch disappeared, Aline crawled over to him. "Kadrass? Are you well? And your ki'ita?"

He lifted his head, swaying. "He lives. You?"

"Winded. Her magic leaves pains inside, but I feel that nothing is permanently damaged." She lay down next to him, panting. "What was that?"

"A'chaffa! I do not know." He shook his head, spat blood upon the ground, eyes closing. "We should ride."

"Where? Can the ba'chi heal himself?" Aline was wiping her rahat on her leathers.

"He can use me." He shook Surial gently. "Surial? Wake up. Can you hear me?"

Their strange guide stumbled toward them, blood trickling from his lips, his nose, shaking his head and pointing to a trail leading up the face of the mountain.

Surial's eyelashes fluttered and he moaned. "No more, please. No."

Aline growled. "He cannot help himself." She stood and went to the fop. "You want us to go up there? Is it safe?"

The man's mouth opened, but nothing came out, just a fresh trickle of blood, so the thin hand pointed again.

Aline growled again. "Get him up on his horse. I'll take care of this one."

Kadras lifted Surial, mounting Mon'keur slowly, cradling the ba'chi in his arms. "I will not lose you, Surial. I will not."

Surial's head lolled against his arm, his ki'ita's breathing slow, shallow. There were dark circles beneath Surial's eyes, as if he had not slept in weeks, and the thin cheeks were gaunt, sallow.

He pulled a cloak from the saddlebags, wrapped Surial close.

"Isna anili, ki'ita. Kama'asi."

I have you now. All will be well.

Aline helped the bard up onto one of the mi'it after wiping the blood from his mouth and his nose. She was used to the sight of blood and did not understand why this small amount bothered her. Perhaps it was because it seemed so incongruous with the neat beard and the fancy clothes. He tilted slightly as she moved to get onto the other horse and with a roll of her eyes she climbed up behind him, holding Mirran in place. She clicked to the mi'it, falling into pace behind Kadras and the ba'chi, pulling the extra mi'it along behind her.

They moved steadily, the path surprisingly clear and easily followed. The man before her was completely silent, not even his breath making a noise. A'chaffa! Had anyone told her of such a life? She would not have believed them.

It wasn't long before they saw stone buildings in the distance and they sped the mi'it. They had wounded who needed healing.

People flooded out of the buildings, tall and tiny and thin and huge and all colors, fluttering and muttering and reaching for Mirran, tearing him from her hands. She heard Kadras' roar, saw the crowds parting, the stark refusal to release the ba'chi.

A'chaffa. She slid from her mount and went to her brother warrior. "If you will not give him up, then come down with him, brother. He must be healed." Kadras' eyes were wild, more animal than man, but he allowed her to touch him, to help him dismount and follow the strange ones.

They were bid to enter one of the buildings, Kadrass urged to release the ba'chi, asked to sit when he would not. The healers came in waves, pouring magicks into the ba'chi's body and fading back as they weakened.

So many of them. She had never seen such a thing. Some tribes didn't see a healer for generations, but here...

She turned, looking for the bard, to see if he was also being helped. He was curled in one corner, draped with a blanket, a tiny child watching him, holding his hand and patting. She strode over to him, clearing her throat to get his attention. "Thank you, Mirran. For your assistance."

Assistance she had certainly not expected from such a source.

Those exhausted eyes blinked up at her and a tiny voice answered. "He cannot speak. His voice is spent for a moon, maybe two. It is a great magic he called upon to draw the elders."

"Thank you." She said it again and nodded, anger filling her. They had so much magic here, so many ways to defend themselves, and her people had been decimated by slavers that were nearly on these people's doorsteps. So many children here and hers had been taken. Kadrass had his ba'chi. The people they had saved had each other, coming together easily as a Tribe, finding pride and honor in themselves.

Growling, she stalked from the building, needing to look up into the sky, to give her pain to the Winds.

She had only been alone outside for a moment, a mere handfuls of heartbeats, when a blanket fell over her shoulders, a cup of hot tea pressed into her hands. The still gray eyes of the bard stared at her for a moment, then he smiled, that motion making the face suddenly young.

She smiled back for a moment, touched, before clearing her throat and standing tall and proud again. The tea was hot and soothing, tempering her anger.

The man stood with her, silent, watching as the mi'it were led within the mountain, Kadrass' little Lit'ka scratched and scared.

Scratched and scared, but still standing, still proud. Like Kadrass and herself and all the ones they'd rescued.

They had been beaten, but were not defeated.

Savina shrieked as she was dragged to him against her will.

How dare he interfere?

How dare he leave her prize behind to be healed? Healed!

Exhausted, angry, the sweet magic and power she'd held for such a short time already fading, she was broken and bleeding by the time she lay on the floor at his feet.

Pendele. Her master. Her lover. Her nemesis.

"Do you never tire of interfering, Savina? Does your fury never cease?" He paced, thin and tall and hook-nosed, still fine, still handsome and dripping with power.

"Interfering? I was bringing you a gift." She spat the words out, pushing herself up with her arms to glare up at him.

"A gift? One usually delivers family members alive, beloved."

Not if those family members are going to kill you. She bit her lip, though. If he didn't want her help... she wouldn't give it.

"I am not your beloved. Have not been for many summers."

"No?" For a moment he looked distant, sorrowful. "You lost your way long ago, Savina. You could have had such power with me."

"I lost my way?" Rage filled her and she found the strength to rise. "I lost my way? You sent me away when you were done with me, discarded me as if I was nothing." She snarled and launched herself at him.

He opened his arms to her, wrapped his arms around her, his light pouring into her. "All I am, I am for you."

"No! No!" She pushed at him, trying to get away from him. She had no wish to join his cause, especially not like this.

The light pushed into her skin, into her lips, her eyes. "I cannot allow you to continue on your path, Beloved Savina. Remember the day we met. You were laughing by the water and I swore to protect you forever."

"You broke that vow years ago." She beat against his chest, railing against him.

"No. Come, be at peace, love. Let me ease your pain."

She'd left years ago to avoid this, had been all alone for so long and now it was all for naught. She couldn't resist him, not weak as she was. With a sob, she stopped fighting, let his light in.

chapter thirty

Surial was still curled up in Kade's arms. The big man had refused to leave him, refused even to let him go, despite the fact that the people here were obviously helping him. He wasn't even sure exactly what had happened. His last clear thought put him healing children. So many children. Not these children, though, the people here were different, held magic in their hands and used it freely.

He could remember being so angry at Kade, could remember the smell of death everywhere.

He couldn't work up the energy to be angry anymore, especially as he couldn't even be sure what had happened between now and then. He remembered... cold hands and the cold of the ground seeping into his bones. He shivered, turning into Kade, arms wrapped around himself.

Kade rumbled softly, hand warm and still on his back. "Do you hunger, Surial? There is broth here and toast."

He made a face, but found his stomach rumbling. "I guess I am."

He was loath to move, though. It was comfortable here in Kade's arms, quiet and warm. A bit of bread was pressed into his hands to nibble. It was nutty and full, heavy and sweet, the big man making no sign of moving, of moving him. He tore a small piece off and began to nibble. "Where are we? Who are these people? Where is the Tribe? Our horses?"

"We are at the place of your grandfather, your people, the... t...talik? The Tribe traveled on without us when the witch stole you. The mi'it are with Aline, well-cared for."

The room they were in was cool, dark stone covering the walls, a huge hearth blazing. Rows upon rows of beds stood empty, pale linens covering them.

