



L.E. BRYCE

Dead to the World

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by L. E. Bryce

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A novel of homoerotic romance by

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eBook ISBN 1-59426-621-2

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Dedication

The author would like to thank the following people
for their advice, encouragement and assistance during
the preparation of this novel: Christine Zeller, Jane
Watson, Pira Urosevic, Mary Lockerbie, Chloe,
Ithilwen, Nellas, Fiona Glass and Emily Veinglory.

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Part I

The Warrior

One

His vision swam before him in a lazy, heated shimmer. The leather knots that bound his wrists to the pommel cut into his skin. *Lady*, he murmured, his lips moving soundlessly, *give me some sign that You still hear me.*

Over and again he repeated the plea, until it was as formless as air. *Give me some sign.* One voice, desolation in an ocean of sand and sun; the goddess did not hear him.

Erred had stopped measuring the days since the foreign raiders ambushed his escort and seized him; his recollection was blurred by flashes of noise and blood that he quickly suppressed. From the green hills of his homeland, he had been carried on a march that now brought him to a wasteland with few discernable landmarks and seemingly no end. Two weeks might have passed, or a month. He did not know, did not think to ask and did not to care.

Other captives, ragged and parched, were chained together and made to walk across the sands, and when they dropped, their corpses were left for the vultures. At night, Erred shut out their stifled sobs and groans as their captors sported with them. Peasants were cheap profit, fit only to be laborers, the raiders told him, and if a few expired from thirst or a bit of amusement there were always more where they came from.

No one touched him. He was sequestered from the other captives in a tent where he was given food and drink and water to wash, though his ankles were hobbled to limit his

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movement. In a broken variation of his tongue, his captors intimated that he would fetch a high price where they were going. He should be happy, they said, as he would not be worked to death like the others, but would go to the house of a wealthy buyer and enjoy luxuries ordinary slaves only dreamed about.

Erred was not told precisely what that implied, but they did not need to tell him what he had understood from the moment they cornered him among the corpses of his guards and torn away his veil. At first they thought he was a woman, but when he punched one of the men in the face they quickly realized the mistake they had made. And when his pale hair spilled loose from its ties and they saw that he was a beautiful young man, they knew what a prize they had taken.

He tried to rise, to shake off the rough hands that grasped him, but a backhand to the face sent him sprawling to the grass. Two raiders pinned him down while another began to undo his belt. Erred struggled even harder, despite the hand that seized him around the throat and threatened to cut off his air. He felt a third pair of hands tear at his clothing, and a heavy body sat on his legs when he tried to kick his unseen attacker.

Then, it ended. The weight pinning his lower body slumped to the side. Shouting ensued in a tongue he could not follow, and the men who had held him down withdrew. He was still choking and gasping when one of the raiders, probably the leader, dropped his veil into his lap and gestured for him to cover his head.

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His would-be rapist, his leggings down to his knees, lay facedown on the grass in a spreading pool of his own blood. The other men were not looking at him, but at the curved blade in their leader's hand, which he wiped clean on the dead man's clothing. Erred heard him say something to the raiders; he had learned enough of the eastern tongue from the eunuchs of the Blue House to understand that his captors were not to touch him. The rest of it, he could not translate except for the word that meant *slave*.

Panic seized him, but he clamped down on his fear and forced himself to meet the man's eyes. "I am a *talevé*, servant and lover of the Lady of the Waters, *and* I am a kinsman to the prince of Altarme." He spoke slowly, enunciating his words in the coldest voice he could muster. "I am no man's slave."

Slowly, the leader bent to him and, murmuring a phrase that might have been an apology, struck him across the face. Orders were given and Erred, his face stinging from that blow and the earlier one, was pulled onto the back of a horse and bound to the saddlebow. Just before they left, the leader returned with a moist cloth and dabbed away the dirt and blood on his face, most of which did not belong to him.

"You no argue now, eh?" the man said. "We go and you be quiet."

The raiders traveled by night, avoiding all roads and populated areas until they were through the Haban Pass and safely in their own lands. Erred watched behind the gauzy silk of his veil as the lush green of his homeland turned to mountainous paths. Then, beyond the mountains where they

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stopped in a village to exchange their horses for camels, the land became a scorching expanse of desert where the sands stretched for endless miles and one day melded seamlessly into the next.

Once, while they were still in his land, he tried to run. A sentry quickly ran him down, bound him with cords and, taking care not to injure him, returned him to the camp. His captors made clear that while he was valuable property and could not be marked, there were ways of punishment that did not leave scars. Then they lashed him to stakes driven into the ground, pulled off his shoes and beat the soles of his feet with withes until he passed out. The skin was not broken, so skillfully had the blows been dealt, but he could not walk again until they were well into the desert.

Numbed by heat and sun, he began to wander in his own mind. He wondered why the Lady had not intervened on his behalf, why it had taken a mortal's sword thrust to stop the man who would have raped him and intimidate those who would have taken their turn next. It was sacrilege to lay violent hands on him, even to attack his escort. The only conclusion he could draw was that he had somehow displeased the goddess, and that this was his punishment.

There would be no rescue, he knew that. He and his escort had been attacked two days from the nearest village, and he would not have been expected back in Altarme for another six days. Only then, when his party failed to appear, would the city garrison—at the request of the House of the Water—ride out to search for him. By the time they found the corpses, scavengers and decomposition would have left little by which

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to identify the bodies. No one would suspect that his body was not among them.

"And your people, they don't fight," said Orneb, the leader. The man's accent was so thick that Erred could scarcely understand him. "They won't come for you. They never come for their people."

Erred was numb to the man's taunts, even to the sniggered references to what would become of him. It no longer surprised him that he was destined for a stranger's bed, though the part of him that was not deadened by the heat and the hopelessness of his situation railed at the sacrilege of being touched against his will. But, in trying to escape he had played his only hand and lost, and there was nothing else he could do.

* * * *

The route that threaded from one oasis to another gave way to a mighty thoroughfare. In the distance, behind walls eighty feet high, whitewashed stone and mud brick buildings sprawled across three low hills. Olive groves clung to the heights below the walls, while goatherds drove their animals along the strip of land where the scrub met the desert. To the east, a faint smear of blue in the heat shimmer beyond the hills, a river nourished fields of wheat, barley and flax. Erred learned from overheard snatches of conversation that this was Tajhaan, one of the great cities of the east.

The raider caravan paid the toll and moved through the gates. Just beyond, the lower city was a sprawl of tenements that loomed over narrow streets. There was no breeze to

carry away the reek of unwashed bodies, cooking food or raw sewage, and Erred gagged.

As the streets opened up to accommodate an open-air market, his ears were assaulted by jabbering tongues hawking everything from pottery to a stringy waterfowl that was thrust under his nose before one of the raiders beat the vendor off. Beyond the produce and craft stalls, the caravan passed a slave market; he had the briefest glimpse of the human wares on display before his camel and its driver bore him off to another, quieter part of the city.

"The others will go to the big market," said Orneb, "but you'll go to different kind of market. There'll be no show in open for you, eh?"

He was taken to a comfortably appointed house and given over to a man who spoke his language fluently. Once Orneb and his men left, servants came to remove the restraints from Erred's ankles and led him to a place where he could bathe and put on fresh clothing. Afterward, he was taken to a small atrium where another man awaited him. This was the master of the house, short and plump with too many rings on his fingers, and whose smile was far too ingratiating for Erred's taste. With a fluttering gesture, he instructed Erred to follow him into a smaller room that looked out onto a private garden whose fruit trees and splashing fountain were an inviting refuge from the late summer heat.

The room was furnished with patterned carpets, a sideboard on which servants had set green-glazed dishes of food, and a table which was too low to the floor for chairs.

Plump cushions were brought instead, and it was among these that the man invited Erred to sit.

"My name is Dhabí ké Abhinar," the man explained. "You are my property now, though I do not intend to keep you. I am an *akesh* broker, one who deals in pleasure slaves."

Erred listened with an impassive expression. He had seen the money exchange hands and knew that he had been the object of the transaction. In those first days, he would have objected aloud to being traded like horseflesh and earned a sharp blow. Now he was simply too tired to do more than try to follow what was being said.

Dhabi continued, "Here in Tajhaan we have many slaves who come from your land. They do not come here, but go straight to the auction in the bazaar. However, you are very beautiful, obviously of good birth and sacred to some goddess or other; this increases your value immensely. I will show you to customers who will pay a high price. But, first you must eat." Dhabi indicated the platters of flat bread, olives, fruit and goat cheese the servants had set out. "The desert is a tiring journey. You must eat and recover your strength."

Erred regarded the food with disinterest. "I do not wish to eat," he murmured.

"As a slave, you will do as you are told. This is the first lesson you must learn," said Dhabi. "Perhaps you have noble blood in you, which is all to the good in mastering the dignity and grace expected of an *akesh*, but if you give yourself airs where you are not entitled to have them it will go badly for you. I have been told that you have tried to escape and been whipped once already. You will not do that here."

Dhabi's voice grew stern now, with a sharp edge. "There is a place for defiant or disobedient slaves on the edge of the desert. Of course, coming from the west you will not have seen the stakes, but should you give more trouble than you are worth, you will die on one of them. A very unpleasant death, the stakes. You will be three days dying.

"Now then, I will have a physician come and he will examine you. And then you will eat what foods he prescribes for your health. Good food, and here I have red wine which is very good for the blood."

"I am not permitted to drink undiluted wine," Erred said quietly, careful not to voice his objection too strongly. "It is forbidden. So is the embrace of a woman."

Dhabi made a disapproving sound. "Hmm, this is not good, though the part about the women, this does not matter. It is men who make the best customers for beautiful young *akeshi*. We must make good health for you if you are to bring a good price."

When a physician was brought to the house, Erred flinched at the command to remove his clothing until it was explained to him that the man was a eunuch and would not touch him except to examine him. "Special physicians we have for noble ladies and pleasure slaves," said Dhabi. "This one wants to see if you are sickly or too thin, and if you are untouched."

During the examination, Dhabi explained that some prospective *akeshi*, if they were young enough when seized, were gelded to preserve their beauty and keep them beardless. "But you are clearly too old for this," he said, "and already you have no beard and very little hair save what is on

your head. Some masters, they desire a cut slave for their bed, but then there are others for whom this does not matter, so we will not bother."

Later, Erred learned that gelding was a risky procedure, fatal if not done properly, and that Dhabi would not risk damaging such a valuable prize.

Once the physician left, others were brought to tutor him in music, dance and the art of pleasuring a man. This last instruction he neither needed nor wanted. The Lady's lovers were not expected to be celibate, for in the absence of women they were permitted to lie together and often did. Erred was no stranger to touching another male's body, but he refused to go beyond the kissing and stroking necessary for him to achieve release.

From childhood he had been taught that the only acceptable love was between a man and woman, and though he grudgingly accepted that as a *talévé* the normal rules did not apply, he would not lower himself to entering another man and he certainly would not consider allowing it to be done to him. It had been a point of contention between him and his occasional lovers, and on more than one occasion had led to bitter arguing.

Gender, he realized, did not matter to the Tajhaani. Those men who could afford the luxury found as much delight in the pleasure afforded by beautiful young men and boys as by equally attractive young women.

There were three classes of pleasure slave in Tajhaan. The first and lowest class, the *akesh*, was not required to do more than satisfy his or her master's sexual desires, while an *aktiri*,

the second class, was a more cultured slave who provided companionship as well as sex. The third and highest class, the *akharu*, was a free courtesan. Dhabi made no secret of his belief that with his beauty and regal bearing, Erred had the potential to become an *akharu*, provided that he accept his lot and do his tutors credit by mastering their lessons.

"You are a pearl among grains of sand," said Dhabi, "and the men I will show you to will burn with desire for you and pay extravagantly to enjoy your embrace. You must have the skill to give them pleasure so they will desire you even more. This, among other things, is how a successful *akharu* is made, and then you will say that you learned all you knew in the house of Dhabi ké Abhinar."

Erred had no intention of doing any of those things and privately cursed Dhabi and his tutors with every invective he could devise. Even in his mind, however, it was empty defiance and he knew it. If he did not gracefully get down on his hands and knees, he could be thrown down and taken in pain and humiliation, as the other slaves in the caravan had been. That he *would* be taken was inevitable, but he did not want to dwell on it and certainly was not interested in lessons on the subject.

His tutors sensed his resistance and arranged for discipline that, while subtle, was nevertheless effective. When a kitchen slave burnt the master's roast, Erred was brought in to watch when he was lashed to a post in the atrium and whipped until he bled. When a slave in another household was caught filching money from his master's coffers, Erred was taken out to the edge of the city to see him impaled. Erred had seen

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criminals executed before, and had been at the table when his father slapped a clumsy servant for spilling his wine, so the punishments themselves had little effect on him. When he was afterward thrust naked into a closet and left for half a day without food, light or water, the images stayed with him.

In that close, lightless space, prayer offered some escape. Weakly, he lifted his palm and went through the familiar litany by which a *talevé* greeted the Lady of the Waters. *Hail, most radiant goddess and sacred lover, bearer of life, attend the prayer of this mortal suppliant.*

Only his own ragged whispers answered from the darkness, hanging in the still air. After a time, the door was unlocked and he emerged dazed and trembling, ready to resume instruction in music and sensual dance, to recite erotic poetry without blushing and to undress with graceful movements. However, when it came to handling the various toys and other devices the elite used as sexual aids and practicing upon them, he balked.

With one of the tutors standing in for his potential master, he was taught to kiss properly, and to judge by the tenor of his partner's kiss precisely how passive or aggressive he was expected to be. His tutor instructed him on the proper use of the tongue, both in kissing and in the giving of oral pleasure, and how and where to place his hands. Erred accepted the other's lips and tongue as best he could without gagging on the taste of the cloves the man chewed to sweeten his breath.

Still, his tutors marked his revulsion, and when he resisted another example of punitive discipline was arranged for him.

Mere hesitation resulted in his being denied a meal or, on one occasion, being forced to hold his bladder for several excruciating hours. The two other slaves with whom he trained, both of low birth, could not understand why he was so reluctant when the work was so easy and the potential rewards so great.

In the seventh week, as the year began to turn toward winter, Dhabi brought in a comely slave on whom Erred was to demonstrate his skill.

When Erred refused to kiss and fondle the young man, he frowned. "Such willfulness," he complained, "is not proper for a slave. I tell you to pleasure this one so we may see that you can perform, for we will not proceed with your sale until you have mastered your lessons. Now this one, he is clean and pretty, and he is already hard for you, yes?"

Erred avoided looking at the young man, whose eyes and naked body betrayed his lust. It was the first time he had been ordered to perform on a live subject. "No," he said. "I would prefer that you whip me."

"Such easy work and you want pain instead!" Dhabi exclaimed. "No, he will sit over there and you will kneel between his legs and pleasure him. This one, it will not take much effort, and your tutor and I, we will watch."

"I prefer to be whipped."

Dhabi slapped his own thigh in frustration. "And ruin your lovely back with the lash? No, you will have this one in your mouth or I will bring another who is not so pretty and perhaps I will have him piss on you as well."

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The slave took his place on a cushioned bench with his legs slightly parted. Trembling at the way the young man licked his lips in anticipation, Erred focused his eyes elsewhere, on the youth's feet, on the floor, anywhere but his face and the member bobbing between his legs. Slowly, realizing he was not going to be whipped, that the slave was not going to leave and that everyone was waiting on him, he clenched his fists in frustration and knelt on the floor between the other man's legs

Licking his lips to moisten a mouth gone dry, he carefully grasped the member in one hand and closed his eyes. He stroked up and down the dry flesh, hoping to bring the other to completion without having to touch him further, yet although the young man groaned at the stimulation he did not come.

"In your mouth, as the master said," he snapped, and with his hands on either side of Erred's head pushed his face down to his groin. Erred reluctantly pressed his lips to the crown, flicking his tongue out to taste the salty skin and recoiling slightly at the seed that had gathered along the slit. It was not his first time tasting seed, but with his lovers it had not been so bitter.

A hand tangled in his hair, tightening around the strands and holding him still as the youth began to thrust his member in and out of his mouth. For a moment, Erred tried to recall his lessons in giving oral pleasure, but his subject's unaccommodating lust left him no room to maneuver. His mouth had become a passive orifice into which his partner could empty himself.

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When it was over, the young man was dismissed. He got up, dressed, and left without ceremony, while Erred remained on his knees, shaking and gagging at the bitterness he had been forced to swallow. When a servant gave him a cup of water with which to rinse his mouth, he did so and slumped against the bench.

Dhabi came over to him and tapped his shoulder with the flail he sometimes used to motivate lethargic servants. "You have talent, but you need improvement, your tutor says. It is good to have skill that you can show off for your master. It is like playing an instrument and the noise is just as sweet, no?"

Then I should like to see you do it. But Erred said nothing. Once, his sharp words would have sent servants scurrying in dismay; now they only earned him hunger and a lightless closet. Instead, he waited to be dismissed, and once in his cubicle bent over the chamber pot and vomited until his body stopped heaving.

Two

In the twelfth week, Dhabi arranged for another demonstration. Erred, who now realized he had no alternative, performed woodenly but without his earlier hesitation. This satisfied both Dhabi and the tutor, who commented that a quick lesson in feigned pleasure could be arranged.

Dhabi began to make arrangements for his sale. This involved making inquiries among the elite and securing appointments with interested parties. Erred was bathed and perfumed, dressed in a clinging silk robe and veil and brought out for display. On other occasions, a palanquin bore him and Dhabi to the house of a client who wanted a private show.

Erred soon noticed how each viewing followed the same routine. If they went out, Dhabi began by effusively praising the client's hospitality and good taste while Erred, standing at quiet attention within arm's reach, waited to be addressed. Clients who came to the house were welcomed with refreshments and the same ostentatious praise.

After the usual courtesies were exchanged, Dhabi instructed Erred to remove his veil so the client could see his beauty. The unveiling, like undressing, was done slowly to enhance the moment. Dhabi then plucked two or three strands of Erred's hair so the client could see that his pale coloring was genuine. Much was made of Erred's regal bearing, and Dhabi constantly reiterated what a rare prize this slave was.

If the client was still interested, Dhabi undid the clasps of Erred's robe and slowly pulled it off his shoulders, leaving him bare. Sometimes the client wanted to touch him or kiss him to see how well he could perform this art. Dhabi allowed a brief demonstration, but demurred when clients demanded more, telling them that Erred was unspoiled and that it would be the buyer's private delight to deflower him.

Once the initial humiliation was past, Erred no longer noted how many clients viewed him. Oiled beards and jeweled hands became a blur, and he learned to send his mind elsewhere to offset the embarrassment of being stripped naked.

From the snatches of conversation and gestures he caught, it seemed many of the prospective buyers were interested but that the asking price was too high. Dhabi pulled his beard in frustration and sent for the steward who kept his appointment books, urging him to find the names of potential clients who had not yet been contacted.

"We could lower our price," he said to Erred, "but one like you cannot be sold for anything less than eighteen thousand *menar*. An *akesh* of your beauty and rarity should, of course, go to the High Prince, but, alas, he has just purchased two *akeshi* and is not interested at this time."

* * * *

The traffic in the bazaar at this time of day was absurd; the palanquin was jostled, halted, then moved again with nauseating regularity, regardless of how often Satu berated the handlers. Practical wisdom told him he should have

arranged for a private viewing and spared himself this headache, but wherever he could avoid it he kept sycophants like Dhabi ké Abhinar out of his house.

For this trouble, that little broker's goods had better be worth it, he thought. By all accounts, it was, but Satu was too pragmatic to believe anything he could not verify with his own eyes or ears.

No sooner did Satu cross the *akesh* broker's threshold than did Dhabi descend upon him with typical overblown hospitality. "Such an honor to have you in my house, but such an unnecessary inconvenience!" he cried. "You need only have sent a messenger and I would have brought my goods to you."

In an upstairs room, wine and sweetmeats were brought in as Dhabi continued to reiterate the honor his guest was doing him by answering his invitation. "Such good taste you have, my lord, and you will see the best, I assure you! I will show you boys and girls whose beauty will melt your heart and quicken your loins."

Satu sipped his wine in disinterested silence. Dhabi should have known better than to try such tired tricks on a merchant who was acquainted with all the formulas of the business. What he saw was nothing that excited his particular interest; the usual array of preening, scantily clad youths and girls paraded past him to the sound of the broker's cloying verbiage.

"The last time you were here you bought a lovely Rhodeen youth," said Dhabi. "I trust you were well satisfied with him?"

The youth in question was the most wanton little creature Satu had ever owned, well suited to his tastes. "Marsu does his work without complaint," he replied, "but I did not come for more of the same. My time is valuable to me, and your message indicated that you have something very special in stock."

"Ah, I would not think to waste your time, but it would have been remiss of me not to show you my other beauties, knowing what you prefer," said Dhabi. "I must warn you, however, once you set eyes upon this one you will not want to part with him or be satisfied with anything else."

Given what he had already heard, Satu did not think that likely. The young man had already been offered to the High Prince, as well as several members of the royal court, and all of them had refused on account of the exorbitant asking price. "We will see," he said. "Let us have a look at him first."

The young man *was* beautiful, although somewhat startling in appearance and older than what Satu preferred. "Is his coloring genuine?" he asked Dhabi.

Dhabi was quick to reassure him. "But of course it is! I would not show a discerning customer such as yourself goods of inferior quality. Look at the noble breeding, the proud carriage. It is not everyday that a man is offered an *akesh* of royal birth."

To hear the man talk, *all* his goods were royally born or were virgins. However, Satu was shrewd enough to discern that where this young man was concerned there might be some truth to Dhabi's claims. When the broker motioned him

forward, he knelt with a fluid grace that one did not find in baseborn slaves.

"See here," said Dhabí, running his fingers through the young man's hair. "His coloring is genuine. Some unscrupulous brokers might resort to altering their goods to make them more desirable, but such things are not for Dhabí ké Abhinar. This one is a pearl, a rarity even in his own land. Now I typically do not allow this, but seeing as how discerning a customer you are, you simply must kiss him and taste what honey his lips are!"

Satu would do no such thing, no matter how beautiful the slave; an *akesh*'s mouth was put to better use elsewhere. A demonstration of that particular talent might be order, if Dhabí could be made to relent. Spending such an exorbitant amount would be foolhardy if the goods could not perform. "Does he speak the language?"

"Oh, yes, he understands us," replied Dhabí. "He is quite fluent and has the most delightful accent."

"I do not purchase *akeshi* for their conversation. You, slave, what is your name?"

The answer was something long and unpronounceable, of which Satu understood only the first part. "Of course," Dhabí interjected, "he will answer to any name you wish to give him."

Satu was strongly tempted to purchase this one for his own use. Under the quiet demeanor was an inborn haughtiness just begging to be broken—but no, this was an investment. Arjha had made it abundantly clear that his affections were not for sale, but that did not mean his father

could not remind him whose interests he served while on campaign. *He so easily forgets the merchants who finance his little skirmishes. I will not be outdone by those preening noblemen and blustering generals he emulates.* "The youth is comely enough, but I do not care for the asking price."

"Ah, of course, but for goods of such quality—" Dhabi stroked the young man's pale hair while he stood at silent attention. "You will never see his like again, I assure you. For such a rare jewel, twenty thousand *menar* is a small price to ask."

So far Dhabi's other patrons failed to share his opinion. Satu took a sip of the cheap wine that the broker passed off as his best vintage and smiled. He knew perfectly well that his had been one of the last names on Dhabi's list; a man who did not know how to discern the potential for gain and overlook subtle insults would have taken it far worse. *He underestimates his quarry, the fool, and he is desperate.* "Quote me a more reasonable price and we shall see."

* * * *

Finally, after fruitless negotiations with several other parties, Dhabi arranged for Erred's sale to an olive merchant. "But not simply *any* merchant, no," he said. "This one is a prince among his kind, very wealthy."

Erred glossed over Dhabi's overwrought description of the luxuries and delights he would know in his new master's house; he could not even remember the man's face, and he was not interested in the promised jewels and silks which were the ambition of the other slaves. When the eunuchs

came to prepare him, he was numb to their ministrations as they rubbed fragrant oil into his skin and dressed him in a plain white silk robe not unlike the one in which he had first been presented. Lastly, a snowy veil went over his head.

Dhabi accompanied him in the palanquin that had been sent to fetch him to his new master's house. During the ride, Dhabi plied him with endless maxims of proper servile behavior, reiterating that Erred was to do him credit. Although he occasionally nodded to give the impression that he was listening, Erred otherwise ignored him.

They came to a house shaded by hanging gardens, one of many such houses in this elite quarter of the city. Before Erred could climb out of the palanquin, Dhabi grasped his arm. "I know you have not been listening to a word I have said. I have said it many times and I will say it once more: you should be grateful for my advice and the care and patience I have taken with you. Ignore everything else, though you are a fool to do so, and listen to me now: you are being given a valuable opportunity here. This man is ambitious and has already risen very high. Looks and breeding are one thing, but if you are shrewd as well as beautiful you have an excellent chance of rising above your station."

"I do not consider this a game," said Erred.

"If you want to survive, you had better start thinking of it that way, and do not sit there and waste your breath telling me about how you *feel* about it. You are a slave, you do not have feelings and you will do as this man tells you. I will not

have you disgrace the name of Dhabi ké Abhinar by your surliness."

In an atrium that looked out onto a small fountain court, they waited while the servants announced their arrival. Presently a man with a long, elaborately curled beard came out to greet them. "I am Eskil, chief steward of the house." He made a short bow to Dhabi, speaking to him as if Erred was not present. "My master is taking his leisure upstairs. He eagerly waits to take possession of his new purchase."

Erred's mind wandered away from the formal small talk. He trained his eyes on the tiled floor at his feet, looking up only when Eskil addressed him and ordered him to follow.

The chamber into which he was led was an octagonal jewel box of pale blue and green. On the low table before a red silk divan were platters of fruit and flat bread. A slave poured wine into a pair of finely glazed cups. Two guards stood on duty at the door.

A middle-aged man seated among the cushions nodded to Eskil and absently indicated that Erred should kneel on the carpet before the table. At another signal, the steward lifted Erred's veil, leaving him bare to his new master's eyes. Erred dropped his eyes, but not before taking in the man's appearance. His dark hair was heavy with grey, as was his short, curly beard. Age added weight to what had once been a slender figure, though Erred would not have called him fat. Amber eyes set in a shrewdly impassive face measured Erred's every movement.

As one of his final lessons, Erred had learned what to say to a new master. "My lord, this body is—"

"You may dispense with the formalities, slave. Get up and take your place here across from me."

Erred hastily did as he was told, resuming his position on one of the cushions directly opposite the man.

"I am Satu ked Menteith. If you do not know my name, you will soon learn it well," the man said. "I understand that your name is Erresh or something like this, and you are fluent in our tongue though you are newly arrived in our land."

Keeping his eyes fixed on his lap, Erred nodded. He did not bother to correct Satu on the subject of his name.

"Apparently you are the sacred lover of some foreign goddess, if what the broker says is true, though I suspect he is telling tales again. Still, I can see that you are very rare and beautiful. I enjoy playthings that are unique, though you are meant for another. Now, tell me how it is that you know our language." Satu munched on an olive, frowning when Erred did not speak. "Come, there is no such thing as a pleasure slave without a tongue."

In halting words, Erred explained that the servants of the Blue House were eunuchs brought from Tajhaan, as women were forbidden to serve and men frequently found it difficult to concentrate in the presence of the young men favored by the Lady of the Waters. With little else to do in their confinement, Erred and some of the other *talevé* had asked the eunuchs to teach them their language.

Satu sipped at his wine, nodding and listening though he saved his questions for the end. "So the little broker is telling me the truth, yes? And what do you do in a house without

women, if you cannot go out? This goddess of yours must be quite amorous to keep so many young men satisfied."

At this blasphemous remark, Erred tensed. Not even Dhabí had gone so far in his inquiries. He wanted nothing more than to be able to put his veil back on and hide his shame; it lay across a cushion behind him, but Satu at once forbade it. "A slave does not have modesty before his master, and I did not purchase you to look at drapery. I have enough of that business with my wives."

Although he kept his eyes on his lap, he could feel Satu's gaze on him, appraising him with predatory eyes that made his skin crawl.

"I very much enjoy the breaking in of new *akeshi*," Satu continued, "but you are a gift for another. I cannot risk spoiling you, of course, or else I would have enjoyed a morning's entertainment with you." He gestured to the guards who flanked the door, rough men who watched Erred with their master's hungry eyes. "It is a custom in my house. I like to relieve my bedmates of any notions that they may put on airs, or that I entertain any sentimental feelings for them."

At a gesture from Satu, a slave set a cup of wine before Erred, who hesitated to take it. "You are most courteous, sir, but I cannot drink such things," he murmured. "It is forbidden."

"You will do as you are told," Satu said sharply. "If you defy me, perhaps I will forget you are a gift, keep you for myself and give my son something else." He looked meaningfully toward the guards before turning his gaze back to Erred. "I order you to drink."

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Erred was not accustomed to the taste of unwatered wine, and though Satu complimented the vintage it seemed bitter to him. Already he had begun to feel lightheaded, his limbs growing heavy. With drooping eyelids, he felt his body sag. He did not understand, as he had not drunk enough to become intoxicated.

Dizziness clouded his vision, and by degrees he became amputated from his limbs. This was unnatural, even for drunkenness. His inability to move stirred a sluggish fear in him.

When arms picked him up and laid him facedown on the cushions, he was powerless to struggle. Hands peeled away his robe, stroking along his legs and up the swell of his buttocks, sliding into the cleft between them. His thighs were nudged apart, and someone seized him by the hips and slid a cushion under him to elevate his flanks.

Something heavy slid between his parted thighs; he felt the variegated textures of silk and linen, and then bare flesh touching his.

By now, he knew what was happening and could not resist, could not even gather enough voice to cry out his denial. Without warning, a finger breached him, stabbing in and out; the burning sensation brought tears to his eyes.

"Perhaps you are wondering why you cannot move." A heavy body bent over him. Warm breath touched his ear and a tongue snaked against his cheek, leaving a slimy trail he could not wipe away. He smelled costly fragrance, and under it the unmistakable sweat and musk of an aroused male. "I

know you are untouched, and I would not want you to injure yourself during our lovemaking."

Erred wanted to shout that what was being done to him was not lovemaking. *How dare you do this to me!* All he could do was squeeze his eyes shut and whimper into the cushion.

"You are so tight, and it is only my finger," Satu murmured. "And the sounds of pleasure you make—it will feel so good when I take you."

The fingers withdrew from his body, but he knew that was not the end of it. He heard fumbling behind him, the opening of a jar or bottle, then the slicking of fluid over flesh. The cushions shifted, then oily fingers grasped his thighs and something hard pressed against him.

Lady, no, not this! Tears spilled from his eyes onto the cushions; the drug did not take away the pain, or the smothering terror at not being able to move. All he could do was groan into the cushion and pray for his ordeal to end.

Satu panted above him. "Ah, you are so hot and tight, tighter even than a maiden's virgin honey pot." The hands that gripped his thighs squeezed and pinched his flesh in time with the thrusts, as if Satu believed that somehow this would elicit pleasure from him. "Such a shame I cannot keep you." Satu's words trailed off into a growl as he approached release.

Erred shut out the sound of his voice. Pain was an ephemeral thing. Shame was not. Whatever bruises and tears his master left him with would fade, while he would spend the rest of his days wondering why the Lady could not see what was being done to him, and why She did nothing to stop it.

Three

After he had regained use of his limbs and was carried to a cubicle where he could sleep off the effect of the drugs, Erred vomited into the chamber pot. Shaking violently, he returned to his cot where he lay like the dead, responding only when a slave came to sponge the blood and semen from his thighs.

His mind had no room for any coherent thought. Even his rage was gone. All that had protected him in the past—his sacred status, his noble birth, and a prince's cold disdain—when a man like Satu could reach out and tear all that from him like paper armor, he had nothing left with which to shield his nakedness from the world. Curling around himself, he wept for his broken pride.

The following morning, a physician came to inspect him. Like the physician in Dhabi's house, the man was a eunuch, thin-lipped and unsympathetic. He sniffed at Erred's silence, wondering aloud how he should be so listless when he had been given every comfort and was so greatly favored.

"I do not see that you have been whipped or starved," he said, "and you are not feverish. Now you must do as you are told and make good your health with food and exercise. Come now, open your mouth and we will see if perhaps it is your teeth that bother you and keep you from eating."

Erred flinched away from the fingers that attempted to pry open his jaw. Nor would he allow the physician to pull aside the blanket to inspect his lower body. Although he could not sit or perform his natural functions without pain, he would not

suffer to have a stranger know of his shame. Baffled, the eunuch shook his head and appealed to Eskil, who sat on a stool in the corner to oversee the examination. The steward calmly told Erred to open his mouth or that a guard would be brought to do it for him. Erred did as he was told, and reluctantly allowed the rest of his body to be uncovered.

The examination was not thorough. Perhaps fearing some displeasure, the eunuch did not inspect his patient's intimate areas and so did not discover the source of his pain. In the end, the only diagnosis he could make was that Erred's pale coloring meant that he was sickly and must be handled carefully.

When told, Satu pulled his beard and made displeased noises in his throat. "I do not spend such sums on *akeshi* that I can nurse them. And if this one expires, see if I do not sue that little broker. Eighteen thousand *menar* for goods in such poor condition, pah!" he told Eskil. "This one will eat and have strong wine for his blood, and we will make arrangements to give him to Arjha as soon as possible."

It no longer amazed Erred that the Tajhaani could be so blind or callous with regard to other human beings; it did not occur to him to sit up and tell the two men exactly why he hid in the shadows and refused all sustenance, for he had seen in Dhabi's house how far his protests went. At best, they would have looked at him in bewilderment at the suggestion that taking a slave without his consent was an act of rape.

Fearing further mistreatment, he forced himself to eat what the kitchen slaves brought, anxiously drinking the wine until it made him ill. When it was clear that he had no

stomach for undiluted alcohol, the wine was replaced with goat's milk and a tart fruit juice given to the very young or infirm. Eskil came each day to inspect his color and weight, and after six days indicated that the master was satisfied.

"What does he intend to do with me?" Erred vaguely remembered Satu having mentioned his plans, but found he could remember very little of what occurred that afternoon.

"You are to be a gift for the master's eldest son, Arjha," said Eskil. "The master has invited him here to dine, so you must be made ready to receive him. Now that you are well enough, we will find suitable clothing and ornaments."

Erred cared nothing for the praise Eskil heaped upon his master-to-be, a great warrior and captain who had won many victories in the north. To hear the steward speak, the man was a god in his beauty, martial prowess and virility, but through the cloying descriptions Erred understood only that the man was a soldier. From what he knew of the breed, soldiers were not gentle lovers.

Dhabi had praised Satu in much the same tone. Such exaggerations belonged only to the poets. If anything, Arjha ked Satu would be no different than his father. Once more, the nightmares of helplessness and shame that tormented his sleep would be made flesh.

"If you remember to smile, you will please him very much, I think," said Eskil. "Arjha is the most handsome and accomplished of the master's sons. He has only one wife whom he does not greatly favor and no other *akeshi*, so you will not have to compete for his attention."

* * * *

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Every warrior cherished a dream of donning his ceremonial armor and riding his chariot through adoring crowds whose chant was his name, hearing his deeds heralded from the steps of the royal palace. Arjha had certainly worked hard enough for it, living rough in the worst months of summer, battling hunger and disease, foes as deadly as any enemy soldier, though there had been plenty of those as well. As far as he was concerned, he had more than earned his triumph, and he was going to bask in every moment of adulation.

The day was clear and cold, and the citizens eagerly came out to see the spectacle and enjoy the bounty of the free wine and bread the victor's patrons were providing on his behalf. By city standards the triumph was a modest affair, with none of the celebratory games or lavish feasting allotted to more prestigious victors. Even Arjha had to admit that the captives and spoils taken were not particularly noteworthy, and that the most splendid sight in the entire parade was him in his freshly painted and garlanded chariot, drawn by the new team of horses the High Prince had sent as a gift to replace the ones killed on the frontier.

Sure enough, his father found some way to spoil the occasion. Arjha did not know whose idea it was to invite Satu to stand among the princes and courtiers on the palace steps, yet there he was, smug and overly dressed, an oily smile fixed upon his face. Arjha's displeasure must have been evident, for one of his lieutenants murmured in his ear that it was customary for a father to greet his son after a long campaign.

From the High Prince's hands, Arjha received the victory wreath in silence. His smile, which from the chariot had radiated genuine enthusiasm, was now fixed, and he was subdued when his prince took him by the arm to speak the words of congratulation that were the honey every ambitious soldier wished to taste.

After the presentation, he was obliged to accompany his prince to receive the compliments of the court. His father, being noble only by the grace of his fat purse and political connections, had been stationed at the end of the line, giving Arjha time to rehearse his greeting. Propriety demanded that he make the responses proper to an obedient son; he would have sooner faced a thicket of Turya spears.

Satu leaned in to kiss him on both cheeks. As usual, he wore too much scent. "Tonight, of course, you will be the High Prince's guest," he said, "but tomorrow you will dine with me. My cook has been instructed to prepare your favorites and all Usha does is ask for news of you."

"I have obligations—" began Arjha. Dining with his father and entertaining his younger half-brother were not high on his list of priorities; the former gave him indigestion and as for the latter, Usha fawned on him enough to grate on his nerves.

Still smiling at the courtiers who milled around them, Satu dropped his voice. "Do not play that game with me, boy. You are willing enough to accept the praise and gifts of the others, so now you will accept it from me as well."

"Such entertainments cost money," Arjha murmured. "You would not make the effort unless you had something to gain by it."

"So little regard you have for your own blood. Look at you, smiling and humbling your pride before those men. They give you some trinkets and a little show and you call yourself happy." Satu made a dismissive gesture. "No, I will not be outdone by *them*. I have something precious for you, something that you do not already have."

Although Satu had money enough to buy a title, the respect of the old bloods that ruled Tajhaan was another matter. Arjha had grown to manhood listening to his father's diatribes and was weary to death of them when he had his own grievances among the venerable military families who regarded him as an upstart. "If it is another jar of olive oil, you may keep it."

Satu seized his arm. "Such gratitude from my firstborn, perhaps I should keep the gift for my own pleasure. I certainly paid enough for it."

Had they not been in public, Arjha might have struck his hand away. He had beheaded men for less. "By all means then, enjoy it and with my compliments. I am certain your rivals will gnaw their livers in envy to see it."

If anything, Satu's grip on him tightened. Anger burned openly in his eyes. "Perhaps I should put it about what an ungrateful child you are instead."

"It sounds to me as if you have bought me a pretty girl or boy for my bed," said Arjha. "If so, you would do better to give the slave to Usha so he might learn the proper use of his

cock. You know perfectly well what happened to the last *akesh* I owned."

"Yes, it is most troubling that such a vigorous warrior cannot master his own wife's temper or rid himself of her in the usual way. Still, as they say, an unfortunate man has no better friend than a fortunate accident."

Arjha did not need to be reminded about Thuva when he had spent a good six months doing his best to forget her existence. Having stayed as a guest in the house of a wealthy patron upon his return, he had not concerned himself with her other than to send word that he expected to find his household in order when he did come. As always, Thuva would demand her conjugal rights with one tongue while complaining of imagined slights with the other. Gods, if her family was not so powerful he would have strangled her long ago and been done with it.

"This one is not a girl," said Satu, "and like nothing you have ever seen before. I would not pay so much for a common *akesh*."

"I think you are tempted to tell me exactly how much. Why, the amount is practically falling from your lips."

When Satu told him, savoring his words with a tight smile, Arjha did not think he had heard the number right. He extricated himself from his father's grasp. "You are not spending that much *menar* because you are a loving father. What do you want?"

"You are just like your brothers, always suspecting something."

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"At least I do not go out of my way to have you murdered as they do," Arjha pointed out. Nor had he ever entertained the thought seriously, though he could scarcely blame his siblings for their ambition. They had gone into the family trade independent of their father, who was a formidable business rival, and a thorn in the side to boot. "Unless you tell me the truth, I will not set one foot in your house."

His father's look of mock outrage was a piece of art that drew the gazes of several passersby. "The trade routes are open once again," he said. "Have you thought of the profit to be made, or were you too busy impaling innocent villagers and burning huts for that? Ah, do not look so insulted—do you think *I* care why they gave you a triumph? Now you will behave like an obedient, grateful son and come to my house. You will see what I have bought for you, and only *then* may you tell me that you do not want it."

* * * *

Erred was bathed and rubbed with fragrant oil, then arrayed as if for a wedding. Eskil had silks and gauzes brought out, laying the jewel-rich colors against his pale hair and skin to see what would best suit his coloring. Finally, a golden silk was chosen, stiff with intricate beadwork; it was too narrow in the shoulders and had to be let out. His hair was brushed until it shone and left hanging loose.

"You are a vision." Eskil stepped back to appraise the results. "We will veil you to heighten Arjha's surprise. He will be very pleased."

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Before the veil was arranged upon his head, a slave came to paint Erred's face. He submitted to the man's art as silently as to all the other attentions, and only when the slave was done did he look at his own reflection. His lips had been reddened with carmine and his eyes outlined in kohl. *I look like a whore*, he thought.

Through the looking glass, the lips parted slightly. *No*, his reflection appeared to say, *there is no seeming. You are a whore.*

After sunset, Eskil returned to take him from his cubicle to a richly appointed bedchamber on the other side of the house. Erred heard the faint strains of music and laughter coming from below, and was told that the master was entertaining. "But you are not required to meet the guests," said Eskil. "He is giving a banquet to honor his son and celebrate his recent victory over the Turyar. When he has had his fill of wine and good food, Arjha will come for you."

Which meant that not only was he going to be taken by a soldier, but a drunken one at that. Erred swallowed hard, not daring to hope that this prince would pass out from excess before he had a chance to possess his new slave.

The room into which Eskil led him appeared as a golden haze through his veil. Candles provided the only illumination; through the silk gauze these were fuzzy haloes that obscured most of the details Erred might have noticed about the room. He lifted the veil just enough to take in a bed overlaid with fine linen sheets and silk cushions of a purple so deep it looked black in the flickering light. An ebony clothes stool stood off to the side, while a sideboard of carved citrus wood

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held a carafe of wine, a pair of goblets and a selection of precious oils. A basin of steaming water stood on a tripod; clean linens were stacked beside it.

That the room had so clearly been furnished with lovemaking in mind disconcerted him. Erred quickly dropped his veil and tried to compose his fraying nerves.

He did not know how much time passed before the door opened and closed again. Looking up, Erred had a sense of a tall figure walking toward him in the hazy light. He took a deep breath to quell his trembling and knelt. "My lord," he said raggedly, speaking the words as he had been taught, "this body is for you." Uttering the formula was so much harder than he had thought it would be.

A hand on his shoulder indicated he was to stand up. As he rose, the man before him gripped the hem of the veil and lifted it over his head, letting it fall to the side. Erred caught a glimpse of golden eyes in a tawny face before he dropped his gaze to the floor. Fingers slid under his chin, gently lifting his head. He smelled sandalwood, and saw the gleam of gold in dark hair and the contours of a firm jaw.

"I was told that you were beautiful and rare beyond words," said a richly accented voice, "but I know better than to trust a merchant's exaggerations. Now I can see why my father was willing to pay such a price for you." A thumb lightly traced his lips, lingering there. "He tells me you are an innocent in the arts of love. More exaggeration, I expect. I find it difficult to believe so beautiful a one has never been touched."

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Erred did not answer, even when Arjha pressed closer to him and began dusting his cheek and throat with feathery kisses; he did not think it appropriate to tell his new master that he had already been taken and by whom.

When Arjha saw the reaction his caresses elicited, he pulled back. "I will not hurt you." A soldier's callused hand took his, gently urging him toward the bed. "I have been told that I am a most passionate lover. I will make you enjoy this."

At the edge of the bed, he undid Erred's robe and slid it from his shoulders, kissing his neck and collarbone as he went. Erred felt a hand slide up his thighs, cup one buttock and gently squeeze it. It was clear that his new master wanted to arouse him. He was conscious of the other's heat and the clothed erection brushing up against his thigh, and did not know whether to be reassured or frightened by this. Somehow it would have been less awkward had he simply been instructed to get on his hands and knees and not move.

Full lips brushed his. "Kiss me back." Erred obeyed, letting Arjha take control of the kiss, not resisting when an exploring tongue ventured into his mouth.

"You may touch me if you wish," Arjha murmured into his ear.

Erred understood that this was more a command than an invitation. "My lord," he said, "where do you want me to touch you?"

"Arjha," he breathed, sucking Erred's earlobe into his mouth, "you will call me Arjha in bed. Ah, here...." A hand

took his and slid it between their bodies, over a hardening bulge covered by silk. "Touch me here."

He stroked the erection in the way he had been taught, and soon had Arjha clasping him and moaning into his ear. Erred knew by his labored breathing that he would come at any moment, and it relieved him to know that he could please his new master so easily, without being taken.

"Wait, not yet." A firm hand clasped his wrist, stilling his movements. With much effort, Arjha pulled back from their embrace and swiftly undressed. His body, when Erred lifted his eyes to look, was lean yet hard with muscle, his tawny flesh dusted with fine dark hair.

Erred's eyes dropped between Arjha's legs, taking in his erection before quickly looking away.

Arjha instructed Erred to get on the bed and, standing over him, appraised the body lying on the linen sheets. "Why are you are not hard for me?"

"My lord—Arjha—I-I am...." Erred modestly lowered his eyes. It was far easier to play the innocent than admit the distaste he felt at being expected to enjoy an encounter he had neither initiated nor wanted. "I have never done this before."

His admission was greeted with skepticism. "Even an *akesh* who has never been taken has received training in the arts of love," said Arjha, "and my father assures me that you are skilled without being spoiled."

"Forgive me, my lord," Erred murmured, "but I was not told I should do anything except touch you as you commanded me. I thought you would simply take me as it

pleased you." There was truth to this, as his tutor had never indicated that his master might expect him to be aroused, and there was no discussion of any pleasure he might feel.

Arjha climbed onto the bed, moving over him like a predatory animal as he reclaimed Erred's lips.

"Now go and retrieve for me that phial of oil on the table," Arjha told him. "Yes, that's the one. Pour some onto your hands and then rub it on my cock."

Erred did as he was told, gripping the other's member and slicking on the lightly scented oil with the long, sensuous strokes he had learned in Dhabi's house. Once Arjha was satisfied, he was instructed to lie on his back with a cushion under his buttocks to raise them, and to draw his knees up to his chest.

He tried to still his breathing, to relax his lower body completely as his tutor had instructed him to do, but when an oiled finger touched his opening and began to breach the outer ring, he flinched and could not suppress the shudder that moved through him.

With one hand still caressing his buttocks, Arjha leaned over him. "Why are you trembling?" he asked. "Were you not instructed in the art of taking a man's cock?" Suddenly, his golden eyes narrowed. "If you have been used before, you will tell me now. I will not have lies in my bed."

Erred's voice was unsteady as he answered, "Only once, my lord."

"Why did you not tell me this?" demanded Arjha. "You will tell me who used you."

"My lord, I cannot say." Erred's voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "Please, I will lie back and try again."

Arjha sat back, his hands propped on his thighs and he gave Erred a curious look. "I know my father well enough to know that he cannot keep his hands off a beautiful slave, even when he intends to give him to another." Taking Erred in his arms, he pulled him down onto the cushions with him. "We will not speak further of this, but you will still give me pleasure tonight. Since you are a trained *akesh*, I assume that you know how to use your mouth?"

Erred shifted position and bent to touch his tongue to the tip of the other's glistening member. He could hear Arjha's gasps and moans, and indecipherable snatches of what he thought might be Tajhaani profanity; he did his best to shut out the man's rough encouragements and forced himself not to flinch when a hand touched the back of his head and urged him to take in more.

He bobbed up and down, taking in as much of the thick member as he could and using his hand to pump what he could not. Since he was not permitted to pin his master down to keep him from thrusting too hard into his mouth, Erred did his best to relax his throat muscles as his tutor had instructed. A moment later, the hand cradling the back of his head seized him by the hair, holding him tightly in place. Arjha groaned, grunting something unintelligible, and came in his mouth.

Erred choked down the bitter fluid; he had never been in the habit of swallowing seed, but his tutor had warned him that in Tajhaan it was considered an insult to spit out the

master's essence. "You are to smile and swallow," the man told him, "and then thank him for the gift he gives you."

While he had no intention of uttering such hollow platitudes, Erred concealed his disgust behind a forced smile. Arjha, still trying to regain his breath, answered with a satisfied look and instructions to bring a cloth to wipe him down.

As Erred rubbed the sweat from his body, Arjha shifted onto his side and caressed his hip. "You have done that before," he said. "Perhaps you are not as innocent as you would appear."

"We practice that skill upon special phalluses or other slaves," explained Erred. "I did not take training in ... the other thing."

Arjha stroked the arm that moved over him with the cloth. "You will learn better, and enjoy it, but for now you will lie here next to me and tell me why you are so rare that my father would spend eighteen thousand *menar* for you; he does not spend that amount even on his own slaves. I have seen many of your people. Some of them serve me in my house, but never have I seen one like you."

"I am a *talevé*, my lord."

"I do not speak your tongue," said Arjha. "It is fit only for slaves and laborers, so you must tell me what that means."

"I am a servant of the Lady of the Waters."

"Is this Lady of yours a goddess?"

"Yes, my lord, a very powerful one."

"Does this make you a priest?"

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Erred shook his head. "No, my lord, I am not a priest. The Lady has priests who serve in the House of the Water, and then She has Her *talevé* who are Her lovers, and they live in the Blue House."

Arjha nodded, though Erred could see he did not entirely understand. "And this Blue House, is it a harem?"

"I have heard that word before, my lord, but I do not know what it means."

"A harem is where a man keeps his wives and concubines, as well as his mother and his young children. All that is precious must be hidden," replied Arjha. He lifted a hand to touch Erred's hair, studying the pale strands in the candlelight. "Do all such creatures, these *talevé*, have hair like yours?" He could not quite get his accent around the unfamiliar word. "I have seen Turyar and Shivarrians with very light yellow hair, but never one with hair like pearl."

"When the Lady favors a man, his hair turns white," Erred explained.

"And are all *talevé* as beautiful as you?"

Erred bowed his head. "Yes, my lord, they are. It is part of the Lady's gift to Her chosen."

Roping a strand of Erred's hair around his fist, Arjha drew him down for a kiss. "Then this goddess of yours," he murmured against Erred's lips, "she is very lucky."

Four

The next morning, swathed in veils, Erred was taken from Satu's house to that of his new master. In the inner courtyard, he was met by Arjha's chief steward, a short, stout man who took him in hand and explained to him the rules of their lord's household. Afterward he was given over to Dornil, the eunuch who oversaw both the *akeshi* and the women's quarters.

Erred was assigned a small but richly appointed room in which he would sleep when he was not waiting upon his master. A single window faced north, across the inner courtyard and whitewashed rooftops to the desert and mountains beyond. During the summer the fretted screens that acted as shutters could be drawn aside to admit light and air.

Dismissing the other servants, Dornil spoke to him. "I believe you have already been told that there are no other *akeshi* in the household, which will make your lot somewhat easier, but all the same you must remember your place here. You are not the only one who shares the master's bed," he said. "You will not see Lady Thuva often, but if and when you do you must show her the utmost respect."

Then, his eyes shifting to see who else might be listening, the eunuch moved in closer and let his voice drop to a whisper. "I will tell you this for your own good. The lady is beautiful, but she has no sons or daughters by our master

and this has made her ill-tempered. You must be cautious in whatever dealings you might have with her."

Clothing and other toiletries were provided. The room was close for a spring morning. He yearned to remove the veil, open the shutters and feel some breath of air on his face but dared not even after the door was closed. Arjha had told him last night that he owned many slaves taken from Erred's native land. He feared to have them see him uncovered.

Lifting the gossamer veil from the bed where he had left it, he draped it over his head. Dhabi had explained to him that he was veiled not because he was entitled to the same status as a man's wives or daughters, for an *akesh* had no modesty or honor to preserve, but to enhance the mystery of his exotic beauty. Satu had refused to let him wear a veil. If Arjha did likewise, then he would have to face the scrutiny of his own people without its protection and feel the horror they would surely know when they saw that a sacred being had been brought to such shame.

In the afternoon, a slave brought him a platter of juice, goat's cheese and flat bread, and a book which he could not read; the slave stammered out the instructions that Erred was to study the pictures and choose which one he liked best.

Undoing the scroll, Erred started at the illustrations, which were of young men copulating in various positions. Another slave came at dusk to lead him to his master's bedchamber. He was to dress himself in one of his new robes and bring the book. Once there, however, he found another young man already lying in his master's bed. This one was naked, kissing

Arjha deeply and moving his hand over his chest in slow, sensual circles.

Arjha looked up, indicating with a smile that Erred was to unveil himself. "This is Nuraj," he said, lightly squeezing the young man's buttocks. "He belongs to one of my lieutenants, but I have asked to borrow him for the evening. Is he not delicious?"

Laying aside his veil, Erred let his confusion show. He glanced at the young man, hoping that what he suspected he might be ordered to do would not be asked of him. "My lord, you do not need me tonight?"

"I do not require you yet," said Arjha. "Remove your robe and sit there. For now I desire you to watch, but you are not to touch yourself."

Erred undid the ties of his robe and let the garment slide down into a pool of linen at his feet; he wore nothing underneath, as the etiquette of the situation demanded. He sat down in a corner chair and set the book on the floor as ordered. "I do not understand, my lord."

Still caressing his partner's back and thighs, Arjha answered, "Dornil tells me the physician has seen you, and that you were injured the last time. I will not have you cringing in my bed as you did last night. Now you will watch me make love to this slave and you will see how much he enjoys it."

Erred averted his eyes, yet could not. Arjha toyed with the *akesh's* nipples, tweaking and sucking them until the young man whimpered and begged for more. He reminded himself

that he was not being given a choice and forced himself to continue watching.

He did not want to be aroused, did not want to do anything more than send his mind to some distant, gray place, but as the two kissed with open mouths he felt the heat rise to his loins. Breathing hard, his tongue darting out to moisten lips suddenly gone dry, he shifted in the chair and fought the urge to touch himself.

When he was ready, Arjha had Nuraj kneel over him. Strong hands gripped the young man's hips to move him up and down, while Nuraj panted for more. He was erect, but Erred did not know if he was really enjoying being taken or if he was performing as he knew many *akeshi* and prostitutes did.

Just short of his climax, Arjha stopped and pulled out, eliciting a cry of disappointment from his partner and a frustrated pause from Erred. "Not yet," he said, kissing Nuraj deeply. He turned to Erred. "Tell me, is he not lovely when he is in passion?"

Unable to find his voice, Erred simply nodded. His tutor had once told him that some masters enjoyed watching *akeshi* perform together. "All men want to watch, no matter who they are and what they might say in public," he said. "It fires their blood and enhances their pleasure threefold."

"Ah, and this..." Arjha reached down and took Nuraj's erection in hand, running his thumb along the crown; the young man visibly shuddered. "He does not come until I tell him, but he is so very close, so hard. I see the look in your eyes. Would you not like to have him?"

The question caught Erred unprepared. "If that is your desire, my lord," he answered shakily. He could not help but notice that Arjha himself had not yet come, and he felt a moment's apprehension at what that might mean.

"You brought the book as I ordered?" Shifting his gaze to the text on the floor, Arjha beckoned for Erred to bring it to him. "Come and show me what lovemaking pleases you most."

Arjha looked at it, then at him, and frowned. "A master does not soil himself by taking a slave into his mouth," he said, "but if you desire that pleasure, Nuraj will give it to you."

Had it been his choice, Erred would have given his polite yet curt refusal, put on his robe and left. *You asked me what I wanted. When did I become such filth that you consider it beneath you?* he wondered. *Considering where your cock has just been, how is it that you are cleaner than me?* But Arjha's concept of protocol was, he sensed, immutable and his opinion was not being asked.

Erred climbed onto the bed and knelt beside Nuraj, yet did not touch him until Arjha gently prodded the other slave. "Kiss him and see how much he wants you."

Smiling, Nuraj lightly placed his hands on Erred's arms and claimed his lips. It was an empty kiss and Erred knew it, but he was aroused enough now not to care.

Afterward, Erred remembered very little of the coupling, save that it hurt when Arjha entered him for the first time. Unable to push Arjha away, he did his best to relax his body, and with Nuraj kissing and caressing him he was able to

achieve release. As he lay gasping for breath among the cushions, Arjha finished what he had begun with the other slave.

Nuraj brought clean, damp cloths for them to wash; he and Erred both rubbed Arjha down while Arjha mumbled his praise. They rested, a tangle of satiated limbs among the silken cushions, until Arjha dismissed Nuraj with a kiss and a gift of silver for his master.

Not having been given permission to go, Erred remained in his master's bed for some time longer. Arjha held him, whispering in his ear how blissfully tight and hot his body had felt during their passion.

"You will learn to enjoy my touch even more," he said.

When Erred was at last allowed to leave, he went straightaway to the bathing room where he roused the attendant on duty to boil water for him. Soaking in the copper tub, he let the heat ease his discomfort and the slave scrub from his body all evidence of his master's passion. When the water began to cool, he stepped out, wrapped himself in his robe to return to his chamber, where he ignored the food laid out for him and sank into a heavy sleep.

* * * *

Arjha leaned forward and caressed his cheek, combing his fingers through hair disheveled during their coupling. "So beautiful," he said. "For once my father actually showed some taste, and some restraint. You have no idea how much you please me."

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Erred lowered his eyes as he accepted the compliment. Arjha attributed Erred's increasing ease in his bed to his virility and skill, and Erred saw no reason to dispel that notion. In truth, Arjha was a far better lover than Satu would have been, as well as an extremely inventive and insatiable one.

With practice, Erred had learned to relax and maneuver his body so he was comfortable, and sometimes was able to achieve the climax his master permitted him, but any emotion he showed was feigned.

Arjha was in a playful mood that night and smiled as he sank back against the cushions. "You may ask a gift of me," he said, "if it is in within reason and in my power to give."

At the end of their coupling, Erred was always dismissed with a kiss, compliment or little trinket. Arjha had never offered more than this, and Erred did not expect it. He had a lovely room, good clothes to wear and food to eat. It never occurred to him to anticipate anything more.

His master fancied himself generous with those who served him, yet Erred knew there was no purpose in asking for the one thing he truly desired. "I would like a silver basin and an image of the Lady of the Waters. I wish to pray to my goddess and require these things to do so, if it pleases you that I should have them."

Arjha regarded this request curiously. "Is this all you ask? You do not desire jewels or silks or a servant of your own?"

"I have no need of such things, my lord."

"A silver bowl and an idol," Arjha mused, shaking his head. At last, he gave a little laugh. "Come, is there nothing else?"