"The witch stole me?" He frowned. Witch? He remembered no witch, could not remember being stolen.

Kade growled low, nodding. The man's heavy braids slid over his shoulder, making him notice that he'd been bathed, dressed in the dark, woven robes the others were wearing. "The witch. Savina. She was trying to kill you."

He shivered at the name of the woman who claimed to know him, who had been helping him. Kade's words felt right, like truth and yet... "Did you say this is the place of my grandfather's people?"

"Yes. They have been kind to you, to the mi'it."

"Why would the witch -- Savina -- bring me here if she meant to kill me?" He didn't understand at all.

Kade shook his head. "Who knows why people do what they do. The singer said something about a prophecy before he stopped speaking."

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Obviously he was still unwell. "Singer? Prophecy? Kade... what is going on?"

Kade handed him another slice of dark bread. "When the witch took you, Aline and I followed. We found the singer -- an odd, floppy, brightly-dressed man who had found Mon'keur. He knew Savina and led us here." Kade looked as if that should answer all his questions.

"I don't remember being taken. I don't remember much in fact. Just..." He sighed, remembering his revulsion at what Kade had done and the stench of blood everywhere. He was tired, though, and couldn't make himself pull away. Leaning against Kade, counting on the man, just seemed natural. After all, Kade had saved his life more than once.

"Good. The Winds blew ill and you need not remember."

"Yes, but the last thing I can remember was being very angry with you, everything else is just impressions -- mostly of being cold -- and then I wake up, tired, aching a little, and in your arms in a strange place. You'll have to excuse me if I'd like to know how I got from one to the other!"

"You must feel better; your temper has found you again."

He had the strongest urge to stick his tongue out at Kade, but instead he tore off a piece of bread, chewing it fiercely. "I simply wish to know what is going on."

Those brown eyes smiled at him. "I swear, friend Surial, you know as much as I do. Healers are close-mouthed folk."

"Healers." He shook his head. "It seems impossible. I was always told to hide my abilities, to never use them, and here are many people with my ability."

"Not many, Va'talik Bansharee, but some." A tiny woman with silvered hair smiled at him, coming around Kade's side. "We are so happy that you found us. Your mother has been sorely missed."

He nodded to her, gasping as one thick strand of hair fell into his face, pure silver. "You knew my mother?"

His maternal family was truly here? Could it be possible, that there was somewhere he belonged?

"I did. She and I were friends, years ago, when Asiana was a child." The woman smiled. "I heard she had children, but I did not know she bore a gifted son or we would have fetched you home years ago."

"Home..." He could scarcely believe it, but it seemed true. He found the energy to sit up, to leave the comfortable warmth of Kade's arms. "Is it true my grandfather still lives?"

She nodded, pale blue eyes twinkling. "He is indisposed at the moment, as you might understand, but rumor is that he will pay a visit upon the morn. I am Va'talik Maris, by the way."

"Va'talik, you called me that as well..." He was beginning to get excited, there was so much to ask, to learn, to see.

She nodded. "It is your title, Va'talik -- of the magicks. You are Va'talik Surial Pendele Banshinaree."

"Pendele?" Kade's voice was rough, low.

"His family name." She grinned and winked. "Your friend here has been very attentive."

"I'd never heard the name before Savina mentioned it. And yes, he is attentive; of course, he has saved my life more than once."

"Well, it's good to have someone to help you find your way home, I'm sure."

"He's a good friend." Surial looked at Kade's face and nodded. Kade was. The massacre notwithstanding, Kade had done what he thought was right and had saved a lot of people.

He got a warm, quiet, soft smile. Kade nodded. "As it should be."

And somehow, that made sense, that they should be friends, good friends after all they had gone through in the time they'd known each other.

"Would you like a bath? Perhaps a room of your own?" Maris patted his hand, a jolt of energy sliding along his arm.

"A bath? Oh..." He would indeed like a bath. Very much.

"There are bathing chambers deeper into the mountain, nearer the school, but I can have a bath drawn here, if you don't feel able to walk."

"I could probably walk if... Kade, would you help me?"

"Anything you need, my friend."

"Thank you." He smiled at Maris. "Lead us to this bath of yours, my Sieki."

Maris led them along quiet, clean, stone halls lit with pale, glowing rocks. There was a hint of sweet winds, a low murmuring filling the air.

He breathed in happily. "Cool. No sand. It is almost as nice as the cliffs of my childhood." He smiled over at Kade. "I like it here."

Kade nodded to him, eyes on the shiny, well-worn floor, lips pressed together in a pale line.

"You miss your sky." He slid his hand along Kade's arm. "There is wind at least, though, is that not enough?"

"For the moment, friend Surial. I will never understand the need to hide from the sky."

He chuckled softly. "It isn't the sky so much as the rain, the strong sun... the snow. Oh, I remember snow. When I was a boy..."

Maris chuckled. "The snows will be here in three moons, trust me. You'll remember why we hide away from them."

"Did you have snow where you come from, Kade?" he asked, slowing as the walk tired him.

Kade's arm came around his waist, supporting him. "My Tribe came from the big water of ice. There was

snow, but mostly cold."

He leaned heavily against Kade, confident his friend would not let him drop. "I like the snow better than the cold."

"Well, you will have as much snow as your can bear here. The mountain passes close after the first snows and we're all kept warm and safe deep inside."

Oh, he could feel Kade tense up at the thought. He had to admit it did sound a little like they were trapped there after the first snows. "Surely you can make your way down off the mountain if needed?"

Maris blinked over at him. "I suppose. I don't know that anyone has tried. Even the travelers, the bards, they are either home by first snow or not at all until the spring."

"The bards are from here? I thought you were... Va'talik here?"

"We are one and the same. The bards are gifted with their own magicks. They find the blessed children and deliver them to us to raise and train and teach."

"Ah..." So it was just a cover. There was more to this mountain than its simple stone walls and its denizens' plain clothing might suggest.

"Is it much farther?" He was growing winded.

"Two more halls. Not far."

"Should I carry you, my friend?" Kade's voice was low, echoing.

He was going to say thank you and shake his head no, but he changed his mind as his legs grew weaker. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

Kade didn't answer, simply lifted him, carrying him easily, carefully, following the healer down the quiet hall. He felt like a child, carried about, but he didn't have the energy to struggle or even protest. Instead he just curled into Kade. The leather against his cheek was soft, well-worn, tiny beads worked in, Kade's constant habit of decorating obvious.

He let his eyes close and floated.

The healer didn't speak again, and before he knew it he was in a huge room, a series of metal tubs filled with steaming water waiting for bathers. "Oh, my! Kade, look at this."

Kade set him on his feet and he went to one of the tubs, hand trailing in the water. "How do they keep them all hot?"

"There are huge fires deep below and the water flows through pipes. The tubs at the very top there? Are too hot to bathe in, so the water trickles down and slowly cools." Blankets and soaps were retrieved from a large closet and set upon a low bench.

"Fascinating!" He'd never seen anything like it and suddenly he was eager to see what other wonders this place might hold. He began to undress. "Will you join me, Kade? You're a little... battle weary."

The healer pointed to a series of thick ropes. "Pull the green bell and someone will lead you to your rooms. I

must return to the infirmary."

Kade began unlacing his thick hide boots, braids dragging upon the floor.

"Perhaps you'll sing me the songs of your braids?" he asked, eyes drawn to the long hair. His hand went through his own, still not much past his shoulders.