You enjoyed the pillow book I sent to you, did you not? Would you like others, perhaps?"

Erred ducked his head to hide his sudden embarrassment. "I am not familiar with such things. But if I must choose something else, I would ask to be allowed to visit the gardens. My window looks to the desert, and I come from a green country. I am told the gardens have pools and fountains. I should like very much to see those, my lord. The sound of water calms me."

"Well, if that is all, then you shall have it."

The next afternoon, a plain silver basin and a statuette of the Lady were delivered to him. Dornil, who often tried to engage his master's exotic but withdrawn slave in conversation, told him that Tajhaan was home to ten thousand deities, and that it was not difficult to find the Lady's image in the bazaar when so many of Her worshippers dwelt in the city.

Erred did not know whether to be comforted by that remark or stung by the reminder that so many of his people were slaves. Instead, he brushed aside the comment and concentrated on the feel of the statuette in his hands; the silver was heavy and smooth, of fine workmanship. He set it on a makeshift pedestal behind the basin and anointed it with droplets of water to awaken the spirit within.

Once he was alone, Erred knelt on the carpet before the makeshift shrine. He lifted his hands, palms outward, and began the litany of prayers. *Hail, most radiant goddess, bearer of life, attend the prayer of this mortal supplicant.* No

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longer did he refer to himself as *sacred lover*, for it was inconceivable to him that She would desire him now.

After so many months without this familiar comfort, his devotions tumbled from his lips in a rush that elicited from him both pain and pleasure. *May Your merciful eye fall upon me, and Your touch take away all sorrow and hardship. Grant me the gentle sleep that will return me to Your embrace.*

Rivulets of moisture clung to the statuette like tears. Whatever spirit inhabited its silver shell, it did not answer.

As evening fell, Erred knew he should get up and seek his bed, but he had no energy. One of the older *talevé* in Altarme had once told him that true spiritual surrender took its toll in ways that far exceeded physical exertion. At the time, the callow initiate that he had been sniffed at such notions. Communion with the divine was not something he sought.

Darkness swallowed the remaining pallid daylight. It was now time to light the lamps and prepare for the evening meal. Erred remained on the floor, sinking into his own heaviness, willing both mind and body into that empty place where despair could not touch him.

He did not lift his head to acknowledge the slave who entered with his meal, even when the man cursed softly at the lack of light and a hand gently prodded his shoulder. "Sir, are you ill?" whispered a voice.

"I-I am weary," he mumbled. In the shadows he could not see much more than a dark mass that was that was one of the servants, but he did not pull away when the other gingerly helped him to sit up.

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"My lord," said the man, "we'd heard a rumor that a sacred one had come here, that he was a slave in the master's bed. We'd thought maybe someone had had too much nightgrass, or that it was a fraud, but Ashan—he brought you a book, see—saw you and said you were too beautiful *not* to be the real thing. And then Dornil sent Shalas out to buy a statue of the Lady of the Waters. My lord, *are you a talevé?*"

It took Erred a moment to realize the man spoke to him in his own language, that he had been addressed by the proper honorific. "I am the master's *akesh*," he said. The glimmer of moonlit silver by the fretted screen reminded him that the Lady was watching, mute.

"Sir, are you the real thing, the Lady's servant?"

The gods are dead, he thought, biting his lip to keep from saying it aloud. "Why are you asking me?" He laughed, a thin, bitter sound. "I am nothing now."

He felt powerful arms embrace him, a face burying itself in his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

Erred turned his face away from the shadow that sought to comfort him. He should have craved this, the gentle touch of another human being, someone who did not want to prod or use him, but all he could do was cringe in revulsion. *You do not know what I have done, what I have become. The gods are dead*, he thought, *if they were ever alive to begin with. I have prayed to a shadow, and become one.* "There is nothing you can do," he whispered. "I am just another slave. Please leave me alone. There is nothing you can do for me."

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The body slowly, reluctantly withdrew from him. "Sir, if it isn't too much to ask, will you pray to the Lady for us? She'll listen to you."

In his heart, he knew it was wrong of him to refuse this man what might be his only solace in bondage, but he would not make a promise he could not deliver. "I do not think She even hears me in this wilderness."

Five

Early the next afternoon, a guard came to escort him to the house's walled garden for his hour's exercise. Through the cloudy gauze of his veil, Erred saw the variegated greens of fruit trees, flowering shrubs and herbs. In this arid land, even the pleasure gardens of the wealthy were put to practical use, and Erred had been told that the parks surrounding the royal lake could grow grain to feed the city during a siege.

A fountain played under the shade of a citrus tree, its colored tiles tinting the water blue. Silver carp darted just under the surface, nibbling at Erred's fingertips as he drew them through the cool water.

"Taraz," demanded a woman's voice, "who is this *bakti* that you bring outside?"

His illusion of calm already broken by the woman's sharp tone, Erred cringed to hear that word. No one had ever translated it for him, but he knew it did not have the same meaning as *akesh*; it was probably the Tajhaani word for *whore*. Turning his head, he saw his guard press his fist to his heart and bow to the red-draped figure standing like a pillar of blood at the entrance to the garden. Through his veil, he could not make out the details of the woman's face or dress save that she wore no veil over her black hair.

"The master gives permission to his slave to—" said the guard.

"I will not suffer his concubines to be present outside their quarters," the woman snapped. "You, *bakti*, were you not taught to show respect before your betters?"

Before Erred could get to his feet and down onto his knees, the woman crossed the distance between them and snatched the veil from his head. "Only wellborn women of honor have the right to wear this," she hissed.

His first clear vision of Arjha's wife was a pair of kohl-rimmed black eyes widening in a tawny face. Hennaed lips parted as she let the veil drop to the pavement. "You are no woman," she said.

Respectfully he lowered his eyes. Instinct and training told him he should kneel, but his legs refused to obey. "No, my lady," he murmured.

"I was told that my husband had been given some foreign witch for his bed," she said artlessly, "a creature so incredibly beautiful or hideous that its face must be hidden, but they did not tell me this witch was a male."

Erred said nothing, keeping his eyes fixed on the gold-embroidered hem of her gown. Even had he been given permission, he would have hesitated to look directly at her. She radiated a honeyed malice that set his every nerve on edge.

"Male or not, witch or not," she said, nudging the snowy veil into the dirt with a foot encased in a sandal of braided red leather, "there is only one mistress in this house and it is not you." She turned and left him with the guard, yet even when he could no longer hear the retreating slap of her sandals it was several moments before Erred could look up again. Taraz

offered no comment as to his lady's behavior; his eyes merely followed his charge as Erred picked up his veil, shook the dirt off it, and put it back on.

In hushed tones, Dornil later told Erred that Thuva had rid herself of every female *akesh* or secondary wife Arjha had taken, though whether by poison or other means the steward did not say. "It is not my place to make inferences, you see," he said, "or to repeat what my master has said to me in confidence, but it is known that the lady has lost favor with him. He wearies of her sharp tongue and her demands, and has spoken of putting her aside."

"Why does he not do this?" asked Erred. "Forgive me, it is not my place to ask, of course, but I am curious."

The eunuch gave him a tolerant smile. "The lady is of a wealthy and powerful family whose support the master needs. As long as they continue to finance his campaigns, he must honor and keep her." Dornil's gaze shifted to the fretted screen behind Erred and he dropped his voice. "Unless, of course, the lady should die untimely. This would, shall we say, be most unfortunate."

He would say no more, but from some of the Tajhaani slaves Erred heard that Arjha was about to enter into negotiations with a prosperous silk merchant for the hand of the man's fifteen-year-old daughter. The girl was, by all accounts, beautiful, biddable and eager to please the handsome warrior who drove up to her father's house in such a splendid chariot. She also came of a family whose women bore many sons. Thuva was naturally furious at these rumors

and demanded to know from Arjha himself if there was any truth to them.

Arjha neither confirmed nor denied the stories, but snapped at her to be silent. Erred was later intrigued to learn that around this time his master had been taken with a sudden interest in medicinal texts, particularly those having to do with poison.

* * * *

Dhabi had told him that at some point his master might choose to let others lie with him, but Erred had not been interested enough to inquire further. Now it fell to Dornil to explain in detail the protocol *akeshi* were expected to observe when they were lent to another.

"It is understood that you are valuable property," said the eunuch, inspecting the raiment he chose for Erred. "Therefore, Lord Esketat will not use you roughly or let others use you. Many *akeshi* enjoy going out. This is a welcome change for them, and when they ply their art well their company is much sought." He smoothed an imaginary wrinkle from the embroidered silk. "Your duty this day is to bring pleasure to the one you serve and honor to your master."

Erred concentrated on the slight tugging of his scalp as a slave wove a turquoise bead into his hair; he drank in the slight discomfort to avoid thinking about what was being implied, that he was now no better than a prostitute. Dhabi had once told him that some *akeshi* had such talent and were so greatly favored that they were eventually able to buy their freedom and become prosperous courtesans. While it was

considered an honor to be an *akharu*, Erred was disgusted at the thought of someday willingly doing what he now did perforce.

Carmine was brushed onto his lips and sweet-smelling almond oil rubbed into his skin. In the bathing room, he had already emptied his bowels, cleaned and oiled himself with the instruments he had brought with him from Dhabi's house. Dornil watched him prepare to make certain he did it properly, then led him back to his chamber to be dressed. With the exception of the golden silk he had worn on his first night with Arjha and one other garment, Erred's clothing was considered too plain for such an excursion.

Each household that could afford it maintained a separate wardrobe for its *akeshi*, for it was understood that a beautiful pleasure slave was a framework upon which the master could display his wealth and good taste. Dornil told Erred that when the master or mistress discarded unwanted finery, these were often distributed among the *akeshi*. The golden robe from that first night had come from such a collection.

"This color suits you so well and the robe has not been worn in many years, so perhaps the master will permit you to keep it," he said. "But first you must bring him credit and go with joy to the bed of the man he chooses for you."

"I will do as my lord wishes," Erred murmured.

"Ah, but you must smile and not be so grim," said Dornil. "You are always so unhappy. Now, when you have done your service you will receive a sum of money. This is customary, but you are not to ask for it. And if you please the master well enough by your conduct, he may give you a portion of the

sum to keep. This is also customary, but again, you are not to ask for such a gift."

Once Erred's hair was dressed, Dornil arranged the folds of his blue-green silk robe and placed a silver veil upon his head. A palanquin came to take him to his client's residence.

Esketat was one of Arjha's lieutenants, a middle-aged man with coarser manners than his captain. In an upstairs chamber whose bed had not been made in days, Erred made the required bow and spoke the formula he had learned in Dhabi's house: "My master sends you this body for your pleasure."

Rough hands lifted Erred's veil. Esketat commented on the peculiarity of draping a pleasure slave as a noble lady as he quietly contemplated the beauty that necessitated the veil; he made an approving sound in his throat before leaning in, taking Erred's lips in a clumsy kiss and ordering him to undress.

Foreplay was brief, almost perfunctory, consisting of a few sloppy kisses and gropes that Erred did his best to pretend to enjoy. Esketat lacked skill, but the coupling was not unbearable; he did his business quickly, taking Erred from behind and falling into a light sleep. Unlike Arjha, he was neither virile nor did he require that the slave under him respond with anything more than quiet compliance.

At nightfall, Erred was given a small gift and a purse of silver to take back to Dornil, who presented the money to Arjha. Fingering the silver coins, then caressing his slave's cheek and tousled hair, Arjha gave Erred one of the coins.

"Esketat was well pleased with you, and this pleases me also," he said. "You should smile to hear such compliments."

Erred lowered his eyes and nodded, but this was not enough to placate Arjha. Cupping his hand under Erred's chin, Arjha lifted his face so he could not look away. "I do not understand why you are so unhappy," he said. "You are well favored and have many rich gifts from me. I am a passionate lover, and yet you do not smile."

"I do as you command, my lord."

"But without joy, that is clear." Arjha gestured for Dornil to leave them and close the door. Once they were alone, he began undoing Erred's clothing, stroking and kissing the bare skin revealed as he tugged the turquoise silk away. "I have decided that I will call you Arquí." His lips brushed the pulse below Erred's ear, lingering there. "The mountains beyond the Turyar lands, they are always covered in white, and because that whiteness is so cold and distant we call it *arqui*. You are like that, cold and distant."

When Arjha took him that night, he caressed Erred's body as if trying to rub warmth into his limbs. "Arquí," he breathed, burying his face in Erred's hair as he reached climax. "One day I will make you melt for me."

Alone in his chamber, Erred laid the turquoise robe across a chair and sat half-naked on the edge of his bed. He did not look at the Lady or think about his devotions, though it was customary before retiring. He did not think about anything at all, not today's excursion or Arjha's ardor or promises of future passion. Thinking suggested consciousness about time and the universe, and one's place therein, yet the one thing

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he had come to understand was that there was no longer a past or a future, only a gray, nebulous thing called the present.

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Erred did not understand why the lady sent for him now when she had made it clear on that day in the garden that she wished to forget his presence. As it displeased her to see him covered, he removed his veil once he reached the threshold of the women's quarters and knelt on the floor in the atrium to await her coming. Because he was not a eunuch, a guard stood at his back and a sly-faced steward watched from the shadow of one of the pillars.

Thuva's three ladies all scurried to veil themselves when he appeared and retreated to a corner where they stared at him and whispered in voices that occasionally carried over to him. Erred shut out their insipid comments about his appearance.

When Thuva appeared, she dismissed the other women and walked over to him, yet did not tell him to rise. All he saw of her was her silken hem and a tiny foot with nails painted red with henna. "How may I serve you, lady?" he murmured.

"Do not speak unless you are addressed, *bakti*," she hissed. It was clear from her voice and her agitated movements that she was unhappy. "My husband may enjoy your subservient platitudes, but I am not he."

Erred apologetically laid his hand over his heart while trying to shove from his mind all he had heard about the fates of his female predecessors. In her rages, Thuva had been

known to whip slaves nearly to death and, despite Dornil's assurances that a male *akesh* was no threat to her, he did not think she would hesitate to eliminate him if she sensed otherwise.

"The servants are whispering among themselves. Do not think that I cannot hear them," said Thuva. "They say you are the lover of some foreign goddess and have strange powers." When Erred did not answer, she prodded him with her toe. "I addressed you, slave. Now answer me."

"I-I am a lover of the Lady of the Waters," he replied softly, "but I have no power save the *hrill* that dwells inside me and sometimes takes form."

"Nevertheless, you have some strange power over my husband. A most ungrateful slave you are, I am told, yet he is besotted with you." Jeweled fingers grasped his chin, long fingernails digging into his flesh as she forced him to look up at her. "You are some witch who has enchanted him. Now you will use what power you have for *my* benefit and give me a child, a son to bear my husband's name."

Erred winced as her nails dug deeper, threatening to draw blood, yet he dared not flinch away. "Lady, you are asking me to—? I cannot touch a woman, it is forbidden."

She released him with a bitter laugh and a shove that nearly unbalanced him. "Do you think I would lower myself to lie with some filthy *bakti*? I am not so desperate that I have forgotten all honor. No, you will perform your enchantments for me and give me a son."

"My lady, I do not have any such power," he protested.

A stinging blow across one cheek silenced his protests. Erred felt Thuva's long nails scrape his skin. "You are a slave and you will do as you are told. If you do not give me an heir for Arjha, then you will suffer."

When he returned to his room and looked in the mirror, Erred saw that her nails had left marks on his face. The thin scratches were not deep but Arjha would almost certainly notice. Sending for Dornil, Erred asked for paint to cover them; the eunuch shook his head and told him that Arjha already knew what his wife had done.

As a punishment, Arjha confined Thuva to the women's quarters for two days. Isolation and boredom did not sit well with Thuva; the crash of breaking glass and pottery and the sound of her shrieking echoed through the courtyard until Arjha himself threw open her door and threatened to break her jaw if she did not give him some peace.

In his room, Erred knelt before the Lady and asked Her what he should do. For the first time since leaving Satu's house, he was truly terrified. As only the truly desperate could be, Thuva was beyond the capacity for reason or sympathy. She fully expected him to be able to conjure up a child for her, and though she did not specify what she would do if he failed, he knew it would mean his life. The *akesh* who came before him had mysteriously slipped on wet tiles in the bath and cracked her head open, while the one before her had succumbed after eating a dish of mushrooms.

Dornil came to see him near sunset. "We will not tell the master what she has done," he said. "You do not wish to put yourself between him and the mistress, nor do you wish to

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burden his ear with complaints. This matter of giving the mistress a son, if he does not already know what measures she has resorted to, you must not court his anger by telling him. There is a saying that the bearer of ill tidings is as despised as the tidings he brings.

"The master is already angry. Perhaps he will forget himself and do to you what he threatened to do to the mistress. I have seen him do worse to messengers when the news is not as he likes. No, you will be silent and perhaps I will find some herbs that will quicken the lady's womb, though there is not one she has not already tried. Of course, it is no good if he does not touch her, and these days he does not bother."

Erred let his gaze fall on the silver Lady. She was a goddess of healing and fertility as well as the mistress of the Waters. He did not, however, think She would hear a prayer for the womb of a foreign woman anymore than She had heard any of his other prayers. "What am I to do? I cannot help her except to pray."

Dornil's face was closed. "Arqui, if this goddess of yours has any power at all, then you had best pray very hard."

Six

The rainy season came to the desert. Six weeks of steady downpour hampered the business of the city and dampened the moods of all in the household. Erred mostly remained in his room, where he contemplated the rhythmic drumming of the rain outside and the shifting patterns of the light that came through the screens. The moist air and shadowed daylight made him crave sleep. Instead, he forced himself to get up and go through his daily exercises.

Sometimes Thuva sent for him and made him kneel before her to repeat the prayers the slaves overheard him chanting. Those slaves who spoke Shivarian should have known better than to pass his private devotions off as magical incantations; when he tried to explain this to her, he learned very quickly that anything other than subservient compliance earned him nothing more than a slap across the face.

Seeing he had no other choice, Erred uttered over the lady every prayer he knew, while she caressed her belly and favored him with a malicious smile.

When they were not occupied with their other duties, the eunuchs who attended the master and mistress congregated in a small room overlooking the street and played dice and board games. Dornil invited Erred to join them, assuring him that the master would approve. "There is no safer company for an *akesh* or a virtuous woman to keep than that of a eunuch," he said, "and you spend too much time alone with that idol of yours."

They taught him how to play *keidu* and *peji*, a Juvan game in which a player won by losing all his pieces, and he taught them staves, in which a bundle of colored sticks was tossed onto a table; the player was then required to remove all the staves of his color without disturbing the others.

The eunuchs were naturally curious about what a *talevé* was; he answered some of their questions while deflecting others. In turn, he learned what it was to be a eunuch. Most had come from families with too many sons and had, at the age of twelve or thirteen, willingly undergone the castration process. There was no shame attached to being unmanned, as eunuchs were a commodity in Tajhaan. No noble household could function without them, and thus there were plenty of opportunities for an intelligent, ambitious eunuch to advance himself. In some ways, they were not unlike *talevé*. Both were barred from normal relations with women, would never father offspring and maintained their appearance of beardless youth when other men began to show their years.

On several occasions, the Shivarian slaves who brought Erred his meals and emptied his chamber pot tried to engage him in conversation, but after that one night he would not speak to them. No comfort remained that he could offer them, and he could not endure the shame of their pity. Instead, he turned his face to the wall and held his gaze there until they had gone. If Arjha ever offered him another gift, he would ask to have those slaves changed.

Erred held out little hope that this would happen soon, as Arjha was preoccupied with other matters and did not send for him as often as before. Dornil was quick to assure him

that he had not lost favor with Arjha. "It is often thus at this time of year."

A campaign was planned for the summer and preparations must be made. When the weather was fair, Arjha readily left the city for the north. Most of his campaigns were fought in the mountains, where the hostile Turyar attempted to establish strongholds. On any number of occasions Arjha said that he preferred a rough cot and the company of his men than too much soft living and a shrill wife who made his head ache.

Through observation and carefully worded inquiries to the Tajhaani slaves, Erred was soon able to educate himself about the city's military factions, who led them and where Arjha's allegiances were. Erred learned that, as a self-made captain, Arjha was scorned by the aristocratic generals whose offices went back several generations. In public, he polished his tongue and paid lip service to these men, even taking the daughter of one as his wife, yet when it came to the business of funding, provisioning and manning his ventures, Arjha looked elsewhere.

Soldiers frequently came to the house, drinking and gambling in the sitting room adjacent to the atrium. All Erred saw of them were their liveries as they passed to and fro under his window; the rough men whom he suspected were mercenaries wore none, nor did the merchants who arrived in their shaded palanquins.

Satu, who would have been a likely ally, never came to the house, and Arjha never courted his patronage. Father and son were not close. Satu still had not forgiven Arjha for

abandoning the family trade in favor of a warrior's rough life, while Arjha resented any attempt to meddle in his affairs.

Only once, when Arjha entertained an emissary of the High Prince, was Erred summoned downstairs to greet a guest. The eunuchs dressed him from the wardrobe in deep crimson silk with a netted hairpiece that dripped gold chains, and Arjha expressed pleasure at the vision Erred created. The emissary also commented on his beauty, yet his interest seemed to end there. Erred served wine to the two men as they talked of troop deployments and the cost of baggage trains, and quietly sat in a corner until dismissed.

Erred was never brought out for the purpose of giving pleasure to his master's guests. Later he might be sent out to serve men to whom Arjha owed favors, but Arjha would not have anyone else touch his *akesh* under his own roof, and cautiously selected Erred's partners. Those with a reputation for drunkenness or brutality were not even considered, though some had heard through word-of-mouth that Arjha hoarded an exquisite slave, and were not subtle in demanding a turn with him. Arjha found other ways to placate them.

Sex was for him a perfunctory act. Erred understood the erections that he sometimes had when he serviced others were his body's natural response to stimuli and had nothing to do with how much he wanted sex at that moment. He learned to pretend passion. This worked with the men to whom he was given, but Arjha was not always convinced. "I do not see in you the bloom of desire that warms the flesh of my other lovers and you are always cold afterward," he said. "You do not lie close to me unless I command it."

Erred knew that if he did not achieve pleasure or the convincing appearance of pleasure, it was an insult to Arjha's virility. But there was also another component to Arjha's displeasure, something that did not occur to Erred until, sitting one day in the garden, he remembered an incident from his youth.

His father sometimes heard petitioners on behalf of the ruling prince of Altarme, who was his first cousin, and had often required his sons to attend these hearings. Once, a young woman came before Lord Camoril to insist that she had been raped. However, when the accused was brought in a few moments later, he insisted that he could not possibly have raped the woman as she had not struggled and enjoyed the act far too much. At ten, Erred had been too young to understand what rape was and could not remember what his father's ruling had been. What stood out in his mind at the time was the conviction behind the young man's reply; he truly believed that what he had done had not been rape.

It was not so farfetched to consider that Arjha might believe the same, that if his *akesh* submitted and enjoyed the sex act, it did not matter what the circumstances of their coupling were. Erred had seen other slaves fall victim to Arjha's volatile temper and knew that one of the surest ways to awaken a man's wrath was to insult his sexual prowess.

On days when the weather did not permit him to go out, Erred resumed his dancing lessons, as he had been warned against excesses of sloth. An *akesh* was expected to be slender and limber.

One morning, a servant came in with alcohol, a cloth and a needle and told him to hold very still. When he asked what the items were for, the servant replied that Arjha wanted his ears pierced.

"Why do they need to be pierced?" he asked.

"So you can wear earrings, of course. All proper *akeshi* wear them." Undoing a little square of cloth, the man revealed a simple pair of silver studs to be inserted with the needle.

The process took only a few moments and did not hurt until afterward, when his earlobes became sore from the needle and the slight weight attached. Twice a day the servant came in to swab his ears with alcohol and inspect his handiwork. "In a few weeks you'll be able to remove the studs and wear whatever you wish. I'm sure the master will give you beautiful jewels."

When the rains ended and the sun emerged, the desert bloomed for a short time, laying garlands of scarlet poppies and other flowers upon the knees of Tajhaan's hills. Banquets were hosted by the elite to honor various gods, and in the house of the fertility goddess Shalat, the High Prince made the Great Marriage with one of the priestesses. Processions and sacrifices, each spectacle more costly and elaborate than the last, greeted the change of season. Arjha told Erred about some of the rituals he attended, for as a slave Erred was not permitted to enter any sacred space.

"In your land they have sacrifices, yes?"

"Yes, my lord," answered Erred. "At certain times of the year we offer garlands and shells to the Lady."

Laughing, Arjha idly twisted a strand of Erred's hair around his finger. "It is no wonder that your gods are so weak if this is how you nourish them. A god must have burnt offerings, the hearts and blood of warriors and maidens."

Erred had known that human beings were sacrificed in this land. It was something he preferred not to dwell upon. "We do not believe in such things, my lord. Human lives are too precious to take."

"One does not give a cheap gift and then expect the gods to smile on him." Gently tugging on the rein of Erred's hair, Arjha drew his head down in order to kiss him. "That is why a man's life is a most fitting sacrifice."

On a cool spring evening ten days after the rains, Dornil came with instructions to prepare himself for his lord's banquet. The eunuch appeared as puzzled by the invitation as Erred. "It is most unusual for *akeshi* to be invited, much less to be seated at the high table," he said, "but I am told the Lady Thuva has asked for your presence."

Bewilderment instantly turned to dread. She had summoned him three more times with the demand that he use his magic to fill her womb. Her single-minded insistence and unwillingness to listen to reason in spite of the clear absence of a pregnancy lingered in his mind when the sweetly-worded invitation came begging the joy and beauty of his company. Erred had seen the corruption in the heart of the fruit, and knew she did not mean to do anything other than humiliate him. For all he knew, a dish of poisoned mushrooms awaited him.

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Dornil had made it clear from the beginning that he could not dishonor the lady of the house by refusing, but with the gall he also offered practical advice for avoiding a mishap. "Eat only what is served to the other guests. Tonight, do not insist upon fruit juice but drink watered wine; she will not expect this," he said. "Lastly, do not accept strange dishes if you see she is not also eating from them. Tell her that you have a delicate stomach and must eat only plain fare."

From the wardrobe, Dornil brought out a tawny silk robe embroidered with golden lotus flowers. Through the mirror, Erred watched a slave's deft fingers slide gold and carnelian beads into his hair. Another slave had anointed his wrists, elbows and neck with perfume, and he had prepared his body for his master's desire. Arjha was never able to resist him so elaborately dressed.

But first he must endure the banquet. Being required to dine in public would mean he could not wear a veil. Thuva would not have permitted him to wear it in her presence anyway, as it was the only armor he had against her.

As Erred walked down the stairs, he heard music coming from a large hall. Slaves dressed in pleated linen stood by the door to drape fragrant garlands about the necks of the guests. "May Shalat smile on you this season," said one, her eyes issuing an invitation that Erred politely ignored.

The hall, usually left bare, had been transformed for the occasion. Carpets brought back from Arjha's conquests covered the floor, broad geometric weaves competing with inlaid tiles. Red and gold cushions softened the dining couches where Arjha's guests mingled over exotic dishes and

wines. Most of these were military officials, but there were also merchants and several royal councilors who conveyed the High Prince's regrets that their lord could not attend. Women milled in the hall; Erred wondered about this until a serving boy whispered that these were courtesans and not wives. Thuva was the only highborn woman present, and her appearance outside the women's quarters caused much stir.

Erred was placed at the high table, where he spent most of the banquet staring at his lap. That an *akesh* received this honor provoked much comment, and he could feel many eyes turn to him, appraising his pale beauty. Even watered, the wine was potent and gave him a headache. He nibbled on flat bread, cooked vegetables and fruit, politely refusing the dishes the lady tried to press upon him. Most of them were too heavily spiced for his palate and he was hesitant to accept anything from her hand.

Once in a while Arjha reached out a jeweled hand to stroke his cheek, yet otherwise did not take note of him. The small gesture was not lost on Thuva. Erred could feel her seething under her carefully studied mask of hospitality, but if anything her attention became even more cloying.

"Perhaps this food is too rich for you," she suggested, "and I have been foolish in forgetting that you adhere to a special diet. I am told that you come from a land of many rivers, so here is a dish you might prefer. It is fish brought from the waters near Akkil. They bring it across the desert in great tubs to keep it fresh for our table."

From the corner of his eye, Erred saw Arjha's gaze dart suspiciously to his wife, but he made no comment. A slave

already stood at his elbow to serve him; it was impossible to refuse.

Erred stared at the garnished filet the man set before him. Thuva watched intently. Her lips curved in a smile even as his throat went dry.

"It was prepared by my very own cooks," she said, but all he heard was an overly sweet voice implying that he would be doing her an insult if he did not eat. "Look and you will see that the other guests are already enjoying it."

Spearing a morsel on his fork, Erred brought it to his lips and cautiously tasted it. The fish was subtly flavored, so tender that it melted on his tongue. If Thuva had poisoned it, he could not tell. "It—it is very good, my lady," he murmured, without meeting her eyes. Beside him, he felt Arjha begin to relax.

"*Hrill* is a delicacy and quite difficult to obtain," Thuva said, "but we do not spare any expense for our honored guests."

He did not hear the subtle acid dripping from her voice. The moment the word *hrill* fell from her lips, he heard only the echo, punctuated by the wild pounding of his heart. His fork slipped from fingers suddenly gone nerveless and he gagged on the aftertaste of citrus and herbs.

Arjha grasped his wrist, forcing him to look up. "What is the matter?" he asked. When Erred did not answer, he turned to his wife and hissed a warning at her. "If your cooks have fed him poison, I will—"

"My lord," she answered smoothly, "I will taste the food from his plate if it will ease your mind. There is no poison, only a silly *akesh* with a weak stomach."

"Please," Erred groaned, "let me...." "He was going to vomit; he could already feel his gorge rising and did not want to embarrass himself or Arjha's guests. "My lord, let me *go*."

Arjha made a gesture. Erred did not know if this was permission for him to leave or not, but he took it. Clamping his hand to his mouth, he rose from the table and walked from the hall as swiftly as he could without running. He made it as far as the outer corridor before turning and vomiting into a potted lime tree. A slave stopped to ask if he felt all right, motioning to the privy where several guests were already paying for their overindulgence.

Once his stomach stopped heaving, Erred wobbled upstairs to rinse his mouth out in the bathing room before going back to his quarters and collapsing on the carpet in front of the silver Lady.

He murmured snatches of prayer in his own tongue, his tears and the roiling of his stomach folding over him in a spasm of dry heaving that left him breathless, a tangle of limbs and rumpled silk, sobbing into the carpet. Whether Thuva knew his incantations were a fraud or was sending him a warning, it did not matter. For all he knew, the Lady had inspired the woman to feed him the *hrill* as punishment for his presumption in using Her prayers for such a base purpose.

The door opened and someone entered with a lamp. "Ah, I am told you have eaten something bad." Erred recognized the voice of Arjha's physician, but did not acknowledge the eunuch even when the other bent over him, prodding and sniffing. A plump finger pulled back his lips to expose his gums. "There is no sign of poison and all others who have

eaten this dish are not ill. Perhaps you have simply had too much excitement."

Snarling, Erred grasped the eunuch by the hair and hauled him up as he came to his feet. Ignoring the other's cries of alarm and the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him, he dragged the eunuch to the door, pulled it open and shoved the man into the corridor. "Get *out!*" he shrieked.

Terrified eyes were all he saw of the eunuch before he slammed the door in his face. In that corner of his mind that could still reason, Erred knew there would be consequences for his outburst, but he no longer cared. Attacking the eunuch had broken the seal on a rage too long suppressed. He tore the silks from his bed and flung them to the floor and upended objects to hurl across the room, wishing that the Lady's gift had equipped him with the teeth and claws to savage men.

Whirling around in the ruin he had made, with no one and nothing else to attack, Erred turned on himself. Frantic hands tore off the silk robe, sending pearl and topaz buttons flying. Fingers ripped out strands of hair as they attacked the gold and carnelian beads. And still it was not enough. Through his ragged breaths, he clawed at his face, rending his flesh to atone for the life of the sacred animal whose flesh he had consumed.

The door opened and Arjha, still in his festival silks, burst into the room. Shock and anger burned in his eyes when Erred, uttering a long, low cry, lunged for him. Arjha deflected the blow while delivering one of his own, a short, swift cuff to the ear that caught Erred off balance. As Erred

stumbled, Arjha seized his arms and pinned them to his sides to ward off further blows.

At last, exhaustion overcame him. Quietly sobbing, he slumped to the carpet as Arjha took in the ruin around them.

"What madness is this?" asked Arjha. His fingers gripped Erred's jaw, forcing his head up. "Arqui, what have you done to yourself? The physician says there is no poison. You have no reason for tears."

Erred tried to pull away from him, to crawl toward the silver Lady that was the one thing in the room he had not overturned. Arjha held him fast, dragging him back into his lap and holding him there while he struggled. "I have eaten my own flesh and it is *her* doing!"

Arjha lifted his hand and delivered a swift, sharp slap to stop his hyperventilating. When Erred was calm once more, he said, "It is only a fish you have eaten. There is nothing wrong in this. My wife has done you a great honor by inviting you to eat at the same table."

"This is not an honor! She fed me *hrill*—my own flesh!"

Once again Arjha raised his hand but did not strike. "You are speaking madness. A *hrill* is but a fish—a *fish*, you foolish *akesh*!"

"A *hrill* is *not* a fish. It is one of the Lady's twelve sacred animals." Sniffing, Erred wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. His salt tears stung the scratches on his face; he had not realized he was crying, and was embarrassed by his loss of composure. "I have a *hrill* spirit inside my body. She *knows* this. I told her."

"I had not heard anything about this," said Arjha. "How is such a thing even possible?"

"Men belong to the Earth, but *talevé* are one with the Water element. We have an animal spirit, a *ki'iri*, living inside us. I have a *hrill*," said Erred. "Your wife thinks I am a powerful sorcerer who can give her the son she wants. She did not believe me when I—"

Fingers suddenly grasped his hair, twisting the tangled strands in a vise until Erred was forced to look up. Arjha's eyes were now as hard and black with anger as they had been gentle a moment before. "What is this about giving her a son? Do you dare touch what belongs to me?"

"She believes I have the power to make a son for her." Erred winced and bit his lip to keep from crying out at the pain. "I have no such power—I could not touch her even if I did—it is forbidden for a *talevé* to touch a woman."

Still holding him by the hair, Arjha dragged him into a sitting position. "She wishes you to lie with her?"

Erred tried to shake his head, but Arjha held him too fast for movement. He could feel strands of his hair tearing loose from his scalp. When his head wrenched backward, baring his throat, he half-expected Arjha to draw a knife for the fatal cut. "She wants to bear your son, but I told her I could not—could not make such magic. I never—"

As Arjha released him, he fell forward onto the carpet where he spent the next few moments gasping for air. His scalp throbbed painfully. "She punished me by making me eat my own flesh," he groaned. "She should have poisoned me

instead and been done with it. If you want to give me a gift, then kill me. Please, I would rather be dead than this."

"Why would I kill you, Arqui? You do not know what you say." Arjha reached down and touched Erred's scratched cheek. "I will speak to my wife about this matter. I will not have her dishonor me by turning to sorcery to make what the gods are not willing to give her. But first I will send for something to calm you and you will forget this matter."

Arjha left him with instructions to clean up the mess he had made of his room. Erred sat in the middle of the floor with the shreds of his robe around him and listened to the sound of his receding footfalls. His plea had been so obvious, and thrust aside like so much air.

Dornil came in with a bowl of warm water and a salve to tend the scratches on his face. "This is only small damage," he said. "It will heal in a few days. You are fortunate you did not do worse. What could have possessed you to do such a thing to yourself? An *akesh* without his beauty is one not worth keeping."

A slave came in with a bowl of steaming liquid. Another tried to untangle the remaining beads from his hair. "This will calm you and help you sleep," said Dornil. "Do not worry about the rest. I will have someone put the room to rights, but I suspect you will have to answer for your behavior and the torn robe."

In the morning, Erred learned how Arjha punished disobedience in his inner household. Dornil was sent to take back three pieces of silver from his savings to pay for the robe, just before a guard came in to deliver three lashes with

a switch. The man did not put his arm into the blows, and Erred was too groggy from the sedatives to protest the humiliation.

Ritual purification was sometimes offered to the priests of the Water and the *talevé*. Erred struggled to remember what the prayers were, and how best to shift for himself. Fasting and purging comprised the first part of the rite; he could manage this on his own. As for the second part, he took punishment meted out by the guard in lieu of the willow withes with which a priest would have flagellated him, though it was not enough to repay his sin. Three lashes were nothing when he wanted a beating that would make the blood flow.

The drugs the physician had given him were strong, and he was facedown in bed and asleep again before the physician's slave had even finished applying the salve to the backs of his thighs where he had been whipped.

By evening, he was awake again. Hot water was brought in for a bath, and food that he refused after telling the eunuchs why. Dornil came in to express his displeasure. "You understand the master allows you to have your idol and your worship as a gift," he said, "but if you cause trouble by it he may just as easily take it away. This fasting and pining is not good for your health. If the master sends for you in this condition, it is I who will be blamed for it."

* * * *

Arjha was in the mood to do worse. After leaving Arquí, he went straight to his wife, tore off her festival raiment and took her as savagely as a man might have done with a

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prostitute. One of Thuva's ladies, watching in horror behind a screen, told others what Arjha had said to his wife afterward, and by afternoon the entire household knew.

Rising from the bed, Arjha had seized the shreds of Thuva's garment and flung them over her bruised body. "I have fucked you hard enough to fill you with ten sons," he said, "so if you do not get one now you will never have one."

Seven

Two days later, the door to Erred's room burst open, rousing him from the disjointed wisps of a dream. Before he could rub the sleep from his eyes or ask who had entered, Arjha had him by the arm and was hauling him from his bed. Erred, unable to get his feet under him, fell heavily to the floor.

"Get dressed," Arjha ordered coldly. Clothing was flung at Erred, which he put on with shaking hands when his master shouted at him for not moving swiftly enough. "Lazy *akesh*, I will drag you outside naked if you do not hurry."

Erred could not imagine why he was being required to go out so early in the morning, and why Arjha was so angry that he had come to fetch his slave himself, and with such violence. But Arjha would not tolerate any questions, slapping Erred hard across the face when he opened his mouth to ask what was wrong.

Whatever awaited him outside promised to be unpleasant. Erred forced himself to remain calm and not provoke Arjha's further anger by his clumsiness or delay.

He managed to get his shift on and was reaching for his sandals when Arjha decided he had waited long enough. He seized Erred by the arm, pulled him up from the edge of the bed, and marched him barefoot out the door.

The house was a flurry of activity. The slaves, quickly scurrying off into the shadows at Arjha's approach, watched Erred with terrified eyes as he was dragged past them. He

could not hear what they murmured to each other, or what they thought he had done. Something had happened while he fasted and prayed in his room, and in his isolation he had not paid attention to what the rest of the household was doing. Too late he realized that this might have been his undoing.

All he knew was that Thuva had been punished, but as Arjha's grip on his arm tightened, he wondered if she had found some way to retaliate.

In the atrium, several armed guards fell into step behind Arjha as others opened the doors that led out of the house. Erred could not fathom why they were taking him outside. He had taken his punishment without complaint and Dornil had said that the master was satisfied by his calm acceptance of the discipline. There had been no hint that there was to be more. Surely Arjha did not mean to throw open the gates and dump him half-dressed onto the street?

As Erred was hauled down the steps into the courtyard, the sun glaring off the paving stones made his eyes sting. It was already midmorning; he had slept far longer than he thought. Blind, he faltered on the steps, and would have tripped if not for Arjha's grip. Rough stones scraped the soles of his feet. His head swam from the abrupt daylight, the ferocity of Arjha's anger and the clatter of the soldiers behind them. For all he knew, he was about to be executed, and for what crime he did not know.

"Look there!" Arjha jerked him to a halt and, seizing him by the hair, pulled his head up. "*Look at them!*"

Through burning eyes, Erred saw three men, bound by ropes, kneeling in the center of the courtyard. Their naked

bodies were bruised, their backs torn open by the lash, and when they lifted their faces at Arjha's shouted command Erred saw more blood streaming from mutilated mouths and eyes.

"These slaves planned to rise against me," hissed Arjha, unhanding Erred and shoving him toward the prisoners. His voice was loud enough to carry throughout the courtyard and into the street. "I have had the tale from two other slaves. They planned to take you and free themselves. Now tell me that I should not deal with you as I have dealt with them."

Erred turned and looked again at the prisoners. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the light, he could see them more clearly. By their features, he knew they were of his own people, but they had been too badly beaten for him to recognize any of the slaves who had tried to talk to him. "My lord," he protested, "I knew nothing of—"

"Be silent!" A slap across the face sent Erred stumbling backward. "This filth will be taken to the edge of the city and impaled, and this will be a lesson to the rest that this is how I repay those who would steal from me and abuse my kindness.

Arjha crossed the distance between them with two strides and seized him by the hair. A hand on his arm drew him back into the house, but not back to his room. Instead, Arjha marched him into his own chamber, shouted for the slaves to clear out and slammed the door before releasing Erred with a shove that dumped him onto the bed.

The moment he felt the mattress at his back, Erred knew what was going to happen. He did not stop to consider why;

the violence, light and noise were still a blur out of which he could barely piece together his part in all of it. As Arjha approached, he willed his body to go limp. Perhaps if he did not resist Arjha would not hurt him and it would end quickly.

Buttons flew everywhere as Arjha wrenched Erred's robe open and tore it from his shoulders, leaving him naked. "You are mine—*mine*—and you will not hide from me, you will not leave me or be taken by others unless *I* will it."

Pulling at his own clothes, Arjha pinned Erred to the mattress with his body and buried his face in his neck. Erred could scarcely breathe at the weight crushing his chest, and his fasting had left him too weak to push Arjha off him. Lips traveled down his throat, painfully nipping and suckling at the skin above his pulse, and when he whimpered Arjha snapped him to be quiet.

"I am branding you," he hissed. "All men will know you belong to me."

This time, Arjha made no effort to arouse him. Erred buried his face in the pillow to stifle his gasps of pain and humiliation at being brutalized by a man who had always prided himself on giving pleasure to his bedmates. By now, he grasped his perceived crime enough to be astounded by the blind rage with which Arjha punished him. It was common knowledge that he was unreceptive to the Shivarian slaves; he had always refused their overtures and told them to leave him alone. Surely Arjha, who knew everything else that went on under his roof, must know this as well.

Anger welled up alongside his pain. *I had nothing to do with this!* He wanted nothing more than to wrench free of the

body slamming into him, turn around and repay his humiliation with rage of his own. Pain kept him as much a prisoner as the hands grasping him, and Arjha's savage thrusts left him too breathless even to cry out for the ordeal to end.

Afterward, Arjha sprawled atop Erred, pressing him facedown into the mattress with his greater strength and roughly caressing him. Turning Erred's face toward him, he forced a kiss with lips and a tongue that did not care about his slave's lack of enthusiasm.

"Arqui, I—" he gasped into Erred's tangled hair. "How could you make me do this to you?"

There was no answer. Erred made no effort to speak. He had no comfort to give and it was too late for explanations. Turning his face to the wall, he ground down on his teeth to hold back his anger.

Once his breath returned, Arjha shifted his weight off Erred. His movements were awkward, even boneless; the rage that gave him strength seemed to have ebbed away with his release. "You may go," he said colorlessly.

Trembling, Erred rose from the bed. It hurt almost too much to move, but he would not give Arjha the satisfaction of seeing him collapse. Feeling Arjha's seed and his own blood run in sticky rivulets down his thighs, he gathered the remains of his clothing about him and limped toward the door. He avoided Arjha's eyes until the end, when he paused at the door and looked back at the bed where his master still sat in a daze.

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"Whatever those other slaves did," he murmured, fighting to keep his voice under control, "I had no part in it."

* * * *

Erred sat curled up in a corner of his bed, his back to the wall as he hugged a cushion to his chest. When he had returned to his room and saw the bruises and welts standing out against his skin, he simply stared at his reflection until Dornil came in and covered his nakedness with a robe. Events blurred and dropped away from his consciousness until he could no longer quite remember what Arjha had done or said to him.

Dornil brought the physician to examine him. Lack of lubrication had torn the tender skin around his opening; it did not appear that the damage had gone further than that. Ointment and hot baths were provided to ease the pain, and Dornil had cautiously recommended to Arjha that he not touch his slave for ten days while Erred healed.

When the eunuch and physician left, a cautious face in the doorway brought him back to himself. He did not know the man's name, had never asked because he did not truly want to know.

In pieces the story came out, the conspiracy to escape and set him free, to return him to his own land. Worse, from the man's garbled account, it seemed Arjha's vicious example had not dampened the servants' resolve to see the plan carried out.

Incredulous at the man's gall, Erred could only gape at him. The last thing he needed or wanted now was to be

reminded of the reason Arjha had hurt him in the first place. "I did not ask you to do this," he finally said. "All I want is for you to leave me alone."

The man shook his head. "How can you say that, sir, when you belong to the Lady? Look how he's used you. He even made you eat a sacred animal. The others, they *died* for you."

"What made you think you could escape this place, or that I would agree to come with you?" All the rage Erred had restrained with Arjha now came pouring out. He heard the knife-edge in his voice; his entire body trembled as he spoke. "You did this without even *asking* me."

Abashed, the man pressed his head to the floor; his shuddering, indrawn breath told Erred he was within an inch of weeping. *Spare me your tears. I did not ask you for any of this. You have no right to burden me with it.* "Sir, we thought—You can't stay here. Some of the others know more about *talevé* than I do, but they say you need the sea or you'll die."

Another thing he did not need to be reminded of: the needs of his *ki'iri* spirit. His only hope was that, in this dry land, the Lady's gift had been so muted that it was dead within him. "That is a matter I will deal myself with when the time comes, if it comes."

"But sir—"

Erred silenced him with a short, harsh movement of his hand. "If it comes to it, I will see to my own release, *without* your help. Now leave me *alone*."

He did not know if the man understood him, and sent him away without explaining. How little they understood. Escape

encompassed far more than mere physical flight, and when forces more powerful than he subdued his body and sealed it behind walls the only road left to him was the metaphysical. There were many ways a man could escape into his own mind, flying down paths that led alternately to madness or spirituality. And beyond that, in the nothingness that existed beyond faith, delusion and despair, he could end his own life. Once devotion could no longer sustain him, he would find a way to atone and do what he probably should have done long ago, when it still mattered.

On those nights when Arjha kept him in his bed after their lovemaking, he had noticed Arjha's sword and dagger lying in plain view on the sideboard. A single swift thrust to the heart, delivered before Arjha ever woke to find him gone, would end it.

Then why do you not do it? When he returned to his room that morning, he had taken his own blood on his fingers and anointed the Lady's image. *My life belongs to You, if You will have it.* Only now, after long, numbing hours of introspection, did he understand. Either She did not hear him or She wanted him to live and suffer, for what purpose he could not fathom.

Free will was something he still possessed in small measure. Oblivion might be a thing he fiercely desired, yet he no longer had any illusions about his lack of nerve in seizing it. Regardless of his sacred status, he was like every other man who was afraid of death, who believed that even a miserable existence was somehow preferable to none.

* * * *

"Sea-jewels," Arjha murmured into Erred's ear. A strand of magnificent pearls appeared in his hand. "You are from the sea, and beautiful and white like they are, so I give you these."

Gently moving strands of white hair aside, Arjha fastened the pearls around Erred's throat. They lay luminous against the blue silk in which Dornil had dressed him, like dollops of heavy cream upon a field of twilight.

Erred did not have to be told what the gift meant. When he entered the chamber, made his obeisance and climbed onto the bed as ordered, Arjha had asked if his health was good. He was solicitous, his warm lips grazing the cheek whose scratches were nearly healed. No apology would ever be forthcoming from him. A gift of pearls served for everything his honor and pride would never permit him to articulate.

"I thank you, my lord," Erred murmured.

Easing back into the red silk cushions, Arjha gestured to Erred to come lie in his arms. "You say thank you, but I can see my gift does not make you happy," he said. "I will say it again: I have given you many gifts, I permit you to walk in the garden and pray to your goddess. I am a passionate lover in bed, but you do not give me your love in return."

I was trained to give you pleasure. No one told me I was supposed to love you as well. "I am your *akesh*, my lord. I do all that you command me."

Black brows knit together in a frown. "My wife complains that you are sullen and ungrateful," said Arjha. "I rarely listen to what she says, but in this there is some truth. Your lot is a

good one. Many slaves would throw themselves at my feet in adoration to have what I have given you."

Yes, and because I do not love you, you want me all the more. If Erred had learned anything, it was that human nature did not alter with a land's customs and language. Men always wanted what they could not have.

And yes, he *was* ungrateful. His own aloofness was not lost on him. He often wondered why he could not be satisfied with what he had, why he could not be content as Arjha's bedmate. Far worse fates might have awaited him elsewhere. Arjha did not drink or beat him, save for that one time, and tried hard to make him enjoy their couplings. Nor did Arjha permit his wife to interfere with their pleasure, punishing her when she did. Why, then, was it seemingly so impossible to feel gratitude?

Erred suspected that it was his princely upbringing that made it so difficult to yield. Had he been lowborn, he would not have cultivated arrogance. Arjha would have been so high above his station that gratitude and adoration would have been the only appropriate responses. He submitted his body without question, doing as all slaves did by giving the appearance of loyalty, but his heart was not in it.

"Forgive me, my lord," he finally said. "Your gifts are beautiful, but I have never needed such things. I do not know what to do with them."

Once, this answer would have been enough. Now Arjha simply pondered his words and the tone in which they were delivered. However subservient Erred tried to sound, it was never quite convincing enough.

"No, there is more," said Arjha. "You hold back from me when you should not do so. Tell me why this is. I told you once before that I would have no lies in my bed."

"My lord, I—"

Anger flashed in Arjha's eyes. "You will not leave this bed until you speak."

For a long moment, Erred struggled to find the right words. How to say what was in his heart, when Arjha could rightly kill him for it later? "My lord, you give me gifts but you do not treat me as a person. To you, I am only a piece of property to be used or bartered for favors."

Unexpected laughter greeted this statement. "Arqui, you *are* property," said Arjha. "How is it that you still do not understand this?"

Before Erred could answer, Arjha continued, "Men own other men, the strong rule the weak and that is the way of things. Your people, they are slaves because their gods are weak and they do not fight. You have told me that your people have no god of war. This is why others conquer them, because they do not make the proper offerings and arm themselves."

There was a truth in Arjha's words that Erred could not argue, but he would not give the other man the satisfaction of acknowledging it. "Yesterday morning, you took me like an animal," he said. "You threw me down and hurt me, and you wonder *now* why I do not smile."

A warrior's powerful hand slid across his thigh, stroking the bruises his anger had left there. "The thought of those filthy slaves taking you from me was more than I could bear, and

the thought of you going willingly with them even worse. Arqui, you do not know how much you rouse me," said Arjha. He sat up and embraced Erred from behind, burying his lips in his hair. His caresses grew more heated, and Erred realized that Dornil's admonition to wait meant nothing to him. It had not even been two days.

The tip of Arjha's tongue darted out to graze his earlobe. "You are so cold, so somber, and yet you enflame me," Arjha murmured. "Someday I will make you burn for me as fiercely as I burn for you."

Another might have taken these words as a declaration of love, but Erred had often heard such utterances from Arjha, and he held in his heart a healthy skepticism. A man who truly loved him would have set him free—a man who loved him would not have called rape desire. He bit his lip against the urge to say this aloud, for he knew that Arjha did not know any other way to love than to possess.

Kissing him, Arjha pressed him back into the silken covers and began to make love to him. He was as gentle now as he had been rough the day before, stroking and teasing, holding off his own release until his partner was erect.

Erred bit down on his lip as Arjha entered him. He had taken the precautions Dornil suggested and oiled his passage before coming to the bedchamber, and Arjha had also used oil, but it hurt. Arjha's member rubbed against places that had not fully healed. Every stroke stung more than the last, until Erred had to squeeze his eyes shut against the involuntary tears.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Arjha took his groans as utterances of pleasure and began to move in and out of him with greater vigor. Had he cried out, Arjha might have stopped, withdrawn and turned to other forms of lovemaking, but Erred did not want to have to explain what his partner should have already sensed. In the end, it was just easier to let Arjha have his fantasy than to reveal pain where he could not comprehend it.

Eight

Arjha did not need his steward to tell him his household was restless; he could feel the unease in the air like the deathly hush preceding a battle. For some reason, the Shivarian slaves were resentful, though he could not see why they should be. Every once in a while a master needed to make an example, and it certainly was not the first time he had sent disobedient slaves to die on the stakes.

When he came back with the information, Dhagal was clearly as puzzled as he. "There is muttering in the slave quarters about the *akesh*."

That attracted his notice at once. "What does Arquí have to do with this?" He had put the young man in his place, albeit more harshly than he intended, and had made him an expensive present afterward to take away the sting of the necessary discipline; he had not expected to hear more about the matter.

"By himself, my lord, nothing, but—"

Arjha tightened his hold on the sword whose leather grip he was oiling. "Out with it," he barked. "If there is some trouble in the slave quarters, you are not paid to hold your tongue about it."

"It seems they are angry that he is a slave in your bed. Apparently he is some sort of sacred being, the servant of some goddess or other."

That part Arjha had heard from Arquí himself, that he had been the priest or lover of some foreign water goddess. Dornil

reported that his bruises were healing but that he continued listless and withdrawn, spending much of his time kneeling before the silver idol in his room. Not for the first time, Arjha wondered if it had been wise to permit Arquí to have an image of his goddess; his other foreign slaves got along well enough without their gods, and the *akesh* devoted far too much of his time obsessing over rituals and taboos when everyone knew that slaves did not exist before the gods.

Arquí was far too sullen for a proper *akesh*. Had he been any other slave and not so rare and beautiful, perhaps Arjha would have made an example of him beyond what he had already done. There had been a slave girl once who presumed too much upon his favor; he had sliced off the tip of her little finger before selling her. Of course, one simply did not do such things with an *akesh* worth eighteen thousand *menar*, or else he might have drawn his knife and done just that.

Some of his father's *akeshi* had been lucky to come away with their lives after displeasing him. Distasteful as it was, there was a lesson to be learned in the way Satu dealt with his slaves.

Perhaps I should do it anyway, he thought. If I do not, he will take on airs, and already he scorns my gifts.

Arjha was horrified to find that there were those among his lieutenants and patrons, battle-hardened men with tastes as jaded as his own, who behaved like besotted youths when Arquí's name came up in conversation. They sent gifts and unsubtle messages requesting the pleasure of having the young man again. Arjha did not know what it was about Arquí that made fools out of sensible men, only that even he was

not immune to it. Just as well that *akeshi* had no place on campaign, otherwise nothing would be accomplished.

"Sell off the Shivarian slaves," he told Dhagal, "and replace them with ones that will not cause any trouble."

* * * *

"Dornil has spoken with the physician and says you are too much confined," said Arjha. "This is not good for your health. I believe this is why you are so sad, like a wilting flower." He leaned over to brush the back of his hand across Erred's cheek, where the scratches and bruises of a few months ago had healed.

"When I return from the lands of the Turyar, I will take you to the sea you love so much and you will show me this *hrill* that lives inside you. Or perhaps I shall take you to see the mountains with their white crowns and the cedar forests. The men of the north will see how beautiful you are and eat their livers with envy."

Erred had known for some weeks that Arjha's departure was imminent. There were no more guests who must be entertained or negotiated with. As spring turned to summer, the business of war began in earnest. Suddenly the quiet house was full of officers and soldiers bearing messages. Armorers and other craftsmen were called to inspect equipment, while in the stables the grooms put Arjha's horses on a special regimen of diet and exercise not unlike that which Arjha himself now observed.

Gone were the trappings of soft living. Arjha slept on a cot in the middle of his bedchamber and ate whatever was served

to his men. A squire roused him in the small hours of the morning when the moon still rode the sky and laced him into a tight-fitting leather corselet sewn with steel rings. Before sunrise he was already in the courtyard with his men, drilling them with sword, lance and bow until the sun was high. Erred often woke to the sound of male voices shouting in perfect time with each other.

These were only the men of Arjha's own regiment, fifty foot soldiers who sported their captain's device, a rampant leopard, on their shields. Elsewhere in the city, other regiments drilled under Arjha's lieutenants.

Toward midmorning, Erred was called to attend Arjha in the bathing room, where the servants had already set out massage oil, clean cloths and the master's favorite robe. A steaming bath was drawn. Lulled by these comforts, Arjha sometimes took him, but on most days he was too spent to do more than eat a light meal and sleep through the heat of the afternoon. Near sunset, he would wake, eat another meal and busy himself with correspondence and battle plans. His lieutenants were regular guests, and while some of these were men Erred had lain with, Arjha did not call him downstairs to serve them.

"This fighting has become a wearisome business," said Arjha. "Every summer we must teach the enemy the same lesson."

"Your father told me you had already gained a great victory over the Turyar," said Erred. Once the squire had removed Arjha's corselet and sweat-soaked clothing, the servants were dismissed. Arjha and his *akesh* were left alone

in the scented, steamed air of the bathing room. Now was the time when Arjha would want to hear compliments. "I was under the impression that you had defeated them."

Arjha dipped a hand into the pool to splash water onto his face. "That was but one victory in a long war. The Turyar are a nomadic people but very fierce. They seek to control the mountain passes, through which is our trade route to the north. Much wealth comes through there: silk and spices, amber and fragrant wood. We cannot afford to lose such trade."

He lifted dripping fingertips to Erred's cheek. "This is why my father gave you to me. I am not his only son, and he does not like it that I have shunned the family business in favor of a soldier's life, but I have made it possible for his wealth to flow. There is no glory in being a merchant. My father may be wealthy, but no one will remember his name a hundred years from now. I was given many gifts on my return, all from those who wish to share in my glory. My father cannot bear to be outdone in extravagance by anyone. That is why he gave you to me for my bed."

Instructing Erred to bring a phial of fragrant oil, he stripped and lay on his stomach. Erred opened the phial, poured the oil into his palm and rubbed his hands together. He was learning the art of massage from one of the eunuchs, and though his technique lacked refinement Arjha seemed pleased with his progress. Once the oil was warm, he began with Arjha's upper body, working it into his shoulders and down his spine to the place where his shoulder blades met.

Arjha sighed under his attentions. "News from the north is not favorable. I had thought I made example enough of Enhir, but now I will have to do it again," he muttered.

"Who is Enhir, my lord?" asked Erred.

"It is not a person but a place, Arquí. It was a village along the mountain route that I ordered my men to destroy. No one lives there now."

A touch more oil for the knot between Arjha's shoulders. "What happened to the people, my lord?" Erred thought he knew what Arjha would say. There was no provision in his plans for mercy. But perhaps somewhere, in the pleading eyes of a mother or small child, his heart might have softened.

"They had allied themselves with the Turyar and were supplying them with food and shelter," said Arjha, "so it was our right to make an example of them to their neighbors. For a time, it was most effective, but whenever we withdraw the people forget who their masters are."

Erred forced his hands to remain steady as they descended to knead Arjha's buttocks. "All of them, my lord?"

"You speak as though this troubles you. But then, you are not a soldier, and come from a land of weak gods. Here, a man who is not feared by his enemies is no man at all." Arjha rocked his hips in tandem with Erred's movements. "It took all day to get them up on the stakes, and by the end of it I was quite weary of hearing their groaning. Next time I raze a village I will simply stick their heads on spears and be done with it. A few we kept alive for sport, but those we eventually killed as well."

The words struck Erred with their casual indifference. Memories of the three mutilated slaves came back to him. He saw in his mind the ruin of their bodies, and the heads Arjha had later brought back and displayed as a warning to the rest of the household. Unable to stop his shaking, Erred pulled his hands away under the pretense of needing more oil.

Arjha rolled over and seized Erred's hand, guiding it to his erection. Erred began to stroke him, hoping to bring him to a swift climax, but Arjha was already tugging at his clothing, pulling him down to claim his lips.

"My lord—" began Erred. If there was ever a time he did not want to be touched, it was now.

"I want you this way," said Arjha, running his hands over Erred's flanks. "Ride me so I can watch you."

Stripping off the rest of his clothing, Erred oiled Arjha's member before straddling his lap and slowly sheathing it inside him. As Arjha seized his hips and began to thrust, Erred let his mind drift elsewhere, pushing aside the horrific juxtaposition of Arjha's arousal and indifferent brutality in order to go through the motions of self-gratification.

Afterward, he felt his master's fingers comb through his disheveled hair, caressing his jaw. "You are so lovely," Arjha said breathlessly. "I will carry the image of your passion with me into battle and burn for you all the days I am away."

Erred said nothing, not when Arjha kissed him or when they went into the pool to wash. All he could manage was a vacant smile and hope that Arjha did not notice that he had not actually climaxed.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

A few days later, Arjha left the city. Before he departed, he came into Erred's room, crushing his slave against his armored chest as he kissed him deeply. "I would take you with me, to make the nights sweet," he breathed, letting his lips graze Erred's earlobe, "but it is no place for you."

Erred did not go to window for a last glimpse of him as many of the other slaves did. He heard Arjha's chariot and those of his lieutenants as they clattered out of the courtyard, then the gates closing. Their men were already waiting for them in the plaza before the temple of the war god Thozar, so Erred never saw how many Arjha took with him. Someone told him the number was fifteen hundred, three-quarters of what he had raised the year before.

High summer slowly passed into the first cool days of autumn. In the north, a few mountain thunderstorms brought humidity to the dry air. During these showers, Erred sometimes wondered if it was raining where Arjha was or what comforts were available in the camp. He did not want to dwell too long on what else Arjha might be doing.

Messengers sometimes came to the house with news for the lady and the stewards. From there, the information made its way through the ranks and within a few hours everyone had heard some variation of the message. In this way, Erred learned that Arjha had encountered fierce resistance in one of the mountain passes, where the Turyar cut him off from his own supply train for two days before he was able to rally his men and break through. Two of his lieutenants had fallen. One of these deaths was accidental, as the man been

standing too close to the Turya archer's intended target, Arjha himself.

Erred resisted taking part in the household's collective anticipation. While he admitted experiencing a certain strangeness in the master's absence, he found he did not miss Arjha. For the sake of appearances, he put on a worried face when he heard the news of the near-fatal mishap, but he was neither shaken nor surprised by it. After Enhir, Arjha's name had become reviled in the north; an attempt on his life was only natural.

He spent his time in the garden, or learning to recite erotic verse from the scribe Arjha had appointed to teach him. A second eunuch instructed him in the art of playing the kithara, which he had begun in Dhaba's house but never mastered. The lady of the house left him alone, and the servants did likewise.

For some reason which the eunuchs could not explain, Arjha was selling the Shivarian servants. Those few who remained shunned his company where once they sought it, leaving him to others who did not care what goddess he worshipped or what his status was.

By now, Erred had amassed enough coins to spend on more than cheap trinkets. Dornil advised him that he should not scorn his master's gifts but openly wear them to show his appreciation. With some of his money, Erred had a robe made in the Shivarian fashion, a simple yet elegant garment of deep blue silk which he could wear to better display Arjha's gifts of jewelry.

To obtain the silk, Dornil had taken him to the royal bazaar, the marketplace for the elite that was set up in the plaza just outside the High Prince's residence. Erred wore a eunuch's clothing and a turban to hide his hair, and the pair were accompanied by a household guard whose evident boredom suggested he would rather be gambling with his fellow guards in the rear of the house.

Dornil treated Erred to a flavored ice and pointed out the elaborate gates by which the High Prince entered and left the palace. Erred took a moment to study the edifice with its red pillars, wondering what sort of man could rule such a people. He knew that Dhabi had initially tried to sell him to the High Prince, but did not know whether he had been fortunate or not to have been sold elsewhere.

"Have you ever seen him?" he asked Dornil.

Dornil looked past him to the red gate and its guards. "Do you mean the High Prince? Oh, once or twice," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"I am curious. I do not see very many people."

"Thanaj is a good ruler," said the eunuch. "I hear no slander about him, which I suppose is the best thing one can say about one's prince. Now come, let us find the cloth vendors and see about your silk."

On his first true outing, he was in no hurry. Even in the sedate elite quarter, Tajhaan's markets had a festival air. Jugglers and fire eaters wandered through the crowds of eunuchs, nobles and slaves who came on household errands, and music competed with the sound of haggling. Erred browsed through stalls of pottery, leather goods and religious

items, frustrated that none of the vendors carried images of the Lady of the Waters.

"Slaves and freedmen have their own gods," explained Dornil. "You will not find a large selection here, only in the lower city."

The vendor took good-natured offense at this remark. "We have only the best here."

Smiling, Dornil waved him away. "I obtained your little statue from a vendor on the Street of the Smiths," he told Erred. "Did you want another?"

"I am not certain what I am looking for," replied Erred.

He allowed the eunuch to lead him to the cloth vendors. Fingering bolts of silk and fine wool, he put his disappointment behind him as he inspected bolts of fabric for the exact shade and texture he sought. Dornil bartered for eight yards of material, which took half the coins Erred had brought with him. The household tailor took his measurements and fitted him for the garment, which afterward he modeled for the eunuchs.

"Let us see it with the jewels," said one eunuch. When Erred obliged by putting on the pearls, then a silver armband, the effect was met with unanimous approval.

Early that evening, Erred roused from a light nap to the sound of wailing. Listening closely, he heard several voices crying out in lamentation. He rose and went to the screen, and looked down into a courtyard colored by the remains of a brilliant sunset. What he saw astonished him, for although he had heard of such customs, he had never actually witnessed them.

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by L. E. Bryce

People milled about below, flailing their limbs and tearing their clothing to the sound of ululating screams that reverberated off the stones and made the hair on his arms and back of his neck rise. Many were doubled over on their knees, smearing themselves with what might have been ashes.

Behind him, the door to his room opened. He turned to see who it was, and froze at the sight of the woman who stood swaying on the threshold. Thuva, her gown rent and soiled with ashes, her tangled hair framing a face whose wild eyes focused on him, wobbled into the room.

Instinctively he backed away from her, but she reached out a hand and seized him, her nails biting into his flesh. Her other hand came up as if to strike, instead rubbing something into his face and white hair. Some of it spilled onto his clothing and he knew it was ash.

"Ashes," she hissed, "we will *burn* and all will become ashes."

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Part II

The Merchant

Nine

Thuva answered his queries by spitting in his face, and neither the slaves nor the eunuchs were in any state to give coherent answers. Erred realized they probably did not know anymore than he did.

He spent the night sitting on the floor of his room listening to the noises of lamentation that carried through the house and courtyard. His own eyes were dry. Why he was so numb when, it seemed, even the lowliest kitchen slave tore his clothes and screaming himself hoarse? He had shared Arjha's bed, Arjha had desired him even above his own wife, and yet he felt nothing.

Dornil, his elaborate clothes smeared with ash and his eyes red-rimmed from weeping, came to see him the next morning. In a voice quavering with emotion, the eunuch told him that Arjha had been flung from his chariot during a skirmish and, as he lay broken and bleeding on the ground, a Turya warrior pinned him to the dust with a spear. His head had been taken by the enemy as a trophy, but what remained was recovered, packed in salt and brought back for ritual cremation.

Some of the household slaves would attend the funeral, but Dornil told Erred that these would go as sacrifices. And the lady, too, would burn, as widows did in Tajhaan. "Sometimes," said the eunuch, "the concubines and *akeshi* burn also, but you are too valuable to die. You will have a new master and life will begin again, as it will for us all."

Arjha had no heirs, so the question of a new master weighed heavily on the minds of all concerned. Several possibilities, none of which appealed to Erred, presented themselves. If he was not claimed by one of Arjha's male relations, he would be given on consignment to a man like Dhabi, and the long process of being shown to prospective buyers would begin again. This time, his price would not be as high, for unless an *akesh* was particularly skilled or renowned he was always sold at a loss.

During the requisite twenty days of mourning, an executor appointed by the High Prince came to inventory Arjha's property and keep order. All the slaves were required to show themselves and their possessions, and when two were found with gold secreted in their bedding they became examples to the others. The entire household was assembled in the courtyard to watch their punishment. Erred was impassive during the lashing, but when their hands were severed he turned his eyes away.

The executor, a tall, dour man named Dornuj, had little to say to him beyond asking what his price had been. Erred was instructed to bring out his clothing, money and any other gifts Arjha had given him. A scribe followed Dornuj with scroll and stylus, dutifully listing all the items and any other information he was told to note down.

"You are the only *akesh* in the household?" Dornuj asked. When Erred nodded, he moved on to his next question. "And how long have you been in the household?"

Erred kept his eyes on the carpet. "I have been here since after the rains, sir."

At a gesture, the scribe jotted down his responses. Dornuj walked up to Erred and touched his hair, parting his roots to see if his coloring was genuine. "And you are a Shivarian?"

The physician was called in to attest to Erred's general good health before Dornuj moved on to his next interview.

On the day of the funeral, Erred was surprised to see the lady one last time. Dressed in her bridal finery of gold-shot silk and jewels, she was calmer than he thought a widow about to be burned alive would be. The chief steward and two guards stood behind her.

For a long moment she did not speak, but regarded him with flat, measuring eyes. "If it had been my choice," she said, "*I* would have had you taken to the lowest *bakti* house in the city and left there for the rabble to use, but you are not mine to dispose of and I do not care what becomes of you after this."

"Lady," he said slowly, "I would have—"

"I did not give you permission to speak," she hissed, "and the words of a slave mean nothing to me. *He* probably would have had you join him on the pyre, but you are only a lowly *akesh* and I am his wife. Still, when they light the pyre I will smile to think of how you will be used after this. I am told that Satu ked Menteith is not gentle in bed."

Seeing the corners of her mouth turn up in a malicious smile, Erred struggled not to give her the satisfaction of his revulsion. How had she known when no breath of it had been uttered elsewhere? Either they had just told her or she was hoping to wound him with a lie.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Either way, she was not going to see him undone. He took a deep breath and bowed to Thuva. "Lady, I must serve whatever master I am given to."

Once she was led away, Erred was left alone for the duration of the afternoon. All those who could secure a place in the procession had gone to the funeral, leaving behind a few guards, eunuchs and the slaves who were not permitted on temple grounds. The daily life of the household continued as always, eerily subdued now that its master and mistress were gone.

Erred knelt before the silver Lady and tried to meditate, to compose his thoughts before others came to take him away. Thuva might just as easily have been lying, but something in her demeanor told him she was speaking the truth. As much as Erred disliked it, Satu was Arjha's nearest male relative. If anyone had a right to appropriate Arjha's property, it was him.

Suddenly the room became too close. He needed to go outside, to hear the splash of the fountain and feel the sun and cool breeze on his face.

The rules of the house did not permit him to go downstairs unattended. However, when he looked out into the corridor and then to the colonnade beyond, he found no one who could escort him; the guards were on the other side of the house playing dice and the eunuchs were not in their quarters. For the sake of propriety, he donned a veil before venturing out into the garden where he sat by the fountain and watched the dead leaves rustling at his feet. Dornil and the chief steward found him there a few hours later, as the

afternoon began to turn toward an early sunset, and led him back into the house.

"The master has gone to the gods," Dornil explained, "and the lady is dead. Tonight you will go to your new master. Satu claims you as part of the property he is entitled to receive from the estate. You will be permitted to keep whatever money and other gifts the master gave you."

His suspicions and Thuva's parting words had been confirmed. Although he felt ill at the thought of being touched again by Satu, Erred was not surprised by the news.

A servant was already upstairs packing Erred's possessions into a cedar chest. The basin and silver Lady had not yet been touched. Those items he packed himself, wrapping them in his veils and placing them on top of the others. He bade farewell to Dornil and the other eunuchs, and a few of the slaves before going down into the atrium to wait.

At moonrise, a palanquin came to take him and his belongings to Satu's house. For the short ride, he wore his blue robe and a veil, removing the latter only when he was brought to the octagonal chamber where his master awaited him. Once there, he respectfully knelt by the divan and dropped his eyes to the floor before speaking the ritual formula.

Satu, dressed in the robes he must have worn to the funeral, was conferring with Eskil when he arrived. At once, the steward was waved aside. Erred heard the tread of his feet, before a heavily jeweled hand fell on his shoulder and slid up to cup his cheek. "I have not forgotten the pleasure of

our first coupling," he murmured. "Now that you are mine, there will be many more such delights."

His salacious smile and small laugh made Erred shudder. Forcing down his revulsion, Erred quietly waited for the command to undress. Before leaving Arjha's house, he had taken the precaution of purging, cleaning and oiling his body. Satu would not have been the first partner to forget to prepare him.

"Come, you will please me now." Satu settled back among the cushions of his divan and gestured to the servants to clear away the remains of the evening meal. "It has been such a grim day," he complained. "The heat and the smoke were intolerable, and the lady's screaming was most annoying. Such a tiresome business, but now that it is over I mean to enjoy myself."

If someone had told him that Satu had not mourned for Arjha, Erred would not have been surprised. "I do as you command, my lord," he said blandly.

Satu made an approving sound. "I remember you were somewhat willful when you first came here," he said. "My son has trained you well, it seems. I sampled your virgin delights last time, but now I would see how well you use your mouth."

When his master opened his robe and beckoned, Erred moved between his parted legs. He did his work quickly, managing a hollow smile when Satu withdrew from his mouth and rearranged his clothing.

"You perform well enough," said Satu. "You will go now with Eskil and he will show you where you are to sleep." The

steward, who had not been dismissed during the exchange, stepped forward to lead Erred away.

Eskil waited until they were well into the corridor before speaking, "Such unfortunate events that bring you here again. We will do our best to make you comfortable."

Erred was given a room not unlike the one he had had in Arjha's house. His chest had already been brought up and set at the foot of the bed; beside it there was a night table with a wash basin and cloth, and a covered chamber pot underneath. Almost immediately, a slave came in with a tray of food, placing in on a little inlaid table. Erred rinsed his mouth with a cupful of fruit juice before picking at the fish and bread. Anxiety had blunted whatever hunger he might have had, and he left most of the meal uneaten.

Turning his attention to the chest, he opened it and gingerly lifted out the basin and statuette. He pulled the inlaid table into the corner, draping it with one of his veils before setting the Lady's image upon it. Filling the silver bowl with water from the wash basin, he placed it before the Lady and anointed Her with droplets. He knelt and lifted his hands for the evening devotion.

"What are you doing on the floor?" asked a voice.

Looking up, he saw two young men lounging in the doorway. Both of them had a sultry, indolent air about them. Judging by their beauty and the richness of the clothing they wore, Erred suspected that they were also *akeshi*. "How may I serve you?" he asked cautiously.

One of them sauntered into the room and fixed him with cold eyes. He was lithe, with the almond eyes and mahogany

skin of the Khalgari. "I am sure the master will find plenty of ways for you to do that," he said. "I am Jasil, and I am the master's favorite."

Protocol did not require Erred to show respect before another *akesh*, but he sensed it might be wise to do so. He inclined his head to the young man. "It is my hope that you continue to be his favorite."

"You are very beautiful." The other *akesh*, slightly shorter and lighter-skinned than Jasil, let his gaze linger appreciatively on Erred. "The master has done nothing but speak of you this past week."

"Be silent, Marsu!" hissed Jasil. "He's nothing more than a novelty. The master will use him and he will learn his proper place here."

"I have no wish to take the master's favor from either of you," said Erred. "I am but a stranger to this house." Noting the sidelong looks the pair gave the open chest with its tantalizing glimpse of bright silks, he went over to it. "If there is some item you fancy, you may have it as a gift."

Marsu raised an eyebrow. "You don't care for your master's gifts?" When Erred opened an ebony box to reveal the jewels within, his eyes widened.

Jasil leaned in for a better look at the ornaments Erred laid out on the bed. "Lord Arjha gave you such rich things." The jealousy in his voice suggested that Satu was not as generous with his bedmates.

Erred held out the pearls. "These will shine like stars against your dark skin," he said. To Marsu he offered a silver armband. For a moment the *akeshi* stared at the ornaments

as if trying to decide what to do with them. Then, shrugging, Jasil looped the pearls around his hand and left the room. Marsu followed him.

The next morning, the steward Eskil entered his room and dropped the jewels into his lap. "As Arjha had no other *akeshi* in his house," he said, "you have not learned how to properly deal with rivals."

Erred folded the ornaments into his napkin to put away later. "I have had no instruction in the matter. I did not mean to give offense."

"Soothing potential rivals with gifts and flattery is never offensive. In fact, it is the wisest thing one of your station can do when entering a strange household," answered Eskil. "However, an *akesh* may only give his own coin or what he purchases with it. What you have done is very dangerous. Passing a former master's gifts on in this manner shows disrespect for his generosity."

"I had not considered that," said Erred. "Again, I meant no offense."

Eskil nodded at him. "Of course not, and that is why I have not informed the master. But you should know that he has other eyes and ears in this house. You must be more cautious, or you may find he will be far less generous with you than he might have been."

Ten

Satu idly ran his fingers through Erred's hair. "You please me, though you still have much to learn about my taste for pleasure."

Erred already knew that Satu found his release in the pain and humiliation of others. His pleasure had begun quite early that morning, with a guard who was called into the bedchamber to make Erred ready for him. Erred had not forgotten what Satu once told him about disabusing his new *akeshi* of any notions that they were particularly favored, and was prepared for the ordeal. He knelt down as instructed and took the man into his body without complaint. Satu, watching from a corner with his hand busy under his robe, seemed pleased by Erred's compliance.

Once the guard had finished his business, Satu dismissed him. He opened his robe and dropped it on the floor. "Now that you are ready for me, we will see what you can do."

Erred had not considered what Satu might require him to do beyond assuming whatever position was required of him and accepting his master's touch with as much feigned pleasure as he could muster. It had never occurred to him that Satu might *want* him to protest and struggle a bit.

"Forgive me, my lord," he murmured. "I did not know what you desired."

Satu's fingers marched down his spine to his buttocks, where they squeezed the flesh hard enough for pain. When Erred winced, he chuckled approvingly. "Next time you will

watch me take Marsu and you will see how prettily he thrashes and cries out. Would you enjoy that?"

Any satisfaction Erred was permitted to achieve in Satu's bed was likely to be tempered with equal parts revulsion. "If it pleases you, my lord," he answered.

"For now," continued Satu, "there is something else you will do for me. I have a son who is untouched in the arts of love. Jasil is too smug these days and Marsu too eager for a cock up his backside not to frighten the boy. But I think you are docile enough to instruct Usha."

Partly because he feared the answer, Erred did not ask how old the boy was. Once, when he asked why *akeshi* all appeared so young, Dhabi had told him the age of consent in Tajhaan was sixteen, but of course a slave could be taken younger. In his mind, the prospect of such a youthful partner made him uneasy, and he had no idea how to initiate a virgin.

Erred was given a few hours in which to eat, bathe and rest before one of Eskil's assistants came for him. For the occasion, he selected a plain silk robe with no jewels. Thinking that the youth would enjoy unwrapping his present, he also wore a veil. If anything, it would hide his reaction if his partner proved to be ugly or immature.

The rooms into which he was led were richly appointed with rare woods and diaphanous silk hangings. A servant greeted him, stepping aside while indicating that Erred was to proceed into the bedchamber.

Satu's youngest son, waiting for him in a chair next to the bed, was a blurry figure through the gauze of Erred's veil. By the timbre of the voice that instructed the servants to close

the door, Erred guessed he was about fifteen years old. *Lady*, he thought, *how can I possibly do this with a child?*

He knelt on the carpet in front of the bed. "My lord," he murmured, "this body is for your pleasure."

"You are wearing a veil," said the youth. "Please, get up and take it off. You look like my mother, draped like that."

Such an observation was not the most auspicious way to begin. Standing, Erred let his fingertips graze the edge of his veil but did not remove it. "Perhaps it would please you to uncover me?"

Normally this request was met with enthusiasm. Even grown men could not wait to undo the wrappings of a beautiful gift, yet in this youth there was still a child's suspicion of the unknown. "Why are you wearing a veil, anyway?" Usha asked. "Are you ugly?"

"Only if you find me so, my lord," said Erred. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to keep his patience. Why did the boy simply not pull off his veil and answer his own question? "Your lord father would not send you an ugly bedmate."

"Maybe he would," Usha murmured. "He threatened to hire the ugliest *bakti* in the city if I did not hurry up and prove my manhood." The chair creaked as he rose and approached Erred. Now, standing inches apart, Erred had a better sense of him. Satu's son was slightly shorter than he, with finely tapered fingers that slid along the bottom of his veil and slowly pulled it away.

Without the barrier of silk between them, each saw that the other was not as homely as he had feared, and Erred

realized he had seriously underestimated Usha's age. He was delicately built, and would never be as tall or imposing as Arjha, yet the down of a young man's first beard fuzzed his jaw.

Usha's dark eyes widened as they looked Erred up and down. "You are not ugly at all," he breathed. "And you have white hair. I have never seen anyone with white hair before."

"I am yours this evening, my lord," said Erred. "What do you desire me to do?"

The young man let the veil slip from his fingers to the floor. "May I see the rest of you?"

Erred undid the three clasps that held his robe closed and let the watery fabric slide to the floor. He gave Usha a moment to take in his nakedness. "Do I please you, my lord?" From the hunger growing in the other's eyes, Erred knew very well that he did.

"I-I would like to touch you." Usha hesitantly lifted a hand, holding it in the air above Erred's collarbone as if awaiting permission.

"You do not have to ask, my lord. I am yours to do with as you please."

A moist, uncertain hand took his and gently tugged him toward the bed. Erred obediently climbed onto the mattress with him and knelt, awaiting his partner's next tentative command.

"What is your name?" asked Usha.

Most of the men to whom Erred had been given never bothered to ask his name. "Whatever you desire it to be."

"I want to call you something and I know your name is not *akesh*," said Usha. Then an idea came to him. "My father told me you used to belong to Arjha. What did he call you?"

"He called me Arquí, my lord."

Usha laughed. "I will call you Arquí, too, if you will stop calling me 'my lord.' My name is Usha." Anxiously biting his lip, he edged forward. "May I kiss you?"

By this time, most of Erred's bedmates already had him on his hands and knees and were entering him. This was going to take a lot more effort than he had thought. "You may do whatever you like with me. You do not need to ask."

"I want you to like it." Usha's hand lightly brushed his cheek. Soft lips tentatively touched his, deepening the kiss only when it became clear that Erred was not going to pull away. Erred parted his lips, inviting his partner to explore his mouth with his tongue while he put his arm around Usha's slender body and drew him closer. He could feel the young man's hardening member between them and slowly let his fingers graze the linen-covered bulge until Usha moaned into his mouth.

"How do you wish to take me?" he whispered. "Do you wish me to lie on my back or on my belly?"

Still dazed from the kiss, Usha blinked at him. He blushed and ducked his head. "You will think it strange."

"I have had many strange requests," Erred assured him. "Do you wish to have me on top of you, or perhaps you wish to blindfold or bind me?"

Usha shook his head. "No, I want to please you instead."

"You wish to touch me?" asked Erred. Most partners who professed a desire to give him pleasure only ended up making the encounter more awkward by their efforts. He was strongly tempted to order Usha onto his back and show him what he was supposed to do.

"I don't like women, you see. I want you to take me."

Never had Erred received a request like this, something so unexpected and outrageous that he could not believe he heard it right. "Does your father know what you wish to do with me?"

Usha shrugged. "He said he wanted me to take you, but I prefer the other way."

Obviously no one had explained to this young man that there were certain things one did not do with an *akesh*. Erred was now in the unenviable position of having to educate him. "My lord, it is forbidden for a slave to be inside a free man's mouth or body. I cannot do as you wish."

"I once saw my father take one of his slaves." Usha now caressed his arm and toyed with strands of his hair. "He enjoyed being taken. It made me so hard to watch him. Father thought it was because I wanted a turn with him, but no, I wanted it the other way, to know what made him feel so good."

It was no secret that *akeshi* often pretended enjoyment; it was merely a question of how well they plied their art. Either Satu did not know this or he knew and had not bothered to explain it to his son. "It is the one thing I cannot do, my lord," answered Erred. "To tell you truly, I have never taken

another, and I must obey the law. Forgive me, my lord, but I cannot."

Although he pouted, Usha did not press the matter any further. He reclined among the cushions and invited Erred to lie next to him. "Did you love Arjha?" he asked.

"He was not unkind," replied Erred.

"We did not have the same mother," said Usha, "but when I was a boy he was very kind to me and took me out riding and showed me how to fly a falcon. I liked spending time with him, when he let me. He was always so busy. I am afraid of my other brothers."

Sometimes, as a prelude to sex, bedmates wanted to talk, and what they had to say was often surprisingly personal. Erred had never understood why they would choose to confide in a slave who, even if he or she was not a spy, was still a stranger. Nevertheless, he had been instructed to be polite and show interest. "Why are you afraid of them?"

Usha picked at a loose thread on one of the cushions. "Because they want what Father has and he will not give it to them. They are always plotting and trying to kill him so they can take his wealth. Father has slaves to taste his food, and sometimes they die because it has been poisoned. A man once got into his bedchamber and tried to stab him, but he was not there. The guards tortured him; we could all hear the screams. And then we had to watch him die. It was terrible.

"Father says my brothers will never have anything of his. Now that Arjha is gone, I am to inherit everything, but I am not as cunning as Father is, and when he is gone my brothers

will try to harm me. I wish Arjha had not died. He did not care about Father's wealth. He would have protected me."

Or he would have turned around and dealt with his family exactly as he had with the villagers of Enhir. Arjha would not have wasted time with his brothers' squabbles, but finished them in one decisive blow and taken Satu's wealth for himself. Usha's youth or innocence would have made no difference to him. "I am sorry that you lost him," said Erred.

"He was very brave," said Usha. "Father did not want him to be a soldier, but he was the oldest and did as he pleased. I wish I could be brave like that, but I would not make a good soldier. Eskil says I am not built to wield a sword or spear, and my father laughs because I cannot even bear to watch the fighters in the arena."

Erred nodded, but said nothing. While he had sympathy for Usha's plight, an *akesh* did not allow himself to feel too much for those whom he served. "Your father commanded me to please you, my lord," he said. "How do you wish to take me?"

Frowning, Usha sat up. "I told you, I want to feel you inside me."

"Forgive me, but I cannot do that," said Erred. "However, I will give you as much pleasure as I can."

He instructed his partner to lie on his back with his buttocks elevated by pillows, and slowly began to tease him. His lips traced Usha's collarbone and dipped into the hollow of his throat. Moving down, he flicked each amber-colored nipple with his tongue, suckling on them as Usha moaned and grasped the back of his head to pull him closer. His mouth

and his hands were his tools, and with them he brought his partner to a swift climax.

Rising from the bed, Erred went to the wash basin on the corner table and returned with a damp cloth for Usha, who lay sweating and breathing hard among the cushions. "Did I please you?" he asked.

The young man nodded. His body was flushed and sated, and he gave Erred a euphoric smile. "When can I see you again?" he asked.

"That is for your father to say, my lord."

"I hope it is soon." Usha leaned forward and kissed him deeply.

The next morning, Satu summoned Erred to the octagonal chamber. He found his master at breakfast, listening to a slave play the harp while another manicured his nails. A third slave fed him slices of fruit and morsels of spongy, honey-dipped cake. With downcast eyes, Erred went to the edge of the carpet and knelt at his feet. "My lord, you called for me," he murmured. "Do you wish me to undress?"

"It is too early for such pleasure," Satu replied. "No, I wish you to sit with me and entertain me with your conversation."

At Satu's signal, Erred took his place at his master's side. One of the slaves handed him a pillow to slide under his knees. "What do you wish to discuss?"

"My son's name for you was Arquí, was it not? I suspect it was some foolish endearment on his part, but it is a better name for you than the foreign one you brought with you, so I will also call you Arquí," said Satu. "Now tell me, you went to Usha yesterday. Did he use you well?"

"I did as he commanded me, my lord."

"So then he wished you to take him, yes?" By this time, Arjha would have seized him by the hair and demanded to know the truth, if he had used what belonged to the master, but Satu remained indolent, turning his head so the slave could slip a slice of red fruit into his mouth. It was obvious that he already knew the answer. "I am fond of him, yet he has these most unnatural urges. Tell me, did you do as he commanded?"

Erred shook his head. "No, my lord, I told him it was forbidden. I used my fingers on him and my mouth, but I did not put myself inside him. I offered myself to him several times, but he did not wish it."

"I will speak to him about this. Next time he will take you," said Satu. The slave offered him a sip of wine, then dabbed the corners of his mouth with a linen cloth. "You are also untouched in that way, are you not?"

There was no way Satu could have known such a thing secondhand. "My lord," Erred asked cautiously, "did you watch us?"

Satu did not seem alarmed or displeased by this. "I always watch what goes on in my house, or have others do so for me, and in the matter of my son I must make certain these things are done properly," he answered. "Now answer my question, Arqui. Are you still a virgin in that way?"

Erred lowered his eyes, surprised at the embarrassment he felt. "Yes, my lord. I have never taken anyone."

"Not even a woman?"

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Growing up in a very rigidly disciplined household, where his father had insisted that there would be no dallying with servant girls or going out to disreputable brothels, Erred had never been among women with whom it would have been acceptable for him to have sex, and he had been taken by the Lady of the Waters just as he became old enough for marriage. "No, my lord, I have not."

Apparently this delighted Satu. He instructed his server to bring a cup of fruit juice for Erred, who did not drink it. "Then I shall arrange for you to take another," he said. "I think I will have Jasil get on his knees for you. It would rid him of some his airs and it would be cheaper and far more entertaining than having the guards do it."

Eleven

A week passed before Satu made good on his word. Erred knew better than to believe that he had forgotten the matter, and knew better than to hope that he would not be required to perform with Jasil. He knew that Jasil and Marsu were casual lovers, but from observing the pair he did not think Jasil was accustomed to being mounted by another slave.

If only Satu had in mind a different partner for him. Jasil truly did give himself airs, barking orders at the servants and eunuchs as if he was the master's son instead of merely another slave; even Marsu did not escape his sharp tongue. Erred, stating his position with cool aplomb, would not be ordered by him, and wondered why Satu had not yet put him in his place. Other slaves had their ears boxed for displeasing the master's current favorite, but when Jasil sensed that his latest rival was an *akesh* of noble breeding he did not challenge him openly.

Their war was one of disdainful looks and gestures, until simply being in Jasil's presence was wearisome. Penetrating him would be an insult that he would certainly find some way to repay, and from what Erred knew of harem rivalries Jasil's retribution could be fatal.

Erred's encounter with Usha had taught him that he could give pleasure in a dominant role, but from observing those to whom he had been given he knew there was an art to entering another male that went beyond simply shoving his member into his partner's body and thrusting; it was a

balancing act of finesse and vigor he might have mastered in the Blue House had the desire or the curiosity been there.

He had skill but no true art, and not in this matter.

A eunuch told him that Satu owned several pillow books, among which was a manual called *The Myriad Ways of Love*. This was a classic text for men wishing to improve their sexual gratification, and Satu apparently thought so highly of it as a primer that he had arranged for Usha to receive a copy.

Satu mentioned the book when he sent Erred back to Usha. "Have him show you what he likes best and encourage him to try it," he said. "Once he gets his cock into you, he will remember his proper place. And then, if he still has these notions that it is somehow pleasurable for a free man to take a cock up his backside, I think I will have him fuck Marsu so he can see what dreadful actors most of you are."

Because he could not read Tajhaani, Erred had Usha read passages from the text to him. Written like a physician's manual, the dry prose took away the excitement of the act, and soon both young men were rolling their eyes. They gave the text a reasonable effort before ignoring it in favor of the pictures. With much effort, Erred coaxed Usha into trying one of his favorite positions, and in the process of teaching him to dominate learned much that was useful.

Although Usha enjoyed the sensation of being inside another, he brooded afterward. "It is not what I want," he said. "I want to be filled, overwhelmed and completely possessed by a lover. This way feels empty, like I am pissing into a sieve."

"I have never heard my body described in quite that way, my lord," said Erred.

Usha gave him a friendly nudge. "Oh, I did not mean to offend you, Arqui."

* * * *

When he was called into the atrium and saw the reed mat spread on the floor with two musicians playing the panpipes nearby, Erred's first thought was that the master wished him to dance. The sensual swaying and contortions of the *suhtara* and the *rendé*, the traditional *akeshi* dances, still gave him some difficulty, but he had practiced as part of his daily exercise and could perform short selections.

He knelt on the carpet before Satu. "My lord, what is your wish?"

Satu instructed him to rise. "I have decided that you will entertain me this afternoon."

"You wish me to dance, my lord?"

"Another time, perhaps. I have not forgotten our conversation of a week ago." Satu gestured to the one who entered the atrium behind Erred, beckoning to him to disrobe and kneel at his feet. Jasil shed his robe gracefully then, throwing Erred a self-satisfied smirk, took his position at their master's side.

Satu motioned again, and this time a guard entered. He was pulling a naked slave along by the arm; the young man stumbled along, visibly frightened by the prospect of whatever punishment he was to receive. Half-healed lash

marks and the brand of Satu's ownership were vivid against his fair skin.

"Now this slave is a recent acquisition," said Satu. "I am told he is a laborer about the house, and comes from your own land. He is yours to use for the moment, Arqui, and you may use him as hard as you like. Such slaves are easily replaced."

Erred looked from Satu to the slave, who was straining to understand what was being said. He looked no older than eighteen or nineteen. The dread Erred felt he quickly suppressed. Showing fear before Satu was to invite greater torment. "Is it your pleasure that I take him while you watch?"

Satu parted his linen kilt and laid his hand on the back of Jasil's head, indicating his desire. "You may hurt him or give him pleasure as you please, as long as you are inside him."

When Erred took a step toward the slave, the young man noticed him for the first time. His eyes widened, his lips parted in a mixture of confusion, awe and terror. He looked from Erred to Satu and back again, his fear growing as Erred began to undo the clasps that held his robe closed. He started to struggle, but the guard only grasped him more tightly and raised a hand to cuff his ear.

"Do not touch him," said Erred. Dismissing the guard, he gently took the young man's hand and coaxed him forward onto the mat. The sooner this was over the better it would be for both of them. "Do you speak Tajhaani?"

"Little ... only little," the man stammered. "Am sorry, not understand much. You have ... you are—" He motioned to Erred's hair. "It's white."

Now was not the time to explain what he was. Dismissing the question with a gesture, Erred tried his native tongue. "Do you understand this?"

Blue eyes lit with recognition and the young man nodded. "Yes, I understand now," he whispered. "What did I do? They tore off my clothes and made me come here. Are they going to punish me?"

"No, the master wants me to lie with you," answered Erred.

The other's apprehension told Erred that he had been used before, probably by the slave traders during the desert crossing. "I promise I will not hurt you," he added.

Satu cleared his throat, urging him to hurry up. Erred lightly stroked the young man's arm to put him at his ease. "What is your name?"

"I'm Tharril," said the young man, "but here they call me Thaqui." Hesitantly he lifted a hand to touch Erred's hair, but stopped halfway as if realizing he was about to do something forbidden. "Are you—?"

Erred laid a finger over his lips before he could say it. "My name in the household is Arquí. If we do not begin, the master will call a guard in here and have him take you instead. Relax and I will try to make it as enjoyable for you as I can."

A slave brought him oil, which he put to one side for later. He would have preferred to prepare Tharril and take him

quickly rather than draw out the ordeal, but he was not yet hard. Leaning forward, he took the young man in his arms and lightly kissed his lips, whispering that he should reciprocate.

With the tip of his tongue, he traced the shell of Tharril's ear while his hand slid down to cup his buttocks; the young man was muscled but too thin for beauty.

He felt Satu's impatience behind him, but he was not going to break the rhythm of his caresses when Tharril was already beginning to relax. His hand moved up Tharril's back, drawing him close. "Do not pay any attention to the master or the guards," he murmured in Shivarian. "They will not interfere, and I will not hurt you."

Tharril nodded helplessly. Erred let his fingertips graze the flaccid member between his partner's legs, caressing him until, reluctantly, Tharril began to respond.

It was not good, though he tried to make it so for his hapless partner. Tharril lay with his head turned away and his eyes closed, biting his lip at the humiliation. For Erred it was little better, for though he finally managed to come he could not look at Tharril afterward. A slave brought him water and a cloth to wash. Jasil was doing the same, cleaning Satu before neatly tucking his spent member inside his kilt and smoothing the folds back into place. Satu looked pleased, idly stroking his hair while beckoning to Erred.

"I think I shall have to arrange for another such performance," answered Satu. "But since you take this one so prettily, you may have him for your sleeping mat."

"My lord, you are giving me a slave?" From the corner of his eye, Erred noticed Jasil narrowing his eyes at him. If Satu did not remember to favor him as well, he would hear about it later.

"This one is still my property," said Satu. "He has other duties in the house, but on those nights when you do not serve me you may spill yourself in him."

Erred was given leave to dress and return to his room, while Tharril was taken away to another part of the house. He spent the rest of the day practicing upon the kithara and meditating, and in the evening took his meal with Marsu and Jasil in their communal sitting room. For his services, Jasil had received a trinket, a small, cheap thing such as Satu often gave. Throughout the meal, he threw resentful looks at Erred until the tension became unbearable.

"He is not even pretty," said Erred, "and he can scarcely speak the language. I do not see what you are so unhappy about."

Jasil answered him with a disdainful look. "You didn't do such a good job of fucking him. I don't see why you get to keep him."

As always, Marsu tried to make peace. Leaning toward his lover, he caressed Jasil's arm and kissed his cheek. "I am a hundred times better in bed than some filthy little laborer. I would say Arquí got the worse bargain."

After the meal, Erred returned to his room to find Tharril already waiting for him. Freshly washed and dressed in the linen kilt that was a male slave's everyday dress, the young

man knelt in the middle of the floor. He was frightened, but managed an embarrassed smile when he saw Erred enter.

"I-I don't understand what they're telling me," he said in Shivarian. "I'm a laborer, they have me scrubbing pots in the kitchen, but now the other slaves say I'm also to please you."

Taking his hand, Erred gently drew him to his feet. Finding the right words took a few moments longer. "You will spend your nights here," he answered. "The master was pleased with us today and has said that you will lie with me at night when I am not serving him."

When he saw the uncertainty in Tharril's eyes he lifted the young man's hand to his lips, gently kissing his work-reddened knuckles. "I will not take you again," he said.

"Are you a *talevé*?" asked Tharril. "I've never seen one before, but I heard they have white hair like you do."

"I am the master's *akesh*."

"But you ... you have white hair and you speak my language," stammered Tharril. "You *must* be, though I don't understand how."

With a heavy sigh, Erred gave in. "I was once the Lady's servant, a *talevé* of Altarme." Urging Tharril to turn around, he gestured to the corner shrine. "You must be used to praying to the Earth Mother, but I do not have the other Shivarian gods here, only the Lady. You may worship Her whenever you wish."

When he saw the silver Lady and basin on the inlaid table, Tharril visibly relaxed. He let Erred guide him to the edge of the bed, where they sat next to each other without touching.

"What part of Shivar do you come from?" asked Erred.
"You sound like you come from the east."

"I'm from Entippe, in the hills east of Altarme. I was taken from my village with two others, and there were several more from other villages nearby. Raiders always come in the spring and summer. They lie in wait for us, when we venture out to the fields or into the forest for wood, and that's when they take us. We always have to go in groups. I didn't. It was so early, not even light yet, and there was nobody to go with. I didn't think the raiders would be out that soon."

Motioning to the water pitcher, Erred asked if he wanted something to drink. Tharril shook his head; he was clearly still too frightened to ask for anything. "How many years has this been going on?" Entippe would have fallen under the jurisdiction of Altarme, yet Erred could not recall ever having heard of any trouble from that region.

"Since before I was born," answered Tharril. "Every year, they'd take two or three. We tried to post guards, but it was only good if you stayed in the village."

"You made the desert crossing?"

Tharril nodded. "It was terrible. We lost so many on the way, and then the raiders used us at night. When we got here, they put me on a platform in the market and men would come and put their hands all over me like I was a horse or cow. They didn't do the same to you, did they?"

"No," said Erred, "they did not touch me during the crossing, but they did it to the others; I could hear it at night outside my tent. When we arrived here, I went to a place

where they train *akeshi*, and then to a private auction. Have you been here very long?"

"I've only been here a few weeks. The work isn't any harder than what I did at home and they feed us, but the guards, they do the same with us as the raiders did," said Tharril. "They do it with whoever they like down in the slave quarters. The cook says that's one way that the master pays them."

Erred took his callused hands between his own, stroking them when Tharril began to tremble; the young man looked within an inch of bursting into tears. "You do not have to share my bed if you do not want to. I have here enough cushions and blankets for two." To emphasize the point, he reached behind them to retrieve his soft woolen dressing gown and arranged it over Tharril's shoulders.

His eyes still on his lap, Tharril huddled into the garment. "No, it's all right. It wasn't so bad when you did it. I've had worse."

"I think you have been used enough for one day," said Erred. "Do you wish to pray, or do you wish to sleep now?"

Tharril quickly glanced up at him. "In the same bed?"

"Would you rather sleep on the floor? The bed is just large enough for two, and I have already given you my word that will not touch you in that way," answered Erred. "What we did today, I am not accustomed to doing that. I did not enjoy it anymore than you did."

They undressed for bed and lay close under the covers, lightly touching each other. Erred pondered the novelty of

having someone in his bed who did not expect to be pleased, who only wanted to hold him and feel his warmth.

"Arqui," Tharril murmured, "how did you get here? They took me from my village while I was out gathering wood, but my father told me once that Water-lovers live behind the walls of the Blue House and they never go out."

"That is not entirely true," said Erred. "The *ki'iri* spirit inside me is a *hrill* that needs the sea, so a time came when the priests had to take me to Sirilon. On the way home we were waylaid by raiders. The priests and my guards were killed and I was taken."

Now that the words began to flow, Erred found he could not stop. He held Tharril close and stroked his cropped hair. "It was my fault. On the way to Sirilon, we went by barge; it was quicker and I needed to be close to the water, but I had been a prince's son and I wanted to ride a horse again, so I persuaded the priests to take the long way back to Altarme."

"You were a prince?" asked Tharril.

"My father is a first cousin of the prince of Altarme. My full name is Erred Falathas né Camoril, but my last master called me Arqui, which means *snow*. *Thaqui*, your name, is what they call a desert mouse."

Tharril laughed softly. "That's because I always hid behind the other captives, hoping no one would notice me." He was quiet for a moment, then asked, "Erred, will we ever be free again?"

"I have learned not to hope," answered Erred. "My life means pleasing whoever I am given to."

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"But you're the Lady's lover. If you prayed She would set you free, wouldn't She?"

"I pray," he said, "but there is only silence. Perhaps She is punishing me for not obeying the priests, for leading them to their deaths, or perhaps I simply do not please Her. Freedom is not something I think much about anymore."

Tharril burrowed closer to him. "Erred, I don't want to be a slave for the rest of my life. It's like being an animal." His voice began to break, and Erred felt the telltale moisture of tears through his linen shift. "I-I want to see my family again and tell them I'm not dead. I'm sure they know what happened, why I didn't come home, but I just want ... I want to tell them that I—" He could not say the last part, but Erred silently supplied the words.

He was tempted to tell the young man to forget things such as family and love, for as a slave Tharril did not have a family and was no longer a human being capable of love. Giving him such advice would have been a service; he would need it to survive. Instead, he brushed his lips across Tharril's forehead and held him until they both fell asleep.

Twelve

In the last week of autumn, Eskil came to Erred's room and instructed him to take his robes and jewels and lay them out for inspection.

"The master is preparing the household for the feast of Abennet," said the steward, "and he has said that his *akeshi* will attend him when he entertains his guests. He wishes that you be properly attired, so I must see what we have to work with."

Erred had been practicing a particularly difficult movement of the *rendé* and welcomed an opportunity to rest. As Eskil began poring over his silks, gauzes and jewels, he went over to the wash basin and splashed cool water onto his face.

"Were you ever present when Arjha entertained guests?" asked Eskil. "Did he ever take you to the homes of others when they invited him?"

Wiping his hands and face on a linen cloth, Erred sat down on a stool beside the bed. "He sometimes brought me out to meet guests, but these were always informal occasions and nothing ever came of it. I never accompanied him when he went out."

Eskil picked up a silver hairclip from Erred's jewel box and studied it. "Then there are certain protocols you must observe when attending your master in public," he said. "There will be rich food and wine, but you are not to partake of the feast unless given leave; you would be wise to eat a light meal beforehand. Some of the guests will bring their *akeshi* to

honor their host, and at some point in the evening he will probably reciprocate by offering you to them. You are not to take the initiative and entertain these guests unless you are commanded to do so. Should any approach you desiring your favors, you will tell them that it is for your master to say."

Erred bowed his head to show he understood. "Will the master require me to dance or play upon the kithara?" he asked.

"Musicians and dancers have been hired, but that is not to say the master will not wish you to dance in private later." Eskil held up a robe of gold tissue, the same garment in which Erred had first been given to Arjha. "Ah, this is lovely, a fitting garment for a festival of light, but the master has already told many that you are called Arquí, as white and pure as the frost, and they expect to see this."

He looked over the contents of Erred's wardrobe once more and selected the pearls and silver clip. "These will do," he said. "As for a robe, we will dress you in white or silver, and we will dust you with powder of pearl so you will glimmer in the candlelight."

Later that afternoon, a eunuch came to take his measurements and a robe of silver tissue was delivered the next evening. It was a magnificent garment among several that had come with the acquisition of Arjha's estate, and was hemmed with arabesques of seed pearls and tiny crystals that caught the light and winked. Eskil told Erred that if he pleased the master by his conduct, he might be allowed to keep the garment. "It is new and I have reason to believe Arjha

ordered it especially for you, though one does not say such things to the master."

Tharril came to him every evening, always damp and freshly scrubbed from a visit to the slaves' communal bath. Their time together began with a shared devotion in front of the shrine. While Tharril knew the prayers to the Earth Mother, whose worship all Shivarians observed, Erred had to teach him how to anoint the Lady of the Waters and recite the morning and evening litanies.

Afterward, they curled up by the heat of the brazier and talked in soft tones, always aware that someone might be listening. Tharril told him about life in his village and Erred described the life of a prince of Altarme. He did not discuss his time as a *talévé*, and Tharril was respectful enough not to ask. Erred often fed him from his own plate: olives, fish and the finely milled sourdough flat bread favored by the elite. Despite what Tharril told him, he knew that the lesser-ranking house slaves were not always well nourished.

He rubbed oils into Tharril's lash marks and half-healed brand to prevent scarring, and gave Tharril ointment for the rest. "I can see they use very little to ease the way, and I think you also struggle. You must keep yourself oiled at all times and relax your body completely when they do it, or it will hurt."

Once, he brought out his finery and let Tharril, who had never touched such things, try it on. Most of their conversations were in Shivarian, as a spy was less likely to understand them and it was good to revisit their native tongue, but Erred took pains to help Tharril improve his

Tajhaani. He also taught his companion some of the arts he had learned in Dhab's house, and shared in Tharril's amusement at some of them.

"Twenty-one different ways to kiss?" exclaimed Tharril. "What's wrong with just plain kissing?"

Erred promptly showed him the subtle differences. "Of course, most men who use a slave are not interested in kissing. They have only one use for your mouth. I will show you how to do that properly also, if you wish."

At first, Tharril objected to learning for the sake of pleasing those rough men. "If I'm good at it they'll never leave me alone."

"You do not have a choice, so instead of fighting your situation you must make the best of it. Do you think it is any different for an *akesh*?" asked Erred. "It is not about my enjoyment, but theirs. Satisfying such men is work, not pleasure, but it is easier work than scrubbing pots and there are rewards. The guards are free men. If they become fond of you, there is a chance that one of them might give you extra food and protection."

"When they want me, most of them just grab me by the arm and shove me into a corner somewhere. Some make jokes, and there's one who gropes me and laughs and asks if I like it, but the others...." Tharril closed his eyes, shuddering.

"That means he is trying in some rough way to arouse you," said Erred. "There are different kinds of lovers. A few truly care about your pleasure or fancy themselves good enough in bed that if you do not enjoy it or at least pretend

convincingly they are insulted. Then there are those like your guard, who would *like* you to enjoy it but do not care one way or another. They usually do their work quickly and will leave you alone for the most part. As for the others, there are men who enjoy inflicting pain. Be obedient and serve them if you have to, but do not let them see how much they hurt you. It will only encourage them."

"I like doing it with you," said Tharril. "I probably shouldn't, but with you it's different."

"Do not become attached to me," replied Erred. "This arrangement will last only as long as it pleases the master. He does not care about your feelings or mine."

Any lovemaking they engaged in was usually for the purposes of instruction. On most nights, however, Tharril was too tired from the day's labor and Erred was too disinterested in sex for them to do more than curl up in each other's arms after their devotions and go to sleep.

When he heard about the festival and saw the silver robe, Tharril concealed his envy with a wistful sigh. "Unless we're serving, the overseers said we're to stay in our quarters," he said. "I heard there's going to be music and dancing and lots of food and wine. Will you tell me about it when you return?"

"Yes," said Erred, "I will tell you everything I can." It was an unspoken rule between them that Tharril never ask him about what he did with Satu or Usha or anyone else to whom he was given, and he in turn did not ask who might have used Tharril during the day except to ask if he was doing as he had been taught and helping him apply the cooling ointment when he was in pain.

Erred knew that Satu meant to show him off in a way Arjha had never done; he had heard from others what Satu's parties were like. "There's always a private gathering later on for important guests. You'll probably end up on your knees," said Marsu, "pleasuring at least one or more of those men."

On the day of the feast, he took care to eat lightly, bathe, and prepare his body. A slave came to dress his hair and pin the silver clip in place, while another dusted his body with an iridescent powder. The silver robe went on last. It was heavy and designed to be worn with a shift underneath. In certain lights, it gave tantalizing glimpses of his flesh. Both slaves turned him around and proclaimed the effect to be magnificent. Eskil, when he saw, was also pleased.

"Remember everything you have been told," said the steward. "Most of the guests will be merchants, but there will be a few minor officials from the High Prince's household. The master is always interested in royal patronage, so we wish to make a good impression on these men."

At sunset, one of Eskil's assistants came to escort him to the banqueting hall, which was illuminated by myriad candles whose warm light complimented the rich fabrics and gold plate with which the hall had been decorated. Musicians, neatly tucked away behind the hall's painted columns, played in the background and slaves served wine to the guests who had already arrived.

Satu reclined on a cushioned dais where he could greet and observe his guests. He wore a rich, deep red with gems on his fingers and around his neck. Seeing Erred, he smiled and gestured to him to kneel at his feet. As Erred took his

place, he saw Jasil and Marsu kneeling nearby, both of them resplendent in flame-colored silk and golden gauze respectively.

A light supper was served while a troupe of fire-eating dancers performed. Other entertainments followed with the dessert. As Abennet was the festival that greeted the winter solstice, honoring the sun god who banished the darkness with his radiance, all the performers dressed in the god's vibrant yellow or incorporated fire in their acts. Satu treated his guests to torch jugglers, sword-swallowing dwarfs with stiffly-starched sunburst collars, and a pair of acrobats who tumbled through burning hoops, all as the air in the hall grew steadily warmer and more uncomfortable.

Guests came to compliment Satu on his magnificent hospitality and to discuss business; many gazed admiringly at Erred but did not presume to address their host's property directly. Once or twice, Satu leaned forward to fondle his shoulder but otherwise did not require his services. Erred maintained his composure, staring straight ahead, above the heads of the crowd even as he began to sweat and his body strained under the kneeling posture.

Late in the evening, when the last of the entertainments was over and the guests began to leave, Satu rose from his cushions and called the three *akeshi* to him. Erred rose on stiff legs to follow his master and the other two upstairs into the octagonal chamber, which had been transformed for the occasion. A dozen richly dressed men were already lounging on couches, conversing and sipping wine while a handful of

beautiful young men and one young woman waited upon them.

One man and a lithe, half-dressed young man kissed deeply in the corner, while another youth fed dates to his master and stroked his chest through his open tunic. Watching them, and noting Usha's conspicuous absence, Erred's suspicions about the nature of this private party were confirmed.

A space was cleared in the middle of the floor and a trio of musicians brought in to play the accompaniment to the *rendé*. Satu called for Marsu, but in honor of the host one of the guests offered his own *akesh* for the performance.

Smiling at the gesture, Satu indicated that Jasil and Marsu should partner those guests who did not have an *akesh* to attend them while he seated himself in his usual place with Erred at his side. Courtesies were exchanged over the wine and sweetmeats served after the dance, then Satu instructed Erred to stand up and undo his robe.

Without acknowledging the gaze that suddenly turned to him, he unfastened the clasp of the silver robe and let the tissue slide to the floor. As the candlelight caressed his powdered skin, transforming him into a translucent, unearthly thing, he heard murmurs of appreciation from the onlookers.

Satu seized the opportunity to milk the moment for all it was worth. "Arqui was my gift to my late son, the most precious of all the gifts Arjha received for his deeds against the Turyar. He is a rare jewel even among his own kind, and of royal blood, a treasure worth hoarding. However, I am nothing if not generous, so if you wish to enjoy him this

night, or any of my other slaves, you may take your pleasure of them. After tonight, of course, the usual terms apply." He gave a little laugh and urged the guests not to be shy in enjoying his hospitality.

The first one to take his hand and lead him onto the cushions was the man who had been kissing the young man in the corner. Others coupled in twos and threes on couches and cushions on the floor.

By the time he was permitted to gather up his clothing and stumble back to his room, he was certain he had serviced each guest at least once. He stopped in the bathing room the *akeshi* shared to wash the pearl dust and dried fluids from his body, vowing that he would soak his sore muscles in a proper bath first thing in the morning.

Tharril was peacefully sleeping on the floor by the bed. Not wanting to wake him, Erred quietly stepped over his body and sank down onto the mattress, dropping into sleep the moment his head hit the pillow. When he woke, Tharril had already left to begin the day's chores.

Eskil came to see him late in the day. "The master was most pleased with you last night," he said. "I am instructed to tell you that you need not return the robe. It is yours to keep."

Erred bowed his head and praised the master's unexpected generosity. "It is such a magnificent gift and such a delight to receive. I shall honor him by wearing it for his pleasure."

The steward appeared satisfied by the formulaic response. "Already there have been several requests for your company, some of which the master has decided to honor. Tomorrow

you will prepare yourself to go out, though I do not know enough to tell you at this time who the client will be. Since you also performed this duty under Arjha, I do not think you need to be told how to behave once you arrive."

"No, sir," said Erred.

When Tharril came to him that night, Erred did as promised and described the banquet with its candles and soft cushions and myriad entertainments. He did not mention that there had been a private party afterward, or that he would be going out the following afternoon. However, when Tharril expressed a desire to see him in his silver robe and pearls, he obliged, draping himself in the glistening tissue.

"Someone spilled something on it," said Tharril. He inched closer, taking the hem between his hands.

"Did they?" A torn or soiled robe was a serious matter, as this showed a lack of respect for the master's gift, and Erred frowned when he saw the stain.

Tharril rubbed at the cloth, narrowing his eyes as he brought his fingers to his lips and tasted them. "This stain—?"

Erred studied it, then inspected the rest of the robe. "I will have it cleaned before the master notices."

"Did you have to—at the banquet, I mean—did they make you take your clothes off and—?"

"There is only one reason an *akesh* is invited to such an event and it is not for his own amusement." Erred leaned forward and kissed Tharril's cheek. "We agreed that you would not ask me what it is that I do in the master's service."

Tharril put his arms around him and pulled him close. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't like to think of them doing such

things to you, putting their filthy hands on you and forcing themselves—"

"It is what I do," Erred said harshly, "and you cannot change it. We will not speak of this again."

This was not the way it should have been. He meant only to teach Tharril the arts of love in order to survive, nothing else, yet the situation had spiraled far beyond his control almost from the very beginning. His own tutors in Dhab's house had felt nothing for him, and he had been forced into taking Tharril under vile circumstances, so why it should be so difficult for him to maintain the same professional distance?

When they were together and the desire took them, they were not slaves, and no other lovers existed. Tharril shyly told Erred that, before him, the only other lover he had had was a girl from his village with whom he had quickly coupled in a hayloft. He had not known that sex between males was possible or that it could be pleasurable. Like Erred, he had been raised to think of such things as shameful and could not understand at first how Erred could possibly find him desirable enough to want to continue what Satu had forced them to begin.

Erred did not have the words to answer. Had he merely craved physical release, his own hand would have sufficed; it was only after pleasuring himself in this way, when he lay spent and alone, that he was able to contemplate how empty gratification was without shared joy. He knew that Tharril was not sexually astute enough to feign ecstasy, and when he returned Erred's caresses with equal passion, crying out and

clutching his lover's body in release, Erred embraced it as the gift it was.

The irony of it was not lost on him. *In Shivar I had the most beautiful lovers a man could want, and I cared for none of them. Why should I want this one, when feeling for him can only bring pain to us both?*

Two days later, as he prepared to go out again, Eskil came in with a length of pale blue silk in his arms. "This is a gift from yesterday's admirer," he said. "It was sent for you and the master has decided that you may keep it, though he also instructed to remind you that you are not to take airs upon yourself on account of it. I am certain you have heard by now what happened to Jasil."