Surprised, honey-brown eyes shot up at him, then the scarred cheeks flushed. "It would be a great honor."

"The honor will be mine." He smiled at Kade and then slipped into one of the tubs, moaning as the heated water cradled him.

Kade unfastened each braid, then joined him, copper and silver hair long and bright as Kade ducked beneath the water. He dunked his own head and reached for the soap, working it into his hair.

It had been so long since he'd had a proper bath. It was bittersweet -- so nice to be in the hot water with soap and blankets solely to dry off with, but it also reminded him of Argent and Madrise and the people he had been forced to leave behind.

Kade washed quietly, eyes closed, soaking and looking almost at peace. Once he was clean, he let himself float in the large tub, finding his own quiet peace. Kade eventually started replaiting his hair, singing once more of his mother, his father, tears still filling the sad eyes. Surial wrapped his arms around his knees and watched, feeling melancholy at Kade's sadness.

The songs continued, one braid after another, songs of horses and friends, lovers and hawks. Then only one strand of hair remained, a long, bright lock in front of Kade's ear. A green bead was threaded on, then another, a low, soft song filling the air. The song told of pleasure and devotion, of eyes like forests, of laughter and knowledge and endless compassion.

The songs were so sad, but this one was different, hopeful. The words were a sweet vow, a promise of protection and care, Kade's voice seemed to fill the bathing chamber, the stones seeming to vibrate with the song.

As the song came to an end he smiled at his friend. "That was beautiful."

"Thank you. It is the most blessed song a hi'icha can sing."

"Is it for your new tribe?"

"No. I have no tribe." Kade caught his eyes, offered him the quietest smile. "It is for my ki'ita."

"You've used that word before." Surial tried to remember when.

"Yes. The greatest honor a hi'icha can receive is to be called by the Winds to protect a ba'chi, to bind his life with a blessed one." Kade stood, stepping from the tub.

"And you've found a blessed one here." It made sense, the mountain was full of va'talik, or, as Kade called them, ba'chi. So why did the thought hurt, wasn't he happy for his friend?

Kade tilted his head. "No. I found nothing here."

"Then who is the braid for?"

Kade pulled on his leggings, his boots, then stood and headed for the door before stopping, turning to look at him. "The braid is for you, ki'ita. It has been for moons. I must see to the mi'it, but I will return to assure your rest."

Him?

Oh.

"Kade, I..." But his friend was already gone.

Leaving him a lot to think about.

His heart pounded and he followed the mi'it's quiet, constant call to find his way out to the sky, to the winds. He had shown Surial his heart and no matter what happened now? His future was set. In the candlemarks that Surial floated between life and death, Kadras had offered himself fully to the Winds, to their will, opening heart and mind so that he would know the way to ride.

This place with its heavy roofs and odd winds blowing disturbed him, worried him, but they seemed to believe his ki'ita one of their own.

Kadras' breath whooshed from him as he stepped from the doors, the bright, dark sky sprinkled with stars. Oh. Oh, better.

He took one deep breath after another, walking across the rocks to the rough-wood barns where the mi'it where kept, nodding to Aline as he neared. "Di'ben sur, Aline. Bright blessings."

"Di'ben sur, my friend." Aline gave him a smile and went back to sharpening her rahat.

"Surial is awake, bathing, walking. He will live." She nodded and he smiled, heading toward the call of Lik'ta. He could hear his iyossi, unhappy and scared, far from home, far from all he knew.

"Kama'asi, Lik'ta. Kama'asi mi'it." He found the mi'it's stall, purring low, smiling as Lik'ta pushed over to him, nickering and tossing his head. "I know, sweet one. You have faced many trials, many hardships, but you have been so brave."

The song swirled around him, clear, loud. The mi'it stamping and sounding, full of anger and fear and pride and pleasure, all at once, the feelings offered completely, freely.

"Kadras. How much longer will we stay here? I am told once the snows come the way in or out will be barred. We have not finished with the tatika."

Kade nodded, eyes on the mi'it's. "It must be soon. We cannot allow them to ride free another winter."

She nodded. "We will not. Do you think they have information here?"

"They do not speak to me. We are barbarian, yes? Outcast? The singer? Does he speak to you?"

"The singer does not speak. They say what he did to bring the light that saved us hurt his voice and only

time will heal it."

"He sacrificed his voice for strangers?" Kade nodded, this one was not tatika. "The Winds must speak to him."

She shrugged, but there was something in her eyes as she answered. "Perhaps."

He nodded, hands sliding through Lik'ta's mane. "My ki'ita will meet his grandfather tomorrow. I do not know if he will stay." The words hurt him to say, to admit.

"Will you if he does?" Aline sounded shocked at the very idea.

"Stay?" He shook his head, sighing. "I cannot. I cannot remain here while our people suffer."

"You would leave your ki'ita?"

"I..." Kadras closed his eyes, listening to the mi'it's song. "I have vowed to avenge our people, sister. We must gather the Tribes."

"I agree, Kadras. I do not understand leaving your ki'ita, though. I know times are hard, different... but it seems most strange." Aline looked him in the eye. "We could use the help of a ba'chi who is a healer."

Kade nodded. It was easier to assume his ki'ita would not come than to ask and be turned aside, turned away. Still, Aline was right; he was caught between promises.

"Could you not talk him into coming with us? He would leave this place for you."

"I must do as the Winds bid, Aline. If we were with the Tribe I would go to the elders, beg their advice, their words, their wisdom." He climbed into the stalls, letting the mi'it mill around him, succor him. "Here I am simply a man, standing and unsure."

Aline snorted. "You are hi'icha. I have seen you fight. You deserve your marks and more. You have chosen not to make him come with us." She shook her head and walked away, back straight.

Kade snorted, pride stung. He had only just spoken of the bond to his ki'ita. They had not sealed it, not made commitments, not done any of the things that were expected of a ki'ita pair. Who was he to demand anything from Surial? Mon'keur whinnied to him, stamping and snorting, speaking of the truth of his bond with Surial. He leaned over, resting his cheek against Mon'keur's. "Kama'asi, mi'it. I brought you to him. I will honor my vow always. He is my ki'ita, promised by the Winds."

Mon'keur's soft lips nibbled at his braids.

Kade chuckled, looking about. There were piles of blankets in the corner, somewhere warm and quiet and out of the way and open to the sky.

He would rest and dream and then in the morning, he would speak to his ki'ita.

Surial spent the night in a soft bed with the winds gently blowing in an odd series of vents in the walls. The stone walls were plastered with pale clay, making the room seem bright and almost airy. The bed was soft,

warm, the blankets colorful and finely woven. It was odd – to be a stranger and at home all at once. He was informed as he took his morning meal that his grandfather would see him in two candlemarks.

He searched for Kade, eager to share this moment with his friend. When each of his questions as to Kade's whereabouts was answered with blank looks, he changed his tactics and began to inquire as to where he would find the stables.

Finally, he was at the blocky, rough-hewn buildings, smiling as Mon'keur welcomed him.

Lit'ka came up, nodding and snorting, eyes dancing. Kade was there in the corner of the stables, snoring lightly, hand curled in the hay. Surial smiled. Kade never looked so at home as he did when with the horses. "Well, Lik'ta, what do you say? Should I wake him so he may meet my grandfather with me? Or let him sleep?"

Lik'ta snorted, tossed his head, and whinnied loud enough that Kade started and sat up, blinking his eyes. "Di'ben sud, Surial."