Satu had seen to Jasil's punishment himself, lashing him ten times with a willow switch before making him perform on the two soldiers he had borrowed for the purpose. A eunuch who had witnessed the event reported everything back to Erred and Marsu, so they knew how Satu had taunted Jasil. When Jasil himself returned he bathed but refused the evening meal and would not speak to anyone. Erred took no particular joy in his punishment, remembering the drugged cup and knowing it might just as easily have been him.

"Yes, I know, sir," replied Erred. "If the master does not wish me to have the gift, then I will not take it. I have no wish to appear spoiled and ungrateful."

"I do not think that will be necessary," said Eskil, "though you should not expect to receive such gifts often. The master does not encourage it."

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When the robe was placed into his hands, Erred could see the tiny crystals sewn along the hem and collar that glittered like raindrops. The client was an advisor to the High Prince, which perhaps explained the quality of the gift. "It is very beautiful. Tell the master I thank him for his generosity."

Eskil nodded. "You must begin to inventory your gifts, if you have not already done so. This is very important, so you do not unwittingly give offense by wearing one man's gift before another. You will not wear this in the master's presence unless he wishes to see it upon you, but should you visit this man again you will honor him by wearing it."

Third and fourth clients followed in rapid succession, with the third sending a note desiring the pleasure of his company again. Satu seemed pleased, while Jasil and Marsu looked on in disdain. Sometimes Satu lent them out to those to whom he owed favors, and that was all the attention they knew. No admirers ever sent gifts or messages requesting their company.

A week passed before he was called to serve another client. He returned late in the afternoon, weary from the dancing and erotic gymnastics the man had required of him. In the fading light of his room, he undid his clothes, letting them fall to the floor at his feet. Tharril would soon come to him, but he was too tired to do more than make his evening devotions and go to sleep.

As he bent to pick up the robe to put away, a foul odor wafted past his nostrils; it smelled like excrement. Turning, squinting in the dim light of the room, it took him a moment to locate the source of the odor, and when he did his breath

caught in his throat. The silver Lady that should have been gleaming in Her dark corner dripped with refuse.

He stood frozen, trembling in shock and helpless rage. There was only one person who would have done this, and when he could move again he flung open the door and stood in the middle of the corridor, not knowing where to go or what to say.

Jasil leaned against the doorjamb of his room with a knowing smirk on his face. Erred's nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed, and he wanted nothing more than to seize the vandalized statuette and smash the other slave's head in with it, to reduce him to a stinking mess to rival that with which he had defiled the Lady.

What stopped him from acting was the realization that Satu would retaliate. A violent slave, no matter how he had been provoked, could not be allowed to live. It did not matter how beautiful or valuable he might be. Erred knew that if he attacked Jasil, he would be executed and, knowing Satu, his death would not be a swift one. He would be humiliated as Jasil had been, then die like the three slaves in Arjha's house, as an example to the others.

Turning his back on Jasil was an effort that took every shred of self-control he had. Shaking violently, Erred went back inside and slammed the door shut. In the twilight of his room, his chest and throat burning as he struggled to hold back his angry tears, he carefully cleaned the Lady.

When Tharril came, he paused open-mouthed in the doorway, then immediately went out for more water and clean cloths with which to scrub down the wall, table and floor

where the refuse had dripped. Once they were both satisfied with their efforts, Erred and Tharril dropped to their knees in front of the shrine and asked the Lady's forgiveness for allowing a non-believer to defile Her.

"Erred," said Tharril, "tell me who did this and I'll make him pay for it."

"You will do no such thing." When Tharril moved toward the door, Erred seized him and held him close, tightening his grip when Tharril began to struggle. "What are you thinking? Have you ever seen what these masters do when their slaves defy them? Do you *want* to end up mutilated or impaled on the stakes? No, I will find some way to deal with Jasil that does not involve violence. As for the Lady, She will repay those who dishonor Her."

Tharril, his fury deflated, rested his head on Erred's shoulder. "Why doesn't She answer our prayers? Every night I ask to go home, to see my family again, and She doesn't answer."

Erred stroked his hair and made soft, soothing noises under his breath. He did not point out that release was something for which he had long ago stopped praying. For whatever reason, the Lady did not want his life, and when Tharril had come to him he realized that some part of him still wanted to live. "It is not for mortals, even *talevé*, to understand how the gods work. We must simply be patient and allow them to do as they will."

"And wait for something that will never happen," muttered Tharril. "I'm beginning to think the gods are dead."

"Fighting will only bring you death and pain. You must endure when there is no escape, unless it is death that you want." He tilted Tharril's face so their eyes met. "Tharril, do you want to die?"

Tharril squeezed his eyes shut, but it was not enough to hold back the tears that began to stream down his face. "I don't know, Erred. I don't know. I can't bear living like this any longer."

Erred wiped his tears away with his fingers and lightly kissed his damp eyelids. "If you are going to die," he said, "do not throw your life away on something as meaningless as a jealous *akesh's* insult."

He took Tharril by the hand and urged him to kneel beside him in front of the shrine. "The gods live, Tharril, and they do not ignore us. Not even in this desert land, I think."

"How can you believe that after everything that's happened to you?"

There had been times, while suffering the wilting heat and fear of the desert crossing or curled naked and hungry in the lightless closet of Dhabi's house, where Erred had pondered the same question. He had struggled with spiritual desolation in the aftermath of being violated that first time by Satu and seeing that a man could abuse a *talevé* and not be stricken dead for it. He had asked the gods to grant Arjha understanding that never came, and begged forgiveness for a sin he had not even known he committed until it was too late. All this he did, knowing the Lady had turned Her face from him, and each time he reached the same conclusion, that if he did not believe in something he would die.

"Because it is all I have," he said.

* * * *

The next morning, Eskil came into his room and told him to sit down. "Some of the slaves have told me that your idol has been defiled. Yes, I can see where you have had to scrub the walls and floor."

Unlike Arjha's slaves, those who belonged to Satu did not speak to Erred and until now Erred had had no reason to believe that they had any interest in him. "When I returned last night the Lady was covered in filth. I know who did it, but I did not think it was my place to confront him or complain of it to anyone."

"It is well that you did not attack him, else you would have been punished most severely," replied Eskil. "One *akesh* injuring another is a serious matter. Both of you would have punished, but it would have gone much worse for you."

Erred took a deep breath and chose his next words carefully. "I understand this," he said, "and stayed my hand, but what am I to do when Jasil does this to me? I have never given him insult."

Eskil clucked his tongue in disagreement. "Simply to be the master's current favorite is insult enough for one who is not his favorite now."

"But Jasil surely must know that the master will eventually tire of me," said Erred. "He will have his pleasure and then sell me to another."

"I know the master's mind as well as any steward might," answered Eskil, "but it is not for me to say what he will desire

next month or a year from now. Even the master cannot say what mood will take him, or where his taste will lie. I simply provide for that which is and do not question the rest."

It had not occurred to Erred that the steward was in some ways as much a slave to Satu's whims as he was. "Eskil," he said, "why do you always come and give me these messages yourself when I know you have assistants who could do it just as easily? Why do you waste your time giving advice to a mere *akesh*?"

Suddenly uncomfortable, Eskil toyed with the end of his beard, wrapping the oiled curls around his finger as he gave thought to his answer. "It is because you are somehow more than an *akesh*," he finally said. "I have seen many *akeshi* come and go, but I have never seen your like. You are not natural, and I do not mean the whisperings in the slave quarters that you have some animal spirit inside you; it is simply that no man or woman should be so beautiful. This is clearly some business of the gods, and I cannot decide whether or not I wish to know why they have sent you here."

Erred had expected the steward to give any one of several answers, ranging from some secret infatuation with him to bearing messages on Satu's behalf to test his obedience. Such candor surprised him. "I cannot answer that question, Eskil," he said.

The steward nodded. "As to this other matter, the master has been told of his slave's conduct and is not pleased. The slave has become too proud and he no longer satisfies the master as he once did. He is to be sold," said Eskil. "After three days you will not see him again."

Thirteen

Once Jasil was gone, Satu never made reference to him or gave any other indication that he had once owned another *akesh*. Marsu attended him in the evening, while in the morning he instructed Erred to sit beside him at breakfast while he went over the day's correspondence.

If there was one thing Satu liked to do, it was to complain about the men he dealt with. Erred could not recall hearing a word of praise for any of them, even those whom Satu warmly greeted when they came to the house. And when he was sent to their beds Satu admonished him before leaving that he was to bring back any useful information that might come his way.

Double-dealing was an art with merchants. Erred's clients did their utmost to extract information from him, offering bribes or the promise of influential contacts for anything he could tell them about Satu's business. With Eskil's help, he cultivated an innocuous persona that knew nothing about such complicated matters. Fortunately for him, most were content to have a vacant-eyed novelty in their beds and to boast of it to their friends.

Satu often talked business in front of his *akeshi*, occasionally soliciting an empty nod or phrase of agreement as he muttered on about this merchant or that deal. "These traders try my patience with their tariffs," he said. "This business with the Turyar is most tiresome and not good for profits. Once spring comes, I will see about backing a general

who is willing to deal with these extortionists. It was so much easier to terrify them into submission when Arjha was at hand. My son was fierce in battle."

Erred could never decide whether Satu genuinely mourned his eldest son's death or not. Whenever Satu spoke of Arjha, it was usually in terms of his own self-interest, in what Arjha had done or could no longer do for him. As for his other son, Satu seemed to care for Usha in the same way a man might show fondness for a favorite horse or hunting dog, patting him and giving him treats without acknowledging that his offspring was a rapidly maturing young man with his own desires.

Although Arjha had spoken of them in passing, it was from Usha that Erred learned that there were four other sons, but they were never invited to the house, and Satu only mentioned them to complain of their ungratefulness and incessant scheming. They were rivals in the olive oil trade who regularly made attempts to kill their father, which he repaid in kind.

"I have visitors coming this afternoon, olive growers who will bore me to death with their talk of market prices. Such a wearisome necessity it is." He smiled at Erred and sent the servant to bring Marsu. "I mean to enjoy myself first, so when they begin to drone on I can think of how delightful you both look when you are fucked."

Marsu entered the room. Making his obeisance to Satu, he undressed as commanded. A servant brought a length of silky cord and a phial of oil, laying them on the floor next to Satu before withdrawing. Erred got up and moved the master's

writing table with its implements and scrolls into the corner while Satu gave instructions to Marsu.

Satu winked at Erred. "I have not forgotten to show you how pretty this one looks when he is bound and squirming." He pinched Marsu's thigh, lightly stroking the mark he had made. "Now assume your position, my wanton little *bakti*, and let us see how well you beg me."

While Erred knelt off to the side to watch, Marsu lay down on his stomach with a pillow under his buttocks and allowed Satu to tie his wrists above his head. He did not seem anxious until Satu undressed and parted his thighs, then his body tensed and he began to breathe hard. He flexed his wrists, testing his bonds, but something in his demeanor told Erred that this was an act designed to please the master.

"Do you want me to hurt you?" Satu slowly licked Marsu's earlobe before nipping it. Sometimes he referred to his pleasures as lovemaking, but he never kissed his slaves on the mouth, never lingered with them in bed after his lust was spent, and never pretended that what he did was for anything but his own enjoyment. "You have been a most disobedient slave."

Erred watched him squirm, feeling a curious mixture of arousal and revulsion when Satu pulled Marsu onto his knees and struck his buttocks with the flat of his hand. "Such a firm, lovely backside you have, and it is even lovelier in full blush. I do think you are naughty on purpose."

Marsu responded with a refusal far too enthusiastic to be genuine. Satu stopped, massaged and pinched the raw skin, and reached between the young man's buttocks; when Marsu

groaned into the pillow, Erred could hear true pain in his voice. Still, he could not help being fascinated by the scene, for he had been told by Eskil that although the master played roughly he did not do serious harm to his *akeshi*, and that sometimes the slaves actually enjoyed being dominated this way.

Once it was over and they were dismissed, the two slaves bathed together and retired to Marsu's room for light refreshment and a game of *keidu*. Although he was now without a regular companion, Marsu did not seem particularly upset that Jasil was gone, and even spoke disdainfully of the petulant manner in which Jasil had left.

"He couldn't even be bothered to kiss me goodbye or say anything beyond harping on how unfair the whole affair was," he sniffed. "It was such an unpleasant business, and to tell you the truth I was glad to be rid of him once he left. And to think I once liked him."

While in Dhab's house, Erred had learned that male *akeshi* often had relations with each other outside the master's presence, and that it was perfectly acceptable for them to do so. In the brief time Erred had spent with them, Marsu and Jasil had alternated between affectionate friendship and bitter quarreling. Never once had he sensed genuine love between them.

It did not occur to Erred to criticize Marsu for his nonchalance. Under the circumstances, Marsu had behaved exactly as a sensible *akesh* should, not becoming attached to one whom he knew could be sold or killed at any time.

"I heard from one of the stewards that Jasil was sold to Alassaio," he said. "He's another merchant and the master sometimes speak well of him, but—pah!—he stinks like the olives he presses. There were other offers, but I think the master chose the worst one just to spite Jasil."

Now that they were alone, Marsu paid more attention to Erred than he ever had before, offering him choice slices of fruit and meat, even asking him to rub a cooling ointment onto his buttocks. It was clear from his inviting looks and the way he moved on the bed while the ointment was applied what was on his mind.

His shameless manner, while suitable for a man of crude appetite like Satu, was repulsive enough that Erred ignored his advances for as long as possible. It was not as easy as he would have liked. Watching Marsu at his work had made him hard, and Satu had not permitted him release. "Do you enjoy being bound and used like that?" he asked. "The master has never used the ropes on me."

"You wouldn't think so," explained Marsu, "but it can be very pleasurable. You see, when you're bound you completely relinquish control. You're not responsible for any pain or pleasure you might feel. You're utterly dependent upon the one who possesses you. You trust him not to hurt you beyond what you can bear, and the feeling can be quite intoxicating."

Marsu leaned forward and whispered in his ear so that anyone who might be listening in on their conversation could not hear them. "Of course, you and I both know how much the master enjoys his partner's shame. I've never felt any. Why should I? Getting on my knees and taking his cock is

easy work, and I'm good at it. If he wants me to squirm and struggle a bit, and occasionally take one of his guards up my backside, then I don't mind."

Erred bit back the temptation to ask Marsu if he would voice similar sentiments after being drugged and rendered truly helpless. There were nights when he awakened in a terrified sweat, believing he had been paralyzed and that he heard the master's footsteps just outside the door. It was nonsense, he knew. Satu never visited the *akesh* quarters, always having his playthings brought to him, and had laughingly dispelled such fears when Erred hesitated to eat or drink with him, saying he much preferred to have his bedmates awake and struggling.

As for the guards, Erred understood why they were employed the first time, but why Satu would allow them to share a slave easily worth nine thousand *menar* made little sense.

Marsu selected an olive from the tray and leisurely sucked on it, spitting out the pit. "I'll admit, when you come from a household where your master was too old and feeble to get it up half the time, our master's pleasure is unsettling at first, but you'll soon become used to it. He doesn't like to use too much oil, so whenever I'm called to him I make certain I'm prepared. If it hurts, I'm good at pretending otherwise, but he probably knows I'm acting. There's not an *akesh* alive who hasn't learned how to act in bed."

Not only did Satu know, but he made no secret that he thought little of the performance. Erred wisely kept this to himself.

"But then, I've learned to enjoy being fucked," said Marsu. "Now tell me, who is that little laborer who comes to your room each night? Every night I see the guard bringing him to your quarters."

"The master gave him to me for my bed."

"Ah, yes, your bedmate," said Marsu. "That was one of the many things Jasil was constantly complaining about, that you received a plaything for your bed and he received nothing except a cheap trinket. As if *I* didn't show him my backside whenever he wanted it." He rolled his eyes and chewed on the olive. "Are you fond of this little laborer? From what I have seen of him, he's thin and not beautiful at all. It doesn't seem that he could give you much pleasure."

Erred had decided from the very beginning that he would not say anything that would make others suspect that he had feelings for the other slave, and he instructed Tharril to keep a similar silence. "He does what he is told," he answered. "The only pleasure he is required to give me is to show me his backside and not complain when he takes my cock."

"So you enjoy being on top?"

There was, Erred thought, too much eagerness in Marsu's eyes. He shrugged. "It is a welcome change."

When Marsu licked his lips and smiled, Erred knew exactly how the afternoon would end. Having rid himself of one jealous rival, he did not think it wise to incite the enmity of another, so when Marsu pressed his body against his and sought his mouth, urging him to demonstrate what eighteen thousand *menar* was like in bed, he swallowed his disgust and obliged.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Later, sitting alone in his room before the Lady's shrine, he could not dispel the feeling that he had somehow misled Tharril by lying with Marsu. It did not matter how many times he told himself that what he did was for the sake of politics, and that his body was divorced from his heart. Slaves did not form permanent attachments. There was no such thing as marriage or love between those who did not have the freedom to determine their own futures. He knew this, yet could not bring himself to function in the same emotionless stupor in which Marsu had carried on and ended his association with Jasil.

What he had with Tharril was a temporary arrangement. It could not be otherwise. There was not a night that passed that Erred did not know that one day he and Tharril would be separated. *You were a fool to be so kind to him, to touch him again after that one time. You should have just told him to go lie quietly in the corner and not bother you.*

And yet somehow, on those nights when he made the offering of their mingled seed to the Lady, he sensed that She approved. There was no telltale rippling of the water in the basin, no silvered shadows wavering upon the wall to signal Her delight in their lovemaking, only a presence in his mind urging him to go back to the bed where Tharril waited for him.

For one who had never known what it was to love before, who had barred all others from his heart, he could only wonder at the terrible punishment he had received from Her.

Fourteen

When Erred entered the young prince's bedchamber, Usha practically bounded into his arms. "Arqui, I must tell you the news."

Still fully clothed, Erred let himself be pulled onto the cushions beside the young man. Satu had been in a sour mood that day, so Erred had been more than happy to be sent to Usha's bed. "What do you wish to tell me, my lord?"

Usha leaned close enough to whisper in his ear. "I am going to become a priest," he said. "My grandfather—my mother's father, that is—he is a high priest of Aben. He is very powerful and I told him that I want to become a priest, too, that I do not care for marriage or the family business because I want to serve the god. Father owes the priests many favors, you see, so when my grandfather told him that I was to go to them, of course he did not like it but he had to agree. Is that not wonderful news?"

"I did not know you were religious, my lord," said Erred. Nor had he known what a shrewd mind lurked behind Usha's innocent demeanor. It was a maneuver worthy of his father. "Forgive me, but I am not overly familiar with the gods of Tajhaan. I am not permitted to enter any of the temples and I have never seen a priest, so I am very ignorant."

Snatching up a cushion, Usha playfully swatted him with it. "Aben is the sun god, you silly *akesh*."

"Well, yes, my lord. I know the names of most of the gods," said Erred, "but the other part, about the priests, I do not understand."

"Priests do not own businesses, so when Father dies I will not be a threat to my brothers. They do not have to marry, so no one will make me lie with a girl where I do not want to." Usha licked his lips and smiled. "They can have male lovers if they want to. Real lovers, I mean, and not just slaves."

Erred now understood Satu's moodiness. To be outwitted by a seemingly complacent young man who was also his own blood was an unseen blow he was not likely to forgive. Usha probably did not have any genuine religious vocation, but neither did most of the young men who became *talevé*; they were elevated simply because the Lady found them desirable. "I imagine your father is not pleased," he said quietly.

Usha frowned and hugged the cushion to him. His mood, exuberant a moment before, changed like a cloud passing over the sun. "No, he is very angry, because now he either has to give everything to my half-brothers or father another son. He said I was weak and foolish." He bit his lip to stop it from quivering, yet the tears shone in his eyes. "I told him I was sorry."

"My lord, from what I have seen he does not forgive easily," said Erred. "Are you certain this is what you want?"

"What other way is there for me? I do not want to die and I do not want to spill the blood of my own kin to keep what I never wanted in the first place." Usha punched the cushion in frustration. "Arjha told me once that Father was angry with him, too, but he forgave him once he saw what a great

warrior he was. Maybe if I'm a good enough priest, then one day he'll forgive me, too."

The young man was too torn between the extremes of elation and dejection for lovemaking, so he sent Erred back to his room untouched. It was still early, but when Erred entered the darkened room he found Tharril curled up on the floor by the bed.

Tharril shifted a little when he heard the door close, and the unevenness of his breathing told Erred that he was still awake. "Tharril, why are you not lying in the bed? I have told you many times that you did not have to lie on the floor."

"Erred, I-I—" His voice was blurred by a faint snuffle.

"Are you crying?" Erred crossed the room and knelt beside the shadowed body on the floor. "Tharril, why are you crying?" He put out his hand to touch Tharril's shoulder, but the other man flinched at the contact. "Have you been injured?"

"It's nothing," whispered Tharril.

Erred left his side long enough to bring in a lamp from the corridor. Gently urging Tharril to sit up, he tugged down the collar of the rough linen tunic slaves wore in colder weather and gasped when he saw the angry bruise that mottled Tharril's skin. Another bruise darkened his cheek. His lip was cut and swollen. "Who did this to you?"

Tharril's eyes dropped to his lap. "There's a guard, Ehmet," he said. "He likes to make it hurt. Do you have any of that ointment? I-I couldn't find it before and I—"

Erred brought the ointment and, after instructing Tharril to lie on the bed, helped him apply it. He also made a mental

note of the guard's name. "Did you fight him, Tharril? I told you to go limp and let them finish."

"I-I had to. He had his hand over my face to keep me from screaming," said Tharril. "He was so big and I wasn't prepared, it hurt so much. I couldn't breathe when he covered my mouth."

Wiping the excess ointment off with a cloth, Erred tugged Tharril's clothing back into place. "I have told you before to keep yourself oiled at all times," he said. "As for this guard, I will find some way to deal with him. Lie here and rest, and I will bring you a blanket."

Early the next morning, Erred found an escort to take him into the garden where the *akeshi* were allowed to take their exercise when the wives and concubines were not present. Seating himself on a bench, he sent a slave to find the guard Ehmet and bring the man to him. He waited, his hands folded primly in his lap while he rehearsed one more time what he intended to say.

The man who answered the summons was neither particularly tall nor heavily-built, but Erred did not like the self-assured smirk he wore. While he paid little attention to the household guards, he had seen plenty such men among the raiders who had taken him; the men who had nearly raped him had looked like that, and he could tell even without having heard Tharril's story that this man was one who actually enjoyed the pain and humiliation he caused others.

"Are you the one they call Ehmet?" asked Erred.

A grunt was the only response he received. The man was clearly baffled by the summons and did not know what to say to the white-haired *akesh* sitting before him.

"Do you know the slave Thaqui, who belongs to me?"

Ehmet shrugged and scratched the back of his neck. "I don't bother learning the names of the slaves."

"The young man you used yesterday, he belongs in my bed," Erred said coldly. "I will not have you taking what belongs to me and abusing it."

"Like I said, I don't bother with the names of the slaves I fuck."

The scorn with which Ehmet greeted this command was sufficient to enflame Erred's anger, but it was when the man rolled his eyes that he rose and, balling his fist, smashed it into the guard's face. "Did you *hear* what I said?"

Erred heard his escort's sharply indrawn breath and sensed his amazement, but as long as the man did not attempt to interfere he did not bother to acknowledge him.

Clutching his face with fingers that were already seeping blood, Ehmet stumbled backward. By instinct, the guard's hand came up to strike, but at the last moment he realized the one he would have struck was the master's valuable property. Growling, he clamped down on his broken nose and stalked away with a murderous look.

"The master will not be pleased," said the escort.

Erred was tempted to snap at him to be silent, but judged it unwise to provoke conflict where it was not necessary. A moment later, the anger and adrenaline bled out of him, replaced by a steadily growing fear. *Oh, Lady, what have I*

just done? Meekly bowing his head, he allowed the man to take him back upstairs.

He had not summoned Ehmet with the intention of striking him; he had not struck anyone with his fist since he was a boy. What he had done was foolish from the start. Had he been thinking past his anger and concern for Tharril, he would have consulted Eskil.

When Jasil defiled the Lady, I kept my temper, he thought. *Why should this time have been any different?*

When Eskil came to fetch him an hour later, he was expecting it. The steward's cold voice and the two guards who stood out in the corridor unnerved Erred. He knew that what he had done was a serious infraction, but presence of the guards with their weapons and steely eyes drove home the possibility that his disobedience was grave enough to warrant his own death. Shutting out the image of the three mutilated slaves, he took a deep breath and followed the steward into the octagonal room where Satu was working at his writing desk.

He knelt on the edge of the carpet without being prompted. When the master addressed him, he would answer, but he was not going to beg for his own life. Begging was a form of fear, and fear only incited Satu to greater demonstrations of cruelty.

Satu took his time about acknowledging him. "Arqui, what is this I hear about you striking a guard?"

As he had not been given leave to rise, Erred remained on his knees. "My lord, he injured the slave you gave me and would not give redress. He was arrogant and callous."

"Is this so?" asked Satu. "Tell me, is the slave crippled or unable to work?"

"He is bruised and cut, and was taken unwillingly."

Making a displeased noise, Satu put the stylus aside; Erred heard the clatter as the instrument was returned to the writing tray. "The guards have been told that they may use the laborers as they will, so long as they do not seriously injure them. If this worker is able to continue, then it is of no concern to me," he said. "Also, the guard is a free man in my house. Under no circumstances may a slave strike a free man, no matter how well favored the slave may think himself."

Erred had not expected any sympathy from him. Still, he tried to salvage what he could of the situation. "Forgive me, my lord, but did you not give the slave to me for my bed?" he asked. "How can he give me pleasure if he is too bruised or hurt inside to do his duty?"

"You speak as though he belongs to you, Arquí," said Satu. "I told you then that he was still my property."

"Then I will buy him from you." From a fold of his robe Erred removed a small pouch and opened it, letting several coins spill into his palm. "You once told me that a common laborer was cheaply bought." He held the money out to Satu. "I will buy him from you."

Satu exchanged an incredulous look with Eskil and then, to Erred's dismay, burst out laughing. When he had regained his composure, he explained, "Obviously you have not had much instruction in the law, my dear. You are a slave, and no slave may own another, so we will not hear anymore of this

nonsense. Now put your money away and remove your robe. I will administer your punishment, and then you will return to your room and forget this business."

Erred let the money and empty pouch fall to the carpet with his clothing. When instructed, he bent over a cushioned stool and gripped the legs. A second later the lash fell and he gasped, clutching the stool as tightly as he could to keep from crying out. The blows were not intended to break the skin, and the pain was negligible in comparison with the humiliation of being exposed and then whipped like a wayward child.

"I would invite Ehmet in here, but I am told that he is in too much pain for any sport," said Satu. "No matter, I will send your little *bakti* to him when he is feeling better, and he may whip and fuck the boy as hard as he wants."

By now, Erred knew better than to protest. His scalp burned and his lower body throbbed and stung. He did not think blood had been drawn. *One word from you and he will have Tharril killed. Say nothing, do nothing. You have done too much already.*

"My son once told me that you put on airs," said Satu. "We will have no more of that. The next time you behave in this manner, I will give you to all the guards at once, and then brand you and sell you for whatever coin you can fetch. That is all, you may go."

Biting his lip against his discomfort, Erred pulled on his clothing and left the chamber with as much dignity as he could muster. He stopped in the bathing room to wash and apply ointment to the tender skin.

In his room, he curled up in the corner next to his shrine and brooded. It was not the physical lashing or even being used that humiliated him, but Satu's laughter. The master could afford to laugh so only at someone who was utterly powerless.

Everything he did had turned back on him threefold. His punishment had not been severe, but for Tharril he had only made the situation worse. *You should know better than to care for him when you cannot even protect him.* He had no idea how to tell his lover what he had done. *If he hates you after this, you will have deserved it.*

Eskil came in the afternoon to drop the pouch and its coins into his lap. "You left these on the floor of the master's study. You cannot forget them."

Erred gave the pouch a disinterested look. "What does money mean to me when I cannot buy what matters to me?" he asked.

"Not even your own freedom?"

"I will never earn enough money to buy my own freedom, and even if I did where could I go? Certainly not back to my own people," said Erred. "It would have been better had the master simply ordered the guard to cut my throat."

"You speak a madness I do not understand, Arqui," answered the steward. "You have your life and you are not to be sold. In fact, you are to go with the master tomorrow when he calls on the High Prince. This is an opportunity for you, and if the prince lies with you it will be a great honor for you and the master both."

When Tharril came at dusk, he sat down on the floor next to Erred and touched his shoulder. "I heard you broke Ehmet's nose," he said.

Erred nodded and hung his head.

"And I heard the master whipped you." Tharril tightened his grip on Erred's shoulder, forcing him to look up. "I didn't ask you to do that for me."

"Tharril, I—" Until that moment, Erred could not decide whether or not he wanted Tharril to know what he had tried to do. "I tried to buy you from him. I have money, coins they give me whenever I lie on my back for someone. The master, he laughed and said because I was a slave I could not own one." His voice started to break and he did not bother to conceal it. "I would have given you your freedom, Tharril."

The tears came and he laid his head against Tharril's bruised shoulder, quietly sobbing until exhaustion overtook him. Outside, night fell on the city. Shadows crossed the room, leaving it in darkness except for the lamp Tharril had brought.

"Erred," Tharril finally murmured, "why are you crying?"

"Because I just remembered that I am a slave."

Tharril sighed. "I wouldn't have taken my freedom unless you came with me."

Lady, I do not deserve his understanding. I have only made his life worse. "That is not the end of it, Tharril. He intends to let Ehmet have you again." Knowing his lover would rebuff him once he knew, Erred slowly pulled out of his embrace. "I was a fool. I should not have done anything, but it is too late and now I cannot undo it."

"He could kill me and the master wouldn't do anything about it."

"If he does, I will put a knife in him myself."

Tharril seized him hard by the shoulders and spun him about. "What, and kill yourself afterward? How is that going to help either one of us? Tell me, where is your goddess now, Erred? Don't you see, it doesn't matter what anybody does to me, I'm just a cheap laborer and an even cheaper fuck, but if they can do this to you then there *aren't* any gods in this place."

Erred raised a hand to slap him, only at the last moment realizing what he was about to do. "I did not *want* to care about you. I never meant for it to happen," he said harshly. "It is dangerous for a slave to love anything more than his own life. I tried to be a man and forgot I was a slave."

"You should not have done that for me. It wasn't worth it." The anger slowly drained from Tharril's face, leaving untainted fear. "Erred, what am I going to do tomorrow?" he whispered.

"I have been thinking," said Erred. "I will have Eskil ask the master if Ehmet can have me instead, the way he intended. No matter how angry the man is, he cannot truly hurt me. If he could have, he would have hit me today."

Even before he was finished, Tharril was shaking his head. "You don't know how rough he is, and how much it hurts when he—"

"He would not be the first man to be rough with me, Tharril. He will slap and pinch me. He will use profanity and not enough oil," replied Erred. "The master already does

these things. I have learned how to prepare for men like that."

From below, the strains of music began drifting up toward the upper stories, faint at first then growing in volume. Recognizing the music, Erred turned his head to listen. It was the accompaniment for the *suhtara*. Satu must have called on Marsu to perform for him. "Tharril," he said quietly, "go sit on the bed. Whatever happens, do not touch me or yourself until I tell you."

"I don't understand...."

"It will be all right." Erred gently nudged him toward the bed. "Go sit down and watch what I do."

Despite the early winter chill, he opened the fretted screen and undid the shutters to better hear the music. He recognized the movement as one he had practiced many times before.

"Erred, what are you doing?" asked Tharril. "It's freezing in here."

"It just occurred to me that you have never seen me dance." Taking his position in the center of the floor, Erred began to move in time with the slow, sensual beat of the drums and kithara. Unlike the *rendé*, in which the dancer simulated the heat of lust, the *suhtara* was an impassioned declaration of love for another, the moment in which the lover bared his or her hidden desire to the beloved.

His body swayed, his hair fanning out behind him like a veil as he slowly began to undo the clasps of his robe. The music moved him, transported him out of his aching body. No

one else existed in that small space, only himself, the music and the one to whom he gave the dance.

He heard Tharril's indrawn breath and, pivoting slowly to peer over his shoulder at his lover, saw his lips part in amazement. The last clasp came undone, the silk slid off his shoulders like a wisp of air, leaving his body bare.

Erred, still swaying to the music, let his hands roam his torso, lingering over nipples that had hardened in the cool air before venturing lower. He locked eyes with his lover, inviting him to accept his passion and consummate their love.

Shut away in the meanness of the slave quarters, surrounded and used by rough men who knew no art, Tharril would never have seen anything like this. Where he had starved, Erred offered him a feast.

"Please.... "Tharril's eyes were dark and shining with need. He knotted his hands into fists, shoving them under his thighs to keep from touching himself.

Erred extended his hand, and when Tharril took it, he pulled his lover into his embrace.

Tharril twined his arms around his back and met his kiss with the same hunger. "Erred," he whispered, "I lo—"

Not wanting to hear those damning words, Erred silenced him with his mouth. "No, Tharril. Slaves cannot do that."

"Yes, they can."

Erred dropped kisses along his jaw. "You will only hurt yourself."

"I don't care."

They moved in the dance together, devouring each other with their mouths. When the music ended, they were still

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kissing. Their bodies twined together on the bed, where they remained oblivious to everything save the feel of each other's lips and bare skin.

Fifteen

The High Prince enjoyed good music and poetry as much as any of his courtiers, and though he judged the *akesh's* skills only passing in proficiency it was not the young man's playing that kept him observing him for so long. The figure kneeling with his kithara at the edge of the carpet was lost in a world of his own devising, oblivious to the royal splendor around him. It intrigued Thanaj enough to distract him from his work.

When courtiers brought their *akeshi* before him hoping to gain his favor, more often than not the young man or woman had been carefully coached to be as ingratiating as possible. Had their masters been more perceptive, they would have realized long ago that such tactics never worked with a High Prince whose first act of office had been to execute the concubines and *akeshi* whose harem conspiracy had killed his father.

And had this slave shown the slightest interest in advancing his owner's cause, he would have found a challenge in a client not easily swayed by a beautiful face. Thanaj knew perfectly well that the young man's master hungered for royal patronage. Satu ked Menteith was one of those newly rich merchants who had not cultivated grace with his wealth. He still had the manners of the olive tender's son he was, and was as vulgar as a common panderer, making no apologies in offering his exquisite slave to the High Prince for an afternoon's enjoyment.

A true nobleman would not have presumed upon his host's desire or ability to find gratification within his own household. Thanaj kept two well-cultured *akeshi* whose affability and art were quite sufficient to satisfy him, and this one's coloring was far too light to appeal to one who preferred a dark complexion in his bedmates. Of course, he moved beautifully, with a somber grace one usually did not find in one so young, but he did not inspire the lust his master was counting on.

Thanaj meant to do as he often did, watch the *akesh* at his music or dance, claim a kiss at the end as a token of service rendered and send him back to his master with his compliments. He did not make a practice of touching the property of another nobleman even when freely offered. In the meantime, the kithara was a soothing accompaniment to the many documents he had yet to read, and Satu's formal application was couched with so much legal verbiage it made his head ache.

Halfway down the first page, the kithara gave an unseemly twang, and he lifted his head to see what was amiss. The young man was clearly distressed by the slip of his plectrum and fumbled to correct it. Perhaps he expected to be beaten for the mishap.

Thanaj put down the scroll and shifted the lightweight writing table and its implements aside to make room on the divan. Gesturing to the attendant eunuchs, he dismissed them from the chamber before addressing the *akesh*. "Come here, Arquí," he said.

Still holding the kithara, the young man rose gracefully to his feet and approached. His eyes were fixed on the carpet

before him; the eunuchs responsible for debriefing guests would have instructed him that no one was permitted to look a High Prince in the face unless given leave. "Did I displease you, my lord?" he murmured. He had a foreign accent, lilting but not unpleasant to the ear.

"No, I am not displeased with you, Arquí. Put down your instrument and sit beside me."

Setting the kithara down on the floor, Arquí warily climbed onto the divan and knelt among the cushions. "I have played four songs for you, my lord, and yet you have not touched me."

"Is that what I am to do with you, then? You may look at me when you answer."

Arquí hesitantly lifted his gaze. Although his hair was the color of pearl, his eyes were a deep brown. He was beardless, yet in his shoulders and the narrowness of his hips he had the fullness of a grown man's physique. How old he might truly be was a mystery. "My master said I was to please you," he said. "By this time in his house you would have had me already."

Against his usual preferences, Thanaj could not help but be drawn to the exotic creature before him. In agreeing to hear Satu's petition, he had indulged his curiosity by instructing the merchant to bring the white-haired slave whose charms he had been hearing about for months. Perhaps, he realized, this reflected a lapse of judgment on his part. The young man was not beautiful according to the classic standard, and he made no attempt to be alluring, yet the very air around him was intoxicating.

There is some sorcery here, though I know not what it is. His instincts urged caution even as his body stirred with arousal. "We are not in your master's house," he said. "Do you wish me to touch you?"

"My lord, I am yours to lie with if you wish it." Without waiting for his client's command, Arquí stood and his fingers reached for the clasps that held his robe closed. From his demeanor, there was no doubt that in his master's house the word was always the same and that the men to whom he was given did not wait to take their pleasure.

Thanaj stopped him with a hand around his wrist. Even with his own *akeshi*, it was not his way to take a frightened or unwilling partner into his bed. Mastery did not hold for him the gratification it held for others.

"I wish to uncover you with my own hands," he said. Undoing the four silver clasps, he pushed back the blue-green silk until it slid from Arquí's body to pool on the carpet. "Lie beside me. I will not hurt you."

Arquí settled back onto the cushions beside him with a flawless compliance, though Thanaj read in him no eagerness to be touched. Through the spy he had planted in Satu's household, he knew enough about the merchant's sexual perversions to know Arquí was simply waiting for the command to assume the desired position.

If so, this one would have to be patient. Thanaj liked to take his time about his pleasure, and was rarely roused to a swift climax. For now he wished to only to touch, to explore this new lover's nuances before tasting him more fully. Lovemaking was an art as worthy of appreciation as

calligraphy or music, and in its highest form it espoused shared ecstasy; Thanaj regretted that such a lovely creature was bound to a household where that was not understood.

As he began lightly stroking and kissing his lover, Thanaj could see further proof of how ignorant of high culture Satu was. All along the flesh of the young man's thighs were the streaks left by a willow lash. Thanaj already knew how the merchant's *akeshi* were disciplined from the moment they entered the household. He had never been able to comprehend what pleasure Satu could possibly find in whipping expensive slaves or allowing his guards to despoil them.

That this one was fresh from such treatment was only too clear, and that Satu would think to foist such ruined goods on his prince and think him crude enough to enjoy it infuriated Thanaj to the verge of smothering his desire.

Sensing some reticence, Arqui stiffened in Thanaj's arms. Genuine fear clouded his eyes. "I do not please you?" he asked.

Yes, you please me, and I do not know why. Desire and confusion, a heady combination, warred within him. Thanaj could not answer save with his need. Pliant limbs twined around his, yielding to the kiss.

Thanaj pulled back long enough to study the body lying under him, his long white hair fanning out over the deep red cushions. From the moment he had appeared in the audience chamber, veiled and silent at his master's side, the young man's regal bearing had been plain to see. Wherever he had

come from, he was not of low birth. "What manner of creature are you?"

"I am my master's *akesh*, my lord."

"But what were you before that? I know what they call you in his house, yet I do not believe you are made of snow."

Sadness filled the young man's eyes. When he responded, his voice was very low, a nearly imperceptible whisper. "I was a *talevé*, servant of the Lady of the Waters."

Thanaj did not know which goddess this was. His informant had told him the young man had been taken on a raid in eastern Shivar and spent his private moments in prayer and meditation. It was not inconceivable that he might have been a priest in a Shivarian temple before his capture.

Arqui reached between their bodies to fumble with jeweled buttons of Thanaj's robe, managing to undo the first two before Thanaj grasped his hand and pinned it to the cushions. He pressed his lips to the pulse that beat warmly under his touch. "In time," he said. "When a High Prince takes a lover to his bed, he does not rut like some beast of the field, he makes love. It is time you saw the difference."

As they began to explore each other, Thanaj soon realized that Arqui understood the difference between sex and making love; he was simply unaccustomed to enjoying the latter. At the end, half-dazed by the afterglow of passion, he smiled, a slight parting of the lips that was not the self-satisfied smirk *akeshi* oftentimes wore after a successful coupling.

Thanaj sent him back to his master with a compliment, the customary geld and a message that Satu's request had been received amicably.

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All that evening, the High Prince sat alone in his chambers with a book of poetry upon his lap as the slaves lit the oil lamps in the shadows behind him. He was a man who enjoyed music and verse as extensions of his own passionate nature, and with his concubines and *akeshi*, and the long-dead princess whose memory was as sweet to him as the night-blooming *yandi*, he had been as much poet as lover.

These were well-worn texts which sang the praises of lush, ebony-haired beauties and youths in the first bloom of their manhood with bottoms like firm peaches, of laughter between lovers and utterances of longing, but in them a man would find neither explanation nor remedy for the enchantment of a white-haired beauty lying beneath him like a broken dove.

* * * *

Usha was downcast and clearly not the mood for lovemaking, yet Erred feared the master's anger too much not to touch him. "I am sorry, my lord," he said, kneeling at the edge of the carpet, "but he has ordered me to do this."

In his rage over the scheming that would deprive him of his youngest son, and doubly infuriated by Usha's own complicity in the matter, Satu had sent for Erred and ordered him to give Usha the thing the young man had initially begged him for. "If he wants a cock up his backside so badly," he muttered, "then let him have it while he is still in my house. Perhaps then he will realize it is not so good to be a priest."

Erred was aghast. "My lord, you are ordering me to touch a free man and a prince in a forbidden manner. Is it your will that I soil him?"

"The boy is determined to soil himself anyway." When Erred did not move from his place on the carpet, Satu glared at him. "Do you dare defy me?"

Satu's mood was such that Erred knew if he refused or hesitated, the master could easily redirect his violent temper at him. Being ordered to deflower Usha was not so terrible when one considered that Usha himself had wanted it, but the thought of what Satu might do or say to him when he came to his senses and realized it was his own son who had been used in this manner made Erred hesitate.

"No, my lord," he answered, and quickly touched his forehead to the floor. "I will do as you command."

On his way back to his room to prepare, Erred knocked on Marsu's door. "I know that you have toys," he said to the other *akesh*. "I wish to borrow one for a few hours."

Marsu licked his lips. "If you are looking for that sort of pleasure," he purred, "then I can give you the real thing right now."

"I am not going to use it on myself," Erred said irritably. "There is a certain client who wishes to be pleased this way and I do not have one of my own."

Long fingers reached out to caress Erred's cheek. "And what will you give me return for this little favor?"

"I will pay you coin out of my own coffer."

Marsu shook his head. "Ah, but silver is a very lonely thing when it isn't accompanied by your body." He smiled before

adding, "Perhaps you might bring your little laborer as well, if he is pretty and clean enough."

Erred restrained the urge to strike him. Marsu breathed sex as if nothing else existed. "I will pay my debt to you this afternoon," he said.

Usha greeted him with tears and an embrace that was much too tight. "Father whipped me, did you know?" he whispered. "And then he threatened to have one of the guards take me, and I am afraid he really means to do it. I cannot wait until the priests come for me, and yet they say I must be patient."

"They will come, my lord."

"He said I was an unnatural son who shamed him." Usha's eyes glistened with fresh tears; he quickly wiped them away with the back of his hand. "He said I deserved to be used like an animal."

"It is all right," murmured Erred, stroking his hair. "He will not give you to his guards. He has sent me to do it instead."

Stiffening, the young man pulled away from him, his lips forming the word that neither of them spoke.

It was clear to Erred that Usha's wanting to be taken had been one thing when Usha initiated the sex, but to be told it would happen with or without his consent was quite another.

Erred took him by the hand and led him to the bed, kissing away his protests once they were among the cushions. "Now listen to me. I will not hurt you," he said. "I will not even enter you. The law forbids it, and your father will remember that once his anger passes."

"He is watching, I know he is." Usha clutched his robe to his body when Erred would have undone the sash. "I cannot do this with him watching."

Leaning into his partner's neck, Erred nibbled at the warm, soft skin below his earlobe. "He was watching us before, my lord," he whispered. "He always watches. Ignore him."

"I do not understand, Arqui." Still holding his robe closed, Usha withdrew from the embrace. "If you do not intend to be inside me, then how can you possibly do what he commands?"

"Your father said you were to be penetrated. He did not say how. Here, I will show you." Erred took out the toy he had borrowed from Marsu and showed it to him. It was an ivory phallus. Somewhat smaller and thinner than a real member, it would slide in quite easily once it was oiled and his partner properly stimulated. "This is one of the many toys *akeshi* sometimes use. It is the only way I can obey your father and the law at the same time."

Usha looked at the object, moistening his lips with his tongue in mingled fear and fascination. "It will hurt," he said.

"Not as much as you think. You may use it on me first if you like." Erred took his hand and kissed it, turning it over to tease his palm with his tongue. Usha's breath caught, his lips parting as Erred's lips slid up to his wrist and lapped at his pulse. "Do you remember how much you enjoyed having my fingers inside you? Lie still and let me pleasure you."

* * * *

"I have heard rumors," said Marsu, "that the High Prince is looking to buy you."

Erred sipped the juice a slave had brought them. "Where do you hear such things?"

"Eskil's assistants have loose tongues. They pass it along to the servants, and I overhear what they say," answered Marsu. "So is it true?"

By all accounts, the High Prince had been very impressed with him. Once their business was finished, Satu had offered Erred to his prince for an afternoon's entertainment. Erred attended the ruler of Tajhaan in private, pouring his wine and playing upon the kithara. The prince was a skilled lover, and the session was far more pleasant than Erred had expected.

Other than the exalted rank of the client, Erred thought nothing of the encounter afterward, even when a golden armlet was sent to him in appreciation. "I do not know," he said. "That is for the master to say."

"If he has any say in it at all." Marsu frowned, contemplating the liquid in his cup before drinking. "He hasn't been in a good mood for days. I gave him a massage this morning, yet it didn't relax him. But tell me, was the young master delighted with the toy I loaned you?"

"How did you know who my client was?" he asked.

Marsu laughed at his surprise. "It wasn't difficult to guess. The entire household knows what the master wanted you to do, and we all know the young master is a boy-lover who has wanted it up the backside ever since he was thirteen. You gave it to him, didn't you?"

With much foreplay, Usha had relaxed enough to let Erred use the ivory phallus on him, and with enough stimulation he had enjoyed it. Still, Erred had left Usha's bedchamber feeling unclean and shaken. He had not wanted any part of this father-son quarrel, and now felt trapped between them. "I did what the master told me to do."

"In a matter of speaking, yes, but I still wouldn't want to be your position now." Marsu set aside his cup and, giving Erred a predatory smile, beckoned to him. "Now I believe you owe me a favor, and here you have been eating and drinking in my room for the past hour and still you haven't touched me."

They lay together for the rest of the afternoon, quietly talking and playing *peji* afterward. When Erred finally excused himself and returned to his room, Tharril was already sitting on the floor waiting for him. He had a hurt look in his eyes that did not leave even when Erred drew him up and kissed him. "You were with the other *akesh*, weren't you?" he asked. "I heard you two together."

Jealousy had never been part of their relationship. Erred was stunned to hear it now, especially when Tharril had been told outright that he sometimes slept with Marsu. "I owed him a favor, Tharril," he said. "I borrowed something very important from him and I promised him payment."

"But you have money, Erred. You have jewels and other fine things. You don't have to sleep with him, too."

Taking him by the hand, Erred guided him to the bed where they could sit down. "You do not understand. An *akesh* cannot show disrespect by giving away the gifts he receives

from his master or others, and Marsu refused to accept my coin without sex. It happens sometimes among *akeshi*, but it means nothing. I have told all of this to you this before. Why are you so unhappy now?"

He looked away. "I don't know," he replied. "I hate the thought of others touching you. When I picture you with them, I always think of the way Ehmet and the other guards use me. I hate it that you have to give your body to them. And I hate it that I let you take my punishment. If I'd been a man at all, I never would have let you do it."

"Tharril, you are forgetting that in this place you are *not* a man. You are a slave. I forgot myself once and look what happened. You did nothing that needed punishment," said Erred. "I was the one who struck Ehmet."

"And *I* was the one who stood by and let you do this! They punished you enough without your having to go to him." Tharril made a visible effort to rein in his anger. "The entire household knows how Ehmet used you. How can you not hate what they do to you? How can you take it so calmly?"

The truth was, it was an act of will that was sometimes very difficult to maintain. Erred had humbled himself before Satu and gone to Ehmet because there was no other choice.

He tried not to think or feel too much, knowing that his hate of those men was a cancer that would consume him if he did. Love only sharpened those emotions. It would have been better for them both for him to turn Tharril away, to forget him, only that he did not know how. "In this world, there are things you cannot change. You do not have to like them, but

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you are a slave and if you want to live then you must accept them."

* * * *

"I have decided," said Satu, "that you are too much preoccupied with this laborer who shares your bed at night. Therefore, I am going to sell him."

Erred's ears burned with the announcement. He had thought himself above surprise or shame, yet this shook him to the point where he could not be certain if he had truly heard it. "My lord," he said in a trembling voice, "I have always been your obedient servant. I have always come to you willingly, whenever you summon me."

Satu stared at him from across the writing desk. "You say you are obedient and eager, yet your heart is given to this common filth," he said. "You behave foolishly, attempting to buy him and striking free men who have the right to use him."

"Yes, my lord, and you have punished me for it. I have since learned the error of my ways."

This statement was greeted with skepticism. "Have you, Arqui? Sometimes I think you are still defiant, though you may put on a contrite face. I have always said that *akeshi* are the worst actors in the world, and wherever I turn there is the proof of it. You think you are so clever, finding a loophole in my order to fuck my son. When I tell you to do something, you *do* it exactly as I tell you!"

Erred prostrated himself again, holding the position for a full minute before rising. "My lord, I am a slave and he is a free man. The law—"

Had he been kneeling within reach, Satu probably would have slapped him, so taut was the tension in the air. "In my house, the law is whatever I wish it to be!"

"My lord, he is your son. Once your anger passed—"

"My anger is not *going* to pass, not for that kind of betrayal, and it is not for a slave to instruct me in what is proper. I pay my stewards for that. My son has spit on the good breeding I have given him. Like his brothers, he has turned his back on me, and I will not tolerate such ingratitude from my own seed."

Pressing his hand over his heart, Erred bowed low a third time. "My lord, if I displease you then take the lash to me."

"And ruin your lovely back? I think not," said Satu. "Make no mistake, I wish to keep you in my household, but I will not have this behavior. The servants gossip how you whisper endearments to this lowly laborer. It shames me that when I offer you a gift for your service to the High Prince you would choose to take this slave's punishment and so shamelessly give your body for him when you do not do the same for your own master."

Erred would have expected such an outburst from Arjha, but not from Satu. "My lord, you have never desired such things from me. I had no idea that you desired anything other than my obedience."

"All those who should have loved me have turned away from me," hissed Satu. Spittle flew from his lips. His eyes

narrowed, crazed and unfocused. "One son is dead and another betrays me with the priests. My other sons try to poison me. My wives, what are they with their useless, empty chatter? Now the High Prince sends word that he desires my *akesh*, only he is not worth the eighteen thousand *menar* I paid for him but is some common *bakti* who shows his backside to whatever filth he can get."

So it was true, there was the real possibility of his being sold to another master. "My lord, you desired me to take that slave." Erred kept his voice very soft and calm, trying not to provoke Satu any further. "You ordered him to my bed. I obeyed and took him."

Satu's eyes blazed with the promise of violence. One wrong word, one misstep, and he could lash out. "You were meant to *use* him, not *love* him! Love is a poison that brings only misery. You should have learned that by now. I am selling this slave. You will not see him again."

"My lord, I did only as you ordered."

"And now I am ordering you to forget him," said Satu. "It is for your own good."

Erred was shaking by the time he was allowed to return to his room. Once the door closed, he dropped to his knees before the shrine and tried to meditate. It was like trying to stop a mortal wound with air. Before his capture, he had not known what love was, until Satu had given him his heart and tore it away he had not even known he was bleeding to death.

Satu's rage had little to do with him and everything to do with Usha, who had departed for the temple of Aben that

morning. Father and son had exchanged hard words in the atrium, in front of Eskil and half a dozen horrified servants before Usha turned his back on Satu and left with the priests.

Half an hour later, the gossip had permeated all corners of the house. Usha had a cut lip, bruises on his wrists and upper arms, and such venom in his eyes that no one ever remembered seeing in so gentle a young man. Other whispers came to the *akesh* quarters, falling from Marsu's lips before Erred could silence him, telling of a late-night visitor from the house garrison, and muffled noises from the young master's chamber.

"If he couldn't get a slave to do it," said Marsu, letting his eyes slide meaningfully toward Erred, "there's no lack of free men who'd do it for money."

That afternoon, Erred came within an inch of splitting his lip. No one needed to explain that Satu punished not only his son but anyone associated with his defection. Certainly it was not necessary to gloat over Satu's horrific methods of vengeance. *You are fortunate all he intends to do is sell Tharril. It could have been worse, much worse.*

Knowing this did not lessen his pain. Satu had sold Jasil to a cruel and physically repulsive master purely out of spite. Now that his anger was roused, he was capable of doing far worse. Tharril could easily end up in a quarry or some other labor camp where servitude was a death sentence.

His own discretion and a prayer to the Lady were all Erred could accomplish now, yet he could not focus his attention on the shrine long enough to get through the ritual formulas when all he could think of was Tharril's reaction when he was

informed that he was to be sold, when he was told that he could not see his lover again. Erred would not be there to comfort him.

Images of Tharril fighting the guards and being beaten or worse ran through his mind. He covered his face with his hands to try to banish them.

Eskil came in at dusk to ask if he required a physician. "The servants say you do not eat and that you have lain here on the floor all day."

Erred turned his face to the wall.

"I have heard that the master is to sell the little laborer who shares your bed." The steward gathered his robes under him and sat down beside Erred. "Do not think that you have been singled out for punishment. It has been a trying day for us all, even the master. He is terribly unhappy; he does not say outright, of course, but I see it. All his life he has worked hard, clawed his way from poverty to great wealth, and for what? Arjha is dead and his brothers are all scheming, ungrateful wretches. Usha was all that remained. The master was fond of him and had great hopes for him. What is left for him, now that Usha is gone?"

"I am not to blame for what happened," murmured Erred.

"You must turn your thoughts to the good, Arquí. Even had he not decided to sell this slave, you would have had to give him up. Messages have come from the palace. An offer has been made," said Eskil.

So the rumor was confirmed. Erred was not at all surprised. The day before, a gift of perfumed oil had been sent along with a note stating how much the prince desired to

have Erred in his bed again. Erred had fallen to his knees before the messenger and praised the High Prince's generosity before protesting that he did not require such gifts to give pleasure, and that he could not displease his current master by receiving them.

Eskil had secretly coached Erred in what response to give, and indicated that such a passionate refusal would enflame the High Prince's desire. The steward had not considered that Erred truly did not want the gift, and that his rejection of it had nothing to do with furthering his ambitions.

"You are off to better things," said Eskil, "and for this you must smile and be grateful. I say this not merely for your own good, but for the master's as well. It will reflect poorly on him if the High Prince is not pleased with you."

Erred had to wonder if Eskil truly acted according to their master's wishes or if such tactics reflected the steward's own ambitions. Like other slaves, most *akeshi* were rarely sold for a profit, and considering what Satu had originally paid he would stand to gain very little if the High Prince decided to appropriate his *akesh*.

Whatever game Eskil was playing, Erred had little interest in the outcome. "I do not think the master wishes to sell," he said.

"When faced with the wishes of one's prince, a man does not always have the luxury of refusing," answered Eskil. "Still, Thanaj is a fair businessman and is not known to take without offering handsome compensation. Should you be sold, the master will come off very well by it, I think. Now as for this slave of yours, I will do what I can to see that he goes to a

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good household, but you must put him from your thoughts. It is not good for your health to grieve so much."

After the steward left, Erred crawled into bed and tried to reconcile himself to spending the night alone; Eskil had told him that Tharril would not be sent to him again. For an hour or more, he stared blandly at the shadows cast on the wall by the fretted screen before falling into a restless sleep.

In the deep of night, pain suddenly thrust him back into consciousness. His limbs convulsed and his body arched off the bed even as he opened his eyes. Gasping for air, he tried to fight the panic that came with the sensation of another body trying to tear itself loose from him.

No, not this, he thought. *Please, Lady, not now*. In the desert, so far from the sea, he had believed the *ki'iri* spirit in him had become dormant, but the bone-deep spasms and breathlessness told him it was awake and struggling to emerge. A *hrill*, dying of thirst in a dry land. Terror stabbed at him, forcing him out of bed where he fell into a heap on the carpet before managing to crawl to the door.

Erred managed to get the door open, but the hallway was dark and empty. Marsu's room was just across the corridor; he might make it that far. He only hoped that the other *akesh* had not been called to Satu's bed.

He inched forward another foot before another convulsion seized him and he lost consciousness.

* * * *

When they told him, he could only shake his head at the obvious stupidity of the priests. "I have only been to the sea

once," he informed them, "and that was when I was a child. I have never even seen a hrill."

His princely arrogance, which he had made no attempt to lose in the nine months he had been in the Blue House, did not particularly impress the priests, who at once set about correcting his misinformation. "The hrill-gift is not restricted to those talevé living in the coastal regions. It is given by the Lady to those whom She wills, for reasons only She may divine."

"Surely there must be some mistake," he argued. "As I said, I have only seen the sea once. There must be some ki'iri spirit that better suits me."

The ki'iri master fixed him with a disapproving glare. "You are not given a choice, and the visions never lie."

"And when I have to transform and there is no ocean for the hrill to be released in, what will I do then?"

* * * *

The physicians hovered over him, prodding and shifting his body while he tried to lie very still to keep the pain at bay. They lifted his eyelids and opened his mouth to peer at his gums and smell his breath, searching for signs of poison while a bewildered Eskil looked on.

Erred did not have the breath to speak, either to tell them to leave him alone or to tell them what was truly wrong with him. If one of the eunuchs had been Shivarian, he could have whispered a single word to the man and he would have understood.

"Is he dying?" asked the steward.

Yes, thought Erred, *I am dying*. For he knew that unless his *ki'iri* spirit was released into the living sea his mortal flesh would not be able to contain it.

"I do not know, sir," said the eunuch. "There is no sign of poison that we see, and there is no evidence of illness unless this is some malady peculiar to his kind. The guards have questioned the other *akesh*, but he has said nothing."

Erred was alert enough by now to realize that they were talking about Marsu. Whenever an *akesh* or concubine became inexplicably ill, poison was always suspected, and his or her rivals were always the first to be interrogated. That the interrogation might involve torture did not cross his fogged mind at that moment.

Gathering his breath, he managed to whisper the word *ki'iri*, but the eunuchs responded with uncomprehending looks.

"What does he say?" asked Eskil.

"Sir, he has spoken only his native tongue since we found him," answered one. "Perhaps if we call a slave who speaks his language, he can tell us what his ravings mean."

A Shivarian slave was brought and made to kneel beside the bed until Erred managed to get the word out again. Then he closed his eyes, trembling and exhausted, as the man hastily tried to explain to the steward and the physicians what a *ki'iri* was.

The next thing he knew, the man bent next to him again, hesitantly touching his hand and asking what *ki'iri* spirit he had. When he could get enough breath, he whispered *hrill*.

He heard the slave speaking to Eskil, but did not hear the steward's reaction. Already he was drifting away from himself, into a place that muffled all sight and sound. Wetness on his brow startled him out of his haze. Someone had laid a damp cloth on his forehead, and the feel of the water revived him enough to tell the physicians to bring a bowl of water mixed with salt and bathe him with it. The remedy had been used by the priests to keep him comfortable during the trip from Altarme to the sea.

Eskil sat down on the stool beside him. "You have suffered this ailment before?"

Erred licked dry lips. A slave at once moistened them with a wet cloth. "The *hrill* in me wants out," he said. "It must have water."

"There is a lake on the High Prince's property," said the steward. "Perhaps we might be able to—"

"No, it must be the sea, the living sea. A *hrill*, it is not a freshwater animal."

Eskil tugged at his beard. The slave returned with a cup of water, and the steward was quiet as Erred drank. "The nearest port is Akkil, and it is a ten day march across the desert. You cannot expect to be taken there."

"The salt water will keep me alive for a while, but I will die if I do not reach the sea." Erred closed his eyes. Already his slight strength was failing. "If the master does not wish it, then tell him to send someone in here to finish me. Otherwise, my death will be long and painful and I will go mad before the end."

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He slept fitfully, shivering under the slight blanket while a slave sat beside him and regularly applied a salt water compress. *Hrill* called to him in his dreams, yet when he tried to reach them his way was barred by a wall of sand and phallus-shaped stakes on which were impaled the bodies of other *talevé*. The stakes drove into his flesh as he pushed them aside and his feet could not find purchase on the sliding dune. He sank, gasping for breath as his body began to merge with the sand, tiny grains mixing with the dune until it turned to glass and smothered him.

Satu came to see him the following morning. He stood over the bed with his arms crossed over his chest, and Erred could see he was not pleased. "If I send you to the sea, you will be well again?" he asked. "It is such an effort for one slave, perhaps it is not worth the bother."

"Then kill me," said Erred.

"This animal in you, tell it to leave."

Erred shook his head. "I cannot do that. The *hrill* and I are one being. That is what it means to have a *ki'iri* spirit. If you want me to be well and eager for your bed, I must bathe in the sea for one day to release the *hrill*. If not, then give me a knife and I will end it myself."

Satu laughed, but the utterance was short and bitter. "You cannot even sit up," he snorted. "Already I have spent too much money on you, and I will not waste more by sending you to Akkil."

"Then it is decided," said Erred. "Send a guard in here to finish me."

Where Erred expected him to send for an executioner, Satu wavered. "You are not so beautiful now in this state, and it is too much expense for a mere *akesh*. I will think on this."

When Satu left, Erred shut his eyes and pondered all the possible outcomes. He honestly did not think Satu would agree to send him out of the city or do anything else for him except watch him die. Whatever release he found would have to come from his own hand.

He seized the wrist of the slave attending him. "A knife, bring me a knife...."

Wide-eyed, the man fled. When the slave returned, he came empty-handed, with Eskil following close behind him.

"I am told you are trying to end your life," said the steward. "This is foolishness. What the master said before, he was toying with you. He must ensure that you live. You will be taken to the sea, if this is what is required for your health."

"Why would he do such a thing?" asked Erred.

"Because you are to be sold to the High Prince." Eskil moved aside so the slave could sit with the basin and bathe Erred's brow. "The transaction has already been carried out, so the master has no choice now. He is already making arrangements to send you to Akkil."

Sixteen

The journey to the sea was a blur of light and motionless air. Even in winter, the desert was warm, and Erred quickly became dehydrated. A veiled eunuch rode in the wagon with him and regularly bathed his face and hands with a cloth soaked in salt water.

Satu, riding a camel at the head of the column, was unapproachable in his foul mood. Why he undertook this journey himself, Erred did not know and no one could tell him. He thought that the soldiers escorting the master's party might have something to do with it; they wore the leopard skin kilts of the High Prince's personal guard. Their captain frequently looked in on Erred, shaking his head before letting the curtains of the wagon fall back into place.

At night in their small tent, Erred instructed the eunuch to arrange his cot near the flap where he could feel the cool air on his face. He did not know his attendant's name, but the eunuch was his constant companion, patiently helping him relieve himself, feeding him by hand when he could not manage, and cleaning the mess he made when he could not keep his food down.

He drifted in and out of consciousness to the gentle rocking of the wagon. The leather canopy and opaque curtains filtered out the harsh desert sun, but even the muted light was too much for his eyes; he gestured to the eunuch to cover them with the compress. Obeying, the eunuch then lay down beside him, soothing his limbs with salt water and

caresses when they twitched. A muffled voice assured him that the journey would soon be over, though after the fourth day he had stopped counting how many more it would take to reach the sea.

Once he reached the ocean, he would wade out into the surf and know a few hours of freedom in the body of a *hrill*, but afterward he would be given over to the custody of the High Prince's servants. When he had left Tajhaan, his possessions were already being packed and moved to the palace.

Eskil assured him that the High Prince would be a gentle master. Erred was informed that in the palace he would enjoy more spacious living quarters and even have servants of his own. When word of his illness reached the High Prince, gifts of red meat and wine were dispatched to strengthen his blood, followed by a physician who came to inquire after his health. The man had taken copious notes about Erred's condition and its unusual requirements, asking if there was anything that might ease his discomfort before leaving to make his report.

Naturally, Satu resented the attention being given to the slave who still belonged to him. "So much fuss for some weak-blooded *akesh*," he sneered, "one would think the High Prince was a blushing bridegroom taking his first bride."

With his customary tact, Eskil had pointed out that Satu was making a considerable profit and that his rivals, aware of the honor the High Prince was doing him, now clamoring for his advice on choosing the best *akeshi* for their beds. Satu scoffed at the notion that he had impeccable taste and said

only that Erred did not seem quite as beautiful as he once had.

The steward spent much time at Erred's bedside, assessing his condition and attempting to soothe him with promises of how well favored he would be in his new household. "The High Prince has had only one princess and she is dead," said Eskil. "A few wives he has taken, but I have heard through reputable sources that he has not looked at another with such passion until you caught his eye."

You speak as though the man would make me his wife, as if such a thing were even possible. "I am merely some novelty for him," Erred answered weakly. "He will tire of me."

"That I cannot say," said Eskil, "but you should be glad of going to him. There are far worse masters in the city."

Erred acknowledged the wisdom in the steward's words and knew he was foolish not to rejoice in the prospect of leaving Satu's house. From the beginning, it had been clear that the High Prince was wooing him where it was not required and meant to treat him well. Erred knew he would not be abused in the royal household, yet he only felt a profound weariness at the thought of a future in which he was prized, cosseted and paraded before others.

The sea offered an escape from bondage, even if it was death. Once he waded out into the surf and shed his mortal body, there was nothing to prevent him from swimming away from his tormentors. Of course, he would not have the strength to go very far and he risked being attacked by predators in deeper waters. Even if he reached a safe shore

he would eventually return to his human body and that body would die of exposure.

And yet, he contemplated both of these options, knowing that when he returned to the desert, he would be put back into his silken cage and there he would waste away to the same end. A death of his own choosing, in a body unfettered and untouched by mortal lust appealed to him. The thought that his end might come in the jaws of a predator did not frighten him. Nature's way was quick and without malice.

On the evening of the sixth day, as they made camp in an oasis, the eunuch entered the tent, laid down the basin of water he was carrying and, pushing aside his veil, leaned down to kiss him with hungry lips. "I've wanted to do this for days," whispered a familiar voice, "but I didn't dare until now."

Incredulous, Erred cupped Tharril's face in his hands, touching the lips that moved against his fingertips. "How can you be here? The master, he ... he told me he was going to sell you."

"He *is* going to sell me, but Eskil sent me to look after you. You mustn't let anyone know. They all think I'm a eunuch."

"Tharril, if they find you here, you *will* be one."

For the next few moments, they held each other, exchanging breathless kisses. "You cannot be here," said Erred. The younger man clearly did not comprehend how much danger he had placed himself in, and Erred wanted to box his ears for being so foolish. "If the master finds you, he will kill you. He is not himself, Tharril, he will kill you."

Tharril silenced him with another kiss. "I don't care," he murmured. "When I heard it was your *ki'iri* spirit that was making you sick, I couldn't just leave you."

"Tharril, after this I—"

"It's all right, I know. I saw the guards. They're giving you to the High Prince." Tharril managed an agonized smile. "So you see, it doesn't matter what the master does or doesn't do to me. This is the end."

Clutching his lover to his chest, holding him close, Erred squeezed his eyes shut against the threat of tears. He was no longer alone, yet with Tharril here there was no escape for him. He could not live and he could not die.

* * * *

The distant mewling of gulls alerted Erred to the approaching sea. His body convulsed among the cushions as his senses reawakened to pain. Tharril's hands were on him at once, pinning him down to keep him from falling out of the wagon.

"It's still more than a day away." Tharril quickly pressed the damp cloth to his forehead, but Erred shoved it aside as he began to shiver uncontrollably.

"The Lady—" he gasped. In his mind, a presence had begun to grow. For nearly a day, he felt the Lady of the Waters touching the edges of his consciousness, but he was too weak to reach out to Her.

Tharril huddled beside him, chafing his limbs as he drew the coverlet over them both. When Chiman, the royal captain,

peered in to see what they were doing, Tharril explained that Erred was chilled and he was trying to get him warm again.

A breeze stirred the curtains. Erred lifted his head to feel the coolness on his face; the air tasted of salt and moisture, and the *hrill* in him stirred hungrily. Tharril had told him that they were following a great southern highway toward the port city of Akkil, but as the green of Akkil's farms and orchards became visible in the distance, Satu suddenly veered off onto a smaller road and the way became rougher than it had been.

"I heard him telling that captain that he didn't want everybody in Akkil looking at you," said Tharril. "There's a small bay not far from here, he says."

Erred stroked his arm through the dark robe. "Stay away from him," he whispered. "I do not want him seeing you."

Earlier, Tharril had told him that Satu was accompanying the caravan in order to make certain that the transfer went as it should, for if there should be a mishap along the way before Erred was given over to the High Prince, then he would be blamed for it. "Eskil says you'll go over to the royal guards after you come out of the sea. Until then, you're still the master's property."

The next afternoon, when they stopped to rest in a grove of spongewood trees, Tharril returned to tell him that he had seen the ocean from the cliffs. "I've never seen the sea before," he said. "It's very beautiful. What sort of creature is a *hrill*? I know they're sacred animals, sea creatures, but I've never even seen a picture of one."

"It is the size of a man, but dark and sleek, made for riding the waves," answered Erred.

Tharril squeezed his hand. "I hope to be able to see you as one. Does it hurt when you do it?"

"No, it feels strange at first, but there is no pain."

In the mid-afternoon, Erred was roused from a light sleep as the wagon dipped. When he gripped the frame in panic, Tharril was immediately at his side to tell him that they were going down a switchback trail leading to the sheltered bay. They would be on the beach within the hour.

When he first heard the hissing ebb and surge of the water, Erred mistook it for the wind. The air was pregnant with moisture and the mingled odors of wet sand and salt. So close to the sea, after so long in a dry land, the presence of the water and the Lady was so powerful that it overwhelmed him. Dusk was falling when he stirred again, and he lay in the tent.

Tharril answered his small movements with a cool compress. "Chiman says you have to wait till morning. The tide's come in and it's too dangerous for you to go out now."

Erred peeled the damp cloth off his face and let it drop to the sand. "Tharril, go to the water's edge and bring me real seawater. It hurts being so close and ... and the other water, it is not enough."

He heard Tharril dump the contents of the bowl on the wet sand just outside the tent; his receding footfalls were lost in the crashing surf. Erred managed to sit up and stretch, but felt too weak to do more without help. Tomorrow he would need someone to assist him into the water.

His gaze went to the tent flap. Tharril should have returned by now, unless he had stopped to obtain food and drink;

Erred knew that he did not like to make too many trips at night, especially with Satu's guards abroad. Tharril did not say, but he guessed Ehmet might have been among them.

Erred rubbed his face with both hands and chafed his arms as the pain threatened to return. He was not interested in food, only in the seawater. "Tharril, hurry up, please."

A commotion outside the tent startled him. He heard Satu's raised voice, then a second, muffled one followed by a cry of alarm. Erred moved forward, tumbling off the cot just as the tent flap was thrust aside and Satu entered, pulling someone along behind him.

"It would seem a little mouse is sneaking about the camp where he does not belong." With a triumphant cry that was half-snarl, Satu dragged Tharril forward by the hair. Tharril twisted in his viselike grip, trying to free himself. Tears streamed down his face, and he stifled a grunt of pain as Satu kicked him to his knees.

"Let him go," Erred said shakily.

Satu's eyes gleamed with anger. Turning, he called to someone standing just outside the tent, and as the guard ducked inside, Erred realized it was Ehmet. "I know you have been bored," said Satu. "Here is a little *bakti* for you to use. Do what you like with him, and pass him along to the others when you tire of him."

As Tharril was flung into Ehmet's arms and dragged shouting into the darkness, Erred surged off the cot. Rage gave him strength, but it was not enough for him to pull free when Satu seized him. The other man pinned him to the sand, holding him down and hauling him over onto his back.

Erred clawed at him. "Let him *go!*"

Satu's palm cracked hard across his face. "You will not raise your voice to me!" Spittle landed on Erred's cheek. "I will do with him as I wish, and with you. And I will not hear this nonsense that you *love* him."

His face burned where Satu had slapped him, and he tasted blood on his lip, but neither the physical blow nor the weight of the body on top of him lessened his rage. Wriggling a hand free, he managed to rake his nails across Satu's cheek.

A hand around his throat cut off his air. He saw Satu's fist poised to strike and closed his eyes against the coming blow. It did not come. From outside, a shrill cry overtook the noise of the camp; it was followed by a strangled moan and the laughter of two or three men. Erred felt Satu's grip loosen in response, and he seized the opportunity to throw off the man's weight and stumble to his feet.

Hands closed around his ankle, tripping him so he fell heavily onto his side. Satu was on him at once, flipping him onto his face and tearing at his clothing.

Satu tore off Erred's small clothes, leaving his lower body exposed. Fingers roughly pinched his buttocks. Erred tried to pull away, but the arm that pinned him down was like iron. Already his slight strength failed him. Satu was beyond warning or reason. "If you take me," he gasped, "you will kill me."

The answer he received was pain. Satu pried his legs apart and shoved into him, and Erred's protests ended in a choked cry. He was not prepared for the invasion or the agony of

being taken raw. Satu was tearing him apart, and all he could do was close his eyes and muffle his face in the sand to keep from screaming.

He heard Satu cursing at him, and felt the sting of blows on his buttocks as Satu thrust into him. His vision clouded over, until the pain sent him spiraling into darkness.

When he regained consciousness, he realized that Satu had turned him over onto his back. One hand was closed around his throat, and he could not draw enough breath to scream or remain alert. He felt his life leaving him, and beyond that, at the edges of his fraying awareness, he sensed the Lady's anger.

As unconsciousness seized him again, he welcomed the escape from his body.

He awakened to find himself lying alone amidst the shreds of his clothing. His face and throat were swollen. It hurt to swallow, and he could not feel his lower body at all until he tried to move. Tears came to his eyes as he doubled over; he knew Satu had torn him inside without having to see the blood and dried semen on his thighs and buttocks. More fluid smeared his clothing where Satu had wiped himself clean, and when he managed to move toward the basin of water someone had left, Erred saw that yet more blood spotted the ground where he lay.

Erred bathed his hands, face and thighs with the seawater someone had left him, biting back a groan at the salt sting. No shrine had been set up for him; his silver Lady had been packed with his other things and sent to the palace. All he could do was focus on the ebb and crash of the waves and

ask the Lady for the strength to endure the next few hours. Once his *ki'iri* spirit was released into the sea and satiated, he did not care what became of him.

Movement outside the tent roused him from an uneasy slumber. Ehmet shoved aside the flap and entered, dragging Tharril in by the hair. Flashing Erred a malicious smile, the guard dumped the limp body on the floor of the tent and left.

When Tharril did not stir, Erred bit back his pain and crawled to his side. Turning his lover over, he checked for a pulse; it was faint, but still there. But when he nudged aside the tatters of Tharril's robe to try to revive him, he froze when he saw what Ehmet and the other guards had done to his face.

Someone had taken a brand and slashed it from just below Tharril's right eye to the left corner of his mouth; the implement had cauterized the wound almost instantly and there was very little blood. Erred retrieved the rag from the basin and gently bathed the wound.

The sting of the salt water revived Tharril. He stirred, wincing as he tried to move his legs. Erred pulled up the dark eunuch's robe enough to see the blood on his thighs; he did not investigate further. Anger filled him. Had his *ki'iri* gift not awakened when it had, and had it not been a *hrill*, this would not have happened.

And if you had not been such a lovestruck fool, Tharril, you would have had a chance. "Why did you come?" he hissed. "Why did you do this, Tharril? You fool, he will kill you once they take me away."

Tharril's lips were swollen; the odd movement of his jaw told Erred that it was broken. "I had to see you again," he rasped. It was difficult for him to speak. "I don't care what happens after this."

Erred held him and stroked his hair, careful not to touch his scalp where it had been torn. His skin was cold and moist, his breathing shallow. Shock had taken him to the point where he might not even feel pain. "But *I* care, Tharril. When the tide goes out, they will take me to the water." He bent his head to Tharril's ear. "I do not intend to return."

"You are going to escape?" Tharril smiled as much as his injuries would allow.

"No, I am going to let the sea take me. I am going to give myself to the Lady."

Reaching up, Tharril wrapped bruised arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss; Erred gagged on the stench of burnt flesh even as he kissed Tharril back. "No," breathed Tharril, "you can't do that. My life doesn't matter anymore, it's over, but yours does. Don't ... don't throw your life away for this."

Satu's guards came and took Tharril away a short time later. Hanging between them, Tharril twisted around and caught Erred's gaze. His bloodied lips parted, mouthing the words *I love you*.

Erred held back his tears until Tharril was gone, then sobbed into the sand that still bore the imprint of Tharril's body. Taking up handfuls of sand, he scoured his face with the grit. *I will see you again, Tharril, in the Lady's embrace. I will see you again soon.*

Outside, the sky began to lighten. He lay quietly by the tent flap, drinking in the chill air, and tried to regain his composure. It would not be long before the tide went out. Then they would come for him.

Sitting up, he crawled toward the shreds of his garment, trying to salvage enough to cover his nakedness; if a spare had been packed for him, he did not know where to find it. Once he was in the water, he would shed his clothes, but he was determined to carry out his last journey with whatever dignity his strength would allow.

It was not Satu's guards but the High Prince's soldiers who came for him. Chiman carried a clean robe over one arm and looked disapprovingly at the bruises on his face and thighs as one of his men helped Erred into the garment. Another tried to clean the grit off his face and brush it out of his hair. He shook himself free of the man's rough ministrations. The sea would wash away the sand and blood.

"Do you need to eat or relieve yourself before this ritual?" Chiman asked. He was the darkest man Erred had ever seen, ebony-skinned and broad-shouldered, with heavy brows knit together in perpetual disapproval.

Erred shook his head. There were other rituals that should have been observed, prayers offered up by the priests of the Water, but there was no one among his party who knew the words. It did not matter. He had spoken the prayers himself and knew that the waves had carried them to the Lady.

When the guards moved to lead him from the tent, he was trembling so hard that he could barely stand. Chiman gave him his arm, supporting him as they took slow steps onto the

beach. Moist sand yielded under his feet, cool and welcoming. Morning twilight shadowed the water, but the tide was receding and in the east, beyond the cliffs and switchback trail, sunrise streaked the sky.

Once, he searched the faces of those who had gathered to watch him. Satu, his cheek scratched and his eyes filled with loathing, was there with the guards of his household. Tharril was not among them.

His heart told him that his lover was gone. Tightening his hold on Chiman's arm, Erred paused for breath before forcing himself to continue.

At the water's edge, he fumbled with the ties of his robe. "Help me take it off," he whispered.

Chiman's large hands undid the closings and pulled away the rough linen. Erred shivered at the touch of the morning air; the spray that leapt from the waves and beaded his skin only heightened his anticipation.

Still leaning on Chiman, he extended one hand to the sea and called out in his native tongue a prayer that only Tharril would have been able to understand. "Lady, if ever You loved me, if ever I found favor with You, give me this one small thing." His voice was hoarse, yet all that was in him he gave to the water. "From nothingness I came, and to nothingness I beg you to return me!"

All night he had felt Her anger, a living, formless thing. If She would not take vengeance on those who hurt him, then at least She might release him from his pain.

Chiman helped him into the surf, releasing him and climbing out of the water only when told. The water was cold

enough to sting. His body trembled at the chill while the *ki'iri* spirit within him rejoiced at the feel of the living sea and yearned for complete immersion. Patches of dark pelt erupted on his skin and gravity dragged him down toward the water. Gritting his teeth, he plunged into the water and let his limbs fuse together.

When he surfaced, he was wearing the sleek, seal-like body of a *hrill*. On the beach, the onlookers cautiously edged toward the surf to get a better look at him; he slapped the water with his tail, splashing those who came too close. Whistling at the others, he dived once more and left them far behind as he headed out beyond the waves.

There were no other *hrill* with which to swim. In Sirilon, pods of *hrill* were regular visitors to the harbor, frolicking in the wake of the fishing sloops and mercantile vessels, clicking insistently when the fishermen were too slow to toss them the leavings of the day's catch, but these foreign waters were empty save for a few scattered schools of fish.

Once in his *hrill* body, Erred had not realized that he would be at its mercy. While he wanted release, crying out with a voice no longer capable of human speech, it exulted in its freedom. Its instinct for life was far greater than his desire for oblivion, and when it dominated him, his wishes were stifled.

The passage of time meant nothing to him. He swam until his strength ebbed. When the *ki'iri* spirit began to withdraw, he did as he had been taught to do. Letting himself be pulled in with the surf, the sea cast him up onto the beach where he lay spent in the foam, unable to crawl out of the waves that continued to crash over him.

She did not take me, he thought. *She rejected the sacrifice*. And the rushing and ebbing of the sea, growing faint as his consciousness receded, was suddenly the most desolate sound he had ever known.

He heard footfalls in the wet sand. The soldiers lifted him up and roughly wrapped his robe around him. They carried him to a tent that did not belong to Satu, where a pair of eunuchs tended to him. A cot with warm bedding had been prepared and fresh clothing had been laid out. The eunuchs, one of them a physician, stood by with salves to treat his injuries. He was given food and hot, mulled wine, which he promptly vomited. Exhausted, he slept until sunset.

When he asked about Tharril, the eunuchs could not tell him anything. They knew only that in the morning they would begin the return journey to Tajhaan.

Chiman came to see him at dusk. "You are now the *akesh* of the High Prince, may the Father bless him with a thousand sons. His servants will attend you," he said. "The man who was your master will not touch you again."

One of the eunuchs brought a warm blanket and bundled him in it. "That man made ill use of you, my lord," he said. "It is good that you now belong to our prince. He is good to his slaves and he will be good to you."

The other eunuch returned with news that he thought might interest Erred. "You are very fortunate to have escaped this merchant," he said. "He has had one of his slaves killed and thrown from the cliffs into the sea. If only we had known that he would treat you thus, you would have been brought here far sooner."

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Chiman grumbled at them to be silent. "No more of this idle talk." He turned to Erred, who lay stunned and unmoving under the blanket. "The man is not your concern now."

Finding his voice at last, Erred dismissed all three. And then, left alone with his grief, he wept.

Interlude

The change was conceived in formlessness, a living spirit expelled from the water and sea foam of the Lady's own element, clad once again in human flesh. Cast upon the shore, weak as an infant and shivering naked in the wet salt air, he waited for a midwife.

Swift footfalls in the sand told of men wary and yet drawn by the Lady's power. Their voices broke the lapping rhythm of the surf, wondering at what they saw, and he could not make out what they said. Salt stung his eyes and the cuts on his body. He drew a shuddering breath; the cold, sharp air that suddenly knifed through his lungs made him cry out. Spasms shook limbs too heavy for movement.

Water flowed around him, cold and gritty with sand, ebbing and receding. He wanted out of it. Hands touched him, lifting him up, and apprehensive whispers reached his ears as the Lady's voice withdrew.

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Part III

The High Prince

Seventeen

The storm that lashed the beach that night was sudden and violent. Erred, feeling the Lady's anger as acutely as his own, allowed himself to fall into temporary madness. He ran into the downpour on legs that scarcely supported his weight, clawing at his hair and clothing, and fighting Chiman when the captain tried to restrain him. He struggled until exhaustion took the rage out of him and, when Chiman carried his limp body back into the tent, he allowed the eunuchs to attend to him.

A sleeping draught was quickly prepared. The eunuch who gave it to him cautioned him to drink only half and leave the rest for later. Ignoring the man's protests, he drained the cup. His *ki'iri* spirit had betrayed him, the Lady rejected his sacrifice and Chiman had stopped him from running into the sea. If this was the only oblivion he was to be allowed, he would take it all.

When the storm ended and the party began the return trip to Tajhaan, Erred was unconscious. For most of the journey, he lay stunned and mute in his wagon, dazed by sedatives. He acknowledged no one, and did not care how the guards and eunuchs anxiously backed out of his presence in awe of the divine spirit he had brought forth.

His first night in the palace was a haze of candlelight and soft draperies into which stepped a sternly handsome face. Dark eyes, pools of concern at first, hardened as the

murmuring eunuchs explained the reason for Erred's bruises and cut lip.

Their conversation filtered into his consciousness as if through honey, too slow and thick for comprehension. When one of the eunuchs told the man that his backside was too bruised and raw for pleasure, he did not grasp enough to be embarrassed, or understand why the man's brows knitted together in such a deep frown.

The last of the sedatives wore off by morning. Because he had taken so little food in the last twenty-two days, his stomach rebelled at his first attempt to eat. Warm soup and goat's milk were brought to settle his nausea, and a hot bath had been drawn in a room floored with deep green marble.

A handsome youth was lounging in the pool when Erred was brought in. Words were exchanged with the servants, at which the young man waded forward to assist them. Erred did not need to be told that he was an *akesh*.

His hair was washed and combed, and his limbs rubbed with eucalyptus oil. The *akesh*, whose name was Hasir, chose a robe of deep blue wool for him while commenting over the lamentable state of his fingernails. "Look how neglected these are! You have not been taking care of them," he said. An array of nail files, clippers and creams promptly came off the shelf.

Erred looked on in disinterest as Hasir went to work repairing his broken nails. He idly wondered what sort of favor the youth was going to want from him in return.

"And your feet!" Hasir exclaimed. "Did the servants who attended you before know nothing? You have pretty ankles, but the skin is so dry!"

Out came a pumice brush and jars of exfoliating cream. By now, Erred realized he had not been so neglected that he required such attention; Hasir simply enjoyed pampering others. From his chatter, Erred learned that there was one other *akesh* in the royal household, and that the two were so alike that they were commonly referred to as the High Prince's little mice.

The second *akesh*, Neshuru, was on hand to help Erred back to his room; for a moment, Erred truly could not tell the two apart. Both had dark Juvan complexions, and both of them fussed over Erred like a long-lost relation. "We have heard so much about you," said Neshuru. "Of course you are going to be very happy here." Neither one said anything about his bruises, which stood out vividly against his pale skin.

His room was more spacious than any he had previously occupied, and was richly furnished. While he was away, the servants had drawn back the green silk curtains to let in light. The bedding had been changed and someone had left reading materials on the inlaid table by the brazier. All were beautifully illustrated and a scribe later read to him from them, telling him they were children's fables meant to make him smile.

A tall, elegant eunuch came in and promptly dismissed the *akeshi*. "You have satisfied your curiosity, but how is the

young man supposed to learn his place if you two crows do not leave him alone?"

Once Hasir and Neshuru left, the eunuch asked Erred to sit down. He introduced himself as Ossur and explained that he had been sent to instruct Erred in the protocols of the palace and his duties within it.

He would go to the High Prince's bed when called, but he was also expected to attend his master in other ways as well. "You will serve at his private table and engage him in conversation," said Ossur. "When he rides out, he may wish you to accompany him. He will also want to hear you play the kithara and sing. These are, you understand, the duties of an *aktiri*, though he has not officially said that he intends to elevate you."

Erred's skills on the kithara were passable, while a tutor was engaged to improve his singing voice and dancing; the *suhtara* and *rendé*, while appropriate for an *akesh*, were not suitable for an *aktiri* in the royal household.

Vessels were brought in, and cushions upon which Erred was to demonstrate his art. Ossur, enacting the part of the High Prince, put him through his paces, showing him the correct way of serving wine and sitting while making conversation. "There are many more protocols to be observed than you are accustomed to, of course," he said. "I am told you have noble blood, and I can see that you have had some training in how to comport yourself with royalty. This makes our task much easier."

At this time, Erred learned what his price had been. Under his polished court mannerisms, Ossur briefly let his

amazement show. "You must understand that twenty-five thousand *menar* is more than the price of two well-trained *akeshi*. I am told that your former master originally demanded thirty-six."

"No one would pay so much," murmured Erred.

"No, indeed, and I do not think anyone, even a prince, has ever paid such a price as our master finally did pay for you," Ossur said. "Therefore, it is an insult to him to have you come to him in this state when you have been so badly used. I have it on good authority that he has had words with this merchant, and with the captain of his guard for not preventing the abuse."

By his tone, Erred knew the eunuch was trying to cheer him. *It does not matter what anyone says to Satu, or what fine he is made to pay, if anything is done to him at all. It is too late for that.*

Ossur patted his hand. "You will find things are much different here. Where you have been, you may dismiss those places as cheap and vulgar. You will see that the High Prince is graceful in all he does and knows well how to care for his treasures. He is the best of all masters."

The eunuch told him that the High Prince had been watching him a very long time. "There was a broker who came some fourteen months ago wanting to sell an *akesh* at the outrageous price of eighteen thousand *menar*," he said. "Certainly our master had no intention of spending such an obscene amount of money, yet all the same he was intrigued enough to make inquiries after the *akesh* who could make a seasoned broker gamble so recklessly."

Erred did not care how much the High Prince had spent on him, although Hasir and Neshuru were amazed and told him that he should be honored at being found so desirable. Erred only looked at his face in the mirror, marking his fading bruises and shadowed eyes, and wondered what folly could have possibly possessed the man to waste so much good money on him.

Men called him beautiful. Too much time had passed for him to be able to see through their eyes; he accepted the compliment as another might accept a perfunctory greeting. A vague recollection he had of that first, startling sight of white hair, the terror of realizing the Lady had come to him in the night, but that had not been the true change. That came later, when the priests took him away from his family, after the fever and purging and amorphous dreams through which he left the Earth element that bound all other men.

When he was well enough to leave his bed, someone brought him a mirror and he grasped for the first time what the beauty of a *tal'evé* was. The reflected face that mimicked his gestures was still his, but overlaid now with a luminous aura like the luster of a pearl. Beauty like that was terrifying, however much the priests told him that it was nothing he had not already possessed; the Lady had merely drawn it forth and hallowed it.

He wondered when he had become blind to it. Day after day for four years he had dwelt with others like him, seeing no others save priests and eunuchs, until the novelty of their beauty and his became cloying. No less a thing would happen

in Tajhaan, he knew. A time would come when his appeal would wear thin and he would be sold again.

When instructed, he attended his lessons but retreated into a world of meditation and fasting when left alone. Upon waking, the Lady's image had been one of the first things for which he had asked. Each morning and evening he went through the anointing, the ritual salutation and the prayers, neither knowing nor pondering why he persisted when it was clear that the spirit that might have dwelt within the silver statuette had deserted him.

A man prays at the tomb of his loved ones, though he knows they are beyond his call. If I cling to this thing, it is because it is all that keeps me from madness. Anything with which he might have harmed himself had been taken away. Slow starvation, the fasting of mind and spirit, would be his only avenue to oblivion. He did not even notice when the flesh began to fall from his bones.

One of the royal stewards eventually came with an order from the High Prince that he was to eat and would be forced if he did not do so. Ossur attended him at meals, making certain Erred cleared his plate before declaring himself satisfied.

"Why is it that you force me to watch you?" he asked petulantly. "You should be happy and eager to regain your health instead of trying to end your life. Where you were before, this was an unhappy place, yes, but here you are safe from all dark things. Now, I have an order that you are to take exercise twice a day in the gardens. Sunlight and fresh air are very good for the spirits."

After two weeks, the High Prince sent for Erred. Ossur dressed him in a silk robe embroidered with pearls and gave him over to the vizier, who led him to the royal apartments.

Protocol demanded that no one might look the High Prince in the eye unless given leave, so Erred was careful to keep his gaze trained on the rich carpet before him and resist the temptation to let his eyes wander above the soft kid leather shoes that peeped out from the hem of a pleated white robe. When he was ordered to sit, he knelt among the cushions with his gaze still on the floor and did not raise them until a voice solicitously instructed him to be at ease.

Thanaj ked Muhal Dharu was a man past his youth, yet still handsome with the trim body of a man half his age and the finely chiseled face and honey-colored skin of purebred Tajhaani nobility. The robe he wore was cut in the Juvan style, its pleated skirt flaring out from a golden silk sash. The only jewelry he wore was an amber ring on one finger and a small gold pectoral set with amber and carnelian.

"How do you wish me to serve you, my lord?" murmured Erred.

"It is not for your body that I summoned you," said Thanaj, "as the healers tell me you are not yet ready to bear my touch. Your color has improved somewhat since the night you were first brought in, but you remain listless and unhappy. I am certain your tutor has told you that I paid Satu ked Menteith an amount far above your original price. I do not think I need to impress upon you the importance of making your presence here worthy of that amount."

Past the gentle voice was the gist of the message, and Erred did not fail to heed it: the prince had made a sizeable investment and intended to reap a profit from it. "Forgive me, my lord, but you have been cheated. If I do not please you, then I am not worth the price." Erred's fingers went to the clasp of his robe, ready to undo it as ordered. "I am for your pleasure. Command me and I will do as you wish."

The order, however, did not come. "You would have me take you, even when you still have pain in performing your natural functions?" The amazement in Thanaj's voice was palpable. "No, I will not touch you today. A man does not ride an injured horse and expect it to gallop. For now you will play music for me, and we will slowly build to these other things."

Thanaj did not touch Erred until his third visit, and then he desired only to hold Erred in his arms and stroke his face and his hair. "Ossur tells me you are still unhappy," he said. "I did not bring you here to die, though I see in your eyes that it is your heart's desire. You will swear an oath to me now that you will not take your life."

Any other command Erred would have obeyed with ease, yet this wanted neither his body nor his art; he did not know how to answer it. "On what would you have me swear?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"Swear on the goddess that guards your dreams at night, the one whose servant you are. Swear that you will live and let others comfort you."

Words, so softly spoken, yet they had the power to make Erred cringe. "My lord, I do not know that I can do this thing."

Thanaj took his hand and lightly grazed the knuckles with his lips. "Am I so cruel that you wish to escape me? There should not be such pain in choosing to live."

The words of the oath stuck in his throat as he forced them out, and his voice broke on the last. Every remaining shred of his composure left him, so that he covered his face and wept like a child in the arms that gathered him close.

An hour later, the vizier was stunned to find a royal *akesh* lying fully clothed and half-asleep in their prince's arms. Thanaj gently roused Erred, gave him water to wash, and instructed the vizier to have Ossur attend him. Drained, Erred woodenly followed the man back to the *akesh* quarters, and that night slept without dreams.

On most afternoons he was summoned to play the kithara or serve wine as Thanaj carried out a prince's task of going through the day's correspondence. Always he was dismissed with some small present, a flower for his night table or a coin to buy a trinket in the palace bazaar, though he showed no interest in leaving the *akesh* quarters unless specifically instructed to do so. To counter his listlessness, Ossur seized upon any pretense to wean him from his isolation and devised errands for him, or sent him to tutors who gave him lessons in music and elegant conversation.

Hasir and Neshuru were his constant companions, urging him to join them in their games and telling him stories meant to make him smile. Neither one was interested in his favors.

As winter turned toward spring, Erred's health and spirits slowly improved. Ossur brought in a physician, who agreed that he was fit to go to the bed of the High Prince.

Arrangements were made for him to begin serving in the royal bedchamber.

* * * *

"I think this will please you greatly, if you will humor me."

Erred did not understand why the High Prince felt it necessary to ask his permission, but he did not resist when the blindfold was secured over his eyes and he was led by the hand from his room.

They moved through the upper corridors of the palace, along the tiled colonnade where Erred could smell the late-flowering trees and hear the splash of the fountain in the garden below, then indoors again where the soft carpets told him that he was approaching the royal apartments. "My lord—" he began.

"We are very close, only a few steps more." Thanaj gently steered him to the left, across a threshold into a space that smelled of fresh paint and plaster. More carpets passed under his feet, while behind him a door closed and he heard Thanaj dismiss the servants. Then the man's arms were around him, urging him to sit.

He felt silk and brocade cushions give under his hands. It was clear that his new master wished to make love to him, but he could not comprehend why Thanaj had not simply summoned him to his bedchamber as protocol dictated.

"Now," said Thanaj, "I think this will greatly please you." When the blindfold came off and his eyes adjusted to the cool light of the room, Erred found himself looking at the painted image of a dolphin. Blinking, he let his gaze roam the walls.

Sea creatures, leaping dolphins, and silver-gilt schools of fish danced across shallow depths of muted turquoise and azure. Water birds and flowers framed ivory screens, reaching toward the summer sky of the ceiling.

"There," Thanaj whispered in his ear, "do you see the *hrill*?"

Above a bed inlaid with mother-of-pearl, *hrill* basked in the twilit foam of high tide. "I-I do not understand, my lord."

"You have told me that you do not desire silks and jewels." Thanaj now leaned into his neck, grazing his earlobe with warm lips. "I desire you to be happy, so I have had this chamber created for you. This is where you will dwell when you do not share my bed. Now look there in the corner and tell me that you are not pleased."

In a corner niche framed by a mosaic of jewel-like tiles, an image of the Lady presided over a basin of translucent alabaster. Blossoms bobbed on the surface of the water someone poured into the basin.

"My lord, I—" Whenever admirers sent him jewels or rich clothes, Erred knew that no great thought had gone into the gesture, as quite often it was the lord's steward who chose the gift and penned the accompanying note. No one had ever done such a thing for him, nor could he conceive what would drive Thanaj to make such an effort. *Why do you do this? I am yours to command, no matter where you house me.*

When Thanaj turned him around and claimed his lips, Erred became fluid in the prince's arms, responding when skilled hands undid his clothing and roamed his body.

There was one thing Erred learned about his new master at their very first coupling, and that was that Thanaj took a long time about his pleasure and was not satisfied unless his partner reached the same height of ecstasy. He spent considerable time kissing and caressing Erred, making certain that their lovemaking would not cause him pain.

Erred gave him what he wanted, his eyes following the curve of a leaping dolphin as Thanaj laid him on the bed and made love to him. It was not love that he felt, though he knew Thanaj sought affection from him, but a gratitude that went beyond thanking him for the gift of a room. When he yielded and took Thanaj into his body, it was not for the sake of physical release but because he craved intimacy with another human being as a balm for his loneliness.

Orgasm came as a surprise. As the first spasm shook him, he clutched at Thanaj, pulling him down for a kiss which the man returned. He thrashed his head to one side, trying to choke back the pleasure he knew he should not feel, but could not stifle his cry. Thanaj continued to move, stroking and kissing him as he strove toward his own release. All Erred could do was lie quietly, wait for him to finish, and bite his lip in shame at having responded.

Afterward, Thanaj brought water and a cloth and gently washed away the evidence of their passion. "You withdraw from me even now," he said. "Tell me what gives you so much pain. Have you another lover?"

"There was one, my lord," murmured Erred. "I cared for him, but he is dead."

Thanaj put aside the cloth and once again lay down beside him. "I was wondering when you would finally tell me about the slave Satu ked Menteith killed. Chiman told me how you grieved when you heard the news, but he did not know more than that. I want you to tell me the rest."

"I have been foolish in dwelling on him." Erred did not want to replay in his mind any part of that night on the beach. "I have been ungrateful. There is nothing more to say."

"It seems to me that there is much for you to say," said Thanaj. "If I order you to speak, you will, but I do not wish to command your words."

Erred sighed and closed his eyes. "His name was Tharril, a laborer in the house of my previous master. It did not please the master that I loved this man when I did not love *him*. I obeyed my master in all things, yes, but I did not love him. That last night on the beach, he found Tharril hidden among the servants and he—I-I cannot say it, my lord. I tried to die, to give myself to the sea, but the spirit inside me would not allow it."

He turned his face toward the shadows so Thanaj would not see his tears. The Lady's image met him, silent and pristine against the twilit darkness; he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Love and grief are curious things," Thanaj murmured into his hair. "I have known both. I had a wife once. She was called Mayetra, a princess of Juva. I loved her from the moment she came into my father's house and lifted her veil for me. She has been gone fifteen years now, yet I still think

of her when I see a maiden with hair like hers or lie awake on a summer night and smell the fragrance of the flowers that she loved.

"Other wives I have had, royal women who have come to me through trade or treaty, and they have given me much pleasure in their company and the children they have borne me. I do not forget my sadness, but if the gods deliver joy to me then I must honor them by accepting it."

Erred felt long fingers gently turn his face. Lips brushed his. "You do not believe me now, but your grief will pass. I have not asked you this before, but Arquí is the name another master gave you. By what name should I call you?"

"My name is whatever you wish it to be, my lord," answered Erred.

"What did your father call you?" Thanaj asked. "There are many beautiful names I could give you, but the truest name is often the first."

"My parents called me Erred, my lord."

Thanaj tried the name on his tongue, lending his accent to the syllables and drawing them out. "It has a beautiful sound, but what does this mean in your language?"

"It does not mean anything, my lord," said Erred.

"A name should mean something, for this is how a man is known to the gods." Thanaj began kissing his neck. His desire was clearly returning, though he made no move to hasten it. "Does it please you that I should call you by your true name?"

No one had ever asked him this question. His lovers had called him *Arquí* according to his master's desire, but they had also called him by other names at the height of passion.

He had often served as a template for the memory of some other lover, yet rather than resent having his identity erased in this manner he had welcomed it as another veil behind which he could hide his true self.

Erred was a name he had known in happier times, what his lover had called him in their stolen moments together, and *Arqui* reminded him too much of Satu and his unrequited anger against the man. "No, my lord, it does not please me," he said.

* * * *

Spring came to Tajhaan with its cool, life-giving rain and the desert bloomed. Wildflowers were brought to Erred's room, splashes of saffron and scarlet in his sanctuary, and these he offered to the Lady. He now had two such shrines in his chamber, the one Thanaj had had built for him and the silver Lady from earlier days; he took greater comfort in the latter, though when the High Prince visited he took care to kneel before his lord's gift.

"It would seem that this goddess of yours has great power," said Thanaj. "I find it strange that we do not know Her here."

Carefully considering his reply, Erred floated a golden flower in the water of the basin. "I was told that the gods of Tajhaan require blood to live. The Lady does not ask for such things. She is the living Water itself, an element more powerful than any human life."

Thanaj toyed with the flower that rested on the cushion beside him. "It must have been your first master who told

you this, Ahiru. Arjha ked Satu was fierce in battle, I remember, and paid for his victories with offerings of blood as soldiers do, but not all gods require this. Aben is honored with the light of many candles and Shalat, the goddess who is celebrated after the rains, is given the gift of pleasure."

Ahiru, the name Thanaj chose for him, was simply a translation of the Shivarian word *ta/levé*. Erred accepted it as a fitting label. While Thanaj respected his right to worship in private, he also expressed a desire to witness his *ki'iri* transformation, stating that those who had seen him as a *hrill* had been much amazed. "I desire to know you in all your aspects, my love."

Although he did not doubt that Thanaj believed in his own sincerity, Erred did not attach any more meaning to his endearments than he had to those from any of his other masters.

Thanaj's desire to see him as a *hrill* and learn more about the Lady of the Waters was probably sincere as well, for he was a spiritual man interested in poetry and music, but Erred was unsettled by the thought of being watched by him in this act. Indifference or scorn for his beliefs he could bear, and would have tolerated more comfortably, yet he could not help but feel there was something patronizing in Thanaj's interest. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was little more than a curiosity, like the pair of white tigers in the prince's menagerie.

He immediately chastised himself for these thoughts. *You should be grateful he shows as much respect as he does,*

whether he means it or not. Your other master was ready to let you die.

"In the summer you shall journey with me to Akkil," said Thanaj. "I am told that you did not see the city itself on your last trip to the sea."

"My lord," replied Erred, "it is not necessary for you to journey such a long way simply on my behalf."

Thanaj laughed at this. "Ah, you think I do this simply to satisfy my curiosity. No, my children and their mothers dwell in Akkil and I always visit them in the summer when it becomes too hot to stay in the city. It will be good for your health to accompany me, and you can bathe in the sea while we are there."

When he was not entertaining the High Prince in private, Erred attended to those tasks which had been assigned to him. When Thanaj had first formally received him, Erred was told that he was no longer an *akesh* but an *aktiri*, which was one step below a free courtesan, and as such he was granted rights that were denied to *akeshi* and ordinary slaves. Under the law, he was permitted to enter any temple of his choosing and worship, he might own slaves and he was allowed to refuse the sexual advances of all others except the one who owned him.

A tutor was brought in to teach him to read and write in Tajhaani, as many *aktiri'ai* composed music and poetry of their own. Now that he had access to the best teachers in the city, his singing voice and skills on the kithara slowly improved, while the poetry he was given to recite was either Thanaj's own or verse composed long ago or in another land.

Perhaps in memory of his wife, or perhaps because he had no taste for explicit pornography, when Thanaj was amorous he chose to hear Juvan erotic verse where the sexual act was couched in elaborate metaphors: lush garden paradises where a woman's desire was articulated in terms of ripe fruit dripping with dew, or a bowl of the sweetest honey that a man's tongue could not resist. Thanaj delighted in the Shivarian accent Erred gave the words and said as much to the guests who had been invited to enjoy his hospitality and his *aktiri's* social graces.

This was not Erred's first experience with Juvan poetry. One of his clients had once staged an elaborate play in which two *akeshi*, male and female, had performed to the accompaniment of a scribe's recital. Erred had lain beside the master of the house, kissing and fondling him as he watched the pair enact the verse.

Thanaj's pleasure was a private thing, and he did not play the voyeur. His custom was to wait until the business of the day was done, the last courtier departed, then lead Erred to one of their bedchambers and undress him. Then, slowly devouring his lover with his hands and lips, he often murmured selections of poetry in Erred's ear.

"...you are the flower not yet budded, sweet with nectar...."
"His tongue circled and captured Erred's hardening nipple, flicking it until Erred moaned and pulled his head closer."
"...my fountain rises with desire to behold you..." Thanaj's hand took his and placed it on his shaft so he could feel the warm, pulsing flesh whose crown was damp with pre-ejaculate.

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"...your lips are pomegranates, swollen red with passion, bursting, spilling seeds from within as I gently break your skin and feast.... "Thanaj's oiled member pierced him as his tongue entered his mouth. At this point, as they were both overcome by the throes of orgasm, the poetry ceased.

Afterward, Erred made no comment on being cast as the woman in Thanaj's fantasies.

* * * *

One week after the rains ended, Erred attended Thanaj on his visit to the temple of Shalat. As a newly-elevated *aktiri*, it was his first visit to a Tajhaani temple and he took in the incense and elaborately robed priests and the flower-garlanded images of the fertility goddess with the eye of one who had seen such things in his own land.

Many of the worshippers stared at the young man in golden silk who wore a wreath of flowers in his white hair and walked behind the High Prince. Ossur informed Erred of the rumors that abounded in the city. These ranged from the plausible to the absurd, Erred's favorite being that he was a demigod of mist and moonlight who took form only at dusk. Apparently they could not comprehend what manner of creature prompted their ruler to spend such an exorbitant sum of money.

He knew Thanaj had not included him in the procession merely for the sake of being seen with an *aktiri* at his side. There had been discontent in certain quarters over the amount Thanaj had paid for his new slave, and the grumbling had continued even after the High Prince explained that the

money had not come from state coffers but from his own personal revenues, which he was entitled to spend as he pleased. Having Erred accompany him to the temple was a calculated political gesture to demonstrate that he was in full possession of his faculties, that his bedmate was an ordinary if exquisitely beautiful young man who was well worth the money spent, and that the subject would bear no further discussion.

"Of course," said Ossur, "there are those who are not pleased that our master has brought you into the royal household, no matter what the price. Some think you an unnatural creature that ought to be sent away or destroyed. And then there are those who are simply jealous. For this occasion, you will smile and be decorative, no more. There will be time enough later for you to play the *aktiri* in earnest."

The vaulted, peristyle hall was crowded with too many bodies, and though the air outside was cool and pleasant, within it quickly became stifling. Even as he began to wilt under the weight of his jeweled robe, Erred maintained his composure, looking at no one but training his eyes on the flower-laden altar. Chanting voices buzzed in his ears and the air was thick with mingled incense, sweat and the cloying fragrances worn by the nobles in attendance; he could not follow what the priests said, as it was in an ancient form of Tajhaani, and the perfumed air gave him a headache.

Unlike some of the rites he had attended in his youth in Altarme, he had been told that this particular fertility rite would not take very long. Worshippers were permitted to lay gifts of flowers and wine before the altar, upon which had

been spread silk cushions. It was assumed that the goddess was in attendance.

When Thanaj left his side to approach the altar, Erred's bewilderment grew. Thanaj carried no offering and did not stop where all the other gifts had been placed. Instead, he climbed the steps to the very top and stopped as if waiting for something. Erred had been told that the High Prince would officiate at the ritual, and had observed that his regalia matched that of the priests, but he had not wished to appear ignorant by asking what Thanaj's duties would entail.

From a side doorway, two priests escorted a young priestess wearing the horned headdress of the goddess. She climbed the steps to the altar, smoothly moving among the flowers and amphorae of wine until she stood before Thanaj. Words were exchanged between them, ritual salutations and responses Erred could not translate. With a graceful gesture, she then undid her robe and let it slide to the floor. When Thanaj reciprocated, dropping his clothing beside hers, Erred finally realized what the High Prince's part in this ceremony was.

His mouth grew dry and his face burned as the naked pair began to make love. The priestess touched Thanaj with her hands and mouth until he was erect and then, reclining on the altar, opened her arms to welcome him. By the time it was over and the prince and priestess left the altar, Erred could scarcely breathe. His body trembled with embarrassment and arousal, and he could only wonder if that was the intended effect.

In the afternoon Thanaj hosted a private feast. The entertainment was modest and the wine served sparingly with the meat, and not before as had been the custom in Satu's house. Erred, seated directly across from the High Prince, found he could not look at Thanaj without blushing.

Throughout the day he tried to understand the reason for his embarrassment. He had witnessed and participated in enough public sexual acts that one more should not have mattered to him. The only conclusion he could draw was that when a slave stripped and performed in public, there was no shame in this because a slave could not be humiliated, but when a free man and a prince flaunted himself in public like an *akesh*, it was a different matter altogether.

Thanaj caught his eyes and smiled; his eyes were an open invitation, yet the feast lasted for two more hours and Thanaj did not appear to be in a hurry to be rid of his guests. Erred's confusion only grew when, in a quiet moment, the prince gestured and introduced him. Several heads turned in his direction, several pairs of appraising eyes compelled him to modestly lower his gaze and wait for the command to rise and undress. Thanaj gave no assistance, changing the subject while leaving Erred to wonder what he was expected to do.

Sensing his discomfort, a servant leaned in to inquire if he wished anything. Erred started to wave him away, then held up his hand and asked if the High Prince had any request of him. It was not a message he intended the servant to take to Thanaj; the man did so before Erred could stop him, and returned with the reply that he was to enjoy himself.

When the guests departed, Thanaj indicated that Erred should follow him to the royal apartments. Servants stood ready with scented water, linens, and fresh garments to replace the rich robes they began to remove. With a word, he dismissed them. "Ahiru, you will remain," he said.

Bowing, the servants backed out of the chamber and closed the doors. Erred watched them leave with a tremor of anticipation. Thanaj's voice was stern, hinting that some offense had been given. "My lord, what is your pleasure?" he murmured.

"Did you not enjoy the banquet?" asked Thanaj. "You did not speak all afternoon."

"Forgive me, but I did not know what to do. I thought you would wish me to—"

Thanaj drew closer to him, putting up a hand to slide through his hair, smoothing back several loose strands before cupping Erred's cheek. His skin felt warm. "You know better than to think I would treat you thus. You are the *aktiri* of a prince, not the bed slave of a peasant."

"I do my best to remember that, my lord," replied Erred.

"Do you believe that I would hurt you?"

Erred could not bring himself to admit that he no longer knew what to think, and it certainly was not his place to weary his master's ears with his feeble attempts at an explanation. "No, I do not believe that is your desire," he murmured.

"Then leave it at that, Ahiru. Ossur has told you that you are to smile and be charming with my guests, nothing more. Only I may claim that pleasure from you." Thanaj lightly

touched his lips with his own, lingering until Erred returned the kiss more fully. "I know that this morning was of great interest to you."

Arousal gradually replaced uncertainty. "My lord, what you did in—" Erred found he could not concentrate with Thanaj's lips on his neck and hands on his body where his clothing was tugged away. An *aktiri's* robes were more intricate than those of an *akesh*, and Thanaj was struggling with the clasps and buttons. "Should I call the servants to help us?"

"Leave it—ah, here!" The buttons that held Erred's golden outer robe closed came undone; Thanaj impatiently helped him out of it.

"In the temple, my lord," gasped Erred, "is it customary for you to—to do such things?"

"No," Thanaj murmured into his hair, his hands working at the fastenings of Erred's inner robe. "Today was for the High Prince to lie with the goddess and make the land fertile, to join divine and mortal in the Great Marriage. You do not have such rituals in your land?"

Although the two goddesses were twin faces of fertility and sexual desire, what the Lady did with Her mortal lovers was not quite the same. *Talevé* were a thing apart, a tangible reminder of Her amorous nature and love of beauty, but of themselves they did not represent fertility and were incapable of it. "No, my lord. I wish you had warned me."

Undoing the last clasp of Erred's robe, Thanaj peeled it off and let it fall to the floor. Their mouths met as they shed their remaining clothes and lay on the bed, where Thanaj quickly covered Erred with his body. "The priestess is always young

and pretty, the embodiment of the goddess in spring," he said, "but I would rather have my pleasure in private, with one who fires my blood. It is a sacrilege, of course, but when I was with her I could not stop thinking about how lovely you are when I take you."

Later, as he lay awake in his sleeping master's arms, Erred pondered the capriciousness of memory and love. Somehow it seemed wrong for him to take pleasure in serving his new master when his grief was still so near, yet he could not help the life that was beginning to stir in him.

He was not naïve enough to believe that what he felt was love. Love was what slaves should have termed devotion, and in a master it was more akin to fondness, an appreciation of something that gave him great pleasure; it was not the twining of two human souls, two equals, in which Erred had been taught to believe. Even in the heat of passion, with Thanaj's verse in his ear, he never forgot this. His fortune was joined with his physical beauty and his monetary worth; neither required that he have a soul.

Had he a choice, he would have preferred to be the soulless counterpart of the priceless statues and hangings that surrounded him. Thanaj, however, was too observant to allow it. During their passion, he took Erred's face between his hands and studied him for a long time. "Another man would only look at your lovely hair, your body, and not see what I see in your eyes," he said. "When you learn to love again you will truly become beautiful."

Erred wanted to castigate his arrogance in making such an assumption, but dared not. Love he reserved for the one who

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

now existed only in his memory, mingled with a pain he could not separate. He wanted to remember his lover as he had been in happier times, laughing or kneeling beside him in prayer or flushed with their shared passion. What he had enshrined were their last hours together.

Thanaj told him that Mayetra died in childbirth, having bled to death after losing their son. "Painful memories are like sharp swords that in time lose their edge," he said. "Yet even then, they have the power to cut."

Erred did not need metaphors to articulate what he felt. Regret and anger would not undo the past, but to forget would be to give his implicit consent to what had happened.

Eighteen

Whenever the High Prince was delayed in meetings with highborn guests and petitioners, it was Erred's duty to welcome them and see that they were well situated. He poured wine and engaged them in small talk while they waited. Initially he thought it odd that a prince's bedmate should have the honor of playing host to his master's guests, but as he settled into the life of an *aktiri* and acclimated himself to its responsibilities and privileges, he gradually came to understand that others considered him more a representative of the royal household than a pleasure slave.

On this last point, Ossur warned him that some *aktiri'ai* forgot they were slaves and behaved very badly. "I saw once an *aktiri* strike an impudent guest, and for that he was demoted and sent back to the harem where he was much ridiculed by the other *akeshi*. For all I know, he is still there."

It was not always easy for Erred to maintain his composure. Under no circumstances was it acceptable for him to claim familiarity with any guest who might have bedded him before, even when those men were not subtle about asking for the pleasure of doing so again.

As an *aktiri* he was in an awkward position, as he could not fall back upon the *akesh's* ritual response that it was not for him to decide, for an *aktiri* who aspired to be an *akharu* could occasionally ask for the favor of entertaining an admirer. In the end, he put on his most contrite look and said that his favors belonged only to the High Prince.

Thanaj was aware of the situation and advised him to hide his discomfort with as much charm as he could muster. "Even a ruling prince must show grace and tact," he said, "especially in dealing with councilors and ambassadors he despises. An *aktiri* must be as much of a diplomat as a ruling prince, for should you ever acquire your freedom and become an *akharu*, it is wise to have a reputation for shrewdness and congeniality."

"I have no desire to be a courtesan," said Erred. "I do not entertain any thoughts about my freedom."

This drew a curious look from Thanaj. "Ahiru, I do not intend that you spend the rest of your life bound to me. It is understood that an *aktiri* will one day be free."