He chuckled, Lik'ta's answer clear. "Good morning, Kade."

Those brown eyes searched his face. "You look well. You have not looked well in too long."

"The healing when the slaves were freed took much from me." He felt good, too. Rested, hopeful.

"Yes. They required our help; you were a blessing from the Winds."

"I did what I must do. It would have been a crime not to help." He smiled at his friend. "You were the blessing -- they would not have had access to my help without you."

Kade's face bloomed with a smile, eyes crinkling. "Thank you, my friend. The Tribe will sing your songs for generations."

"Come and meet my grandfather with me, Kade. My only family."

Kade stood, nodded. "I would be honored. Perhaps this family meeting will blow easier than the last. Yes?"

"Oh, I hope so." He smiled ruefully. "I am counting on it."

It hadn't even occurred to him that it might not and suddenly there was a bite in his stomach.

"Oh, now. You were welcomed, all were happy to see you." Kade offered him a warm smile, eyes sure. "Your grandfather will be proud."

"Thank you, Kade. We should go -- I would hate to be late to this first meeting."

Kade straightened his braids and brushed the hay from his leathers. "I am behind you always."

"Thank you again." He led the way back to the main hall. They were to pick up a guide there.

A tiny lad, skin and hair paler than snow, eyes wide and the color of pure ice hurried over to them, voluminous black robes fluttering. "Va'talik Bانشinaree? I mean, are you? Him? The va'talik? The master's family?"

The air in the huge room was cool, almost cold, making him shiver.

"I am Surial, yes. And I am told that Pendele is my grandfather. We were supposed to meet with him." He hoped this wasn't another delay, he wished to know if he truly did have a grandfather still alive and if that man would make him more welcome than the rest of his family.

The boy's head bobbed, the motion quick and odd and birdlike. "Yes. I am Daslin, Va'talik Pendele is my master. Come with me. He's awaiting you in his chambers. I heard you were sick, are you better now? Have you broken your fast? Would you like to stop by the kitchens first?" The chatter was quick, rapid-fire, and made his head spin.

Surial blinked and gave Kade a look, shaking his head. "I am better now and I have eaten, thank you. Did you say master?"

Kade chuckled, one corner of his mouth curling up.

"Oh, yes. He's a great teacher, my master. I am very lucky he picked me to be his ward, his chosen. You must be very proud of him, everyone is. The whole school. He's the head of the Elders, the head of everything. You must be very proud." The boy moved quickly, leading them on a merry chase down long corridors and up hewn staircases, deeper and higher into the mountain itself.

Surial wasn't sure what to say. He had never met his grandfather before, how could he be proud? His emotions were vacillating between happy to meet family he didn't know was his, especially from his mother's side, nerves about it, and an anger that here was a place where he would have been nurtured, guided, celebrated and he had never been given the opportunity.

"Look down there. That's the main hall. There are six hundred and forty-five students and another two hundred faculty and nursery people, then the Elders and the healers and the bards and then the staff. They cook and farm and wash and..."

Daslin pointed out over a vast room, the floor seeming to glow with the gilt runes carved into it. People hurried back and forth along it, groups of adults and children scurrying back and forth like ants.

"Six hundred and... it's like an entire city hidden away inside the mountain." And all dedicated to magic, to powers like his own. It wasn't fair.

"Not hidden. Well, I don't think we're hidden. I mean, the bards go out, don't they? They go out and bring in the children they find."

Kade's hand landed on his shoulder, sure and strong. He took a deep breath and gave Kade a smile. "Yes, but no one else knows of this place. I would say hidden."

"Oh. Well, there's lots of magicks outside to keep strangers out, so, yeah. Hidden. My lab's windows face out onto the ocean, have you have seen it? The ocean, not the lab. I'd know if you'd been in the lab..." The child started moving again, Kade softly chuckling as they hurried.

"Do you think he ever pauses for a breath?" Surial asked Kade quietly. He raised his voice to answer the boy. "I have seen the ocean. I have also traveled it."

The corridor they traveled suddenly was filled with the breath of winter. "Traveled it? On a boat? Really? Why? Weren't you worried about sea monsters? Did you see any sea monsters? Were they green?"

Kade whispered, "Your grandfather must be a most patient man."

He nodded. Yes. Extremely patient. "There were no sea monsters. I don't believe they exist."

Of course, there could have been a hundred of them and he still would not have noticed.

"Oh. That's too bad. I like the idea of sea monsters. I like it a lot." The hallways they traveled became more and more ornate, the stone floors giving way to carpeted halls, art and sconces decorating the walls, the boy's voice slowly fading, slowing, becoming silent.

They were led to a huge set of copper doors, a silken bellpull on one side. The boy pulled the cord a single time, then waited, head bowed. In a few moments the door opened, an older man with sharp features and green eyes appearing. The appearance stunned Surial -- first and mainly because of the glow that seemed to pour from the man, an energy that crackled and snapped with power, but also because he could see his mother's face hidden within this stranger's.

Daslin bowed deep, "Master, the Va'talik Bانشinaree and his companion, as you requested."

"Thank you, Daslin. Return to your studies. I expect to visit you this evening to discuss your progress." Rich and deep and oddly familiar, the voice echoed in the hallway.

Wow. This man really was related to him. "Hello... what should I call you?"

Grandfather seemed wrong somehow, for someone he barely knew, and Pendele seemed too informal.

"You may call me Rana, Surial. You are your mother's son, without question." The man nodded, waving them into a beautifully decorated salle, the furnishings as fine as Surial had ever seen. "Please, sit."

"Rana, this is my friend Kade." Introductions made, he sat in one of the lovely chairs. "My mother was your daughter? Truly?"

"Asiana was most definitely mine, yes. It broke all of our hearts when she left with Arundial to be married. How does she fare? Is she well?" The long fingers folded over the intricately embroidered robe, the pattern fascinating.

Oh. Of course Rana wouldn't know, how could he? Surial cleared his throat, met the green eyes so very like his own. "I'm sorry to say that she died some years ago, Rana. It was the saddest day of my life."

"Died? But... Had your gifts not exposed themselves then? You carry the mark of a healer."

The pain of that day came flooding back and he hung his head. "I did. Or at least I tried."

A low rumble filled the air, the sound pouring from Kade, and he looked over. The man was almost vibrating, eyes flashing.

"Your companion is most protective of you, but I mean no harm." His grandfather's eyebrow arched. "Your father agreed to send any of his gifted children home to me. I imagine you were... discouraged."

"We were forbidden to even talk about it and when I tried to heal my mother I was sent away." Angry tears filled his eyes. "I should have been brought here, been trained properly. Accepted!"

"Yes." The word was accompanied by a short nod, his grandfather's eyes fastened onto his own. "Yes, and

had I known, I would have brought you here, let you grow in the school with the others. Your father broke his word, to you, your mother, me."

"She might still be alive." The words were whispered, his pain and anguish returning as if it has been only yesterday.

"How? If you had been here, my dear boy, you would have been as ignorant of her death as I was until this morning."

Well. He supposed that was true. He was grateful for Kade's quiet presense.

"I cannot make up for the years you have been away, but I can offer you a place now. A place here among your own kind." Another young person came in, hands full with a silver tray of tea and pastries. "Ah. A repast. Will you have tea?"

He wasn't hungry, but had no wish to be rude. "We would, thank you."

Just like that he had a home, family, a place to belong. It was what he'd hoped for, yet it didn't seem real.