"My lord, I will never have the coin to buy my freedom," said Erred. He was given a small weekly allowance with which to purchase trinkets; he added it to the sum he had brought with him from Satu's house, but had not bothered to tally how much he had amassed. Certainly it came nowhere near the sum of twenty-five thousand *menar*.

"An *aktiri* does not buy his release," explained Thanaj. "It is a gift given by his master after a certain time has passed."

Erred did his best to be diplomatic with his master's more persistent guests, and once firmly rebuffed they chose to express their interest in subtler ways, by wearing raiment or scent they thought would please him, or by sending modest gifts of sweetmeats and wine. Erred learned to send colorless acknowledgements while handing the gifts off to the eunuchs, the *akeshi* or his servant, a quiet yet efficient young man named Khasi.

Other petitioners wanted Erred to use his influence with his master to advance their interests. Knowing that to refuse was to risk creating enmity where he could not afford it, Erred accepted only small bribes but made no promises, saying that the High Prince was never swayed by anything his bedmates said. When he did this, he always showed the money to Thanaj and told him precisely what had occurred. Thanaj was amused by the attempts at underhand dealing and took note of who offered the greatest bribes, as this indicated how desperately those petitioners wanted his favor.

"I will humor some of them," he said, smiling, "as it will be of little cost to me and bring you some prestige. If you are cautious in your dealings, you may acquire some powerful connections of your own."

One bright spring afternoon, Erred entertained a single guest, a man dressed in the ostentatious clothing and jewelry of a merchant who had come to discuss a new shipping route to the isle of Thrindor.

As a boy, he had learned to behave with silent dignity in the presence of his father's guests when other boys his age fidgeted or were otherwise intractable. He had perfected a prince's look of bemused interest long before becoming a *talevé* and used it to his advantage now, feigning interest in the man's talk of increased markets and revenues.

Servants moved back and forth, bringing in water and linens to wash, wine and delicacies. Erred took note of the silver vessels specified by the steward who made and recorded the High Prince's appointments. All who were admitted to the palace were entitled to the High Prince's

hospitality according to their station, and etiquette demanded different procedures for each level of the hierarchy; the servants of the royal household were expected to learn them all so as not to give offense.

Whenever the golden service was brought out, Erred relaxed. Visitors of the highest nobility admired him as they would an exquisite vase or statue, with a fixed smile and compliment that spoke nothing of the subtle request they might later make of the High Prince. It was the others Erred attended, those mid-ranking nobles, merchants, and military officers who could afford a title and were entitled to be served off silver vessels, who had not always mastered the better graces.

The man before him was such a one. His manner was pleasant enough, but behind every word and look was a hunger Erred knew and dreaded. Such men were not content to appreciate beauty from afar. They were concerned only with their appetites and eyed beautiful things solely with their own gratification in mind.

As Erred reached to refill the merchant's goblet, carefully averting his eyes to avoid the appearance of invitation, he could feel the man's gaze on him.

"Forgive me for not commenting before," said the merchant, "but you must be the fair *akesh* of whom I have heard so much."

Erred nodded blandly at the compliment, turning to set down the carafe and offer the man a dish of ginger-glazed almonds. Jeweled fingers suddenly closed around his wrist, urging him closer. "Come, do not be so aloof. Two of my

brothers have already had you as well as my father, though he usually does not have such good taste." The merchant licked his lips. "I merely wish to sample what they have enjoyed."

An *aktiri* did not presume to make eye contact with his master's guests, and while Erred noted the clothing and any badges of rank these men wore, he had never had much reason to study their faces. Now, lifting his eyes just enough to take in the man's amber eyes and the contours of his lips and cheekbones, Erred was unnerved at the resemblance to Arjha. He fought the urge to wrench his hand out of the man's grip. "I am to entertain you only until my master arrives," he answered stiffly.

Satu's son lifted his hand to his lips, teasing knuckles that wanted to break his jaw. Of all the days where the High Prince was not eavesdropping behind a screen, this had to be one of them. "And I should delight in your entertainment, Arquí. It *is* Arquí, is it not? Call me Albar, if you wish. Your accent would make of it a lovely sound."

"My lord," Erred said shakily, "I am an *aktiri*, not an *akesh*, and I am called Ahiru. While your interest is ... flattering, my favors belong solely to the High Prince."

"Ah, but it is not unknown for an *aktiri* to take other lovers," Albar purred. "If you honored me with your company, you would find me as hot-blooded and virile as my late brother and far more agreeable than my father."

Drawing a sharp breath, Erred extricated his hand and stepped back. He was trembling in barely concealed anger,

and only Ossur's warning kept him from speaking more sharply. "At this time I do not entertain anyone else."

Albar paused, frowned, and his face changed, closing as he studied Erred. "Perhaps my father has spoken ill of me and my brothers, or perhaps—" His voice dropped, taking on a conspiratorial tone. "My little birds are everywhere in my father's house. I know that he used you badly; I even know about the slave he gave you and then took away. It was a bad business, but not without the potential for profit."

Every ounce of control Erred possessed was channeled into keeping his composure. He could do nothing but listen as Albar stood and drew close to him, close enough to lean forward and whisper like a lover in his ear. "Would you not like vengeance on him, Ahiru? Other slaves are beneath my notice, but you are quite intelligent, so you might serve me well. Perhaps you would be willing to cooperate with me and give information?"

"My lord," Erred said coldly, "I do not know what information you think I possess. I no longer dwell in your father's house."

"Ah, but you serve the High Prince, whose little mice and birds are everywhere," answered Albar. "At the very least, your soft words on his pillow might persuade him that my current venture is worth his patronage. Now that Usha has deserted him, my father will have to look to me, as I am the only one among my brothers capable of maintaining so vast a fortune."

Albar drained the goblet of wine and motioned for Erred to refill it. "I am the best of his sons and still he does not favor

me. I mean to repay his lack of favor." His lips curved in a secretive smile. "For those who assist me, there is enough reward to share. Perhaps even enough, let us say, to buy one's freedom?"

Erred did not believe any part of what he said except that he meant to ruin his father; the man was too much like Satu for him to be trusted. With a deep breath, he answered, "My lord, I am content to remain my master's servant. I have need of neither vengeance nor freedom."

"This is most curious, but then I have heard you are a curious creature," said Albar. "Perhaps it is true what they say about you, that you turn into a fish by moonlight and the heart that beats in your breast is not that of a man."

Whatever Erred might have said in reply was interrupted by a servant announcing the arrival of the High Prince. Once the proper courtesies were exchanged between the host and his guest and they fell to discussing business, Erred was excused.

Once alone in his room, relieved of his cumbersome robes and seated on a stool before the calm ripple of the Lady's basin, he pondered the encounter and his own reaction to it. For all his attempts at seduction, Albar could not have harmed him. For someone who was on such poor terms with Satu, the meeting should not have gone so badly, nor should Erred have left feeling so shaken.

Erred trailed his fingers in the water, taking comfort in the coolness against his skin. It was not that Albar had propositioned him but that, for a moment, he had recognized the man as a tool of vengeance and had seriously considered

helping him. Yes, he had been more than tempted, within a hair's breadth of yielding, and even that brief willingness to stoop to the scheming and backstabbing of his enemies frightened him.

At dusk, after refusing the light meal Khasi brought in for him, Erred went to the High Prince's apartments and presented himself to the steward to ask for admittance. Unless he was sent for, he did not presume to venture into the royal quarters, but his need was so great that it could not wait on his master's pleasure. After an interval, the steward returned to tell him that Thanaj was occupied with one of his *akeshi* and could not see him. Erred returned to his room, where he spent a restless night.

A summons awaited him at the morning meal. Dressing in his most sober attire, a dark gray robe with many silver buttons, Erred followed the steward into the royal apartments where Thanaj had just finished eating. Once the door closed behind him, he prostrated himself before the low table and waited to be addressed.

Thanaj gestured for Erred to rise and be seated on a cushion across from him. "I am told that you came here last night wishing to see me. Have you not been instructed that this is against protocol?"

"At one time I may have been told, my lord," replied Erred, "but my need has never been so great that I had to seek my master out."

Thanaj raised an eyebrow at this. "You desire me this much?"

In his embarrassment, Erred looked down at the fingers he twisted in his lap. "It is not for that that I came here, my lord, though my favors are yours whenever you desire them. Yesterday there was a guest who came to the house. I served him as you wished, but I—"

"Yes, his name is Albar ked Satu." Thanaj took a sip of the liqueur he usually enjoyed with his morning meal before continuing. "I would not be surprised to hear that he had asked for the pleasure of your favors. Do you wish to accept?"

The mere suggestion made Erred queasy with anger. "No, my lord, I do not. It is for precisely that reason that I wished to see you." His face burning, he looked directly into the prince's eyes now that he had been given permission. "I do not want any part of the family of Satu ked Menteith. I refuse to serve them ever again and if you must whip me for being so bold, then I will remove my robe so you may administer the lash, but it is the truth. I would rather be beaten than breathe the same air as they."

Thanaj regarded him for a long, silent moment, then dabbed at his lips with the linen an attending slave held out for him. "I have no intention of striking you," he said. "You should have learned by now that I do not beat my slaves. A man does not whip his horse or kick his dog and expect their willing service, so it is with a slave. I will not punish you in this way, though I am somewhat disappointed in your answer."

Erred once again let his eyes fall to his lap. "Forgive me, my lord. I should have spoken more softly."

"You will not receive *any* member of this family?" For some unfathomable reason, Thanaj seemed playful.

"Please do not ask it of me, my lord."

"That is unfortunate," said Thanaj, "as just the other day I entertained a high priest of Aben and some of his entourage. One of them was a young acolyte named Usha ked Satu. When he heard that you were now part of my household, he asked about you. He seems genuinely fond of you."

Erred was ashamed at having so quickly forgotten Satu's youngest son. "I was not referring to him, my lord. Yes, I would meet with him again, if it is his desire and yours."

* * * *

He wanted death and did not know how to find it. Going to his jewel casket, he unlocked it and pulled out a pouch containing gold and silver coins. While he had only the most basic knowledge of Tajhaani currency, he was certain he held enough to buy a common soldier's life.

Stabbings and poisonings were commonplace in Tajhaan, yet for one who had never plotted another's death, finding the right path proved difficult. It was not something about which he could openly inquire. He would have to watch and wait for the right information to come along. In the royal household, it always did.

Ossur was his best potential ally. Deciding he had little to lose by approaching him, Erred drew him aside one evening and asked how a man might do away with another if he could not openly kill him.

Although Erred did not use the word *assassin*, the eunuch at once understood. "Whose death is it that you are plotting, Ahiru?" he asked softly. "Surely you would not harm our lord and master?"

"You may rest assured that I am his loyal servant," said Erred. "No, it is a lowly soldier whose death I want, the man who cut my lover's throat."

Ossur shook his head. "There are people who can be hired, but it is very dangerous. These walls, they have eyes and ears. Certainly you have enough money to buy this man's death, but should you be so bold, word of it will eventually come to our master. Perhaps he already knows that you are speaking to me. He will never again trust you as he did before, for there is a saying that once a man sheds his first blood murder becomes easy. You risk far too much."

"What am I to do, then? I cannot bear it that this man still lives." Erred closed his eyes to shut out the image of Tharril's bruised, slashed face. "It gives me no peace."

"That is difficult to say," answered Ossur. "This man is so far beneath you that I would put him out of my mind. However, if you are so determined to have his death, then you must be straightforward. A time will come when the High Prince will be pleased with you and offer you a choice of gift. Most *akeshi* ask for jewels or monkeys or other such amusements, but this would be your opportunity to ask for the thing you wanted."

A gift that, most likely, Thanaj would not give him. Erred bit his lip in anger, hating it that he had to rely on another's

pleasure and approval to do what he should have been able to do with his own hands.

* * * *

The face that turned to him was a bruised and shapeless mass whose swollen lips were the only evidence that it belonged to a human being. Those lips parted to release a single bloody bubble that broke and formed the words *I love you*.

Erred awakened, trying to catch the words in one hand while the fist of his other hand went for the source of the laughter that undercut his pain. Arms went around him, pinning him down, and the last wisps of the dream slipped from his consciousness into a bloody sea.

"Ahiru, stop!" growled a voice. "You are dreaming, it is only a dream."

His awareness returned to him in a moonlit room haunted by water lilies and dolphins frozen upon the walls. As he saw that the arms holding him belonged to Thanaj, his rage ebbed and he stopped struggling.

"You are safe," Thanaj said. "There is no one who can harm you."

"I know, my lord," Erred whispered harshly. Tears streamed down his face, no matter how hard he tried to hold them back. His throat closed around burgeoning sobs.

Warm lips touched his forehead. "It is not the first time you have awakened so in my arms. What is it you dream?"

Some nights it was the old dream of drugged helplessness that haunted his sleep. He wished it were so now, for then

Thanaj could comfort him. "My lord, you ordered me not to speak of it. Forgive me for waking you like this."

Thanaj sighed heavily. "His shadow haunts you even in your sleep. If it gives you some ease to speak of it, then you must do so."

The only words Erred had could not express the depth of his anger. "I dreamt of his death," he said. "I heard them laughing. *He was laughing*, and I wanted to kill him when he took Tharril away. I tried to stop him, to tear him apart with my own hands. I tried, but I could not, I—"

Thanaj's hands were in his hair, smoothing back the strands dampened by his tears. "It is only a dream. It will pass, as all dreams do."

"No, my lord, it was not a dream." Erred squeezed his eyes shut against the memory of his last glimpse of Tharril. If there was ever a moment for him to speak plainly, it was now. He drew a deep, ragged breath. "There is no peace while this man lives. Give me his life and I will be content."

Surprised by the request, Thanaj pulled away from him. "Are you asking me to put a man to death?"

"Yes, my lord," said Erred.

"Ahiru, under the law it is a man's right to kill his slave, even to torment and mutilate him. I do not condone Satu ked Menteith's cruelty and I have had words with him for what he did to you," he said, "but I cannot punish him for acting within the law."

Men made laws, and men could break them. Erred had seen such hypocrisy even in his own land. If Thanaj thought it was the end of the matter for him, he was mistaken.

"I was not speaking of *him*, but the guard who cut Tharril's throat. Ehmet is not a slave. He is a free man, and a guard in that household. He was not ordered to be cruel. He did those things to Tharril because he *wanted* to, not because it was the law, and now *I* want him dead."

"This bloodlust is unlike you," said Thanaj. "It is the passion of your dream that is speaking. Try to rest now and we will speak of it again tomorrow when your mind is clear."

Had Thanaj not been his master, Erred would have shoved his hands away. *You are not trying to soothe me. You care nothing about my heart. You simply want me to shut up and lie still like a good little aktiri.*

"My lord, I have wanted this for a long time. I simply did not know how to go about doing it." He shivered in the slight chill of the room and drew the blanket around him. This was not how he had meant to ask for Ehmet's life. The words were coming far too fast, his anger and need made them impossible to contain. "It should not be this difficult to kill a lowly soldier."

In the next moment, Thanaj had him by the arm and forced him to meet his gaze. The blanket fell away. "Are you telling me that you have already tried to buy his death?" he asked sharply. "What madness is this? I have seen the ruin of men who have turned to lies and murder. They cheat and kill, and once they begin they do not know how to end. You will not do this thing, you will *not*. My desire is to see you happy, not filled with this ugliness."

"If you did not want to know my heart, then why did you order me to speak?" Thanaj's grip was hard enough to hurt,

but Erred did not flinch. He had made the attempt and failed. There was no more reason for him to hold back. "You either wish to know the truth or you do not."

"Because it is better that I know your heart than that you wander unwittingly into danger," answered Thanaj. He brushed the back of his hand across Erred's cheek, wiping away the tears that had fallen there. "Ossur has told you that I knew about you for a long time before you came here. Did he also tell you why I finally decided to buy you?"

Erred shook his head sullenly. "It cannot be because of my surpassing skill in bed."

"You should know by now that a few tricks are not all that makes a good bedmate," said Thanaj. "No, the day I took you into my chamber and had you play the kithara for me, I saw you were not like the others. When *akeshi* come before me, they are always eager for me to notice them. You did not seem to care. And then, when I did take you to my bed, I saw that you had been lashed."

At the time, Thanaj had not appeared to notice the welts. "My master struck me the day before for being insolent," replied Erred. "I hit that guard for hurting my lover. It was foolish of me. I should not have done it."

"And it was right of your master to discipline you. For such an infraction, I might have done the same, though not with such cruelty."

"My lord, I—"

Thanaj laid a finger over his lips to silence him. "And after all that, when your master offered you a gift for pleasing me, you asked him to give you to this guard because you knew he

could not hurt you as he would have hurt your lover. Yes, I know all this. I even know how the man used you. When my informant told me how willingly you bore his abuse, I knew how you had been broken."

Erred cringed at the shame of what else Thanaj might know. "And you paid twenty-five thousand *menar* for a broken slave?"

"No, I paid that sum for a beautiful creature who would have died had I not intervened. My only regret is that I did not do it sooner." Thanaj leaned forward and kissed him. "It is a dangerous thing you ask. Even if I could do it, I would not. I am not a cruel man or a violent one, despite the things that are sometimes done in my name. I will not see you become the thing you hate."

* * * *

"You are the first blush of dew on the white flower, the silver edge of moonlight moving like a ripple across a pond, and when I reach for you, your mystery flows like water through my fingers."

Erred did not know enough about poetry to judge whether or not this rated as good verse. It seemed somewhat trite to him, but he smiled and thanked Thanaj with an affectionate kiss. Neither of his other masters had honored him with such flowery sentiments. "You give me too many gifts, my lord."

He was wearing a strand of pearls that Thanaj had given him over a robe of pale blue silk. Almond oil had been rubbed into his skin and his hair hung loose and heavy down his back, the way Thanaj liked it. Most of the jewels he had

brought with him he still wore, except for the few things Satu had given him.

In secret, Erred sent for a jewel merchant and sold those items. No doubt he disappointed the man by not haggling, but he did not care what coin he was given for the jewels as long as the merchant took them away.

The silver robe he wanted to burn, until he remembered how Tharril had lain on it and sighed in passion. So he kept it in memory of that time, crushing the delicate fabric to his face in search of his lover's scent before laying it aside. New robes had been provided for him, elaborate court attire whose layers and fastenings were more suitable for an *aktiri*. Only in private, when the harem eunuchs brought tokens indicating the High Prince desired pleasure from him, did Erred don the loose fitting garb of an *akesh*.

"I spoke truly," said Thanaj. "There is a mystery in you, and it is not merely the sacred spirit that shares your body. I think that your first master gave you a true name when he called you Arqui, for there is a part of you that is cold and distant."

Since the night of his dream, Erred had taken care to speak only of subjects that he knew would please his master and had requested to lie alone after their lovemaking as so not to disturb his master's sleep. Sometimes, however, Thanaj looked curiously at him, measuring the unease and dark desire that roiled within him, and addressed the matter. "Why do you desire vengeance when this is beyond you?

"My lord," Erred said cautiously, "what does a free man do when his loved ones are cruelly taken from him? It is a

woman's nature to weep, but it is a man's nature to burn with rage and to seek solace by striking out at that which has injured him."

"But you are not a free man." Thanaj rolled up the text containing his poem, secured the scroll with a silk cord, and laid it before Erred. "And until you are free, you must put aside these ghosts and desires. There is much in this world that is unjust and to struggle against it is like a fish struggling upon a hook: it does not save its own life and only does itself greater injury in the process."

The poet and philosopher in Thanaj could not seem to grasp that other men did not view the world as he did. "My lord, when a man becomes a slave, he does not stop being a man. Yes, he wears the marks of bondage and bows his head in fear and obedience, but in his deepest being he remains a man."

"Does he?"

Erred caught himself before he could speak too passionately. "If I have offended, forgive me."

Thanaj answered him with an indulgent smile. "As long as you remember who your master is and do not overstep the bounds of propriety, I am pleased to speak with you. I know that your people do not keep slaves, and I find this way of life to be most curious. Civilization is built on the backs of slaves, all learned men know this. I do not see how it is that your people can live without bondage and still thrive."

"My lord, do you condone the way slaves are used here?" Once again he was skirting the edges of propriety, but cautiously took the chance.

"I have always said that I did not condone it, Ahiru," replied Thanaj. "However, the laws are very old, and they give owners the right to do as they wish. I have made small amendments to the law codes, but there is little else I can do, and I cannot always enforce the changes I have made. As the son of a prince, surely you know that old ways are the most difficult to change?"

Erred was not yet ready to concede the argument. "I was my father's youngest son. I had very little to do with his daily business, and he is not the ruling prince. It is his cousin who sits on the throne of Altarme."

"Even so, you would have seen and heard enough in his household to know certain things. Tell me, is there no cruelty among your people? Do they not also lie, cheat, and hurt each other?" asked Thanaj. "If you tell me no, I will know you are lying. All men lie and do violence, though some relish it and make an art of it where others do not."

There was once a woman who came before my father and accused a man of rape, Erred wanted to tell him, and I have seen my father slap servants for being too clumsy or slow or surly. Many times he himself had snapped at servants, forgotten their names or neglected their weariness. On these points, he could not defend his people. "In my land we do not make war like you do," he said. "We do not massacre entire villages for sport."

Confusion slowly gave away to comprehension. Now Thanaj's voice was very soft, very grave. "Your first master was a soldier, and in war soldiers do things that are not decent. Once the fire of war passes, some regret those things

while others live for the carnage and boast of it. I can only guess what things Arjha ked Satu might have said to you about his exploits."

Erred concentrated on keeping the bitterness out of his voice. "He told me you gave him a triumph for it."

"No, I gave him a triumph because his campaign reopened a trade route that had been closed by two years of fighting. I did not approve of what he did at Enhir, though I did not say anything at the time. I have seen enough of the northern frontier to know how vicious a place it is. It is very easy to judge others when one is so far removed from such decisions, but I avoid the temptation.

"You have been owned by vulgar men, and all you have ever seen of my people is their cruelty and meanness," said Thanaj. "By now you must think that beauty and virtue do not exist in Tajhaan. On the contrary, we are a great and ancient people. Let me show you things and introduce you to those who will teach you better, and perhaps you come to view the matter differently."

That their debate was little more than an intellectual exercise for his master rankled. Still, he knew that Thanaj could not take his views seriously, and that this was not entirely the man's fault.

In his master's eyes, he was as a wounded animal or hurt child, something to be coddled and protected. For Thanaj to approach him as a man would mean acknowledging that he was not as impotent as a slave should be. Erred had realized very early that Thanaj wanted a companion he could rescue, a surrogate for the dead wife he could not save, and it was no

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accident that his erotic readings did not include any verse that addressed a male lover.

Nineteen

As summer approached, the weather became unbearably hot. Most of the High Prince's petitioners called on him in the morning hours, after which the household retired for the afternoon. A few more callers might come in the evening, and when they did Erred brought them into the atrium or the shaded fountain court to serve them iced drinks and engage them in idle talk until Thanaj arrived. On such occasions, the High Prince might discuss business with his guests far into the night, and Erred's bed would remain empty.

During the day, when he was not engaged with visitors or his lessons, Erred spent time with Khasi or with Hasir and Neshuru. The *akeshi* were both several years younger than he, but congenial and well-cultured. The High Prince did not tolerate petty rivalries between his pleasure slaves and had selected these two for their affability and gentle breeding.

New faces were rare in their world, so the *akeshi* welcomed Erred's presence and taught him some of their arts. In a short space, Erred learned to manicure nails, create artistic flower arrangements and paint elaborate henna tattoos on the hands and feet. The two young men also taught him to perform traditional Tajhaani dances and, in hushed voices, told him off-color jokes which he did not immediately understand.

Being an *akesh* in a royal or princely household was a better life than most *akeshi* knew. The highest nobility did not curry or return favors through their slaves, and *akeshi* rarely

went beyond the beds of those they served. Hasir and Neshuru were both survivors of political coups that had claimed their families when they were young. Their beauty had been marked and they were sold unspoiled to an *akesh* broker who did not pander to coarser tastes as Dhabi did; the man had raised the pair like sons, educating and nurturing them until they were old enough to learn the art for which they had been spared the sword. They were fifteen when they came to Thanaj, and they had never known the touch of any other. Sometimes they went to the palace bazaar, where they had many friends, or the eunuchs brought them tidbits of gossip, but this was the extent of their lives and they seemed content.

While they admired the length and color of Erred's hair and tried their jewels on him, it never occurred to Hasir and Neshuru to barter their friendship or favors for sex. Since their earliest days in the *akesh* broker's house, they had been close, chaste lovers once they were old enough to know desire. They knew that Erred ranked above them and had been told from the beginning that he was to be their prince's companion. This did not appear to bother either one, as Thanaj had not forgotten them and had been even more generous with his affection and gifts since Erred's arrival.

As summer approached its zenith, preparations were made for the journey to Akkil. Erred was not looking forward to another trip across the desert, but Thanaj assured him that it would not take as many days to reach Akkil as it had before. "Camels move much more swiftly," said Thanaj, "and you will wear a veil to protect you from the sun. I am not like other

princes who travel with their entire households and so take a month to cover a distance that should only take a few days."

The High Prince's retinue consisted of thirty soldiers, a pair of eunuchs and two baggage carts containing water, foodstuffs and camp furniture. Along the road to Akkil, there were two oasis villages and several wayfarer shelters in which the party could rest a few hours during the hottest part of the day. Except for one night, they slept in the open under the stars. Thanaj complimented Erred on his ability to handle a camel; Erred accepted the praise without explaining how he spent weeks tied to the back of such a beast and learned what he knew perforce.

During this, his third trip across the desert, Erred learned there was far more to camp life than drinking, dicing, and sex. Some of the soldiers had grown up among the trade caravans, where storytellers were prized like freshwater springs. Each night, as the heat bled out of the sand and the air grew chill, Thanaj drew Erred close to him under a thick blanket and held him as the men told their stories.

On the last night before Akkil, one of the men, emboldened by the cheap date wine the soldiers drank, asked if their prince's companion knew any stories. "Surely they know good stories in the west," he said.

Erred demurred, saying that he had no talent for such things. Only when Thanaj encouraged him, murmuring in his ear that he had never heard a Shivarian story and would like to, did Erred relent.

The date wine, which he drank to please Thanaj, was potent and gave him a headache. He searched his memory

for a suitable tale, perhaps something told in his father's house, yet the only thing that came to him was the tale of a *talevé* who strayed too far from his companions. "This happened long ago," he said, "when the Lady's lovers were not kept in a harem. They were permitted to go where they pleased and when.

"In the young man's body was another body, that of a fleet-footed *gaizhan*. He thrilled to the speed with which he could race across the meadow, and each day he ventured farther afield from his companions, giving no thought to the dangers men and predators might offer him. A *gaizhan* alone in a field is a tempting morsel to a wolf or moor cat, and though it might be one of the Lady's twelve sacred animals, it is hunted.

"Now a hunter came and saw this beautiful creature browsing through the grass. Even in the body of an animal a *talevé* is desirable, but the hunter did not know what it truly was that he saw. He thought only of the animal's magnificent hide and tender meat, of how the fat from its belly might make soap and of how he might carve its antlers into needles.

"Moving quietly as all skilled hunters, whether they be human or animal, do, he fitted an arrow to his bowstring. His arm was steady and his eye sharp. His aim would be true; the creature would feel no pain." Erred did not have the skill to pantomime the action in the way the other storytellers had, so he let his words carry the tale.

"The arrow sped across the meadow, more swiftly than the eye could follow, and the *gaizhan* fell. The hunter slowly approached, drawing his knife to clean and quarter the

carcass, yet in the moment the *gaizhan* fell it began to change. There upon the grass was a beautiful young man with an arrow through his heart.

"When the hunter saw what he had done, he flung away his bow and quiver and fled, but there is no hiding such a crime from the Lady's sight. That night, a storm came and washed away his cottage and him with it."

Erred knew from the puzzled reactions of his listeners that they did not think it a very good story. They were accustomed to tales of heroes, gods and princes, to the thunder and color of great deeds, not to some rustic legend of a careless young man and an unwitting hunter. Still, he accepted their polite compliments and, pleading exhaustion, returned to the tent he shared with the High Prince.

Thanaj came in a short time later. The blanket, still draped over his arm, he deposited on the folding camp stool next to Erred's cot. "A curious tale," he said. "I wonder why you told it."

"Forgive me, my lord, if I offended you by my poor talent. I said before that I am not a very good storyteller."

"I did not say I thought it a poor story, only a strange one," answered Thanaj. "But tell me why you chose that particular one."

Erred pushed back his blanket and started to sit up. "They tell many such tales in Shivar. Perhaps it even happened once, I do not know, but the priests tell us it is one of the reasons *talevé* are not permitted to go out."

Thanaj reached out to stroke his cheek. "I should think so," he said. "I shall have to keep this in mind when you

bathe in the sea, as I do not want to be the hunter who is swept away by your goddess' displeasure."

* * * *

Akkil gleamed like a pearl in the distance, white walls and buildings rising where the desert met a lush river delta and the turquoise sea. As the city loomed closer, dusty olive groves and goat pastures yielded to orchards and irrigated fields. Anthropomorphic statues flanked the road leading to the northern pylon gate, until it became clear to Erred that the city's architecture melded the arabesques and domes of Tajhaan with the colossal splendor of some other civilization. Later, in the cool of his house by the water, Thanaj explained that Akkil was on the crossroads between Tajhaan and Juva, and was an amalgamation of both cultures.

"Mayetra loved this city," he said. "She was born in Naddath by the sea and could not bear the heat and barrenness of the desert. Each summer when we came here she was filled with more joy in those six weeks than in the rest of the year."

"I would have liked to know her, my lord," replied Erred. It was not a hollow platitude. With the exception of Thuva, whose venom almost made him forget how gentle the other sex could be, women had been excluded from his life for six years.

Thanaj answered him with a wistful smile. "She would have welcomed you, even as I do." Later, he showed Erred a miniature painted on ivory which he kept in a casket that traveled with him. Such portraits, rendered in the highly

stylized Tajhaani fashion, were so homogenous as to be of no help at all, but Erred complimented the lady's beauty as he was expected to do.

The house occupied two stories, its double wings divided by a garden of fruit trees and fountains. Erred knew that Thanaj's two lesser wives dwelt here, but only the household stewards were on hand to greet the High Prince's party. Refreshments were served in an atrium floored with mosaics. A leisurely hour passed in the garden before eunuchs came to lead the guests up to their rooms.

Erred was situated in a chamber decorated in the Juvan style, with stars painted on a deep blue ceiling and a bed of gilded ebony spread with fine wool and skins. His chest was brought in and the first thing he did was to unpack the silver Lady and basin, setting them in a corner beneath a panel depicting a bird-headed goddess.

In another room, a bath was drawn for him. The tiles around the sunken tub were set like flowered jewels in the marble floor, and just beyond were carpets and a raised couch where a bather could enjoy the ministrations of the household masseuse. Shelves held linen towels, combs, and phials of precious oils. After days of having been denied such luxuries, Erred sank into the warm, scented water with a sigh and let Khasi wash his hair; he closed his eyes to better enjoy the sensation of the man's long fingers caressing his scalp.

Halfway through, Thanaj appeared, undressed and stepped into the pool. "I will do that for you," he said, dismissing the servant, "and you will do the same for me."

Erred waded out to the center of the pool and took the soap Thanaj handed him. He worked the sweet-smelling lather over Thanaj's chest as the prince leaned forward and began kissing his neck and shoulders. "I have been days without your body," he growled, "and I cannot wait any longer."

The soap slid from Erred's hands and fell to the bottom of the pool as their lips met. Fingers reached down to fondle his member and tease it to full erection; his ragged gasps were swallowed by Thanaj's mouth. Powerful arms encircled him and, lifting him out of the water, laid him down on the raffia mat at the lip of the pool. Erred felt the mat's rough fibers dig into his back as his lover's weight pinned him down. Thanaj locked their legs together and began to grind against him. Erred cried out at the friction their bodies created. Thanaj buried his face in his neck, nuzzling the damp skin as he reached his climax.

Once his breath returned, Thanaj carefully shifted off Erred's body. "Well," he chuckled, "now we shall need another bath."

That evening in the wide, peristyle court of the house, a meal of fresh fish, fruit, and olives tossed in a tart dressing was laid out for them under the glow of hanging lanterns. As they ate and drank watered apple wine to the accompaniment of soft music, three grooms led a bull into the center of the room and secured its tether to a ring in the floor. Erred regarded the animal in bewilderment, which did not cease even when the prince smiled and instructed him to watch.

The musicians struck up a lively chord, flutes trilling and handheld drums pounding as a troupe of lithe, naked young men took turns vaulting over the animal's horns to land on its back. Erred's eyes were riveted on the scene, on the lithe bodies of the dancers and their sensual movements. He wondered how the bull bore such treatment so patiently and how the dancers managed to avoid injury.

"The dancers practice upon a wooden bull, training from a young age until they can perform flawlessly," explained Thanaj. "The bull is usually a gelding, which eases it of some of its more aggressive tendencies. Sometimes an intact bull is used to heighten the challenge and the animal charges, or the dancers misjudge and injure themselves. I once saw a bull dancer split his side upon the horns, and have heard of others being gored or breaking their backs."

Erred's gaze followed a dancer who had just made a successful landing; the youth lifted his arm in a sweeping flourish before dismounting for the next dancer. "Why would anyone endanger themselves for such a sport?" And it was not only the bull dancers who were in danger. There was no barrier between the bull and the spectators. Should the stout rope break the animal could charge them.

"Because it *is* dangerous, that is why. Bull dancing is usually done in a sandy arena, and the animal is not restrained. The risk of death adds a certain thrill to the spectacle. For a private showing, of course, we take precautions." Thanaj drained his cup of wine and gestured to a servant to refill it. "You do not have such sports in your land?"

"No, my lord," answered Erred. "I have never seen anything like it." Indeed, the rhythmic rise and fall of the drums and the limbs of the dancers as they writhed on the bull's back and lightly sprang away was having a strangely erotic effect on him. Some of it might have been the wine, which he had drunk to please his host. It was not so harsh on his stomach when watered, though it often left him feeling rather lightheaded.

Later that evening, when they retired to Thanaj's bed, their lovemaking took on an intensity Erred had not known before. Thanaj took his time, savoring the responses his touch elicited while holding off his own gratification. Once he had mentioned that he was capable of achieving release without spending his seed, but only now, unfettered by the rituals of court life, did he demonstrate his art.

Swimming in the effects of the wine and dance, mingled with the sea air, Erred was wild with arousal. Never had his desire quickened to such a frenzied pitch, never had he wanted to be taken so badly. His training had always enabled him to hold off release until he received permission to come. Now it was all he could do to cling to the unraveling threads of his self-control.

Once their passion was spent, both of them sprawled together in mutual exhaustion, a tangle of sweaty limbs and linen sheets. "Do you understand now why I consider lovemaking an art?" asked Thanaj.

Sexual communion with the Lady was the only pleasure that could compare, yet for the sake of propriety Erred did

not mention that which was sacred. "Where did you learn such a thing?"

"When I was old enough to desire sex, my father taught me that a man could conquer the appetites of the body and strengthen his mind," said Thanaj. "Other men rut like beasts because they are enslaved to their baser lusts, but when we restrain ourselves we can attain a higher level of spirituality."

In the small hours of the night, before Erred left his bed, Thanaj asked him when he wished to bathe in the sea. "Is there anything you require for this ritual?"

Erred knew he was eager to watch. "I will need a private beach, my lord. I do not wish to have a crowd of people watching my transformation, and there is a danger in releasing the *ki'iri* spirit into a populated area. I know there are those here who hunt *hrill* as a delicacy."

"I have not forgotten your story," said Thanaj. "I will make the necessary arrangements."

The following afternoon Thanaj told him that a suitable beach had been found for him within an hour's ride of the city, and that he might proceed with the ritual whenever he wished.

Only a priest of the Water or another *talevé* had the right to witness a *ki'iri* transformation. The prospect of being watched in a sacred act by a non-believer had always irritated Erred, but as the time approached his annoyance grew. He was not a bull dancer performing for an audience, and bit his tongue against the urge to tell Thanaj to leave him alone. Instead, he bowed his head in appreciation of the effort being made and said that he would be ready the next day.

When he saw that the beach was not the same one to which Satu had brought him, Erred relaxed a little. To have gone into the sea in the place where Tharril had died would have been beyond him when he was already finding it difficult to call forth a dormant *ki'iri* spirit. His *ki'iri* master in Altarme had once told him that a transformation could not be forced, but eventually, wading out into the surf and emptying his mind to all but the wind and waves, Erred was able to coax the *hrill* into emerging.

He knew that he was on display for Thanaj and made as good as show of it as he could, frolicking in the waves close to shore and, when the prince stripped down to wade out into the water, swimming close enough for the man to stroke his pelt. Erred knew the sounds Thanaj made were ones of wonderment and joy, but in his *hrill* body he could no longer understand human speech.

His forced effort drained him of the energy that would have gone into hours of swimming and he cast himself up onto the beach long before he normally would have. He needed help to dress and could not stay upright, drifting into unconsciousness even before the party left the beach. When he awoke in the ebony bed in the High Prince's house, he could not quite remember how he had gotten there.

Late afternoon was turning toward sunset; the day was gone. A light meal was brought in, of which he ate as much as he could before wrapping himself in his blankets and going back to sleep. Khasi peered in to see if he needed anything. Other than that, he was left alone for the night.

Even had he been able to stay awake, he did not think he could have borne Thanaj's company. What he had done that day felt like sacrilege, even when an amazed Thanaj had lifted his spent body out of the surf and commented that he had never seen anything so remarkable.

A physician came to examine him the next morning, but he waved the eunuch away after telling him that he was well enough to get out of bed and join Thanaj for the morning meal.

Erred dressed and made his way downstairs, pausing in the corridor at the sound of childish voices and laughter, something he had not heard in a long time. When he entered the room where the meal was being laid out, he saw Thanaj surrounded by five children, none of whom looked over the age of eight.

Seeing Erred in the doorway, Thanaj greeted him with a broad smile and explained that the children were his. "Such lovely little ones," he said, "and how they have grown since I saw them last."

One at a time he introduced them. Each child answered with practiced courtesy and polite curiosity; it was finally a five-year-old girl who asked why Erred had white hair. Abashed, Erred permitted Thanaj to answer for him.

"Ahiru is very special," said Thanaj. "In his land, there are some who have white hair."

The eldest boy appraised Erred with his father's shrewd eye. "Are you an *akesh*?"

Thanaj made a shushing noise. "He is an *aktiri*, Hathil, and you should not be asking such questions of your father's honored guest."

Embracing each one, he sent them off with their servants. Erred now had leave to sit down, and at once a servant was at his elbow to offer him something to drink.

"They are such splendid children." Thanaj's eyes were still on the door through which his offspring had gone. "Their mothers are beautiful women, and wellborn. They dwell in the women's quarters on the other side of the house. Already they have heard much about you, but it is not seemly for me to bring an *aktiri* before them or I would have introduced you."

In the time Erred had spent in Satu's house, he had never once seen the master's wives. Only Arjha's wife had not been confined to the women's quarters, and this because her forceful personality and family connections had won her this privilege.

"I would have the children live with me," said Thanaj, "but it is not good for their health to come to court so young. In a few years, I will send for Hathil and begin training him in the ways of a prince, and then it will be time to find a suitable husband for Safira."

Had Erred not already known how long royal marriage negotiations could take, he would have said that the girl was far too young for Thanaj to consider the matter. When he had become a *talevé*, his own father had already been trying for eight years to find him a bride; the Lady's will had abruptly ended whatever ambitions his father had entertained for him.

"They are very lovely, my lord," he commented. "In the Blue House where I lived there were no women or children, so it has been many years since I have seen a child."

From the platter between them, Thanaj took a peach and began paring it. "You may yet have children of your own. Among my councilors there is a certain prince whose grandfather was a famous *akharu* before he wed. Here, try this. It was plucked from the orchard just yesterday."

Erred accepted the proffered slice of fruit and nibbled at it. "*Talevé* are forbidden to wed, my lord, and they cannot father children."

"You speak like a priest," said Thanaj, "and yet there are many priests who do these things."

Because they serve empty gods, thought Erred, *who do not punish them for breaking faith.* "My lord, a *talevé* is not capable of fathering a child."

"You are not a eunuch, Ahiru. I have seen that for myself," said Thanaj. "How is it that you possess your parts and yet cannot sire children?"

"It is the Lady's will, my lord. She takes away that gift in return for Her favor."

Thanaj proceeded to ask how he had become a *talevé*. "It seems that you must sacrifice much for this goddess of yours. Was this a path you chose, like a priest entering the temple?"

Erred picked at his food. His exhaustion had left him but he did not have the appetite to match his returning vigor. "No, it was not my choice, my lord. One morning I awakened to find my body and my bed soaked with sea water. My hair had turned white. It was a clear sign that the Lady had come

to me during the night and taken pleasure in me. That same day I was given to the priests who took me to the Blue House to dwell with others of my kind. I have not seen my family since then."

This answer further stirred Thanaj's curiosity. "Before when you spoke of union with your goddess, I had assumed you meant you had dedicated yourself as a priest and taken vows. I had no idea you meant it literally. When the High Prince lies with the goddess Shalat in the Great Marriage, it is understood that it is done through the body of her priestess. This is a great honor for you, to lie with a goddess in the flesh and not with a surrogate."

The turn of the conversation had begun to make Erred uneasy. "My lord," he said quickly, "it is a sacred matter and I am not permitted to speak of it."

Thanaj did not question him further. "How long has it been since you have seen your family?"

"It has been six years, my lord," said Erred. "I am twenty-four now."

"You are already old for an *aktiri*. Your goddess is powerful but cruel, taking away your seed and your family."

Erred thought it wiser not to mention that the Lady had also shortened his life. Those tied to the Earth element, as mortal men were, passed through the seasons of youth and maturity and old age, but a *talevé* was a man remade by Her in the Water element, and for him death came gently in the late summer of his life, sparing him that long, slow descent into twilight. The oldest *talevé* in the Blue House of Altarme

had been thirty-nine when Erred left and would surely be dead by now.

That night, having been satisfied that his companion was once again in good health, Thanaj came to him. Shedding their clothes, they lay down together on the ebony bed in the twilight of Erred's room, where an open window drew in the cool tang of the sea. Thanaj did not take him immediately but kissed and caressed his body for a long time.

"Your body is the ocean, sweet and bitter." He buried his face in Erred's hair, running the strands through his fingers. "You were so beautiful when you went into the sea."

Sliding his hand down Erred's torso, he palmed the erection he found there, bending to touch it with a tongue that traced the veined underside and nuzzled the slit. Erred started, but the only response this elicited was further teasing on Thanaj's part. Opening his mouth, he suddenly swallowed the shaft, increasing his speed and suction until, just short of Erred's climax, he let it slide from his lips and crawled back up Erred's body to kiss him.

"My lord," Erred asked breathlessly, "why did you do that? It is forbidden."

Thanaj kissed him deeply, and Erred tasted the salt of his flesh on his tongue. "You forget who I am. If I wish to make love to you in this way, then I will."

His lips nuzzled the tendons in Erred's neck. "It was a mighty gift you gave me, allowing me to watch you," he said huskily. "I have never seen a clearer sign of divinity. I should worship you, and your goddess should have temples and

monuments among my people. I will build them, if you desire it."

Erred could not presume to speak for the Lady, but as they made love it occurred to him that if his goddess had wanted worshippers among the Tajhaani, She would have appeared to them. "Stop the *hrill* hunts, my lord," he gasped. Thanaj slowly entered him and began to move, the angle of his body stroking the tiny nub that heightened Erred's desire. "The *hrill*, they are Her sacred creatures, they are...."

As his release overcame him, he could not say more, nor did he know if the words he had said had the intended effect. Had Thanaj come to him afterward interested in a serious discussion of a Water cult in Tajhaan, Erred would have reiterated the *hrill* argument, for no people could truly worship the Lady who did not honor Her creatures, but Thanaj never mentioned it again.

There was no doubt that Thanaj's curiosity and wonder had been genuine, but Erred was astute enough to know that in the end the High Prince's religious convictions were shaped by what was politically expedient. A foreign goddess whose worshippers were slaves barred from the temples would not take precedence over established deities whose priests held a sizeable portion of the kingdom's wealth and secular authority.

He closed his eyes and slept, sinking into the soft mist of a dream that led him into a garden. All the while, he knew he was dreaming the graveled path and the tinkling splash of the fountain beyond the fruit trees. No fear threatened in this

place, allowing him to keep walking until he came to a colonnade.

In the shadows under the archway a figure appeared, draped in blue and gray, the robes of a priest of the Water. But the stern face framed by the silvery-gray hood belonged to Tharril. He was unblemished and carried himself with an authority he had never possessed in life.

When he spoke, his voice was seductive in its gentle urgency. "Wait for me, Erred. I will come to you."

In the heavy scented air of this place, Erred could taste his own confusion. *You are dead*. Sad knowledge hung suspended like a bubble in the air between them. Within his own dream, he understood what he saw and heard. *This is the afterlife. One day I will come here to stay, but it is not today.*

"We will be together," said Tharril. "Wait for me."

Yes, one day, but not now, thought Erred. The garden dimmed, merged into a room painted with stars, and he woke.

* * * *

When the High Prince's entourage returned to Tajhaan toward the end of summer, the heat still lay like a blanket over the city. Thanaj once again received petitioners and spent many evenings dining with the priests and merchants whose continued support he needed. Erred greeted them and remained for some of the meetings, playing the kithara and reciting poetry during lulls in the conversation. He was told later that several guests, expressing interest in him, expected the High Prince to lean on him to accept their invitations.

One evening, Thanaj took him aside and explained that an *aktiri* could not always escape becoming involved in his master's political dealings, and so it was even in the High Prince's house. "I know you do not care to lie with any other and I cannot force you to go to the bed of any man if you do not wish it," he said, "but it might be wise of you to cultivate good relations with some of your admirers."

"I was under the impression that my relations with them were amicable," said Erred. "Or is it that they desire something more?"

Thanaj made no attempt to deny this. "You come from a royal court, and so you must understand that a ruler who is not generous, who does not listen to his people or his councilors, is seen as a tyrant, so it is sometimes necessary for me to do or share things I do not wish to. A prince does not share his *akeshi*, but an *aktiri* is another matter, as he has the right to consent," he said. "I will not send you to the bed of any man you despise."

At some point, Erred had expected this. He knew that he had little choice in the matter; an *aktiri's* right to refuse was no more than a few scratches of a stylus on a legal document, and men always found ways to bend the law to their own use. Some lords he outright refused to lie with, but otherwise allowed Thanaj to choose which invitations he would answer. For several days, this was the last he heard on the matter.

On the last warm afternoon in autumn, Thanaj arranged for an excursion to the private lake he maintained just outside the palace. Nestled between two of Tajhaan's three hills, surrounded by hanging gardens, the lake was neither very

wide nor deep. It was fed by an underground reservoir and channels ran from it to irrigate the fields and olive groves below the city walls. During those summers when he did not leave the city, Thanaj occasionally invited friends and courtiers to swim in the cool water or enjoy an afternoon aboard his small pleasure barge, but today was not hot enough for such activity. Thick blankets were spread on the ground under the trees where the water softly lapped at the shore, and a makeshift table was unfolded for the food and drink Thanaj ordered brought.

A guard and servant hovered nearby, but the only guest Thanaj invited to accompany him and Erred was one of his councilors, a man with a neatly trimmed black beard. Thanaj explained that he and Amasur had been friends since youth. "He is the only one on my council whose company I can truly bear," he said, smiling.

Amasur gave a short laugh before drinking wine from the little cup the servant poured him. "That is because I do not gild my opinion like a maiden's fingernails."

Thanaj smiled at him before turning to Erred. "Still, he is too modest to remind me how many times he watched my back during the civil war."

"I did it only because the gods did not bless you with eyes in the back of your head," said Amasur.

Several times Erred had heard of the civil war fought before Thanaj became High Prince. Not wishing to give offense with a potentially ill-considered question, he had asked Ossur instead. The eunuch accompanied him back to his chamber and there, refreshed by wine brought by Khasi,

told him all he wished to know. By day's end, Erred knew that Thanaj had not been born his father's eldest son, and that his father and elder brother had been assassinated in a harem conspiracy that placed a younger half-brother on the throne.

"Our prince was very fortunate," said Ossur, "for he had many friends who warned him before the assassins came. He slipped out of the city by night and rode hard across the desert until he came to Atrija, which is halfway between Tajhaan and Juva. This was where the princess Mayetra was waiting with her attendants, you see. She was to have been married to the eldest son. The prince Thanaj saw her there, and they fell in love, but the princess' father would not grant them leave to marry until Thanaj took back his throne. It was two years of fighting, but in the end the people of Tajhaan surrendered the city to him. His half-brother, may the vultures peck at his bones, was too young to rule and not bred for it besides. Two years of bad rule, we were glad to be rid of it."

Through snatches of conversation, Erred further learned that Amasur had commanded Thanaj's army during the civil wars, and though he was no longer a general, he was still consulted on military matters.

In his plainspoken way, Amasur openly admired Erred's beauty but did not touch him. Whenever he addressed Erred, he was courteous and engaging, yet gave most of his attention to Thanaj. Once, he asked to borrow Erred's kithara and played a lively tune with lyrics that made Thanaj laugh and Erred blush. He ended his performance with a little bow

and a tongue-in-cheek apology for recalling his soldiering days.

When, in the privacy of the royal bedchamber, Thanaj later asked Erred what he thought of Amasur, Erred knew why the man had been invited to accompany them. Although he had suspected it from the first, he confirmed his suspicions when Thanaj revealed that Amasur had seen him at a festival and desired him. Erred cared little for the underhanded ploy but agreed to go to Amasur's bed because the man struck him as being agreeable, intelligent, and reasonably attractive.

There were protocols to be observed when an *aktiri* or *akharu* went out, and Ossur was sent to advise Erred on how he was expected to dress and behave with a client. "As you are not an *akesh*, you are not there to give sexual gratification. You are a guest, but you must be charming and speak only of lighthearted matters." Music, art, and poetry were suitable topics for conversation, while politics and religion were not. Nor was he to mention any other admirers or speak of what he did with the High Prince.

For his first visit, Ossur helped Erred choose a dark silk robe that would set off his white hair; the ensemble was brightened by a necklace of golden leaves that Thanaj had given him.

Amasur's household welcomed his arrival with much courtesy and fuss, and the master himself presently came out to lead Erred into a beautifully appointed atrium where refreshments had been set out. Unlike an *akesh*, who was simply property lent out by his master for sex, when an *aktiri* or *akharu* chose to give his favors, the gesture was

understood as precisely that: a favor. The business of lovemaking was heightened by foreplay that began long before the partners ever made it into the bedchamber, and some successful courtesans were known to make their new clients wait a week or more beyond the initial visit to invite them into bed.

Erred, however, did not make Amasur wait beyond a few hours. When he felt that he and Amasur had exhausted their conversation for the present, and when he knew that the man was hard for him, he took Amasur's hand and suggested that the man show him a place where he could rest. At once, he was led upstairs to a room where the bed was already laid with the finest silk and linen.

"If you wish to refresh yourself with a bath," said Amasur, "my servants will bring hot water. I also employ a skilled mass—"

Erred silenced his anxious courtesies by unfastening the ties of his robe and letting it fall to the floor. Save for the necklace, he was naked underneath. That and his best seductive pout were all the invitation his host needed. Amasur could not shed his clothes swiftly enough.

What Erred had not realized was that making love as an *aktiri* was not a one-sided affair. He was not expected to perform without receiving gratification in turn, and could refuse any lover who refused to grant it. An admirer sometimes forgot an *aktiri* was still a slave or, in the act of wooing his lover, the taboos that governed intercourse with slaves simply did not matter to him. Amasur was eager and

passionate, bringing Erred to climax with his hands and mouth before entering him.

On the way out, Erred received a purse of silver. Thanaj permitted him to keep the entire amount as an *aktiri's* due, save for the one coin that he took as the master's token. Ossur appraised his performance and expressed his displeasure that Erred had permitted his client to bed him on the first visit.

"An *aktiri* or *akharu* who lies with every potential client at the outset is not respected. If it is simply lovemaking these men desire, they have *akeshi* to sate these appetites," he said. "I have told you before: a skillful courtesan offers things an *akesh* cannot. Part of your charm is that you are exotic and aloof. Cultivate these attributes along with your skills in music, poetry and conversation and the quality of your admirers and their gifts will increase."

This was not the last time Erred went out. Thanaj chose three more lovers for him, and these became regular admirers, sending him gifts and requests to revisit the pleasure of his company. At first, Erred hesitated to accept their invitations, having been under the impression that what he had done had largely been for the High Prince's benefit, but Thanaj told him that as long as he did not stray beyond the bounds of propriety, there was no reason why he should not continue if it pleased him.

Whenever he reflected on the situation, Erred could not fathom Thanaj's apparent lack of jealousy. That Thanaj himself had arranged the initial encounters made little difference. Erred's previous masters had sometimes

expressed mixed feelings over the arrangements they made; Arjha in particular had afterward demanded greater demonstrations of devotion and ardor to offset this uncertainty.

Erred noted the anniversary of Arjha's death as an afterthought, as if it was something that had happened a very long time ago. With Thanaj's permission, he had given two of Arjha's gifts to Hasir and Neshuru, but sold the pearls and most of the other jewels Arjha had given him. What remained he no longer wore, preferring instead to honor the High Prince and his admirers by wearing their gifts, and had no desire to keep any reminder of his time as an *akesh*.

On the eve of the feast of Abennet, as he was selecting his raiment for the banquet, Thanaj came to him with a dark look in his eyes. Erred at once laid aside the silks, dismissed Khasi, and sat down to hear the news the High Prince brought him.

"I have had news from the lower city," said Thanaj. "A certain guard died last night."

While Thanaj knew the names of his own guards and servants, Erred found it strange that he should concern himself with someone from outside the palace. Still, if he wished to mention the matter, then Erred would do his best to feign interest. "I did not know this, my lord."

"I know you did not, Ahiru, but I will tell you anyway. Perhaps the news will interest you somewhat?"

Apprehension began to crawl up Erred's spine, stilling whatever question he had been about to ask.

"This man was involved in an altercation in one of the lower city's more disreputable wine shops. Someone dragged

him into a dark alley and cut his throat," said Thanaj. "He was employed in the household of a certain olive merchant who I am sure will greatly miss his services."

Erred's mind quickly supplied a name where Thanaj deliberately omitted it. *Ehmet*. His eyes darted to the High Prince's face, noting how Thanaj's tone hinted at something more sinister than his mere words suggested.

Thanaj studied his reaction, or rather his lack of one. "Is there nothing you wish to say?" he asked.

"The man died as he lived," Erred said coldly. "Do not expect me to mourn for him." He knew he ought to feel more, if not for the event then for the man who had brought him the news, but where his mixed emotions of hate, triumph, and gratitude should have converged there was only a void.

As Thanaj turned to go, Erred suddenly got to his feet and knelt before him. "I am ungrateful, my lord," he said.

"Forgive me. I did not expect such news."

Thanaj's hand fell on his shoulder, bidding him to rise. "Does this satisfy you, Ahiru?" The set of his jaw indicated that this was the limit of his generosity. Satu would remain unassailable, unpunished.

"Yes, my lord. It satisfies me."

But it was not the end of vengeance. Erred knew how cutthroat the conflict between Satu and his four sons was. Poison and double dealing were common currency in all five households. Thus far, Satu had been lucky, yet luck almost always found its match in persistence. With so many enemies so close to him, it was simply a matter of time before Satu found his end.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Erred had only to wait, and pray. He had become adept at doing both.

Twenty

When Thanaj learned that his *aktiri* was a proficient rider, he gave Erred a beautiful chestnut horse and invited him to take his exercise by riding around the lake. The weather was cool enough for such excursions, and Erred always returned exhilarated.

In the last week before the rains forced him to curtail his activities, Thanaj rode out on the hunt. It was not the first time Erred had accompanied him, for at Akkil they had gone duck hunting in the river delta, but that had been sedate compared with a desert hunt. "The animal we hunt today is fierce, but wears a beautiful spotted coat in winter that is worth the danger," said Thanaj. "You will come with me and watch me take the game."

"Will you have men to drive it before you?" asked Erred.

At Akkil, dogs had driven the ducks from the marshes so the men could shoot. Ossur had said that it was customary for men to flush out the game and corner it so a prince could shoot, and Erred had seen a similar thing in Altarme. So when Thanaj laughed, he did not understand.

"If I wanted others to do my work for me, I would stay at home," answered Thanaj. "No, I will ride the prey down myself, though you may rest assured that I will take precautions."

Amasur and five other close associates rode with their prince, with eight soldiers as a vanguard. Six hunting dogs accompanied them. All the men save Erred were armed with

spears and bows; an *aktiri* was permitted to ride, but it was unseemly to give him a weapon.

The hunt began in the northernmost stretch of the hills, where a goatherd reporting seeing a large cat days earlier; fresh droppings on the trail confirmed the animal was still nearby. The dogs were loosed to find the scent, and ten minutes later the cat was flushed out amid ecstatic barking and a low, fearsome growl. From there, the pursuit led across the hills, the quarry staying just ahead of the dogs and riders.

From his saddle, Erred saw the cat. Tawny-gray against the brush, it had a black tail with a white tip and claws that could eviscerate a grown man. And it was fast, leaving dust in its wake as it sprinted. As the men rode hard after it, Erred kept to the rear with one of the guards. Riding behind was neither unexpected nor new to him, for as a youth he had often had to vie with his older brothers for a place during the hunt; when he took a shot, it had always been at smaller game and never at the main quarry.

He did not see whose arrow took the cat, but he knew that no one was permitted to shoot until the High Prince yielded his right of precedence. A strangled snarl and a cloud of dust as the animal dropped signaled an end to the pursuit.

Afterward, Thanaj invited him to look at the carcass, with its dusty paws and tongue lolling in the dirt. "Feel how fine the pelt is," he said. Leaning closer, he whispered in Erred's ear, "I mean to have it cured for my bed, and then I will have you upon it."

Before Erred could reply, Thanaj swiftly kissed his cheek and called for the wineskin to be passed around. A temporary

camp was set up as the carcass was cleaned and quartered. One of the soldiers carefully separated the skin from the muscle and rolled it up to be stretched and cured later. As the work continued, other predators, scenting the blood, drew near. A few well-placed arrows and the snarling of the hunting dogs kept them at a distance.

He was startled by Thanaj's hand upon his shoulder. "Ahiru, I am told that you can shoot. There is an easy target, if you wish to try."

Mindful of protocol, Erred politely demurred, but Thanaj's tone indicated that he would like to see his companion shoot.

The bow that was placed into his hands was longer than a Shivarian bow and took greater strength to draw. Erred nocked the arrow, making certain the fletching was properly positioned, and took his stance. His target, a lean, long-limbed feral canine whose hunger or curiosity kept bringing it too close, was no more than twenty yards away. He sighted, drew and fired.

It was not a clean shot, glancing off the animal's hindquarter as it turned; the dog yelped but did not flee. A second arrow dropped it to the dirt. Polite applause greeted his effort.

"Forgive me, my lord," said Erred. "I have not practiced in a very long time." With a short bow, he returned the weapon to Thanaj. His fingertips were tingling even through his gloves; he no longer had the calluses necessary to draw such weight.

"But well done nonetheless," said Thanaj.

Their pursuit had taken them a good four miles from the west gate by which they were to return. Much of the distance was flat terrain. Half a mile from their campsite, Thanaj was seized with a sudden restlessness that prompted him to tug at the reins of Erred's horse and urge him to race. The captain of the guard protested, but the horses had had sufficient time to rest and Thanaj was determined.

In the end, they all had to follow. It was a side of Thanaj, wild and carefree, that Erred rarely saw. He drove the chestnut as best he could, but though he acquitted himself well he did not have his master's drive or stamina. As the gate came into view, he dropped back to give Thanaj his due.

Thanaj was exhilarated by the day's activity, and so was he, who had forgotten what it was to ride hard and hunt as other men did. Their lovemaking that night was more energetic than usual, and for the first time Thanaj did not whisper poetry in his ear. Once the heat of their passion was extinguished, Erred found breath enough to wonder at it. As he burrowed deeper under the coverlet, seeking his lover's warmth, it came to him that Thanaj could no longer pretend the man who had ridden beside him and shot so well was a woman.

* * * *

At the end of each spring, the High Prince made a ritual progress to each of the city's temples. This was a carefully orchestrated event that, with all its pageantry and protocol, might last as long as a week and was a call for the people of Tajhaan to reaffirm their devotion to the gods.

This year, Erred was permitted to accompany Thanaj on three of his visits, but while the High Prince and his chief advisors were closeted with the high priests of each temple, he had little to do except admire the architecture. Now that he was permitted to enter the temples and worship, he began to take greater notice of the Tajhaani pantheon, the differences between its gods, and the way in which their devotees comported themselves.

The Father to whom all Tajhaani prayed was a thunder god and earth-shaker. Various other deities ruled the lives of Tajhaan's citizens, depending on their preference and trade.

In his house, Thanaj had kept his wife's Juvan servants, and they worshipped their own gods. The slaves were permitted to own idols and were allotted time for daily prayer, although few were devout enough to request the privilege of a shrine. Hasir and Neshuru were not particularly religious, and the few Shivarian slaves Thanaj employed were not devotees of the Lady. When they prayed at all, it was to the Earth Mother.

Thanaj occasionally allowed Erred to watch him light incense and pray to his gods, under the provision that Erred not interrupt him. His worship was a private thing and few were invited to share in it.

Appearing in such close proximity to the ruler meant that Erred was high in Thanaj's favor, but his role in the progress was strictly ornamental. In the house of Aben, arrangements were made for him to sit in a shaded courtyard where he might read from the scroll he had brought or speak to some of the priests who tended the grounds. As most priests

tended to bore him with their sanctimonious droning, Erred opted for the former.

He was making slow progress in learning to read and write Tajhaani; the alphabet bore no relation to written Shivarian, and the text was laid out in vertical columns that moved from right to left, making it difficult for him to keep his place.

"Is it fair reading, that scroll?" someone asked.

The voice belonged to a young man whose shaven head, homespun yellow robe, and lack of jewelry indicated that he was a temple novice. "It keeps me occupied," answered Erred.

"Then you must have aspirations of being a healer, if you find entertainment in that dry text." To his surprise, the novice laughed and sat down on the bench beside him. "Oh, do not pretend that you do not know me, Arquí. It was not so very long ago that we last saw each other."

Once again, he glanced up at the young man, taking in his high-boned, aristocratic features. Embarrassment found him. "Forgive me for not recognizing you, Lord Usha."

Still laughing, Usha waved aside his apologies. "I am not a lord here, so you do not have to be so formal. I was surprised to see that the High Prince brought you into the temple. Does this mean you are no longer a slave?"

"I am an *aktiri*," said Erred. "I thought you already knew this."

"Oh, I knew you were living in the palace and I asked how you were, but the High Prince had very little to say to me and I could not say anything else to him with my grandfather and the other high priests around," replied Usha.

Erred laid aside the scroll. "Do you enjoy being a priest?"

Usha shrugged. "All the rituals and rules are dull sometimes, but I study hard. My teachers seem pleased, and Hebet keeps me happy. He has been by my side since the very beginning." His gaze drifted to a group of men who stood talking under a nearby awning; he caught the eye of a handsome older man who wore the pectoral of a full priest and glowed when the man returned his smile.

But when he looked back to Erred, all the softness had gone out of his eyes. "I hear that my father is not doing well. I have tried to send him messages, but he does not answer. Eskil writes to me sometimes, though. He says that Father is sick and tormented by nightmares in which he is being devoured by strange creatures. I do not know what to make of any of it."

Erred offered none of the usual platitudes. Whether the man lived or died, he did not care.

"I have thought of visiting him, but Eskil and Hebet both think it unwise," said Usha. "It troubles me to think I am to blame for this."

"No," said Erred, "you are not to blame, and you should listen to their advice. I did not see you when you left your father's house. I heard things. I—"

"I am sure there was plenty of gossip in the house. You know what my father is like," said Usha.

"Perhaps if I had done as he ordered, it would not have been so terrible."

"There is nothing more that needs to be said about the matter," Usha said tightly. "I am now an acolyte in the house

of the god where I am safe and well cared for, and I have taken my grandfather's name as my patronymic. I am now Usha ked Shakhar." His eyes wandered to the open scroll. "Why are you reading about herbs? Do you wish to become a healer when you are free?"

Once again, Erred looked at the text, very little of which made sense to him. "Is that what am I reading?"

Long fingers unrolled more of the scroll to find the title. "It is a healing text by a Juvan physician named Mekeneb. Did you not know what you were reading?"

"I simply chose one of the scrolls the eunuchs gave me," Erred admitted. "I am trying to learn to read and write in Tajhaani but it is very difficult."

"I suppose it is if you are going to learn with such a boring subject," said Usha. "Learning the sacred texts is much harder. They are written in a very old language and hardly anyone speaks it anymore except at rituals, but it is pretty to listen to. I think that is why it is still used in the temples, because the gods find the sound pleasing."

On later reflection, Erred realized that he might have been mistaken about Usha. Although he had gone into the priesthood for an entirely different reason, the young man seemed determined to be a good priest and, as he grew older, might one day show a deeply spiritual side.

* * * *

Everywhere he heard the rushing of water. He could not escape it, even when he pulled a cushion over his head to muffle the sound. Eskil and the physician who came to see

him looked strangely at him, insisting the room was perfectly quiet. Marsu stood in a corner, his eyes wide and fearful.

"No!" Satu cried, wheezing for breath enough to correct them. "Do you not see them? *There*, in the corner!" Jabbing his finger into the shadows, he tried to make them see the creatures waiting there. Once he was left alone again, once he closed his eyes to try to find the rest that eluded him, they would fall on him.

"Lord Satu," said the physician, "you have been working too hard. There is water in your lungs and you have a fever. If you wish, I can give you a syrup that will help you sleep."

Instead, he shoved the man away, banished everyone from the room, and curled into himself, trying to shut out the demons with their watery hissing and devouring eyes. As evening fell, he roused from a fitful, sweating nightmare in which he was being consumed alive to a gripe in his belly. His bowels were loose.

He bent over the privy, gasping for air as his body undid itself. Above the rushing torrent he heard a voice murmuring, indecipherable and full of malice. Surely it was a curse put upon him by his enemies—no doubt his sons had hired some sorcerer to do this thing to him. He wept and beat upon the walls of the privy, railing at the nameless terror that stalked him until he forgot his sons, the servants who came running at his cries, and last of all, his own name.

* * * *

Erred was playing dice with the two *akeshi* when a servant came in with refreshment and the latest gossip. He was

content to listen as Hasir and Neshuru badgered the eunuch for more details about the feast a certain lord was planning and about the merchant who had just been found dead on the floor of his own privy.

Hasir impatiently nudged his companion. "Why do you care so much about what entertainment Lord Eshninda is hiring when you know neither one of us is going to be invited to the banquet? Let us hear more about the other matter, Bekhu."

"It's not a pretty thing, this death," said Bekhu, "and there are whispers of plague and poison. They say the man was afflicted with water in the bowels and water in the lungs that slowly strangled him."

Neshuru made a disgusted noise. "Is anyone else in the house sick? Do they say it's spreading?"

"No, they all think it is poison." Bekhu leaned forward and dropped his voice, as he customarily did when he had something truly interesting to share. "His servants found him lying in his own foul mess. No one can agree on what poison it might have been, though."

Erred thought nothing of the matter and forgot about it once Bekhu left. He spent part of the day entertaining an ambassador from Dhahar, Tajhaan's easternmost province, after which he rode his horse by the lake and enjoyed a hot bath.

Toward evening, Chiman appeared to escort him to the High Prince's private office. The presence of a guard, much less the royal captain, unnerved Erred enough to wonder what was wrong, but he held his tongue until the man ordered him to get to his knees before his prince.

"I assume that by now you have heard from the eunuchs about the merchant who was found dead in his home?" Thanaj's eyes were as cold as his voice. "I will ask you directly: did you have any part in the death of Satu ked Menteith? You know the penalty for this, but if you admit it now and ask my mercy, I will order Chiman to give you a quick death."

He could not speak. His eyes darted from the High Prince to the captain of the guard, both stern and implacable, and his ears rang with Thanaj's words. *Satu is dead*. His brain refused to work beyond that, not comprehending why he was now on his knees in danger of his life. Slowly, it came to him that Thanaj believed he was responsible for Satu's death. "My lord, I did not touch him."

By the time he was dismissed and had returned to his room, Erred was shaking violently. Unable to stop the tremors, he wildly paced up and down the length of the room, and when he was out of breath and wild with mingled ecstasy and terror, he flung himself to his knees before the Lady's image and wept. *Hail, most radiant goddess, life-giving water, bringer of vengeance*. In the waste land, She had heard him and, at last, She had answered.

Khasi, alarmed by his master's behavior, inquired if he was all right. Erred waved him away.

Twilight crept upon the city, and still he remained on his knees. A rustle in the darkness belied a presence behind him. Thinking it was Khasi, he took no notice.

"The physicians cannot tell me how he died, by what illness or poison," said Thanaj, "and now the joy in your eyes

says you are guilty." Pain thickened his voice. "Ahiru, I do not want to have to end your life, but if you have done this...."

Slowly, shakily Erred got to his feet and turned. With his tear-streaked face and disheveled hair, he knew what a wild picture he made. "I prayed for his death, and She answered. A thousand times in my heart I have killed him, but it was not my hand that did the deed. I prayed, and at *last* She heard me." His words dissolved into a sob that mingled grief and sated joy, and through the tears that misted his eyes he could scarcely make out Thanaj standing in the doorway.

"Ahiru—"

"She *heard* me and took vengeance." At his back he could feel the luminous presence of the goddess, even as Thanaj turned away in revulsion.

Euphoria quickly became uneasiness. Pulling back the screens, Erred tasted fear in the spring air. It was smoke and copper, the taste of blood. Dread filled the room, centering on the shrine where the moonlit figure seemed to tremble with an anger that was only beginning to stir.

Erred pressed his hands over his mouth, wondering what he had done. More than anything, he wanted to call Thanaj back, to retract his wild words, but it was too late. With a trembling voice, he ordered Khasi to light the lamps and spent a restless night afraid of the dark.

It did not end there. By turning to the priesthood, Usha had forfeited his inheritance, and Satu had not designated another heir. His half-brothers, unwilling to wait for the city authorities to assess and divide their father's estate, a

process which might have taken months, turned on each other before he was even properly cremated.

Three days of bloodshed and panic gripped the city, and the strife did not stop with the men and guards of each household, but spilled over into the slave and women's quarters. Wild tales of concubines being raped and babes dashed against walls or spitted on lances spread through the bazaar and from there into all parts of the city.

Erred was sitting at breakfast with Hasir and Neshuru when word came that Satu's *akesh*, seized by the third son, had been found in a courtyard with his throat slashed and his genitals hacked off. More atrocities had been committed upon the body, but Erred at once held up his hand for silence as Bekhu began to describe them.

"I have heard enough," he said sharply.

"But Ahiru," protested Neshuru, "this is interesting."

"There is nothing *interesting* about the murder of another *akesh*, especially if he is someone you once knew." Erred threw down his napkin and got to his feet. "If you still wish to hear everything, you will do it without me."

He stumbled toward the balcony, thinking he would vomit up what he had already eaten. *She is killing them all. What have I done?* Behind him, he could hear Hasir telling Bekhu to get a physician. Erred shook his head, mumbling that he did not need medicine, only fresh air and a moment to collect his thoughts.

The balcony he chose looked out over the elite quarter of the city. A mile away, beyond the palace grounds, he saw smoke rising from some of the buildings in dense clouds

broken by flashes of tarnished orange. From that direction he heard distant shouts. Bekhu had said that the violence was beginning to spill into other parts of the city, and now the bazaar had been closed and the citizens ordered to stay indoors.

"What has your Lady done?" asked a sharp voice from within. "Is this also part of Her vengeance, to destroy my city and slaughter the innocent?"

Thanaj had shed his robes for a leather corselet studded with brass. A sword hung from his belt and he carried a close-fitting helm under his arm. His face was stern, wearing the look of one about to order destruction, and for a moment Erred did not recognize him.

"It is Satu's own sons who are responsible for this," answered Erred. "All save one, they have turned on each other."

The High Prince made a gesture, at which a guard wearing a leopard skin kilt came up and took his helm. "I have sent word to Usha's grandfather to take him to safety outside the city. As for his brothers, they will have much to answer for when they are brought before me."

Three full companies, two infantry and one chariot, moved into the city to restore order. Their orders left no room for negotiation. Wherever they found rioters who refused to disband, the punishment was swift and brutal, and as they advanced toward the quarter where the violence had first erupted, they left as many bodies lying in their wake as the rioters had.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Messengers brought word back to the palace at regular intervals. Erred donned his most sober attire and found a place in the hall just outside the royal council chamber where he was able to hear most of the dispatches that arrived for the stewards and advisors. Few spared him a second glance, so he learned which streets had been secured, how many were injured, and where pockets of resistance still lingered.

No one thought to offer the messengers any luxuries. All were soldiers, accustomed to hurrying back and forth between battle lines, but some were young enough that they could not have seen too many campaigns. Wanting more information than he could glean by eavesdropping alone, Erred took advantage of their exhaustion, plying them with cool drinks and wash cloths with which they could refresh themselves before returning to their posts.

Sometimes they were in too much haste to do more than swallow their beer and mumble a word of thanks, but a few spoke to him, giving him accounts of the action beyond the words they carried. In some quarters, rioters had engaged the soldiers in fierce hand-to-hand fighting while some ordinary citizens, weary of the bloodshed, had tried to intervene and were caught between sides. Other citizens told of being forced to take the part of one brother or another; any refusals led to the summary mutilation or killing of family members.

Twilight fell, followed by a restless night lit by flames. A curfew was imposed, and extended even to the royal household. Erred was forced to retire upstairs, where he picked over his supper. Sleep did not come; he stayed awake

all night with the eunuchs and *akeshi*, gambling with the latter for copper coins.

"Do not fear, he will return safely," said Ossur. "His guards will keep him away from the fighting."

Not once did he kneel before his shrine. Knowing what his prayers had already wrought, he could not face the Lady in Her wrath. All he could do was hold in his heart a faltering kernel of hope that Thanaj would be spared.

At midmorning, news arrived with a breathless messenger that all four brothers were dead, the last one slain by his own guards when they had seen the soldiers coming; the guards had promptly fallen to looting his house and killing the remaining inhabitants who were in their way. A battering ram was brought in to break down the gates. Infantry swarmed the grounds, subduing everyone they found, and by noon the High Prince had taken possession of the house.

In a back room, the soldiers found one survivor, a small boy cowering under his dead mother's skirts. Thanaj himself carried the blood-spattered child out of the ruined house and was still holding him when he returned to the palace a few hours later.

The first Erred saw of Thanaj was the child clinging to his neck. Thanaj was patient with the boy even as he whimpered and refused to be parted from his savior. Stewards and eunuchs converged on them from all directions; the former waited on their master's pleasure, while the latter loudly fussed over both prince and child. The attention frightened the boy. His bawling only alarmed the eunuchs, who clearly were not accustomed to dealing with children, and they

threatened to smother him with their jabbering and fumbling attempts at comfort.

Erred, who had kept a respectful distance in the atrium doorway, pushed forward to order the eunuchs aside. As they withdrew, the child's head turned toward him. Tears had left streaks on a grimy face and a bubble of snot had formed on his upper lip. His eyes were unfocused; the awareness slowly came back to them as he focused on Erred's white hair.

Holding out his arms, Erred reached for the child. "Here, my lord, let me take him for you."

Thanaj hesitated, glancing aside to the stewards who had withdrawn to the corners of the atrium. "I do not think that would be wise, Ahiru." His voice was thick with weariness, and Erred noticed that he had trouble keeping his head up.

Calmly, Erred instructed the eunuchs to bring food, wine, and clean water to wash. Other servants were ordered to fetch cushions so their prince could sit. Erred waited until they were gone before he addressed Thanaj. "My lord, you have been more than a day without sleep." He struggled to conceal the hurt in his voice. "You do not know what you are saying."

"This boy is Satu ked Menteith's grandson," said Thanaj.

"Do you think I would take him to murder him? After four days, do you *still* believe I am responsible for all this?" The earlier accusation had not been settled between them. Erred struggled to rein in his anger, and still he felt it slipping. "My hate for that man ended with him."

Thanaj did not speak. Some of the servants returned with cushions, refreshment and water with which to wash. Thanaj

watched the preparations and looked at the child clinging to him—he let his eyes fall everywhere but on Erred's face, while Erred stood waiting for an answer he knew would not come.

Once the servants had withdrawn, Thanaj gave a great sigh. His shoulders sagged. "Take the child," he said, "if he will go with you."

Erred took the boy, whose arms immediately locked around his neck. Taking one of the linen cloths the eunuchs had brought, he dipped the end into the water and began to wash the boy's face. He murmured in the boy's ear, asking his name; the only answer he received was a vigorous shake of the head.

Thanaj slumped onto one of the cushions and poured his own wine with trembling hands. He lifted the cup to his lips and, tipping his head back, downed the contents in one shot. When Erred lifted a free hand to his face, Thanaj mirrored the movement, noticing for the first time the scabbed cut over his left cheekbone. He stared at his hand and the crusted blood on his knuckles, trying to remember how it had gotten there.

Calling for the servants, Erred found a suitable nurse for the child among them. The boy did not want to be parted from him or Thanaj and howled even as the woman carried him down the corridor.

"Come, my lord," said Erred. "I have had a bath drawn for you."

Upstairs, he dismissed the servants. He helped Thanaj out of his battle-stained armor and tunic and bathed him. Aside from the cut on his face, Thanaj had not been injured. True to

Ossur's words, the High Prince's guard had kept him well away from the fighting.

From the shelf Erred selected eucalyptus oil from Thrindor and rubbed it into Thanaj's tired limbs and back. "You must rest."

"I do not know that I can sleep," Thanaj mumbled into the cushions. "There is so much damage, so much to do."

"It is over, my lord. You can rest now."

Thanaj abruptly rolled over and sat up. "Do you remember Albar, the one you would not serve? We took his house last. He was in his death throes when we broke through the doors. His guards stabbed him several times but in their haste they were clumsy. I wanted to stab him myself, to repay him for what he and his brothers had done, but I could not strike him. I stood there and watched him bleed to death while he begged for water."

Erred wiped his hands clean on a linen cloth and brought Thanaj's robe. "It was just, my lord. He did not deserve your mercy."

"Would you have done the same, Ahiru?"

The uncertainty in Thanaj's voice told Erred that the question was not meant to convey any lingering suspicion of Erred's own motives. No, he needed to hear that what he had done was right. "You are not a murderer," said Erred. "They gave no quarter to the innocent, and you repaid him as he deserved."

He bit his lower lip before giving in to the tension that had hounded him for four days. "I prayed for vengeance, my lord, but I did not want this. I only wanted the Lady to give me

some sign that I still existed in Her eyes. I *never* wanted so many to die. I never meant—"

A hand tightly gripping his shoulder cut short what might have turned to hysteria. "Ahiru, you give yourself too much credit, and too much blame. You said yourself that the brothers turned on each other for greed, that they would have done it regardless."

"I do not know what to think, only that I have never been so afraid of Her as I am now."

Thanaj pulled him close but did not kiss him. "Stay with me tonight. I do not think either of us can bear the shadows alone."

For the next three days the smoke of numerous funeral pyres blanketed the city in a gritty haze. The treacherous guards and all others responsible for the violence were taken to the edge of the city, impaled and left to die in the company of criminals whose corpses had already been desiccated by the dry heat. So the High Prince's justice was considered done, and the city gradually returned to its daily rhythm of life.

A week after the riots ended, the priests of Aben brought Usha back to the city where he was promptly ordered to appear before a tribunal. Thirty religious and secular authorities publicly confirmed his innocence and informed him that he and his four-year old nephew were the last of Satu's line.

Although the actions of his half-brothers had rendered Satu's estate forfeit, Thanaj decreed that a generous sum of money would be set aside for him. A second portion would be

held in trust for his nephew, whom the High Prince had already taken as his ward; the child would be sent to Akkil to be raised with Thanaj's own children.

Usha, relieved by the decision, thanked the High Prince for his intervention during the city's recent troubles. Although he did not attend the tribunal, Erred was able to see him later, before he returned to the house of Aben. There was a certain gravity in the young man's face that had been there only once before. Erred recognized it as the look of one who has had all illusions torn away.

* * * *

The hot weeks of summer were spent at Akkil. Erred had difficulty drawing forth the *hrill*, succeeding only on the third day of trying. Afterward, Thanaj nursed him in the room with the painted stars. "If it is not your Lady's will, then you must not force it simply to please me," he said.

"I remember how much you enjoyed seeing the *hrill* the last time, my lord. Some *talevé* can make the change often, but it has never been so with me." Erred was so weary he could barely keep his eyes open, but he made the effort for his master's sake. "If it should come, I want it to be while we are still here."

On one cool evening, as the sea mist rolled in to blanket the harbor, he stirred from sleep to find his body wet and the bedding soaked. Shivering, he sought out the silver Lady, glittering with droplets he had not placed there. *She still desires me, though I know not why.*

He wrapped himself in a dry, warm robe and knelt before the shrine, and in the morning when Khasi came to wake him he explained that the damp bedclothes were no cause for alarm.

At breakfast, Thanaj noticed subtle changes in him. "Your skin is flushed with passion," he said, "and you seem even more beautiful than you did yesterday. You do not have a secret lover, do you?" His smile and the twinkle in his eyes suggested he had already guessed the reason.

Erred could not help blushing. "She is not a secret love, my lord. I would tell you, but it is forbidden to do so and I do not have the words to describe what my lady's embrace is like."

Autumn came with visits from nobles from the outlying provinces. Erred entertained several higher-ranking lords as they waited to meet with the High Prince, and on occasion accompanied them out to the lake or on the hunt when Thanaj requested his company.

Several lords had heard about their prince's exquisite *aktiri* and praised both his beauty and manners. Erred knew that some privately asked for the pleasure of bedding him. Only once did Thanaj suggest that his companion might answer an invitation, and in this Erred understood that pressure had been put upon him by a prince whose citadel held the northern border against the Turyar.

"Shaberu knows how to play the game," he sighed, "and whenever he sees something he wants he plays in earnest."

Anticipating the request, and seeing how it pained Thanaj to speak of it, Erred took the initiative and asked for the

pleasure of entertaining the prince. The next day, he went to Shaberu's bed and stayed with him until evening, when he returned to his chambers with a generous purse of silver and the pearl-studded waist-chain the prince had wanted him to wear when they made love. Thanaj reported afterward that Shaberu was far more agreeable than he had been previously and rewarded Erred with the gift of a beautifully tooled saddle for his horse.

At this time, Erred added a fifth lover to his roster of clients. This was a minor prince who had been a client during his time in Satu's house, and to please the man he wore the soft blue silk robe that had been sent to him after a visit. Vahaar's eyes reflected quiet delight at seeing Erred in the garment.

Most of Satu's business associates had been pragmatic men of crude appetite, with newly acquired wealth they had neither the sense nor inclination to spend wisely. From the first, Vahaar seemed out of place among them, though he had been one of the dozen intimates invited to Satu's private party. Erred remembered him chiefly for his solicitous lovemaking on a night which had otherwise been a blur of too much sex, and for his intelligent conversation afterward.

"You remembered my gift," Vahaar said quietly, smoothing his fingertips along a silken sleeve dusted with tiny crystals. "I am honored by the privilege of your visit."

Erred smiled and accepted the compliment as easily as the goblet of watered wine a servant set before him. Neither of them was so tactless as to mention their previous encounters, particularly where Satu was involved. These days, Satu and

his dead sons were not a subject for genteel conversation anywhere. "The color and cut are so flattering I could not help but recall the good taste of the one who sent it to me."

"In a time when you are so much more richly adorned as an *aktiri*, I am even more honored by the remembrance," said Vahaar. "Forgive my boldness, but I am not at all surprised that the High Prince took an interest in you."

Lovemaking was not part of the afternoon's amusements. Erred passed a few hours in light conversation, taking his leave with a kiss and his assurance that he eagerly anticipated their next meeting, which was not merely courtesy on his part. Exercising an *aktiri's* prerogative made discretion a necessity. Therefore, he reserved his attentions solely for those with whom he was interested in maintaining a long-term association.

In both public and private, Thanaj intimated that he would soon have his freedom. His clients seized upon these rumors with lavish presents of money and invitations to grace their homes with his presence. Particularly lovelorn missives Erred shared with Hasir and Neshuru, who occasionally received gifts and notes from chaste admirers themselves, and all three laughed at the hyperbole conjured by these otherwise dignified princes.

"If the man were truly so wan and heartsick," said Erred, "I would never find him attractive to begin with."

"I should rather hear that a man feels more alive because he wants me," said Hasir. "If our master said such things to me, I would worry more for his health and sanity than his pleasure."

Neshuru smiled. "I would prefer to hear them say my beauty makes them want to spend outrageous sums of money on me."

Although Erred had begun looking toward the day when he would establish himself as an *akharu*, he would miss the sheltered life of the palace and the brotherhood he had found with the *akeshi* and royal eunuchs. Nothing so pleasant could last forever, he knew. Even had freedom not been a prospect for him, at eighteen Hasir and Neshuru were approaching the age when they would no longer be able to remain *akeshi*. Thanaj was already making arrangements to establish them in some honorable trade suitable to their skills and inclinations.

A year ago the thought of becoming a courtesan would have been too horrifying to contemplate. The reality, however, was that Erred would not be a slave forever, which meant that he must be practical with regard to the future. He could not marry and did not want to become a merchant or a priest to some foreign god, and he knew that he could not return to his native land. The life of an *akharu* was the only feasible option available to him, and upon reflection he admitted that it was not such a terrible thing to entertain admirers of his own choosing.

All of this would mean managing his own household and income, something which had always been done for him. During one of his small dinner parties, Thanaj introduced Erred to an established *akharu*, a beautiful woman who had come on the arm of a prosperous wine merchant, and arranged for her to meet with him at a later date. Two days

later, Erred went to her home, a modest but tastefully appointed dwelling in a high-class neighborhood, where she promptly welcomed him as if she had already known him for many years.

This was, Erred understood, part of the lady's professional demeanor, immediately putting guests and potential clients at their ease. Taking him by the hand, she instructed him to call her Tanar, which was a shortened form of the name Tanarharit, and took him out into the garden where servants brought cool juice and honeyed almonds.

"Our dear Thanaj looks so healthy and content these days," she said. "It does him so much good to have a lover again. This is no offense to you, my dear, but he is a fool to talk of giving you up when he is so besotted with you. If you were a woman, I do think you would already be one of his little wives or perhaps even his High Princess. He said you had royal blood in you."

From there, Tanar immediately began to give him practical advice on setting up a household, selecting servants, choosing and entertaining admirers, and giving him the name of a priest of the gods of commerce who could give him advice on how to invest his money. "Now my steward was once a scribe in the house of the Twin Brothers and has this amazing gift for turning one *mena* into four," she said. "Here, you must try these dates. My cook soaks them overnight in a sweet wine to bring out their flavor."

When he returned to the house in the late afternoon, Erred found the servants rushing back and forth with unusual fervor. Ambassadors had arrived unexpectedly from the west,

one slave told him, and nothing was ready. Rooms must be opened and beds made, baths drawn and food prepared. The High Prince and his chief steward were already closeted with the guests; the other stewards were feverishly running about the palace and barking orders at the servants. One of them glared at Erred for keeping the slave too long in conversation.

Erred released the man and ventured into the atrium to see if he was required to attend the High Prince. Crossing the threshold, he froze at the sight of the soldiers standing at the opposite end of the atrium. Fourteen of them, arrayed in Shivarian dress and standing at full attention—they were a vision from his childhood in Altarme. He blinked to assure himself that they were, in fact, real.

His eyes crossed the atrium to the place where the devices of visiting princes or ambassadors were displayed. Three pennants in the Shivarian style hung in the place of honor beside the banner of the High Prince. The first pennant, pale blue with the Air rune in gold, was that of Min Lord of the Winds, patron god of Altarme; the other two pennants belonged to the royal house of Altarme and the princely house of Camoril.

He did not know what any of it meant, and could scarcely think beyond his surprise. Shivar did not have diplomatic relations with Tajhaan. There was no reason for representatives of his family to be here unless they had come for him. He found that difficult to believe. No one could have possibly told his people that he was here.

Erred stepped back through the doorway and slipped away before the soldiers could see him.

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Part IV

The Shumadi

Twenty-One

Afternoon passed into dusk, and as the moon rose, Erred still was not called down to attend the High Prince. A steward was able to tell him that the visitors were princely folk from the west, and that refreshments had been sent in to the council chamber. He had not heard of their errand and could not say more.

Erred knelt on the floor in front of the silver Lady and tried to compose his thoughts. It could not be chance that representatives of his family had accompanied this delegation. Altarme had no business with the cities of the east, but if the ruling prince had been interested in establishing a new trade route, there were several prominent merchants on his council who could have served as diplomats. The Camoril family, close cousins though they were, would not have been Prince Aglahael's first or even second choice for such a venture.

If they had come for him, he did not know what would happen if he was called to appear before the delegation. Appearing before slaves of his own race was unnerving enough, but these royal ambassadors were quite possibly his own kinsmen, and there was no guessing what they had been told about his situation. He could not help but imagine their disdain for one whom they had thought to be dead.

Toward mid-evening, a steward came to inform him that his presence was required downstairs. The man gave him a

few moments to comb his hair and straighten his robe before escorting him to the council chamber.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"I am told they are princes of some western city," answered the steward. "I did not bother to listen for the name."

"Did you hear what their errand is?"

The steward was visibly impatient. "It is not my business to ask too many questions. You will see for yourself, but not if you do not hurry."

Erred did not look anywhere but straight ahead when he entered the hall, but he could tell by the atmosphere that a recess had been called. Slaves moved around the chamber bearing platters of food and drink, and men milled around with their cups, murmuring in low tones.

He felt as well as heard the sudden hush that greeted his appearance, and was grateful he had not changed out of the plain, dark robe he had worn to go out. Resisting the urge to study the faces around him, he focused instead on Thanaj. The High Prince, dressed in full regalia, was seated on the dais beneath a gold-spangled canopy. Two guards in leopard skin kilts flanked the throne, and his chief steward stood at his left hand. A silk kneeling cushion occupied the floor at his right.

When given the signal, Erred approached, delivering the required straight, stiff-backed bow. Thanaj received his obeisance and gestured to the cushion. It was not often that Erred appeared at court, but he had practiced the art of kneeling until it appeared as a single, flawless motion.

Drawing a deep breath to try to still his shaking, he folded his legs and sank down, maintaining the same upright posture with which he had bowed.

Murmurs of discontent greeted his movement. Already tense, the mood in the hall darkened until Erred could feel the thinly restrained outrage. *I am the reason they are here*, he thought. *What must they be thinking, seeing me like this?*

The chief steward pounded the end of his staff against the tiled floor to call the petitioners to order; Erred heard a second voice, in Shivarian, translate for the delegates. "Thanaj ked Muhal Dharu, High Prince of Tajhaan, may the Father bless his loins with a thousand sons, now summons all petitioners to give their attention and bring their grievances before him."

The first one to speak was Thanaj himself. "All is as you have requested," he said. "The *aktiri* Ahiru has been sent for and now appears before us. He is in good health and spirits, as you may see."

When the remarks were translated, the Shivarians murmured among themselves. One of them spoke, "Our brother's name is *not* Ahiru. He is Erred Falathas né Camoril, a prince of Altarme." Erred recognized the voice as that of Meren, his second-eldest brother. His heart sank. Meren, not known for his tact, was perhaps the worst choice for a diplomatic mission.

"When Ahiru came to me, a choice was given him," Thanaj said patiently. "I asked what his true name was and if he desired to use it, but he did not. The name I chose for him, it

means 'water-lover' in our tongue, and this, I am told, is what he is also called in yours."

"We did not realize you had knowledge of the Lady of the Waters in this land." Erred heard the voice of Athan, his next-eldest brother. Chancing a glimpse, Erred noted Athan's relaxed posture and intent eyes; he had come to calmly present his case and listen, not to demand. Meren stood beside him. There was no sign of Eharin, their eldest brother. Off to the side, a eunuch in Shivarian dress was translating; he had probably been borrowed from the Blue House of Altarme.

"I have witnessed the power of this goddess," answered Thanaj, "and though I do not add Her to the gods I already worship, I do not deny Her divinity. Her devoted servant Ahiru is much beloved and honored in my household. He has been raised from the rank of *akesh* to *aktiri*, and will soon be made a free *akharu*."

When Meren asked what these words meant, the eunuch translated them: *bed-slave*, *bed-companion*, and *bed-lover*. For Erred, hearing the words in his own tongue was to hear them for the first time as blunt, ugly terms that did not fully convey what each rank meant. As he sensed Meren's anger gathering, he kept his eyes on the floor, concentrating hard on the elaborately patterned tiles and shoes of the petitioners.

"Do you mean to say that you have had our brother in your *bed*?"

Uneasy murmurs greeted this statement. Erred sensed Athan trying to restrain Meren; he could not hear the words

they whispered between each other, but felt their eyes on him. He pressed his lips together and fought the urge to flee.

The chief steward immediately rapped the floor with his staff to restore order. "You are guests in my home," Thanaj said tightly, "and Ahiru is an honored member of the household. You will hear this from his own lips, when you are ready to meet with him. For the time being, enough has been said. This council is ended."

With those words, the petitioners were dismissed. Guards and stewards appeared to usher the crowd out into the atrium. Erred was not given leave to go; he remained kneeling, staring at the floor as he struggled to contain his embarrassment.

Thanaj did not speak until the great bronze doors clanged shut, and then his voice was heavy, exhausted. "I am certain you understand by now that your brothers have come from across the desert to take you away."

Erred took the hand that was offered him and got to his feet. "If they have been rude, I apologize, my lord. I do not know who told them that I was here. I do not wish to see them," he said.

Thanaj's reply was polite but noncommittal. "Their arrival was most unexpected, and they demanded an immediate audience. Obviously they do not know the proper forms for a High Prince's court, but I do not find them unbearable. And they are your family. Why should you not wish to see them?"

"The only words I will hear from them are words of anger; I can already hear it in their voices. I am alive and a slave. I

have lain with another man. That is enough to disgrace me in their eyes."

If he had expected condemnation, Thanaj would not give it to him. "There is no shame in any of this. You are my beloved companion, and your goddess' faithful servant. There is no reason why they should not greet you with love," he said. "Ahiru, they have come a long way to find you, and you must do courtesy by receiving them."

Still holding Thanaj's hand, Erred pressed his lips to the prince's knuckles. "What answer will you give them, my lord? I do not wish to go with them."

Thanaj touched the curve of Erred's face with his fingertips. "It remains to be seen what I will do. I will meet with them again in private after you have had words with them. They will hear nothing I say until they are satisfied that I have not mistreated you."

* * * *

Early the next morning, a steward brought Meren and Athan to Erred's room. Erred had spent a sleepless night sitting in front of the Lady's shrine and still wore the same robe he had worn the night before. His brothers, who had been offered Tajhaani clothes to wear in the palace, stubbornly clung to their native dress and seemed determined to remain out of place.

While Meren stood glowering in the center of the room, Athan walked around, appraising the frescoes and the richness of the furniture. When he reached the alabaster image of the Lady and its basin, he turned to Erred.

Questions brimmed in his eyes. "We were under the impression that you were not permitted to worship."

"He is a *talevé*, it is his right to worship," Meren said sharply.

For the present, Erred ignored him. "The room was a gift from my lord, and the Lady's image was also a gift. I have another shrine by the bed." He indicated the silver Lady, whose curves glistened with the droplets with which he had just anointed Her. "Do you desire something to eat or drink? I have instructed the servants to bring food."

"You are permitted to give orders?" Meren was visibly surprised by this. "We were under the impression that you were chained and—"

Athan waved him silent. "It is clear that things are not exactly as we have heard. We have eaten somewhat, Erred, but we will break bread with you again." He gently took Erred's arm and walked with him toward the low table. "It is very strange, sitting on the floor, but the cushions look comfortable enough."

Erred served them, pouring wine and juice and offering choice delicacies from a little tray. Athan and Meren sampled these, cautiously nibbling as if they expected poison. Finally, Athan set down his cup and motioned to Erred's empty plate. "Why are you not eating?"

"Forgive me, I have little appetite."

Meren slammed down his cup. Wine sloshed out onto the table, staining the cloth. "You will eat something, brother, or I will force it down your throat. For all we know, this master of yours has ordered you to poison us."

"If you believe that," Erred said tightly, "then you understand nothing about guest-right in Tajhaan. You have been welcomed under the High Prince's roof and have eaten his food and drunk his wine. By law, he must protect you or offend his gods."

Athan reached over to help Erred mop up the spilled wine. "That is enough, Meren. If you do not like what you are eating, then do not touch it. Erred, he does not know what he is saying. This business, it came as a shock to us all. We were not told that anything had happened to you, that you were not safely in the Blue House where you were supposed to be. Imagine our horror when we found out that you had been taken and made a slave in a foreign land. At one point, we were told that you had committed suicide. What the imagination does with a little truth can be a terrible thing, and we have had all these weeks crossing the desert to think about what we would find."

"And then we find you alive and less than pleased to see us." Meren resumed eating, yet his movements remained tense. "Yesterday, you might have smiled at us, but instead we find you kneeling and fawning before that man. You are a prince, you should have more dignity than that."

"We will let him explain." Athan started to pour wine for Erred; he was stopped by his brother's uplifted hand and explanation that *talevé* were only permitted watered wine. "Tell us why you are so devoted to this High Prince. It cannot be pleasant being kept as another man's bed slave."

Erred studied the edge of the tablecloth. "He has been kinder to me than those who came before. I am not unhappy here."

He felt Athan reach under the table to grasp his hand. "A kind man would have given you your freedom and not touched you. He would have had some thought for you and your family. Here, make Meren happy and eat something. You do not have enough flesh on you."

"How can he possibly keep his health with such strange food?" Meren gave his plate a disdainful look. Spearing a morsel of meat on his fork, he held it up. "I do not think I want to know what I am eating."

Half out of spite, Erred told him. "That is heron basted in olive oil, and flat bread with honey; they do not bake loaves here. Those are figs and dates on the tray, and the red fruits are pomegranates. There are also prunes, but I would not eat too many of those unless you want to spend the rest of the morning in the privy."

Meren scowled at his half-hearted attempt at humor. "You did not answer Athan's question. Why do you defend this man when he keeps you in bondage?"

Erred drank the juice his brother set before him. "My lord keeps me because he has the right to do so. My duty is to provide pleasure and companionship, but I am not without rights. I was an *akesh* when I came to him, but I am now an *aktiri*, an honored companion. I am now permitted to enter the temples and own property. I may have lovers of my own and I may refuse anyone save my master. One day soon I will be free. An *aktiri* does not remain a slave forever."

The explanation fell on deaf ears, as Erred had known it would. "How can you speak of rights when you have allowed this prince to use you like a woman?" Meren wanted to know. "I would have fought to the death before I permitted anyone, man or woman, to touch me against my will."

"What makes you think that I did not resist, in the beginning? There was nowhere to run, and no way for me to end my life. All I could do was live." Meren had always been stubborn, but Erred was amazed that he still did not understand. "When one is a slave, one simply *does* as one is told. There is no choice. The High Prince is my master, and he has the right to touch me whenever and however he wishes."

Both men gaped at him. Meren took a moment to rein in his temper before speaking. "We have heard the tales, Erred. We know you have been beaten and made to service many men. We know that you have been publicly humiliated. And yet here you sit as if it was nothing."

Not for the first time, Erred wondered where his brothers had come by their information. How had they known he was alive, or where to find him? "Yes, those things happened, but not in this master's house," he said. "I have been honored by him since the day I came here."

Meren made a derisive noise. "Any man who would keep another enslaved and use him as such, no matter how kind you may think him, does not earn my respect, and I fail to see where his *honor* is. We have come to take you home, so you need not bother to defend him any longer."

Erred had expected this; his anticipation had only heightened the dread of having to respond. "To what life

would you return me?" he asked weakly. "I cannot return to Altarme having been an *akesh*. At least here I have some honor."

He did not flinch from his brother's explosion, even when Meren slammed his fist down on the table, upsetting his wine and the tray of figs. In his rages, Meren was just like their father. "That word again! You consider lying on your back for some filthy stranger an *honor*? You are a prince of the Camoril blood. Moreover, you are a *talevé*, and a *talevé* belongs in the Blue House, not here in this godless land."

Athan waved Meren silent. "Lower your voice and clean up your mess," he said sharply. "Erred, we are not returning you to the Blue House in Altarme. To the House of the Water, yes, so the priests can examine you, but after that you will be sent on to Sirilon," he said.

"They do not want me in Altarme?"

"It is not like that, Erred. You should have been there in the first place and not out on the road between cities. We had no idea the priests were so possessive of the *talevé* under their jurisdiction, to the point where they would house a *hrill* away from the sea. Prince Aglahael has spoken to them, and he has sent messages to the House of the Water in Sirilon. When we left, arrangements were already being made for you to be sent there."

Erred started to protest, to tell them both that he did not want to go to Sirilon or any other place where he would know shame for having been a slave, yet Athan indicated with a gentle hand on his arm that he was not finished speaking. "There is a young man in Sirilon, another *talevé*, who is

waiting for you. If not for him, we would not even have known that you had been taken. He told us where to find you, and in what state."

At this, Erred gave a harsh, bitter laugh. "You are mistaken. I have never met any of the *talevé* of Sirilon, only their priests. There is no one in Sirilon who could have told you I was here, and there were no survivors among my party. I saw the bodies lying on the grass when the raiders took me away. No one could have told you these things."

"Yet you *are* here," said Athan, "and everything we were told is true."

Meren spoke again, addressing Erred with forced patience, as if speaking to a slow-witted child. "There is a *talevé* in Sirilon by the name of Tharril; he gave us the information. The priests of the Water made an exception and allowed us to speak directly with him. He told us how you had been taken in a raid, that you were a slave in the house of a cruel master and made to perform degrading acts."

Erred could only shake his head. *This is madness. It is all true, yet it is madness.* "The only Tharril I know is dead. My last master had his throat cut and his body thrown into the sea."

"Then that must be he. Of course, I was interested only in what he could tell us of you, so I did not inquire of his own history," said Meren. "I only know that the Lady accepted the sacrifice of his life and gave it back to him. Beyond this, I do not question the Lady's mysteries."

Athan looked at him, then at Erred. "I did ask," he said. "The priests told us that this young man had been found on a

beach near the city with both the marks of the Lady's favor and his own death upon him, and yet when the priests came to collect his body he opened his eyes and drew breath. They call him *shumadi*, the Twice-born, but he told me that he was called by another name here."

It was enough, and too much. Erred tried to stand, to escape his brothers and their words, but could not make his legs work. He could not breathe for what was being said. A *talevé* and twice-born, washed up on the shores of Sirilon, so many hundreds of miles from Akkil where he had died—Erred heard the words, and yet when he tried to grasp them they spun around and slid from him even as the room was doing. The only thing he understood was that Tharril was *alive*. He could not hold to anything else his brothers had said, not even the image of Tharril with a *talevé's* white hair.

"Oh, Lady," he gasped. Turning, he tried to focus on the silver shrine; as his vision blurred and swam, he could not find it.

His brothers both reached for him. Athan's lips were moving, forming a sound that might have been his name. Meren's arms closed around him, supporting his body even as he slipped into darkness.

* * * *

Thanaj's presence roused him from a light sleep. It was dark in the room, save for the candles someone had lit and floated in the Lady's alabaster basin; Thanaj had brought another light, a shaded lamp that illuminated the bed with a soft glow.

"The servants tell me you have been abed all day," he said. "Are you ill, Ahiru?"

Erred had spent most of the day in bed with a cool cloth over his eyes. When he could get up, he was on his knees in front of the silver Lady, weeping and prostrating himself in disbelieving gratitude. Khasi came to offer him a bath and light meal; he allowed the man to help him into the warm water, but could not eat. His brothers did not return. "No, my lord," he murmured.

"I have dined this evening with your brothers," said Thanaj. When Erred cleared the sleep from his eyes, he saw the warm glow of the pearls and gold embroidery on his lord's robe, and the circlet that pulled back his hair. It had been a formal dinner. "I would have come to you sooner, but there were many matters to discuss. I know they upset you this morning and I have taken them to task for this. They express their sorrow and ask how you are."

"I fainted, my lord. That is all."

Thanaj set the lamp on the floor near the shrine and touched Erred's cheek with his fingertips. "Have they dared to insult you, Ahiru? They are your brothers and my guests, but I will not tolerate this."

Erred told him that it was Meren's way to speak abruptly, even when no insult was intended. As for Tharril, Erred thought it wiser not to mention what his brothers had told him; he did not quite believe it himself and did not trust his ability to explain. "They are angry to find me a slave, my lord. They are princes, and this is a matter of honor with them. I

have tried to explain, but they do not understand why I do not speak unkindly of you."

"Perhaps their minds are clearer now that I have spoken to them. Do not trouble yourself further with it, Ahiru." Thanaj leaned over and touched his lips to Erred's forehead before retrieving the lamp and leaving.

Erred remained awake a while longer before going back to sleep. A tray of food had been left on the table; he wobbled out of bed and forced himself to eat something. Normally Thanaj would have stayed with him, but even in their brief exchange there had been something distant in his manner. Thanaj's kiss had been chaste, even reluctant, as if he feared to touch Erred too intimately with his brothers under the same roof.

Had he not known about Tharril, Erred's response would have been an easy one. He would have thrown himself at Thanaj's feet and begged him to send his brothers away or, if the High Prince refused on the grounds of diplomacy, Erred would have asked for his freedom that he might send them away himself. Now, however, he did not know what to do or how to feel. Being separated from Thanaj seemed inconceivable. Whether his brothers liked it or not, Erred felt deeply for the man and ached at the thought of leaving him.

And yet, all day Tharril kept returning to his thoughts. With the passage of time, he had been able to face the pain of his loss without flinching, the memories of torment and separation increasingly giving way to ones of shared joy or contentment. Now he revisited them, sifting through those moments, smiling at little things: Tharril's lopsided grin, the

way he liked to take Erred's hair in both hands and comb his fingers through it, the slight twitch and flex of his hips as he neared his climax.

Erred was pragmatic enough to realize that it was a changed Tharril who awaited him in Sirilon, one raised to the status of *talevé* and more. A *shumadi* ranked above all other *talevé*, existing in that limbo place between mortality and the divine, and for all the days of his life after his death and rebirth he would be venerated. Some of the lower-born *talevé* took on airs when they entered the Blue House; Erred dreaded the possibility that the simple laborer he had loved would be unrecognizable.

All he could do was try to ease his mind with the few facts he had been given. *He could have forgotten about me; it is easy to forget the world in a place like the Blue House. He could have put me out of his mind, but he told them I still lived, that I existed in this place. Athan and Meren are here now because of him.*

It was late and the fretted screens did not entirely keep out the chill. Erred returned to bed and burrowed under the covers for warmth.

Just after daybreak, his brothers evicted Khasi and woke him themselves. Meren poured water into a wash basin and Athan helped Erred select clothing while the servants brought in the morning meal. Erred chose a plain dark gray robe; his brothers had yet to see the rich silks and jewels he owned, and he was reluctant to show them. He washed his face in the basin and brushed out his hair and pulled it back into a silver clip.

"After all these years, I am not accustomed to seeing you with white hair," said Athan. "The priests took you away from us so quickly, I do not remember if I ever saw you like this."

"I was away when the Lady favored you," mumbled Meren. "I have never seen you like this at all." At first, Erred had taken Meren's distant behavior as disgust for his subservient behavior; upon closer observation, he realized that Meren was also uncomfortable in the foreign environment and did not know how to behave with a *talevé*. Once or twice he asked Erred if he was feeling better, yet when he opened his mouth as if to say more, he was silent.

As the servants laid out the meal, Athan told Erred that they had dined with the High Prince the night before. "Perhaps I should not say it," he said, "but I am impressed with him. He has shown himself to be hospitable and has openly answered all of our questions. He seems a reasonable man—"

"Oh, yes, he is a *perfectly* reasonable man who keeps slaves and performs unnatural acts with other men," finished Meren. "Erred, I will not pretend I do not know what this Tharril means when he says that he loves you. It seems that *talevé* have different rules about this sort of thing and that it is done under the Lady's eye, though I have no idea how you can bear it. Men were not made to be taken like women, and that they should enjoy it is completely beyond me."

Erred did not care for his brother's tone, and his patience was rapidly leaving him. He was no longer a child living in their father's house. "It is not as you think," he said. "I am the Lady's faithful lover, as all *talevé* are. If I touched another

man in the Blue House, it was only because I needed release. We are not expected to be celibate."

Meren took a deep draught of wine before answering, "You certainly do not seem to have much trouble taking another man's cock now. Who is to say you are not some pervert of nature?"

"If you insist on speaking to me this way, you may show yourself out. I did not invite you here."

"Erred, please, there is no need to—"

He shook off Athan's restraining arm. "I was not taken until I was already a slave and had no choice in the matter. The man who bought me drugged my wine and he forced himself on me. I was awake enough that I felt all of it, because that was his pleasure, to have me helpless while he used me. After I had been soiled once it did not matter who else did it to me or how many times they did it, and I could not tell you the names of all those I have been with. Slaves do not feel shame for doing what their masters order them to do. A slave is property, nothing more."

Whatever objections Meren might have had after this, he did not give voice to them. Erred returned to the table, but the meal was strained. No one spoke, and the tension that filled the room throughout dissipated only when Meren and Athan excused themselves. Erred sat on a stool while the servants cleared away the remains of the meal and tried to sift through his thoughts. As always, Meren was ready with his criticism, while Athan did not seem to know what to think.

At midmorning, he was summoned down to the High Prince's private office. Once the doors were closed, he knelt

on the floor before Thanaj's inlaid writing desk and waited to be addressed.

"I have spoken with your brothers." Thanaj cleaned his stylus on a chamois square and laid it in its tray. As always, a pile of dispatches and petitions were stacked in a basket beside him, waiting to be read. "They are intelligent and make good conversation, but there are many things about which we do not agree. They have this curious notion that pleasure exists only between a man and a woman, and do not understand why I would keep you by my side. They also do not grasp the difference between an *akesh* and an *aktiri*, but this I attribute to the fact that your people do not keep slaves."

"I disgust them, my lord," Erred murmured.

Thanaj moved his writing implements off to the side and ordered a servant to bring refreshments. "You have not eaten much in these last few days. It is not good for your health." He waited until they had been served to continue. "Disgust is too strong a word. I see that Meren is very set in his ways and this situation does not sit well with him, but Athan is willing to listen. Here, eat the almonds and drink this, Ahiru. Your color is far too pale."

Erred regarded the food and fruit juice with disinterest. "I cannot eat, my lord."

"I will not speak further with you until you do."

Cringing under Thanaj's scrutiny, Erred managed to choke down a few almonds, a bite of fruit, and half a cup of juice. "I wish they had not come, my lord."

"This is always the situation with family," replied Thanaj. "One both loves and despises them. Your brothers are not pleased at what they have found, but they would not have made such a long journey across the desert and risked such an uncertain welcome had they not cared for you. You do not see it, perhaps, but they love you.

"I have given much thought to their words, weighing them against my own wishes and yours, and I have decided that you will be returned to them. When they leave, you will go with them."

The words did not immediately register, yet as Erred grasped their meaning he felt the blood run out of him. At the very least, he had expected Thanaj to consult his wishes before making such a decision; in retrospect he realized he had forgotten that he was still a slave who could be sold, transferred or freed on the master's whim. Thanaj could do as he saw fit, and had done so. "My lord, why do you do this?"

Thanaj's surprise was nearly as great as his own. "Ahiru, I would have thought that this would please you," he said.

"You thought that I would be pleased to leave you when I have said that I did not want to go with them?" Erred shook his head. "My lord, does it please *you* that I should leave?"

The reply he received was a piece of diplomatic art, and told him nothing of Thanaj's true feelings. "My wishes are subject to the concerns of my realm. It is not good for future relations with Shivar if I refuse to release you."

"My lord, Tajhaan *has* no relations with Shivar beyond the slaves taken from its borders. Is that what you truly feel, that I must go because diplomacy demands it?" The moment Erred

spoke, he knew he had presumed too much. Even a prince could not always order things as he wished them. He dipped forward and touched his forehead to the carpet. "Forgive me, I should not have said anything. It is not my choice to make."

Thanaj murmured that he should sit up. His face, stripped of its regal mask, bore lines of sorrow and care that Erred had not noticed before. "Athan has already brought up the matter of the slaves. Your people are training soldiers and sending them to the border to prevent further raids. Though I have the stronger army, I do not crave war with your people; I cannot afford conflict in both the north *and* the west. When your people did not know you were here, that was one thing, but now I am risking a diplomatic incident.

"What is best for me is not necessarily for the good of the whole. Nor is it necessarily good for you, though you may not think it. You must believe me when I say that if it were my choice alone I would send your brothers away and keep you by my side, but we must not talk of things that cannot be."

"I do not wish to leave you."

Brief emotion passed across Thanaj's face before being swallowed by impassivity. "As a prince, you should know that love rarely dictates policy. If you were a woman, I would have put the veil upon you long ago and united our peoples by this act of marriage. But you are not a woman, and your people would never accept a bond that is to them unnatural. Nor have I forgotten that there is another between us, or all those nights you wept in my arms because he had been taken from you. Now that your goddess has given him back to you, I find it difficult to believe you are not eager to go to him."

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

All of it was true, and yet Erred could not summon the courage to turn away from the life he knew. Constrained as it was, it had become to him something comfortable and familiar. "I am afraid, my lord. You cannot tell me that death and rebirth does not change a man. He will not be the same. I do not know what I will find."

"In love," said Thanaj, "there is always fear. Perhaps you do not see it this way, but in sending your brothers, this man has made it clear that he still desires you. I would not see you live regretting what might have been."

Although he knew Thanaj did not wish it, Erred prostrated himself again, pressing his face to the carpet to hide his burgeoning tears.

Above him, he heard Thanaj urging him to rise. "Ahiru, you must dry your tears and accept what is. My heart pleads with me to keep you, but I have seen the anger of your goddess and will not put myself between you and the one whom she has chosen for you."

Twenty-Two

"What is the difference between an *akesh* and an *aktiri*?" asked Athan.

They were sitting in Erred's room, with a large chest in the middle of the floor and the contents of his wardrobe and jewel casket spread around them, as Erred tried to decide what he would take with him. Athan had come to help him pack and speak with him as he could not do in Meren's company.

"An *aktiri* is of higher rank than an *akesh*, but his duties are not confined to the bedchamber. He pours his master's wine, serves him and entertains him with music and conversation. He is allowed to own property and worship freely." Erred smoothed out the folds of a scarlet silk robe before setting it on the growing pile of items he would leave behind. "My lord has been lonely since the death of his wife."

Athan fingered a golden armband, studying the intricate metalwork. "Then why does he not marry again? Being a widower does not seem like a sufficient reason to take a male lover."

On the bed were the Shivarian clothes his brothers had brought; Erred would wear them when he left. The kithara, which he did not want to leave behind, lay among the clothes. During a brief repast, Erred had set the instrument before him and played for Athan, who did not comment on the sound it made beyond expressing surprise that his brother had acquired some musical skill. "My lord has two lesser wives

and children by them," he said. "You have spoken to him. He has already told you that it is different here."

Athan put the armband down while looking at the other jewels. "Yes, and I do not suppose I will ever understand."

"Here, pleasure is not seen as something exclusive to men and women alone. As long as a man does his duty by producing children, it does not matter what gender his lovers are," explained Erred. "My lord has two *akeshi*, but he provides well for his wives and is a very devoted father." Had it been allowed, he would have introduced his brother to Hasir and Neshuru. That his brothers were permitted anywhere near his bedchamber on the same floor as the harem was a singular honor.

"You have not seen your nieces and nephews in years, and you have never met my wife," said Athan. "Your sister is betrothed to a minor lord from Emerrás. It was Father's choice, but she seems happy with him."

His family had been so far removed from his life for so long that it seemed to Erred that he was listening to news of strangers; he could not even remember what his sister or eldest brother looked like. "Meren is angry. I cannot talk to him."

"You know he is not a man of words. He has no patience with diplomacy, and he is frustrated by his inability to act," said Athan.

"Which makes him the worst possible choice for an envoy. Father should not have sent him."

"Meren insisted on coming. Eharin could not go and Meren would not let me go alone, though I argued it was for the best

should we find a hostile reception here. Truly, we did not know if we would be received or killed outright, or what this prince would make of our demand," Athan explained. "We half-expected him to laugh in our faces and shut the door on us. Imagine our surprise when he receives us, and we learn that he is actually kind to you. Those who abused you are dead, so there is no one for Meren to be angry with. He wants someone to punish, and there is no one."

Erred contemplated a silk robe dyed various shades of blue as he carefully wrapped it in muslin and laid it in the chest. "It is me whom he punishes."

"If you greeted him more warmly, if you made him believe that you *wanted* him here, then he would not be so unhappy," answered Athan. "I confess I do not entirely understand your behavior either. It is as if you do not want your freedom."