The girl poured out three cups, silent and graceful. "I'm sure you have many questions, but you must tell me, how did you meet up with Savina? I was quite surprised to see she'd found you."

"She came to Azize shortly before... we left it. She introduced herself as a friend of the family, claimed to know you. I must admit I was quite skeptical, but when it came time to leave I chose to come here with her."

It was actually quite a coincidence, how well-timed her arrival had been.

"A friend of the family? How fascinating." His grandfather drank deeply, shook his head. "She is quite disturbed, Savina is. You are lucky you survived her."

He shuddered. "I'm still not sure what happened."

"Savina and I have quite the past. She felt that leaving you dead upon my very doorstep would grab my attention. She underestimated your companions and their luck. Va'talik Mirran called for me in the very nick of time."

"All I can really remember is being so cold." Kade's hand came down on his shoulder again and he took a deep breath, the warmth and connection calming him, keeping him here rather than lost in the memories of what had happened.

"She feeds from energy." Rana's eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring. "How it is you became acquainted with a b... Naik warrior in your travels?"

Surial winced. "I won him at the races."

"Won him?" The next words were very carefully spoken. "You treat the men you own very well."

He shook his head. "I own no man. He was the first and I freed him. Owning slaves is wrong." And if he didn't admit how long it took him to free Kade, could anyone blame him?

"I see. That was very generous of you, many men would not."

"Many men are wrong." It was wrong to keep another as a slave. Of that he had no doubt. He held his head high. "I am sure your healers would agree with me."

"Have you met many of the healers? They are quite excited, I understand, to welcome a new man to their ranks."

"I met... Maris, I think her name was. She welcomed Kade and me here, though I understand more than one of them worked on me. I have to admit to being excited to know that there are more of my kind, that what I do isn't an abomination to everyone."

"An abomination? Nonsense! You come from a long line of talik. We have been here since the very beginning of the mountain!"

"My gifts were never welcomed. With my family, nor with the people of my adopted city. It was Kade here who recognized them and insisted they were a gift, that I was to use them." He smiled at Kade.

"Ah, the Naik and P'lel are known for breeding the lesser magicks. It does not surprise me that he recognized them." The words were quietly, but surely, dismissive.

Surial bristled. "I am alive today because of Kade." The words were sharp, waspish. Kade was his friend, his protector. Important.

Kade rumbled softly. "The Winds offer all her people blessings. Some find them differently than others."

"I would not have found them at all without you, Kade." He took a drink of his tea; the flavor was intriguing, sweet and slightly sharp at the same time. "I would not be here without you, or alive."

"It sounds as if you owe him much." Rana slowly ate a pastry. "It is good to be blessed with friends."

"I do, and yes. I have been blessed with several very loyal friends." His Rowan. Yamin. Argent. All dead or left behind. Now he only had Kade. It didn't leave him feeling as bereft as he might have thought.

"I'm sure you will find even more here, Surial. There are so many things to learn, so many people who wish to know you." He was given a smile, a nod. "This is your home, after all."

He nodded, something easing in him. He had a home again.

"Thank you, Rana. It is good to have a place where one is wanted. And I would like to get to know you better as well." His only family left who would acknowledge him. He would like to come to be at ease with the man, to share hugs as a grandson would with his grandfather.

"I will have a permanent room arranged for you, something more suiting than a guest suite." Pendele snapped his fingers, the same silent girl appearing. "Have a room arranged in the faculty wing. Something with a view of the ocean."

"Thank you very much, Rana. You have been very kind. Would you have something near the stables for my friend?" He knew Kade would not be very happy under the heavy stone roof of the mountain stronghold for long.

"How long will you be staying with us, friend of Surial?"

Kade tilted his head. "We should ride before the snows fall. Mon'keur and Lit'ka are not built for the snows."

"So soon, Kade? I had hoped to spend some time, get to know my family..."

"Oh, surely you're not leaving, Surial! I've only just found you again." The rich, low voice was a perfect mixture of shock and displeasure.

Kade's eyes were sure, steady. "I will not leave you here, ki'ita. But we must ride. The others await us."

"How long, Rana, before the snows close up the paths?" He understood Kade's urgency, but he would stay as long as he could.

"Two moons, perhaps three."

Kade's eyebrow lifted. "We will stay until the leaves fall and the skies turn to gray."

He sighed. It wasn't very long at all. "I'll come back," he told his grandfather. "And we have the time until I go."

"Perhaps I can convince you to stay longer, with the time we have." Kade was given a long, cool look. "Your kinswoman has rooms next to the stable hands. Will that suffice?"

Kade nodded. "It will."

He thought maybe his grandfather was trying to snub Kade and hid his smile, knowing that instead Kade was where he was happy. He hoped that by the time they left, Rana would look upon Kade with less... disdain.

"Excellent. I would like to hear about your family, about your gift, your life." Pendele reached out, fingers cold as they touched his skin.

He shivered, reminded of Savina. Kade's rumble sounded, filling the air, and Rana leaned back. The air was full of tension and Surial didn't like it one bit. Kade was his friend, his only friend who had cared enough to come away with him. Rana was his grandfather, family. He wanted, perhaps even needed for them to get along.

Kade's hand brushed his arm, the cold dissipating. He didn't know how Kade did it, but the man always made him feel better.

Pendele stood, "Shall I give you a brief tour? There is a galatian glass, so that we might look without tiring you out."

"A galatian glass? I've never heard of such a thing." How fascinating.

"It's a blessed glass. It shows me what I wish to see within the mountain. It was a gift from my current ward and his predecessor."

"I cannot wait to see!" He was excited, eager. He wondered what other magicks he would find here.

"Come with me, then, my dear boy. I have so very much to share with you."

He got up, bouncing lightly on his heels. "Come on, Kade, doesn't it sound exciting?"

Kade stood, braids swinging. "Yes, my friend. Most fascinating."

Surial had expected they would go back out the way they had come, but instead his grandfather led them to a door that was cleverly disguised at the back of his office.

The hall behind it was wide, well-lit, and carpeted, so it could hardly be the secret passage its door suggested. Nonetheless, it was quieter here and the air fairly hummed with magicks. He took a deep breath -- it was almost intoxicating.

"Ah, you can sense it." His grandfather gave him a grin. "It is better than any wine."

"What is it?" he asked, taking another deep breath, almost laughing from the sheer delight of it. "Can you feel it, Kade?"

Kade shook his head and stepped closer to Surial, the tingling fading, becoming a quiet thrum. Curious. He stepped away, gasping as the sensations became strong again, and then stepped closer to Kade, nodding as they once again faded. "How do you do that?"

"Do what, my friend?" Kade looked completely confused.

He stepped away again, and again was hit by the full sensations, which faded as soon as he was close enough to Kade that their arms brushed as they walked. "You make things... normal. No. Right."

"You are my ki'ita. It is the way of things."

"Pish-posh. That is barbarian hocus-pocus." His grandfather snorted. "Do not be fooled by this... religious stuff and nonsense."

"Then how do you explain that your intoxicating air is muted when I am near him?"

Pendele shrugged one thin shoulder. "Distraction, perhaps?"

He didn't like his grandfather's attitude toward Kade; it seemed too similar to that of the denizens of Azize. He repeated the move away and closer again, with the same effect. "I assure you, it isn't distraction -- it's happening."

"Do you feel anything?" His grandfather's green eyes flashed over to Kade, who tilted his head.

"I feel Surial."

"You don't feel the magicks at all, Kade? It's like a... a tingle, but not so overwhelming when I am close to you."

"I feel you, sure as I feel the air."

"Oh." He wasn't sure what to say, what to make of that. He did think that there was more to this ki'ita business than his grandfather credited.

"See, Surial? The man cannot feel the magicks. He is not one of us. His kind are not capable of connecting with the universe as we are. See, the scholars tell us that..."

His grandfather rattled on and Kade met his eyes, brown eyes rolling.

He had to bite back his chuckle. There was no denying his grandfather was a teacher, and the diatribe gave him a new insight into Yamin's horror every time he began to talk about poetry and theatre and history. Interesting, he hadn't thought of Yamin or Azize really in days, his old life falling away much easier this time than it had when he had been first sent to Azize. He thought maybe it had something to do with the man at his side.

"This place? Would make the mi'it nervous."

"Like the belly of the ship?" he asked, thinking that what Kade was saying was that this place made him nervous.

Kade pinked, but nodded. "It is unnatural, to be beneath so much earth."

Surial nodded. He had to agree, it did seem unnatural. Not necessarily bad, but definitely unnatural. Especially with the way the magic seemed to vibrate along the hall.

"How much farther?" he asked.

One long, thin finger pointed to a metal door. "Just there, my boy. I have so much to show you."

"I'm eager to see this magic mirror of yours." He wouldn't believe it was possible really until he saw it with his own eyes.

"Oh, my dear, dear boy, the glass is the least of the treasures I have to show you. Come. Come and learn."

chapter thirty one

Savina stood at her window, watching for the barbarians. Their movement was her cue, the big male would lead her straight to Surial, as he had the last two days running.

Oh, she was being good, playing Pendele's game, letting him think she had been seduced yet again by his brilliance.

His light.

His all-encompassing power.

She snorted.

He was growing soft, old, while she was just coming into her own. He had no clue that she hadn't been overcome by his power, that she was only faking her submission. And once she took the healer's life, once Surial's magic was absorbed into her, she would be more than a match for him, she was sure. There was the barbarian, braids shining in the sunshine as he crossed the courtyard.

She slipped from her room and, keeping to the shadows, began to follow him as he came into the building. The air here was delicious, magic flowing freely everywhere, filling her with every breath. It was hard not to just open up and pull it to her, but she knew the safeguards that were in place would trap her if she tried it. She had been there when Pendele had first set them up, had watched as the unfortunate who'd played tester had dropped into a coma.

She could only imagine they would have improved.

She knew that the barbarian did not enjoy being indoors, that sooner or later he would leave and Surial would not stay behind, but would go with him. That was when she would make her move, once they were out from under Pendele's all-seeing eye. She followed the barbarian to Surial's rooms. He was unhappy enough with being so deep into the mountain that he paid no attention to those around him, didn't notice her at all, sidling along behind him.

The healer appeared at the barbarian's knock and even here, in this place where magic flowed on the air like sands in the wind, she could feel him. She had tasted Surial's essence, had nearly tasted him completely before the two barbarians had interfered.

She would always be able to find him, able to home in on him, just by his aura, the magic inside him calling to her like the moon called her children to dance in the night.

He looked pleased to see the barbarian. Interesting. Surial's smile seemed wider for this man than his own grandfather. When push came to shove, she was sure that Surial would fulfil the prophecy and unite with the barbarian over his grandfather. She was doing Pendele a favor, though he refused to believe it, refused to see. The man thought himself invincible.

If she did not already have her heart set upon Surial, she would let him leave, grab one of the other high powered magic users and fill herself with them, leaving the healer to take Pendele down.

Ah well, in time she would do it herself.

She was so busy revelling in that idea she nearly missed it when they took a different turn, heading back outside today instead of deeper into the mountain, instead of into Pendele's lair.

She tried not to pout. She liked going so deep into the mountain, liked risking Pendele knowing she was playing at being tamed. The danger gave everything an edge, made her sharper. She followed Surial and his barbarian out into the courtyard, rolling her eyes and retreating as they met up with the female barbarian. She couldn't risk taking him against the two of them, not with help so close.

Instead she slipped back inside and cruised through the halls like a ghost, finding the quiet girl she'd singled out several days ago. Not that there was much singling out to do, the girl was a loner, her magic rich and thick, full of the promise of womanhood.

Savina was hungry and if she couldn't have Surial yet, that didn't mean she had to starve. "Adisy, good morning, sweet."

The girl smiled brilliantly for her -- all she wanted was a bit of attention, her loyalty and trust had been so easily bought by tea and cookies for an afternoon or two.

The girl curtsied. "Good morning, honored Lady."

"Would you join me for tea and sweets? I'm feeling rather peckish."

"Oh, yes, Lady, that would be wonderful." The girl looked around. "Oh, we're right near my rooms, will you join me this time? You've been so generous, and I can return the favor."

Savina smiled. Perfect.

"That sounds lovely, my dear."

Adisy smiled and took her hand and Savina closed her eyes a moment to keep from doing more than absorb the magic that sank into her from where their skin met.

She was a truly patient woman, after all, she had waited decades to take her revenge upon Pendele, surely she could wait another five minutes to taste this young mind from the inside out.

Aline was with the bard Mirran when the uproar began.

They were in the courtyard, the bard more quickly recovered than expected. They spoke about the people Mirran had met in his travels. She was working him for information, truth be told. There was a scream from inside that they could clearly hear where they were and then shouting and crying and people rushing into the castle-like building. She turned to Mirran, one eyebrow raised.

Mirran shrugged, the look at once curious and blase. "You do realize that we have had more trouble since

you and your party arrived, dear lady, than in recorded history. Odd, don't you think?"

"We did not come alone. The witch was yours to begin with."

"Not mine. She'd never have come back, until you brought her." She got a wink, then Mirran stood. "I suppose we should go gasp and gawk with the rest of them. It's the thing to do."

"Something certainly has everyone in a panic." She headed toward the big hall, following the sounds and chaos.

As they hurried through the rough hewn corridors, hallways growing wider and fancier -- lamps and carpets and artwork beginning to appear, the rumors began floating back.

"Dead. Murdered. Barbarians. Savina. Poor girl. Sucked dry. Like the desert."

Aline walked more carefully after the first rumor laid a girl's death at the "barbarians'" hands. It would not to do be taken unaware and she was innocent of this crime. That it was a deed performed by the witch, she could more readily believe. She had never trusted the easy assurances that the witch was dealt with.

Mirran looked over at her. "Do not be frightened, lady. I will speak for your innocence, defend you."

"I can take care of myself," she told him, barely containing her growl. This fop thought she needed *his* protection? It was almost laughable.

"Against an entire village of talik? You must be amazing with your curved knife."

"The Winds are strong in me," she agreed. "And you talik are not... organized and you are prone to panic." She nodded to the place ahead of them where people were coming and going, wringing their hands.

"Not organized? Why, my dear lady! Where is the utter chaos in that?" Those mottled eyes danced at her, Mirran's chuckle husky and low as he grasped a pale-haired child, tears sliding down the round face. "What happened child?"

"A...a...adisy, Va'talik Mirran. Havvan found her. M...melted or something. In her rooms. D...d...dead!"

"Melted? Was there an accident?"

"N...no. No. Someone -- one of the newcomers, they say, killed her."

Aline growled, hand going immediately to her rahat. "Of course, they blame the newcomers. They do not understand honor as Kadras and I do. And the healer would not hurt a mosquito, even to save himself from being bit. So we are back to it being your witch who is stirring trouble."

"Easy, she's only a child." Mirran dropped one arm around the girl, finding a lace-edged handkerchief in a pocket. "Easy, child. Things will be well."

"Even children are not spared pain and horror. She is well to learn the way of things now." And if the child was old enough to make accusations, she was old enough to hear them repudiated.

"Children ought be spared, that is why we bring them here, away from the horror of the outside."

"That is stupid."

"Oh? It's better to let them be outcasts? Feared? Hurt? Here they are safe, supported. Defended."

"In my tribe the children were safe, supported, and defended, but they were not kept away from the bad things. Death and hatred are a part of the world, Mirran. You do them no favors pretending they do not exist."

She shook her head. They were all the same here, thinking everything was bright and lovely. It would get them all killed and not by the Naik, but by ruthless, evil ones, like the witch Savina.

"Many, no, most, never leave these halls, Lady Aline. They die here, gray and happy and quiet. Of all of us, there are ten that ever leave. We are not part of the world. We never have been."

"Then you would do well to do a better job of keeping the world from coming in."

Fools. Allowing one such as the witch into these walls, so totally unprepared to deal with her. And if the slavers were to ever find this place... If she had such feelings left in her, she would shudder and worry for the people of this place. However, the slaughter of her own people had left little room in her heart for others.

The commotion, which had died down, began anew, this time the word "missing" quickly flowing back to them.

Mirran tore his focus from her, eyes searching through the crowd, lighting on a tall, skeletal man with only a single eye in the center of his forehead. "Ian! What news!"

Aline didn't step back, though her hand tightened on her rahat.

"Savina and Va'talik Surial -- the Master's grandson -- have disappeared! The barbarian is furious!"

Mirran's eyes went wide, shocked. "The witch is free?"

Aline rolled her eyes. "You see? Not ready for the enemy you have let in yourself."

"The barbarian has injured three guards already attempting to reach the catacombs." The talking skeleton shook his head. "These strangers bring trouble, Mirran."

"Kadras is an honorable man," Aline growled. "Unlike the witch who was one of yours! I will help him find his ki'ita as it is obvious no one else here can offer him assistance!"

"The elders do not allow anyone into the catacombs, lady. Someone will subdue your friend and Va'talik Pendele will rescue his grandson."

She snorted. "Point me in their direction, Mirran. I will not leave my brother alone in his search."

Mirran looked as if he would argue, then nodded. "Follow me. I know a... little used path."

She strode along after him, shaking her head as they went deeper and deeper into the earth. It was unnatural to live like this, was there any wonder strange things happened here?

She said a prayer to the Winds that Kadras would find his ki'ita before the witch could finish what she had started.

His roars echoed through the halls, his nostrils flared. He could feel his ki'ita reaching for him, screaming for him. It was a burn, a deep ache, a pain beyond any other. Another guard fell beneath his hands, landing with a dull thump on the stone floor. The next came, the stream endless.

"You cannot go into the catacombs, barbarian. It is not allowed." A thin sword was drawn, the man unpracticed, awkward.

He did not bother to answer, simply growled and attacked, rahat flying. Again and again, a man fell, uniform turned dark with blood. Again and again, another came to take his comrade's place.

"Please! Please! My master asked me to speak to the man. Please!" The little white-haired boy, the slave that Surial insisted was not a slave, hurried up in a flutter of black fabric, balls of fire driving a wedge between him and the guards.

He growled at the boy. "I will go in."

"My master wishes to see you."

"No. I will go in." He stepped forward and, to his surprise, the boy held his ground, fire flaming around them.

"Yes, but not here. I'll show you, but you have to hurry. They're coming for you. Coming for you. Hurry."

Kadras blinked and nodded, flinching from the fire.

"Come on. Hurry. Hurry. Before they come. Hurry." The little one started moving, the fire blazing furiously behind them.

He squinted against the smoke, focusing on the fluttering of the boy's cloak.

The fire followed them, screams and roars loud behind it as they ran. Suddenly the boy disappeared, leaving him coughing and blinking, braids whipping about. "Boy? Boy, where are you?"

An icy cold hand grabbed his arm, pulled him through a tight, rough-hewn opening behind a tapestry. "Come on, hurry. I can't stay long. I have to get to my lab. Your friend is down here."

"Where?" His chest was bleeding, shoulder torn on a sharp bit of rock, his mind screaming.

"Down. Down. I don't know. I can't stay." Those icy blue eyes fastened on him. "My master will know, do you understand? He'll know, and I can't get caught."

Kadras nodded, heart breaking. And Surial believed these children were not slaves. "I am in your debt."

"Yes. Fine. *Go*." The walls were lined in frost, the air near suffocating as the child ran.

He closed his eyes, whispering a low, desperate song to the Winds, to his father, to the ancestors who preceded him. He needed to find his ki'ita. Please. Please. All he was, he would offer.

Please.

The catacombs were still, dank, black as night, the ancient smell of death and rot surrounding him. His voice, a mere whisper, seemed to be stolen by the spirits of the men buried in the horrible stone. His heart was breaking, his muscles taut. A breath of clean air mingled with the dryness of the desert brushed his cheek and he followed, rahat in hand, fire in his eyes.

He nearly tripped over them, the witch with his ki'ita, lying on the ground, Surial lax, eyes closed, the witch bent over him. She shrieked as he came in, eyes glowing in the darkness.

"T'isna anilo, tatika." His words carried the power of his ancestors, of his ki'ita, of every hi'icha that had ever lived to protect a ba'chi.

"You're too late, he's mine," she told him, crouching over Surial's body.

He shook his head, lip curling, baring his teeth. "You cannot steal him, not with your magic or your mind. T'isna anilo."

His rahat flew, straight and sure, heading for a killing blow.

Her arms were raised, mouth open for another scream, but his rahat flew true. Her head was severed from her body.

The sound of screams and horror filled the air, mists pouring from the body, red eyes with teeth and claws surrounding his ki'ita, the pale body arching and writhing. Kadrass roared, throwing himself over Surial's body, screaming as thousands of hungry mouths tore into him. "T'isna anilo! T'isna anilo! Ki'ita!"

Surial was still beneath him now, shallow breaths assuring that his ki'ita was at least alive.

Teeth tore at him, rending his flesh from him, the spirits that the witch had trapped scared and starved and howling. Kadrass threw his focus on surrounding Surial, defending, protecting.

Another voice joined the howling. A battle cry, familiar -- his sister in the wind, Aline, coming to join in his battle.

The voice of the bard sounded, then the noise of what seemed a thousand drums, beating and pounding, the chants of a dozen throats calling the Winds, easing the stings of those mouths. He lifted his head to see the bard struggling with Aline, attempting to hold her back as a handful of wizened, ancient, white robed men chanted, the spirits twining around them like mists in the forest.

Blood dripped from him, splashing on Surial's clothes, on that pale skin, the parted lips. "Ki'ita."

Surial's lids fluttered, the dark green eyes slowly revealed. "Kade?" It was barely a whisper, more the shape of his name.

He nodded, the light from the torches dimming, his head drooping forward as his lifeblood flowed from him. "You are safe. I kept my promise."

A low, agonized cry sounded and he turned his head, his ki'ita's grandfather cradling the now-dessicated head of the witch and sobbing. "Savina. My Savina." Green eyes that were so-like and so-foreign from the ones he defended glared at him. "What have you done?"

"I... T'isna anilo. He is mine to protect. She heeded no warnings." He slumped forward, Surial bearing his

weight, the light fading faster.

Surial's hand reached out from beneath him. "Grandfather."

The old man took Surial's hand and suddenly Kadrass could feel the healing tingle of his ki'ita's powers, the sensation almost exploding through him, pouring strength and healing into him until the old man dropped Surial's hand with a cry and Surial slumped beneath him.

Kade groaned, closing his eyes against the heavy ceilings, the lack of true wind. He gathered Surial close, whispering 'heal yourself, heal yourself' over and over as the old man wailed and rocked, stroking the short, silvered hair.

The short, silvered hair on the head of the witch. The head that was still smiling.

chapter thirty two

Surial was getting Mon'keur ready for their journey. The saddlebags were full with blankets and food, spare clothes. The denizens of the mountain had been more than generous, despite the uproar of the day before.

He shuddered at the memories. The sight of that poor girl, decimated, and the grasping, slithering touch of Savina in his mind. He'd been able to feel her killing him, stealing his life and his magic as if she was drinking it from him. He leaned against Mon'keur, eyes closing. If Kade hadn't found him...

It seemed he was again in his friend's debt.

Kade, once out of the mountain and under the sky, had refused to return, eyes quiet and haunted. "We leave, ki'ita. We must."

He'd had no choice but to agree. He would have liked to have stayed longer, to learn more about his background, but he didn't feel safe there anymore, even with Kade nearby. And his grandfather's grief over the woman who had so very nearly killed him didn't help.

He couldn't be sure of the man's loyalties. Surial had certainly had enough experience with family who put him and his concerns aside. The only one who had not done so, who had remained true and saved him again and again, even when he was unkind and unfair, was Kade.

"You will regret this leaving, my boy." As if summoned by his thought, Pendele stood at the entrance of the stables, his grandfather's tiny ward almost cowering beside him, completely covered barring those odd, pale eyes.

"Is that a threat, Rana?" It certainly sounded like one, colored as it was by the strange events of the past day.

"Not at all. Merely a concerned grandfather offering a warning." His grandfather offered him a wan smile. "You have much to learn, much to understand. The world is not welcoming of our kind."

"And my welcome here was less than I would have hoped. I was almost killed under your roof, Rana. I don't feel as if I belong here anymore than I did in Azize." Perhaps he was fated to spend his days wandering.

The thought failed to upset him as much as he would have thought. Perhaps he was growing to understand Kade's fondness for the open sky.

"So I am to be blamed for that? I have offered you all I have, Surial -- a home, an education, comfort and safety and power and wealth. Savina was my lover, yes, but her mind was her own." The old man sounded angry, lost.

"Kade is on a mission to find the men who killed his tribe. I'm going with him. When it is finished, we'll return. I will be back, Grandfather."

"So you're going on a crusade now? Going to travel with murderers?" Pendele shook his head. "I will guarantee your safety, your position. Nothing but sorrow lies upon the path you travel. I worry for you, my boy."

The little boy beside his grandfather whimpered, seemed to shrink.

"Kade is not a murderer. He killed, yes, but to free slaves. He has acted honorably." The irony of the fact that he was arguing against his own stance did not escape him. He knew he had judged Kade too harshly, distance from the death and blood of that day let him see that.

"And he will not travel alone. His position was given to him by the Winds." Kade stood beside him, wide and strong, braids shining in the sun. "Are you well, child?"

The boy nodded, his grandfather's hand landing on the hood of the boy's cloak. "He is frightened of horses."

It seemed like more than that to Surial, but he was not willing to argue it now, unsure if his instincts were telling the truth or if everything was still being colored by yesterday's experiences.

"And I'm sure I can teach him anything he needs to know, Va'talik Pendele." The bard that had befriended Kade's clansmate entered the stable, dressed in bright traveling clothes. "After all, I have been talik my entire life."

"You can't come with us dressed like that!" Aline followed the bard into the stables, grumbling, glaring. "You'll notice how Kadrass and I are dressed? We blend in! That... that... foppish garb will alert all that we are near."

"The lady is simply frightened another will snatch me away." Mirran winked, draped his saddlebags over the little spotted gray mare.

Aline snorted. "I have little hope such a thing will happen."

Surial bit his lip to hide his smile. "Are you traveling with us?"

"Indeed. Your grandfather seems to believe you could use a guide and a practiced talik to assist you and besides," Aline was given a grin. "I haven't had a decent adventure in days."

Kade's laughter slid down his spine.

"Well then, I imagine we're losing light or something. We should go." Surial went to his grandfather and held out his hand. "I am glad to have met you, Rana. And I will return."

Rana took his hand, leaning in close, green eyes so familiar. "You will not reconsider? I would offer you the world."

The temptation was huge -- to be safe, succored, adored above all others. Protected and happy here...

Kade's hand fell on his shoulder, heavy and warm, and his grandfather seemed suddenly no more than an old man, lonely and sad. "Ti'isa anilo. He has the world."

And, strangely enough, that didn't seem like an exaggeration. "We will return, Rana. Kade will keep me safe and make sure I come back."

His grandfather turned without another word, the flutter of his ward's cloak the only sound.

Kade's hand was sure, eyes warm. "Come, my friend. There is much to do, much to see. You told me once that you wished not to be a captive. Come, now. Fly free."

He smiled at his friend and nodded.

Together they mounted their horses and headed out, Aline and the bard Mirran following. He was his own man. Grown up finally and choosing where he would go instead of being ordered about, choosing who he would go with.

The sun shone on him through the trees, warming him despite the chill promise of winter that hung in the air.

As they passed through the gates of his grandfather's mountain stronghold, the wind began to blow, the breeze gentle and sweet, carrying with it the scent of leaves and earth and a hint of sea salt.

Lik'ta ran ahead, tail held high, and Kade laughed, the light setting a deep green stone on one copper braid aglow. "Di'ben sur, mi'it. It is a good day to be alive."

The horse tossed his head, reared, whinny echoing through the trees, agreeing.

"Yes, my friend," Kade nodded, moving ahead on the path. "A very good day. As it should be."

epilogue

Ekina waited in the tavern, hand wrapped around a pint of ale. Waiting.

He hated waiting.

Still, the bird had come, a scroll tied to its clawed foot, the sigils there giving direction that the cheftain could understand. They had drawn bones to see who would go and sit and wait and who would continue go with their chattel.

He? Had lost.

So he was waiting. Night after night in the noise and smoke and stench and...

"I have a message for you."

He looked up into a dark cloak, glowing eyes, and quickly looked away, warding against the evil eye.

"What message?"

"You are hunted by a party of four. Two barbarians and two talik. Kill the barbarians and the bard, but the one with silver in his hair? He is to be delivered to your employer, unharmed."

He blinked. This? He waited for this? "That is easily done. How much?"

"Ten thousand sesteri, but nothing if he is marked or damaged in any way. He is family."

Ekina nodded, muddy blond hair brushing the table, his good hand tight around the ale. "We have an accord."

"Excellent. Our business is complete."

With that, the cloaked figure faded, slid back into the shadows that bore it.

His father had warned him, warned them all that to sail this path with the Others led to damnation. Still... the paths to Hel were at least lined with gold.

Ekina stood and headed out. If he rode through the night, they could plan their attack in the morning.

Kill the barbarians and the bard, but take the other home.