"You say freedom as if it were that in truth," said Erred. "I have always been a slave in one way or another, always shut behind walls and told what to do, always guarding my tongue. My life has either been governed by Father or the priests. Now I have a different master, and I do as he tells me."

Athan stared at him, incredulous. "And what he tells you to do is to lie with him like a woman. I am sorry, but you cannot deny that is what it is. As for your other masters, they used you like an animal. I do not see how you can be so nonchalant about it."

Erred did not bother to remind him that a master was entitled to treat his slave however he wished, or that calm acceptance was the only path open to a slave who wished to survive. "The Lady has repaid their cruelty threefold," he said.

"I do not dwell on what they did or how much it hurt; there is no purpose in it. Nor am I ashamed to say I am my master's willing servant. He has always been good to me. Had you not come, he would have set me free anyway, and I would have become an *akharu*."

"I have heard the translation," said Athan. "You would have been nothing more than a high-priced whore."

"You may have heard it, but you did not understand. There is a difference," replied Erred. "A whore is a *bakti*, one of low breeding and manners. An *akharu* is an honored courtesan. Sometimes he marries or becomes a priest, but as a *talevé* I cannot take a wife and I will not serve a foreign god. I do not see becoming an *akharu* as a dishonor. It would have been my choice, where I have never had a choice before."

Athan's contemplated his brother's answer, grappling with it. "Is this what you truly want, Erred?" he finally asked. "Do you want to stay?"

"The choice has been taken out of my hands." Reaching for another garment, Erred gave the vivid yellow and orange silk a cursory look before putting it aside. Some of his admirers had truly execrable taste. "For a Shivarian prince to turn his back on his people would be reason enough for discontent, but for a *talevé* to refuse to return to the Blue House would be an outrage. I have been told about the soldiers mobilizing on the frontier. I cannot stay, even if I fell to my knees before the High Prince and begged him to keep me."

And he *had* fallen to his knees, his heart burning with Thanaj's endearments and his eyes filling with tears it was

not seemly to shed. In the end, it did not matter. They both knew their roles. It was finished.

"There is someone waiting for you in Sirilon," Athan reminded him.

Erred gazed at the ebony casket where he had packed his jewels. That morning, he had gone to the palace bazaar with Khasi to buy Tharril a gift. Knowing what they would say of it, he had not shown it to either of his brothers. "I did not want to love him in the beginning. It is dangerous to love when you are a slave, but I could not help it. When he smiled at me and trusted me, I remembered what it was to feel. Now he is both a *talevé* and a *shumadi*. You cannot tell me that he will not have changed. What if I do not like what he has become?"

"The young man Meren and I met was very pleasant," said Athan. "Somewhat rustic in his manners, but he was genuinely pleased to talk with us. It seems he had been trying to get the priests in Sirilon to listen to him for some time."

"What did he say?" asked Erred.

"He told us many things, including some things I wish he had not told us. Erred, I—" Athan visibly drew a deep breath. Whatever he intended to say was difficult. "He told us you were going to take your own life. Please, do not misunderstand me, but after everything we have heard I can only wonder why you chose to live."

Erred folded his hands in his lap, staring at his fingers against the dark wool. How much easier it would have been for his family had he died. "I did not choose. The Lady rejected the sacrifice, and the High Prince made me swear an

oath that I would not harm myself. I am sorry if I disappointed you."

"That is not what I meant, Erred."

"You do not need to say it. I can see it plainly enough without words," answered Erred. "We do not have to speak of it again."

Together they finished sorting through Erred's belongings. Athan was impressed with the richness of the robes and jewels, most of which Erred would have to leave behind. A choice of the remaining ornaments was offered him, but he refused, telling Erred that he and Meren had already been given gifts of silk, ivory, and three magnificent horses. In the end, he took nothing and Erred arranged to send the jewels and clothing to Thanaj.

The money Erred had accumulated he distributed between Khasi, Ossur, and a few other favorite servants save for a small amount his escort might need to purchase supplies or accommodations on the road. He returned the chestnut horse and saddle to the stables, for in the Blue House he would not be able to ride. Last of all, he wrapped the silver Lady in silk and laid the statuette in the chest, sandwiching it among his clothes so it would not be damaged. The kithara was tucked into a dark canvas bag wrapped with cords.

A small banquet was held that evening to celebrate his departure. Erred dressed for the last time as an *aktiri*, allowing the eunuchs to rub his body with oil of roses and dress him in a rich blue silk robe embroidered with gold flowers that was not one of the garments he had elected to take. The forward strands of his hair were braided and pulled

back into an elaborate gold clip. Soft blue leather shoes were slipped onto his feet.

The royal banqueting hall beckoned to the guests with a shimmer of candlelight that was reflected off gold and silver vessels. Three long, low tables formed a horseshoe around a space reserved for later entertainments. Musicians were already tucked into their discreet corner, playing a duet for flute and kithara as the guests walked in. As the guests would sit rather than recline, chairs and cushions were provided, and slaves stood behind the tables, ready with wine and water for washing.

Erred was seated at the dais at Thanaj's right. Athan and Meren were seated at the prince's left, in the place reserved for honored guests. They wore Shivarian robes which, while rich enough for the court of Altarme, paled in comparison with the deep crimson samite, gold, and pearls worn by the prince sitting beside them. They conversed briefly with their host and some of the High Prince's councilors through their eunuch interpreter, yet otherwise were quiet observers.

This was the first time his brothers saw him in full regalia. Meren pulled back in revulsion. "You look like a whore."

"I do not understand," said Erred.

Athan gestured to his eyes and lips. "You are painted like a prostitute."

Until his brothers commented on it, Erred forgot what a startling image his kohl-lined eyes, pierced ears, and reddened lips presented. "Then so is everyone else present, including the High Prince. Everyone who can afford it wears cosmetics and jewelry."

When the slaves brought in the courses, Erred watched his brothers' confusion as they were presented with the unfamiliar dishes. The royal household of Altarme rarely strayed beyond the traditional Shivarian fare, and as a result its two princes were lost at their foreign host's table. Erred saw the slight grimace Meren made as oysters wrapped in seaweed and saffron-flavored couscous were set before him. Also noticing his hesitation, a eunuch at once suggested through the interpreter that the foreigners try the roast duck garnished with plum jelly or the desert hare in olive oil. He also recommended a light, crisp wine from Akkil as being easy on the palate.

Athan agreed to sample the wine, but Meren did not touch it until his brother had taken a sip and pronounced it a good vintage. Erred remembered that in their father's house the only acceptable wine came from the orchards of Emerrás, as this was the same wine that was served at Prince Aglahael's table. By now, Erred was enough of a connoisseur to know that neither his father nor the prince had very good taste in wine, though he did not see fit to mention this to his brothers. Nor did he tell them that the High Prince had ordered his steward of the royal table to select a menu palatable to western tastes, with none of the fiery spices Thanaj himself preferred, and that both the food and entertainment were considered modest by Tajhaani standards.

Athan and Meren appeared to enjoy the music and clapped with the rest of the audience when a troupe of jugglers and sword-dancers took the stage. There was a brief lull in the entertainment as cakes sweetened with dates and honey,

fresh fruit, and liqueur were served, then a performer brought in one of the High Prince's monkeys, a gregarious creature dressed like royalty that danced to the flute and caught the coins tossed to its trainer. Erred carefully watched his brothers' reactions, idly musing over what they would have made of seeing him dance the *suhtara*, or the sensuous Akkil bull-dancers. No doubt they would have found both far too immodest for their tastes.

At the end of the evening, Thanaj called for the attention of the audience that he might make an announcement. The conversation ceased and the musicians briefly stopped playing as the High Prince took Erred's hand and led him to the floor in front of the dais. When he saw the scroll in Thanaj's hand, Erred knew what was coming. He was ordered to kneel.

Thanaj read aloud the article of manumission; Erred heard the words then the echo as the eunuch interpreted for his brothers. The document was brief, but the High Prince gave the announcement the flourish the occasion demanded. "Our faithful and beloved slave Ahiru, after completing a term of twenty-one months in our service, is this day given his freedom." Placing his hands on Erred's shoulders, Thanaj instructed him to rise and kissed him on both cheeks.

Afterward, the councilors and other guests milled around Erred to congratulate him. Athan said a few words to him, but Meren did not seem to know what response to make.

Once he had returned to his room, Erred lit candles and floated them in the alabaster basin, then ordered the servants to set out wine, goblets, and a platter of delicacies that he knew were Thanaj's favorites. Another servant was sent with

a message for the High Prince. Erred inspected the room one last time, adjusted his clothing, and sat on the edge of his bed to wait. It was but a short distance between his room and the royal apartments, yet it seemed the servant was taking too long.

Never before had he requested Thanaj's company and did not know if protocol even allowed him to do so. He fretted, knotting his hands in his lap and imagining all that might go wrong even when he heard the sound of footfalls in the outside corridor. The door opened, the High Prince entered and Erred could barely rise to greet him for the sudden, wild beating of his heart.

Thanaj appraised the candles and wine with bemused curiosity. "You desired my company?" he asked. Then, as Erred moved into his arms and placed his hands on Thanaj's shoulders, the other man's confusion became evident. "I gave you your freedom this evening. You do not have to do this."

"It is only a piece of paper, my lord." Erred brushed Thanaj's lips with his own. "Until morning, I am still yours, and I want to do this."

Their arms slid around each other, tightening the embrace as their mouths met. It was a long, deep kiss, and by the time they drew apart both men were flushed and panting.

"This room will be so empty when you are gone, I almost cannot bear to be here now." Thanaj gently tilted Erred's head back and began kissing his neck, lips teasing the skin above his collar. "Ahiru—no, Erred, you do not know how difficult it is to let you go."

The sound of his name so richly accented only stirred the fire within him. "I wanted to tear that paper to pieces so you would not read it." Erred turned his head to kiss Thanaj's temple as the other man's fingers began undoing the fastenings of his robe. "I wanted you here, in this room, so I could remember."

Thanaj pulled back. "These are words of love," he said. "Why did you not speak before?"

"I was a slave, my lord, and it would have been insolent. Tonight I am still yours, and I want you to love me the way you did in Akkil."

His loosened outer robe crumpled to the floor, leaving him clad in only a thin linen garment. The pearls and stiff embroidery of Thanaj's clothing were a welcome roughness against his skin as Thanaj pulled their bodies together and began kissing him again. Erred pulled back long enough to unfasten the pearl clasps that held Thanaj's robe closed and slide his hand between the samite folds to caress the warm skin underneath.

Still kissing, they moved backward toward the bed, leaving behind them a trail of clothing and ornaments. Neither of them was in any hurry; they moved together in an unspoken accord that their ecstasy should last as long as possible, for they both knew that when it ended the night would also end.

Unless he was performing for a client, Erred was usually very quiet when he came, but tonight he had no thought for his inhibitions. He groaned and cried out, grinding down on his lover's body as his passion took him, and if in his ecstasy it occurred to him that his brothers might hear through the

walls what he was doing, he did not care enough to dwell on it.

Afterward, his limbs sated and heavy, encircled by his lover's arms, Erred drifted off into a light sleep. When Khasi came to wake him, faint morning light was filtering in through the screen and Thanaj had already gone. Gathering the rumpled bedclothes around him, he sat up, sluggish and melancholy. He forced himself to eat and dress in the traveling clothes his brothers had brought; the chest with his belongings and the wrapped kithara had already been taken downstairs.

His robe lay neatly folded on the stool; Khasi must have come during the night to set his clothing in order. He had not intended to take it with him but, bringing the embroidered silk to his face, his nostrils were filled with Thanaj's scent. Carefully wrapping it in a linen cloth from the wash basin, he slipped the robe into a muslin sack used to store shoes.

Before leaving, he gave the room a last, lingering look. Most of the furnishings remained, yet somehow the space seemed stripped of its soul.

* * * *

He did not go down to the courtyard with the rest of the household. All goodbyes had been said the night before, and where words could not be spoken the touch of their bodies had sufficed. For him to be present on this occasion would be considered unseemly; it was just as well, as he did not think he could have borne it.

After their lovemaking, he had not lingered, wanting to carry with him the memory of Ahiru's sleeping face softened by the dying candlelight. He had not slept at all, but waited out the night in his chambers, refusing the meal and bath the servants had prepared for him.

From his apartments he wandered down the corridor toward Ahiru's chamber. The servants were gone, and the room was empty save for its furniture and the ghosts that had already begun to take up residence. Thanaj remembered standing on this very threshold not two years before to inspect the work of the artisans he had commissioned to transform the room into a fantasy of water flowers and sea creatures. It had been a work of his imagining, a gift and an enticement for the beautiful *akesh* who had lost all will to live.

Protocol demanded that a High Prince summon his bedmates to him through the harem eunuchs, yet having commissioned this garden of delight for his lover he found he could not stay away; the young man had been at his most exquisite in his own element, and making love to him here was to shed the trappings and constraints of office in a way he could never do elsewhere.

The bed was newly made. Thanaj let his fingertips graze the silken coverlet before lifting one of the cushions to his face. He inhaled deeply, seeking Ahiru's scent. Only once before had he done this, entering the harem where his dead princess had dwelt and dismissing the servants so he might sit alone among her things. Touching Mayetra's silks and gauzes, drinking in the fragrance of her perfume, he had wept for the loss of his soul's mate.

In Ahiru, he thought he had found the one to end his loneliness. That this companion was male did not matter to him, for in Tajhaan love and pleasure did not recognize the boundaries of gender, and he had raised the young man from a bed slave to an *aktiri* that there would be no question of what he intended. It was only now, when Ahiru's brothers had come to reclaim him, that Thanaj cursed the lot the gods had dealt him. A woman he could have taken in marriage and made his princess, thus sealing their passion with formal bonds. That his beloved was a prince meant there was no denying these foreign emissaries or the goddess whose servants had sent them.

A gleam of white in the corner drew his eye to the alabaster shrine that Ahiru could not take with him. The painted dolphins and *hrill* upon the walls, that in the corner of one's eye had sometimes seemed to move, were now shadows. Only in the image of the foreign water goddess did some semblance of life remain. This did not surprise him. For some time he had known that this was no hollow idol, but the vessel for a vast elemental force that encompassed both pleasure and terror.

Setting down the pillow, Thanaj approached the shrine.

Ahiru had not emptied the shrine's votive basin when he left; he said once that it must always be kept full to welcome the Lady's presence. Thanaj took the silver ewer from beside the shrine and added water to the basin, watching the ripples that mirrored the Lady's image. While he had been content to watch his lover at his devotions, he never learned the prayers by which one properly addressed this goddess. Never had he

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come here alone, as a suppliant, and now it was too late to ask what he should do.

His heart hammered in his breast and he knotted his fists against the urge to run out like a lovesick boy and call Ahiru back to him. The Lady of the Waters was now the only god before whom he might pour out his grief, and the only one who could see past the façade of court ceremony and diplomacy to know how hard his heart was breaking.

* * * *

In the courtyard Erred said farewell to Khasi and the other servants. Thanaj did not appear, instead sending his regrets with his chief steward. Erred had not expected him to come and was grateful for his absence. Tears and parting words were not what he wanted; the memory of the man's embrace was enough.

Athan and Meren awaited him with their guards and hired guides. Erred estimated there were thirty camels and pack animals crowding the palace courtyard, and among him he saw the three horses Thanaj had given his brothers.

Meren looked hard at him. "You were with him last night," he said. "He set you free and still you wanted his cock."

Erred did not care for his crude remark and said so. "I gave him a gift to repay him for what he gave me." He fought to keep his voice even. "Do not stand there and tell me that you did not spend a last night with your wife before you made this journey."

"I lay with a woman, and that is how it should be," said Meren. "And he was *not* your husband, unless this is another perverse local custom I know nothing about."

Others were looking at them. "Once I am in Sirilon," Erred answered tightly, "you will never have to look at me again and you can forget how much I disgust you. Until we reach Shivar, perhaps you should hold your tongue and pretend I do not exist."

Meren looked to Athan, who only frowned and told him to be quiet. Erred mounted his camel and, drawing a rider's veil over his head and the lower half of his face, waited for the signal to march.

He tried not to look back, to keep his eyes fixed on the reins and the camel's head before him. From the palace gates, the procession of riders moved through the elite quarter with its manors and temples toward the lower city. The streets narrowed, giving way to tenements and marketplaces, until at last they reached the city gates and the road beyond. Erred closed his eyes as they left the olive groves behind for the empty desert, willing himself not to turn around however strongly the city's presence loomed at his back

The camel's rolling gait did nothing to ease the soreness of last night's coupling; concentrating on his discomfort distracted Erred from his roiling emotions.

The western horizon was a thin haze of mountains that steadily loomed closer as the days, then weeks, passed. Winter in the desert was mild, quite pleasant for traveling, and Erred's only complaints were boredom and the lack of a

daily bath. Oases appeared every three or four days, providing a welcome opportunity for the travelers to refresh themselves.

Halfway across the desert, they turned northwest toward the Haban Pass that would take them through the mountains into Shivar. The desert slowly began to give way to scrub land, populated by goat-herding nomads who spoke an almost unrecognizable dialect of Tajhaani.

During this time, Erred said little to his brothers and nothing at all to the guards, who watched him with wary eyes. He spent the long daylight hours meditating, letting his mind drift away from what had been to the uncertainty that was, and at night took no interest in the socializing and storytelling that occupied the rest of the camp. Athan respected his desire for solitude. Meren seemed determined to forget his existence.

At the foot of the mountains a day's ride from the Haban Pass, they exchanged their camels for horses in a village Erred remembered from before; the inhabitants eked out a slight living from the land, but made most of their profits from the slave trade. With the camels also went the Tajhaani guides.

The way through the pass was narrow and uneven, guarded by newly manned outposts whose sentries the travelers never saw yet who silently let them through.

As they climbed into the higher altitudes the air became chill and damp. Trees, their branches stripped bare, began to appear, and by the time the riders left the western mouth of the pass and descended into eastern Shivar, Erred recalled

what winter in his native land was like. Over his clothes he donned a thick, fur-lined cloak and pulled up the hood against the curious gazes of the locals and the light rain that misted the landscape.

In villages along the road to Altarme, the travelers stopped at hostels where Erred was finally able to sleep in a real bed and soak in a real tub. He took care not to let the hostel staff or any of the other patrons see him, knowing they would give him no peace if they learned that a *talevé* was on the premises. Athan acted as his intermediary, giving orders to the servants who brought their food and bath water, and when a heavy downpour kept them off the road for one day he even hired a laundress to clean their clothing.

Meren did not sleep in the same room. He excused himself under the pretense of keeping an eye on their escort, but Erred knew full well that their father's soldiers did not need such close supervision. Whatever direction the men required, their captain would provide. Athan made a few apologetic remarks until Erred told him not to bother.

"He does not wish to speak to me," said Erred, "and I do not wish to see him. The arrangement suits us both."

Athan pulled a chair up to the window and occupied himself with a book. Erred took the window seat, gazing through the rain-spotted glass at the world outside. He quietly observed the comings and goings of those whose daily chores had no regard for the weather. The landscape was brown and gray, skeletal trees and muddy streets running between half-timbered buildings. After the jewel-like splendor and sophistication of Tajhaan, Shivar seemed painfully rustic

by comparison; Erred felt the meanness of his surroundings as one who was starved for color and sunlight.

Soldiers wearing the livery of the prince of Altarme patrolled the streets, and were stationed as lookouts all around the village. When Erred asked, Athan came to the window, looked and nodded. "It is like this all over eastern Shivar," he said. "Men are being sent to the border as quickly as they can be trained and outfitted."

His brothers visibly relaxed in the drab atmosphere, yet as much as he tried to do so Erred could not. Rather than feel joy at returning to his native land, Erred was disappointed. Initially he attributed his feelings to the season and the plainness of the villages through which his party passed, but when they arrived in Altarme and he saw how small the city on its high crag was, he wondered how he could have ever thought it beautiful.

A messenger had been sent on ahead to the House of the Water. By the time Erred and his brothers arrived, a room had been made ready in the gatehouse within sight of the Blue House; Erred immediately recognized the apartment as the one in which he had been quartered during his changing sickness. Two priests and a eunuch came out to meet him, ushering him indoors as it began to rain again. He sensed their recognition and curiosity, but to their credit they made no comment beyond the required courtesies.

He was not hungry, regarding with disinterest the food laid out on the table before the fire. Instead, he soaked in the hot bath prepared for him and, as the servants were still carrying the water out, crawled into bed and fell asleep to the

rhythmic beat of the rain on the roof above. Disjointed dreams followed him through his sleep until he woke, sad and exhausted. Twilight had fallen, the fire had burned low in the grate and the room was cold, but he was too sluggish to do more than burrow under the covers and close his eyes again.

Gray daylight was streaming into the room when the servants came to wake him. Erred did his best to eat the warm oatmeal and bread with apple butter, then dress in the clothes one of the eunuchs had brought. As the servants cleared away the remains of the meal and made his bed, Erred looked out the window. Through the diamond-paned glass, he could see the slate rooftop of the Blue House a hundred yards away.

He would not enter the sacred premises or see the other *talevé*. This had been at his own request, though there remained a sense of taboo at being set apart, like a slave who was not permitted to enter a temple. *They would only stare at me, and I could not bear it.*

He did not have long to brood or become bored. As soon as the room was presentable and the servants had left, a physician came to examine him. The man, employed by the House of the Water to tend the *talevé*, was solicitous, allowing Erred to keep most of his clothing on during the procedure. When he asked questions about Erred's activities as a slave and how he had been treated, the man apologized in advance for causing him embarrassment.

"I must ask, you understand," he said. "If you have been mistreated, I must know about it so I may treat you."

Erred looked at him. "I was ill-used more times than I can count, but those injuries have healed," he answered calmly.

The physician noted this in a small book. "When you say ill-used, do you mean you were beaten?"

"No, but that also happened."

As the man comprehended his meaning, all color drained from his face. "I-I would not ask you to describe that for me."

"You may if you wish," said Erred. "I have nothing to hide."

Once the physician left, Erred was allowed to walk in the small, enclosed garden that was attached to the gatehouse. It had stopped raining, and the air was brisk, redolent with the smell of overflowing rain gutters and dead leaves. Dark clouds lowered on the horizon; there would be another downpour before nightfall.

A priest was waiting for him when he returned. Erred knew him by name. The man began by expressing his relief that he had come safely home and apologized effusively for not having known that he had been captured.

"Forgive us," he said. "By the time the bodies were discovered, they were so—"

"I know the tale, Amardal," replied Erred. "I am to blame for what happened, no one else."

Amardal gave him a letter and quietly waited by the fire as he took it to the window where he could read it in the light.

To the priests of the House of the Water in Altarme, from Tharril, talevé and shumadi of the Blue House of Sirilon, greetings.

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Since I am not very good with writing, this letter is written with the help of Arion, one of my brother talevé. I wish to inquire about a talevé of your order, a man named Erred Falathas ne Camoril; his party was attacked in the spring of last year on the road between Sirilon and Altarme, and you most likely believe him dead. I will tell you my story later, but I have seen him alive in Tajhaan, a slave in the house of a cruel master. For eight months I have tried to tell this to the priests here in Sirilon, but they insist that being dead and reborn has addled my wits. They refuse even to send you a letter to ask if anyone named Erred ever lived in your Blue House, so I am sending this message in secret.

There was more, but Erred was too choked with emotion to do more than skim the text. He already knew how Tharril had tried to talk to the priests of Sirilon and how ultimately he had had to smuggle a letter to Altarme; he never expected to be able to read it himself.

"You may keep it if you wish," said Amardal. "You should also know that Prince Aglahael has taken the head of the Sirilon order to task for not informing us of your capture sooner."

Erred folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket. "As I said, I do not blame them for not acting or you for not knowing. There would have been little left of the corpses by the time you found them. You could not have known my body was not there."

"Why did you not take the river passage in returning?" asked Amardal. "We did not even know the bodies belonged

to your party until someone found the remains of a badge of the House of the Water."

Biting his lip, Erred looked away from him toward the window. He had not given any thought to what he would say when asked about his disobedience, for in the end there was nothing he *could* say but the truth. "I had not ridden a horse in some time and wanted to do so again. I was never told that slave traders preyed upon the eastern border. I truly had no idea that there might be any danger."

"It was your ill fortune that they came so far west," said Amardal. "They have been growing bolder in the past ten years."

Amardal informed him that once the remains had been collected, an effigy had been dressed in his clothing and taken to Sirilon for sea burial. The priests of Sirilon would be able to provide ritual purification and prayers to restore him to the Lady's sight. When Erred asked why the rites could not be performed in Altarme, the priests told him that he was no longer under their jurisdiction.

Like the physician, Amardal asked questions about his activities in Tajhaan, and seemed particularly interested in how he had kept his daily worship and in anything having to do with his maintenance of the *ki'iri* spirit. As before, he held nothing back, telling the priest about his transformations as well as his inadvertent eating of *hrill* flesh. "I purified myself of this transgression as best I could," he said, "and the master's wife was punished for her sin. She is dead now."

The interview lasted most of the afternoon, and afterward Erred was allotted a private hour in which to rest or read one

of the books the servants had left for his amusement. One of the servants came to inquire if he wanted to visit the Blue House, as the evening meal would soon be served; the *talevé* knew that he had returned and were inquiring about him. Erred simply told the eunuch to convey his greetings and explain that at present he was undergoing ritual purification and would be leaving for Sirilon once the weather allowed.

A light supper of hot soup and bread was brought in at dusk, and he ate a solitary meal by the fire. He had just opened a book and begun reading when a servant came in to announce a visitor. Wondering who else wanted to see him, and at this hour, Erred instructed the servant to show the person in.

Even in the flickering light and shadows, Erred recognized the broad silhouette of his father. Alanthas né Camoril looked grayer than he had been when Erred last saw him seven years ago, but the same grim fire still gleamed in his eyes. Erred set the book down and rose to greet him.

"I wanted to come and see you for myself, boy. The priests do not like it, of course, but at this point I honestly do not care what they think." Alanthas shed his cloak and draped it over the back of the nearest chair. "I did not believe it when they told me you had been waylaid and taken. Those stupid priests waited two years to tell us anything was wrong, and then I had to wring it out of them. Having Aglahael threaten to cut off their revenues for a year was most persuasive."

He sat down, his frame filling the chair. Erred quietly took a seat across from him. "You are taller and broader in the shoulder than you were when I saw you last, but thinner in

the face than you should be. I have seen you since you left my house, you know. On the holy days you and the other *talevé* would go in procession past the royal pavilion. I often looked for you."

Alanthas gazed down at the hands knotted in his lap. "This ordeal, whatever you wish to call it, has left its marks on you. I see it in your eyes. You do not look like my son anymore. Athan told me how he and Meren found you in that place, and that you did not want to leave."

"I am not used to being my own master," Erred murmured.

His father grunted his disapproval. "Aglahael has begun training a standing army that will patrol the eastern borders where people have been taken. What soldiers are available he has already posted to the border and villages are forming their own militias, killing raiders where they find them."

"I know, I saw them on my way here," said Erred. "Tajhaan has a very strong army. They could press the matter if they wanted, but the High Prince has said he does not want conflict on his western border when he is already at war with the north. I believe he is going to take measures to stop the raids."

Alanthas snorted. "I will believe it when I see it. Over the years it has been more expedient for us to ignore the loss of a few villagers here and there than go to such trouble, but when a *talevé* is taken and—" He loudly cleared his throat before continuing. "We are not a warlike people, but this insult will not be borne."

Erred had always understood that his father's ferocity was his way of expressing what he could not articulate; Alanthas had always been a stranger to the gentler emotions. Nodding, he stared into his lap and let his father talk.

"Aglahael also wishes to see you," said Alanthas, "though the priests are not certain this is wise. You have had enough visitors, they tell me."

He leaned over and picked up the book Erred had left lying on the table, turning it over in his hands to read the title embossed on the spine before tossing it back; the book landed on the table with a thud. "Meren has told me about your situation in Tajhaan. Kneeling in public before this man who called himself your master, going to his bed even after he set you free, and wearing paint like a whore. Have you no sense of honor or shame?"

"I know perfectly well what he told you," Erred said tightly, "and how it must have sounded to you. He has no idea how things are in Tajhaan, or what it is to be a slave. If he wanted to see me shame myself, he should have asked me to dance the *rendé* or service a dozen men in a night. I learned very early that honor and shame are the luxury of free men. Slaves have no honor to soil and they cannot feel shame. They are less than men, less than animals. Just be thankful that you do *not* understand."

For the next several moments a heavy silence pervaded the room. Erred had never spoken so to his father, and the words he *had* spoken were unimaginable. If Alanthas did not grasp what he said, it was to be expected.

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"Athar says you were very much attached to the man who owned you, this prince." Alanthas was fidgeting now, drumming his fingertips on the armrests of his chair as he stared into the grate. "Did you love him?" For the harshness in his voice, the question might have been an accusation.

Erred had resisted using the word *love* to describe his relationship with Thanaj, and he would not utter it now. "He was kind to me, and passionate. I felt safe with him where I had not been with my previous masters."

"I do not understand how you can regard being with another man as natural. The gods made desire between men and women alone."

"I told you, I do not expect you to understand."

"And what of this man in Sirilon, the one who sent word to us?" Alanthas asked. "Do you bear an unnatural love for him also?"

Erred let his eyes wander into the grate. In Tajhaan, there were oracles who could read the future in fire. The flames bathed his hands and face in warmth, yet kept their secrets. He would find no answer there. "Love is different among *talevé*. I do not know what I can give Tharril," he murmured. "I do not know that I have anything left to give him."

Twenty-Three

This time, Erred obeyed the priests of Altarme and took a barge down the river Herel to Sirilon. On this final stage of his journey, he was accompanied by his eldest brother Eharin, who came to the gatehouse to collect him, and a regiment of the archers of Min, priestly warriors whose sole function was to guard the House of the Air; his family and Aglahael were leaving nothing to chance on this trip. Eharin was polite but not overly friendly. Erred had not expected any great warmth from one who was not only fourteen years older than he but a mirror image of their gruff father.

Alanthas had sent word that once his youngest son was safely in Sirilon, he did not wish to hear further about the matter. Erred was not to write to him or use the Camoril name, and for the sake of the family's honor was to disappear completely. This was not unexpected. Erred calmly received the message in the gatehouse, saying nothing while Eharin read aloud their father's demands.

Afterward, Erred had drawn a deep breath and answered in the tightest, coldest voice he could manage. "When you tell our lord father how I received the message, kindly remind him that as a *talevé* it is *my* duty to sever all ties with my kin, not his. Considering the depth of his concern for my well being, I do not think it necessary for him to take it upon himself to anticipate me."

A slight widening of the eyes had been Eharin's only visible reaction. "I will not bear any insult to him," he said. "This lack of gratitude is unbecoming a Camoril prince."

"Obviously you have not been listening, or you would have heard that he no longer considers me a Camoril prince," said Erred. "As for my seeming lack of gratitude, if he should forget how much I appreciate this current state of affairs, you may kindly remind our lord father that had he wanted me to disappear he might have left me where he found me."

"If he had known what he would find, he probably would have. Personally, I think you would have done better to have died than lived with such shame." The words were spoken quietly, without malice, but were barbed enough that once Erred was alone in his cabin aboard the barge, a space no longer than a closet, he let his composure fall away from him. He took care that no one should hear his muffled sobs, and afterward drew up his hood when he went on deck so no one should see his red-rimmed eyes.

The two day journey was uneventful. Erred occasionally left his cabin to walk on deck and watch the fields and river marshes of southern Shivar pass by. He did not wear a hood; a few people on the river's edge saw his white hair and ran after the barge, calling out in homage. Eharin, narrowing his eyes at these shows of reverence, muttered only that peasants could not be counted upon for their good judgment.

The archers of Min were a uniformly dour lot, as aloof as could be expected from the servants of the Lady's consort. On the other hand, the barge crew, aware of the good luck a *talevé's* presence brought a ship, asked Erred to bless their

little homemade talismans and brought him whatever small luxuries they could devise for him.

Two miles above the mouth of the river, the barge made anchor at a jetty within sight of Sirilon. Stands of winter-stripped trees and the sea-cliffs obscured the view of the ocean, but the shrieking of the gulls that wheeled overhead and the salt tang of the air confirmed its proximity. The party disembarked and climbed up to the city on foot, arriving by late afternoon. Eharin secured rooms at a hostel in a clean, quiet neighborhood and from there sent word to the House of the Water to tell the priests that his brother had arrived.

A message came back that night to say that temple guards would come to escort Erred to the House of the Water the next morning. As before, he kept to his room to conceal his presence from the hostel staff, while his brother spent the evening downstairs dicing and talking with the archers. By the time Eharin came upstairs, Erred had gone to sleep.

The arrival of the temple guard caused some stir in the inn. A nervous innkeeper assured the men that no blasphemy had been done on the premises; when he saw Erred come down the stairs, his expression turned to one of mingled relief and astonishment, and he hastened to do homage to his guest even as the guards bore Erred away.

High above the city on the steps of the House of the Water, two priests waited to welcome him; they were accompanied by a third who was also a *talevé*. At a signal from the elder priest, servants appeared to take Erred's belongings to the Blue House.

Erred took leave of Eharin and his escort. There were no embraces, no words of farewell or good fortune. Eharin simply commended his brother to the care of the priests, turned on his heel, and left.

Once he was gone, the priests immediately closed ranks around Erred and led him up the steps, through sea-green copper doors bearing the Lady's sigil and into a columned foyer, away from the worshippers who were beginning to stare at them.

"Such a lack of manners is not fitting," complained the younger priest.

Here as in Altarme, some of the priests were entirely too preoccupied with the outward forms of ritual. "I do not expect much homage from an escort in the service of Min," Erred said. "As for that man, he is nothing to me."

The elder priest introduced himself as Madril, head of the Sirilon order, and informed Erred that he had been expected for several days. "A room has been made ready for you, but we will give the servants time to take your things to the Blue House and announce your arrival."

At this point, he deferred to the other *talevé* in the room. He was slightly older than Erred, with earnest eyes and a quiet demeanor. "This is Olveru," said Madril. "He is a healer, but he also takes charge of new arrivals. We will leave you in his care."

Olveru led Erred from the House of the Water down a shaded path to the gatehouse that guarded the walled compound of the Blue House. Along the way, he attempted to

engage Erred in small talk. "Your journey was a pleasant one, I trust?" he asked. "The *shumadi* is most eager to see you."

It took him a moment to realize that Olveru was talking about Tharril. "What can you tell me about the *shumadi*?"

They came to the gatehouse's private garden and went in. With its neatly clipped hedges and fountain, the garden offered a hint of the formality that lay beyond in the Blue House. Inside the house, the sentry on duty rose and saluted the two *talevé*. Olveru exchanged greetings with him before leading Erred up to the apartment where new *talevé* were housed during their changing sickness.

A fire burned in the grate and a servant was setting a table by the window. Erred remembered the room from his two previous visits, and took a moment to look out at the city and harbor below before sitting down with Olveru. Making a little bow, the servant disappeared into a side room and emerged a moment later with a tray of food.

"What is it you wish to know?" asked Olveru.

"I have not seen him in two years." Erred unfolded his napkin and spread it across his lap. The hot soup the servant set out stirred his appetite; the food was one of the things he had always liked about coming to Sirilon, as the Blue House in Altarme could not seem to employ anything but the most unimaginative cooks in the city. "How has he changed?"

Olveru paused as he started to reach for a loaf of bread. "Forgive me, but I did not know him before he came to us, when he was already reborn," he said. He tore the heel off the loaf and offered it to Erred. "I can tell you that he is fair

to look upon, quiet and pleasant of manner. We often forget that he is a *shumadi*."

So Tharril had not acquired any airs. Knowing this, Erred could relax. "What has he told you?"

He was not surprised to see the healer's face darken, but to his credit Olveru divulged little. "We know that you were held captive in the east and treated very badly. If you wish to know more, you will have to ask Tharril."

After the meal, a priest and second *talevé* came to escort him into the Blue House. Erred's eyes were at once drawn to the latter's face, wondering if this was Tharril, until he saw that this man was ten years too old and too refined in his mannerisms to be him.

Sirilon's Blue House was larger and more elaborately appointed than the one in Altarme. Frescoes of sea creatures and marsh birds decorated the atrium walls, reminding Erred of his room in Tajhaan; Olveru told him that there were artists among the *talevé* who had painted these and that more such frescoes could be found throughout the house.

Beyond the atrium, the house looked out onto a spacious garden with fruit trees and flowering shrubs. Winter had stripped the branches and scattered dead leaves on the paths. No one was abroad. Erred was told that the *talevé* were either reading or busy at other amusements in the common sitting room, or they had duties in the House of the Water; he did not encounter anyone on his way upstairs.

His assigned room was comfortably appointed. The four-poster bed was hung with pale blue draperies, and by the window a clothes chest of carved oak doubled as a seat. A

Lady shrine, its basin newly filled with water, occupied a corner under an ancient, faded tapestry. The trunk and canvas bag containing the kithara had been left on the carpet next to the bed. Olveru asked if he wished to bathe or see the rest of the house. Erred wanted only to rest and unpack his belongings.

When he saw that Erred had not brought enough serviceable clothing, Olveru arranged to have additional clothing sent from the House stores. Erred did not go so far as to show him his silks or jewels, but he unwrapped his silver Lady and placed it on the sideboard by the mirror. When he took the kithara from its bag, Olveru asked if he could play the instrument.

"We love music here, but do not have enough skilled brothers," Olveru told him. "Some of the eunuchs play and sometimes the priests will allow musicians to come and perform for us. Tharril told us that you also danced."

Erred flushed at the thought of what Tharril might have said about his dancing. "I have only passing skill in music," he said. Turning the kithara over, he saw there was a small scratch at the base but no other damage. He tried the strings. "Practicing gives me something to occupy my time."

When a servant came with a pile of clothing, Olveru helped Erred select small clothes, tunics, and leggings that would fit him. Measurements would be taken for shoes if he needed them and a tailor would show him a selection of the rich robes the Blue House provided for formal occasions.

He had an hour to himself before Madril came to see him. "We are prepared to offer you ritual purification, if you desire it and did not already receive it in Altarme."

"How soon can I undertake the rite?" asked Erred.

"Tomorrow, if you wish. I will send someone to instruct you in all the procedures and protocols."

The ritual began with a twelve-hour fast, so Erred did not go down to supper with the other *talevé* but began the required litany of prayers to ask for the absolution of his sins. Later in the evening, however, Olveru interrupted his devotions to take him downstairs to the communal sitting room where four *talevé* were sitting by the fire. All greeted him warmly and invited him to join them in a game of cards. No mention was made of where he had come from or what he had done before his arrival, though he was certain they all knew.

Two others joined them mid-game, but Tharril did not come down and Olveru made certain that Erred did not stay up too late. Erred was tired enough not to need the sleeping draught the healer offered; Olveru left it on the night table anyway. "It will be here for you should you have nightmares or are otherwise uneasy, as we were told you might be. It is not strong and will not incapacitate you for tomorrow."

Purification for a *talevé* or priest of the Water meant giving oneself over to the element as thoroughly as possible. At daybreak, Erred was given a bitter drink to purge his bowels, which took the better part of the morning. After a bath to relieve the soreness, he was taken into a tiled room and was

instructed to lie on his stomach on a table between two braziers from which steam poured and fogged the air.

Steam brought euphoria. Under the fine sheen of sweat that filmed his body, his heart began to race, his vision wavered and his hold on consciousness became tenuous. For most, this altered reality was enough to induce a sense of peace, or waking dreams in those who took it strongly, yet Erred had not come to submerge himself in vapors. He yearned to drink in every moment of the ritual, to lay open his sins like wounds.

"More," he gasped. The half-naked priest standing above him paused in the chant to ask him to repeat what he had said. "*More*—give me the last part, the pain."

The sting of the willow lash stirred him from his misty dream. He cried out, uttering the catalogue of his sins and urging the priest to continue when, in his alarm, the man would have stopped. What had begun as little pinpricks along his back, buttocks and legs became raw pain. Now he was delving toward the vortex of the mystery, falling into the sensation of his body's own awakening, and he could scarcely breathe. It was the very thing he wanted, to pour out the black libation that was his anguish against the reluctance of those who were telling him it was enough—*enough*—and withdrawing the tools of his deliverance even as he was overcome by pain and weakness.

Evening fell over the city before he returned to consciousness. Olveru was sitting beside him, wiping the ointment from his hands with a linen cloth. "You took far more of the lash than you should have. The ritual does not

demand it." Disapproval was heavy in his voice. "I have applied something to ease the sting, but in the meantime you are very weak from fasting and water-loss."

Rising from his chair, he returned with a steaming cup. "You should not take solid food until tomorrow. These herbs will curb your hunger and give you strength." He carefully propped Erred's head against one shoulder and helped him drink. Erred swallowed some of the hot liquid before letting Olveru tuck the covers around him. His body felt light and empty, and he drifted into a sleep nettled by eerily disjointed dreams.

Dawn spilling through his window stabbed at him, forcing him awake. Blinking and shielding his face with one hand, he saw a silhouetted figure rise from the bedside chair and draw the curtains. When the sunspots cleared from behind his eyes, Erred saw the silhouette was that of a young man who was not Olveru or anyone else he recognized.

The visitor was dressed in the blue-gray robe of a priest, but the white hair that fell to his shoulders marked him as a *talevé*. Once the curtains were closed, he sat down again, primly folding his hands in his lap with the air of one who was trying too hard to contain his anxiety. "I never liked the purification ritual very much," he said.

Hearing the sound of a familiar voice, Erred studied his face until recognition came to him. The sight of Tharril as a *talevé* gave him a start. While he did not possess the stunning beauty Erred had seen in other *talevé*, Tharril was nevertheless a vision, unblemished and whole. The touch of his hands seemed unreal, and Erred grasped his fingers to

assure himself that what he saw and felt was not merely some hallucination brought on by the ritual.

Shakily, he reached up to run his fingertips over Tharril's face, lingering on his lips and the curve of his jaw. Tharril quietly leaned into the touch, his fingers grazing Erred's wrist. Neither one spoke, nor did Erred have the slightest idea what he would have said if Tharril had spoken. For the moment, it was enough to touch him and see the joy lighting his eyes.

When Tharril leaned over to kiss him, Erred stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "I look terrible," he groaned. His hair was a sweaty tangle and he knew he needed a bath.

"No, you're beautiful just as you are." Tharril quickly dropped a kiss on Erred's forehead. "There's so much I want to tell you."

His rural eastern Shivarian accent was not quite as pronounced as it had been; the priests would have insisted on lessons to improve his speech and manners. "You were reborn," said Erred.

"I remember dying, but not being dead." A shadow passed over Tharril's face; he quickly banished it with a smile. "They took me away before you changed. I never got to see you as a *hrill*." He slowly got up and, averting his face, quickly brushed away his tears. "I'm so glad you're here. I'd begun to think you'd never come."

"I am here now," said Erred.

"I wanted to look in on you but I have to go to the House of the Water. I'll come back after supper." Dropping a quick kiss on Erred's cheek, Tharril got up and left, softly closing the door behind him.

Olveru came in a short time later, accompanied by a servant carrying a tray of food. He gave Erred a quick examination, then sat with him through breakfast. "If you are strong enough this evening you can take your meals downstairs," he said. "In the meantime, you will have a bath and rest. I have brought some books for you if you wish to read."

"What does the *shumadi* do in the House of the Water?" asked Erred.

"Did he come and see you this morning?" Olveru set two thin volumes down on the night table. "Tharril assists the chief priest in administering the Lady's blessings. He also receives lessons in improving his speech and writing, as both of these are not quite to the required standard."

"Does he have any real authority among the priests?"

Olveru gave the question a moment's thought before answering. "It takes many years for a *talevé* to gain authority in the House of the Water, if he gains it at all. When the Lady favored me, I was already studying to be a healer and had several years of training under my father behind me, so it was quite natural for me to continue this pursuit. It is more difficult when a *talevé* like Tharril has no specific training. His duties are purely ceremonial, but that does not mean he is without status."

That was not, however, what Erred had asked and he said so.

"A *shumadi* automatically becomes a priest," replied Olveru. "That is the law. However, the priests do not always listen when Tharril speaks. He tried for a long time to tell

them about you, but the story was too incredible to be believed. We did not believe him either, at first. He was so frantic to tell his story that we simply thought him crazed from his ordeal. Then the eunuchs confirmed what he said about Tajhaan. Whatever else he said, he had clearly been there. They listened, and then we began to take notice.

"But the priests still would not listen to him. I see the look on your face. Do not judge them too harshly. You were a *talevé* of Altarme, not Sirilon, and even if the story was true they did not have the authority to do anything on your behalf. That answer did not sit well with him or with us. We decided to make our own inquiries. It was not until the House of the Water in Altarme answered Tharril's letter and confirmed part of his story that we understood how truly serious the matter was. Even the priests could no longer ignore it."

In a sentimental moment, Erred found the letter and reread it, hearing Tharril's voice in the words. He also browsed through one of the books Olveru left him, but spent most of the day sleeping. Toward evening, the healer returned and, pronouncing him fit enough to leave his bed, took him downstairs to the communal dining hall. Tharril, who had changed his priestly garb for a simple robe of gray wool, was already in the hall waiting for him. Smiling, he took Erred's hand and introduced him to everyone in sight.

Unlike the *talevé* of Altarme, the residents of Sirilon's Blue House had far greater freedom to pursue their intellectual, artistic, or religious interests and did so. Erred, sitting at Tharril's right, had on his left the artist who was responsible for some of the frescoes on the upper level, and across from

him a scribe who wrote many of the hymns sung in the House of the Water. The conversation was interesting enough, so Erred could not understand why he remained so detached. To be polite, he smiled and nodded, occasionally commenting, but was otherwise a passive listener. He was grateful when the meal ended and Tharril led him upstairs.

Tharril had been in an ebullient mood all evening, while it was all Erred could do to stay awake. His movements were shaky, and his back and legs stung despite Olveru's cooling poultice.

"That wasn't so painful, was it?" Tharril pressed a quick kiss to Erred's cheek as he opened the door to Erred's room and drew him inside. "Before you came here, I made them promise me that they would never say anything about what happened to you in Tajhaan."

He closed the door and placed his hands on Erred's shoulders. "But you're here now, and safe, and I've missed you."

Erred had known the same eagerness too many times in his masters and clients not to know what Tharril intended, yet now he felt only coldness where he should have been aroused. However much he had yearned to see Tharril again, he had dreaded this moment. He accepted the first tentative touch of Tharril's lips on his, but when Tharril tried to deepen the kiss he pulled away.

"What's wrong?" asked Tharril. "I can't be that terrible at this. I still remember you showing me how to kiss properly."

"I do not know that I can do this."

Tharril loosened his embrace but did not entirely let Erred go. "I'm sorry," he said. "I forgot that after I died, you went to another master, and that he...."

When Erred shook his head, murmuring that the High Prince had not been cruel, Tharril looked troubled. "If he didn't hurt you, then why do you pull away?"

Erred reached up and gently pulled Tharril's arms from his shoulders, holding the younger man's hands between his own. "It is too soon, Tharril. I feel weak, from the journey, the purification, and I cannot take any more. I have no wish to disappoint you, but I will not make promises I cannot keep."

"If you want to go back to bed," said Tharril, "then you should. You're right, I shouldn't have kissed you. It's just that I'd been dreaming of this moment for so long. I've imagined what you would say when you saw me as a *talevé*, what you would do."

"Tharril, sex is the furthest thing from my mind right now. It is not something you should expect from me."

Pulling back, hurt brimming in his eyes, Tharril shook his head. "Tonight I can understand, but there isn't any reason once you've recovered that we can't be intimate."

"My body is fine, Tharril. It is my desire that is wanting."

"I thought you loved me."

Of all the things Erred had expected to hear, this had not been one of them. "How can you say such a thing?"

"Because you pull away from me," answered Tharril. "You've been distant all evening. How can I *not* think something is wrong?"

"When did I ever tell you that I did not love you?"

Tharril's face tightened. "When did you ever tell me that you *did*?"

Erred had meant to be gentle, but had forgotten how impulsive and quick-tempered Tharril could be. "When you died, I wanted to die with you. I tried to die, but they stopped me. I went so far as to ask the High Prince to kill Ehmet where no other slave would have dared and I wept with joy when I heard how Satu died, so do not speak to me of my never loving you."

Anger was briefly replaced by astonishment, both at the statement and the harshness of Erred's voice. "I wanted to come with your brothers," said Tharril, "to make those men pay for what they did with my own hands; the priests wouldn't allow it. I didn't know those two were dead. Will you tell me how they died?"

Tharril sat on the edge of the bed while Erred lit one of the lamps. The telling was difficult, for he was weary and the memories still stung, but Erred did not stop until he had described for Tharril his attempts to buy an assassin, the unexpected gift of Ehmet's death and the vengeance the Lady had taken on Satu.

Afterward, there was an uneasy silence as Tharril weighed his words. "Erred," he began quietly, "answer my question. Did you ever love me?"

"Yes, I loved you," Erred admitted.

"Meaning that you don't love me now."

"Things are not as they were, Tharril. You cannot pretend that they are. I have had my heart taken from me not once but twice, and I do not know what to feel anymore."

In the flickering shadows, he saw Tharril's lips moving, forming the word *twice* as recognition took hold and his anger flared anew. With his impulsiveness, it was only natural Tharril would rush to judgment. Now it was too late to snatch back the words. "Are you telling me that you loved him?" he cried. "You cared for the High Prince, didn't you?"

Erred remained calm, even as Tharril shot to his feet and paced the room, his frenetic breathing matching his stride. "I never thought of it as love until my brothers came and took me away," he answered quietly.

"Did you even want to leave?"

"I was not given a choice," said Erred. "He chose for me, because he wished to avoid war with Altarme and he knew it was the Lady's will that I return."

"And that's the *only* reason you came back, because he made you? Did you think of me at all?"

"Yes," replied Erred, "and I did not know what I would find when I got here. I hated to think that you might have put on airs and become unrecognizable."

"You mean you thought I'd become like you?" Tharril shot back.

Erred drew a sharp breath. "That was not necessary. You do not know what I was like before I was taken. The person I was before would have ordered you from the room or slapped you for speaking to me like this."

"Oh, forgive me for acting like such a peasant!" Tharril flung the words at him in a broken voice. Turning, he walked out of the room, moving with a wounded dignity far older than his twenty years. The door slammed shut behind him.

In the darkness, Erred tried to collect his thoughts. He trembled at his own stupidity, his lack of tact and Tharril's native impulsiveness. Hurting Tharril had never been his intention. Thanaj should not have come between them, and it was only by a foolish slip of the tongue that he had done so.

All he had said was true, all of it as conflicted as his own heart, and he did not know what to do. The reality of the situation was that he had clung to Tharril because he had needed another human being's warmth, some deeper connection than sex, and Tharril had reciprocated because he needed the same. What had existed between them then could not continue as it had been. Erred knew that even if Tharril did not. They were both free men now, no longer living in fear for a few stolen moments of joy, and neither one of them the same person he had been when they parted.

After a restless sleep, Erred struggled through an awkward day. Once he had eaten and bathed, Madril and another priest escorted him to the House of the Water. Behind the temple, on a spur of cliff that jutted out over the ocean like the prow of a ship, stood a shrine to the Lady that was one of the oldest in Shivar. In the shadow of marble columns whose blue paint was slowly weathering away, Erred knelt as Madril anointed the pulse points of his wrists and throat with sweet oil, then repeated the words the priest instructed him to say.

In Your sight, beloved Lady

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

*I stand, Your servant returned
From the deep.
I take back my name, Erred,
And take the breath of life
To restore me to the embrace
Of the living.*

He spent the rest of his day quietly exploring the Blue House. Tharril was attending to his duties in the House of the Water, sparing Erred the embarrassment of having to face him in the garden or the small library where he went to read in the afternoon, but he returned for supper. At the table, the two sat apart, neither looking at nor speaking to each other. The other *talevé*, sensing something was not right between them, did not address either one.

Back in his room, Erred knelt before the silver Lady, offering the evening litany before drifting off into his own meditations. *Most radiant goddess, attend the prayer of this mortal suppliant. Tell me what I must do.*

For most of his life, his path had been determined for him. He had not acted but reacted, either because no choice was offered him or because he had not been strong enough to make his voice heard.

In the moonlight that filtered in through his window, the Lady's image remained silent. *If this is meant to be, if he came back from the dead because it was Your will that we be together, then why do I feel so numb inside?* he thought. *I do not deserve to have his love when I cannot return it.*

Common sense at once offered a rebuttal. *How do you know you cannot love him when you have not even tried? All*

you have given him are excuses. The Lady may open the door, but you must walk through it.

Two paths now lay before him. Whether he returned Tharril's love or turned him away, it would be an exercise of his free will. But where he had never known such freedom, it frightened him.

It is a sin to squander the Lady's grace. I must try. Taking out the silver robe, he put it on over a soft linen shift. He toyed with a silver clip before tossing it back into the jewel casket and letting his hair hang loose. Tharril would not see him disheveled, with eyes red from sleeplessness; he would face his lover with purpose, though he could not say what victory or defeat his courage would bring.

At the bottom of the casket he found a small silk pouch which he stuffed into his pocket. Beside the shrine he lit the oil lamp and refreshed the water in Her basin, then asked a passing servant to bring Tharril.

When Tharril stormed through the door ten minutes later, Erred started, fearing for half a moment that he had miscalculated. "I might be a stupid peasant, but I'm not going to fetch and carry for you. If what you had to say was so important, you—" His eyes focused on the silver tissue with its jewels glimmering in the candlelight and his breath caught in his throat. "Erred, I know that robe. Why are you wearing it?"

"Because I remember how you loved seeing me in it." Erred drew close, enough that Tharril could touch the silky fabric. "Tharril, I am a fool, the same arrogant, ungrateful

fool I have always been. I do not deserve what you did for me. I do not deserve your love now."

Tharril's fingertips traced the arabesques of seed pearls on Erred's sleeve. "No," he said heavily, "I don't believe that. It's not a heartless fool who does what you did for me in Tajhaan. If anyone has been foolish, it's me. I was so happy to see you again I never stopped to think how you must feel coming home after so long. It seems I never really stop to think about things."

"It was not as you believe, Tharril." Erred touched his arms, running his hands up the soft woolen sleeves. "You were dead, and I wanted nothing more in the world than to die with you. He did everything in his power to make me want to live, until I could no longer fight him. After you, he was the only one who *cared*, and yes, I grew to love him."

A lump rose hard in his throat. Swallowing his anguish, he continued, "My brothers told me you were alive. They told me everything, but I did not know what I would find when I saw you again. I was afraid that being reborn would have changed you into something I would not recognize. It was only when I saw your letter that I understood, and if anything, this outburst has shown me that you are still Tharril."

"The letter I sent to Altarme, you've seen it?"

"The priests gave it to me to keep. I still have it."

Tenderness took the place of mutual tension, and the storm passed. "Then you know how long and hard I tried to get them to listen to me," answered Tharril. "I would have done it even if you hadn't loved me. I truly believe it was the Lady's will that I deliver you from that place. I couldn't leave

you there, and I would have torn down the walls of Tajhaan with my own hands to get you out."

Such passion made Erred blush and turn his eyes to the floor. No one had ever spoken words of love to him with such violence. Not for a moment did he doubt Tharril would have done exactly as he said, only that he was not deserving of it. "I never meant for you to know about him. I knew what you would think, and what you would say." Erred drew the black silk pouch from his pocket and let the contents spill into his palm. "I meant to give you these before. I brought them with me from Tajhaan."

Without looking at them, Tharril gently closed his fingers around the hand with the pearls and pushed it away. "I couldn't wear them knowing what you had to do to earn them."

"They were not given to me," replied Erred. "I bought them with my own money just before I left. I thought you would like them."

When Tharril relented, Erred fastened the pearls around his neck, touching them and the skin that pulsed warmly underneath Tharril's collar. They stood close enough to feel each other's breath, and their shared warmth drew them forward into a soft kiss. For several moments they lingered over each other's lips, but the passion that might have flared into lovemaking was contained by the uncertainty still lingering between them.

"Do you love me, Erred?" asked Tharril. "If you don't, tell me now. I just want to know."

Dead to the World
by L. E. Bryce

Erred breathed his answer into Tharril's ear. But it was also his body that spoke, his arms pulling Tharril close to him, his lips caressing the ear where his whisper had warmed it. "To know that you are alive and to hold you is enough for me," he said. "Whatever else comes, you must be patient."

Cupping Erred's face in his hands, Tharril kissed him lightly on the lips. "Why didn't you tell me that your family turned you away? How could they do such a thing after everything that's happened?"

This was not a burden Erred had meant to share with him. "How did you know?"

"Madril had a message from your father in Altarme; it said you were not to use your family name. I didn't see the letter, but he thought I should know about it."

Having put the incident from his mind as best he could, Erred ached to realize it was still potent enough to sting. "They did not understand why I did not resist, why I had not killed myself for shame." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I tried to make them see, but I could not."

Tharril drew back and, taking his hands and turning them over pressed a kiss to the pulse point on each of his wrists. "They don't matter anymore," he murmured. "The only thing that matters is here."

Twenty-Four

Tharril learned patience as Erred acclimated himself to life in Sirilon. He limited his physical contact to private displays of affection, to an embrace or passionate kiss stolen at opportune moments, and did not push for more even when his eagerness was evident. If time was what Erred needed, then he would have it.

Erred turned his energies to his devotions and was content to let Tharril overshadow him as the younger man gradually took on a more prominent role as *shumadi*. Tharril was developing a genuine vocation, and their moments of shared worship left Erred with a feeling of greater spiritual fulfillment than mere physical pleasure could have provided.

In the spring of the following year, one of the other *talevé* gave Erred a pencil drawing of him sitting in the garden with Tharril. He had always admired Ninion's work, as did everyone else, yet had not been one of those who clamored to have their portraits done. Erred thanked him for the gift and placed it on his night table, but his eyes kept going to it, studying the way his body was slightly turned toward Tharril, the way Tharril held his hands between his own and how the younger man's eyes remained on him while his were downcast. Something stirred in him in that moment, an awakening of desire that surprised him. Others had told him how much love Tharril showed him, but in looking away he had not been able to see the devotion and unfulfilled longing in Tharril's eyes.

This time, he did not send for Tharril. Again he went into the clothes chest, pushing aside everyday wool and linen for his silks. Not wishing to appear out of place among the other *talevé*, he did not wear them even on festival days, but kept them hidden like memories under the trappings of his present life. Now he chose a deep green robe embroidered with gold and silver birds, and drew his hair back into a golden clasp.

It was late and no one else was abroad to see him in his finery. Not knowing if Tharril himself was awake, Erred went to his room and, finding him seated by the brazier with a book in his hand, greeted him with a kiss into which he poured all his renewed passion.

If anything, the kiss startled Tharril into silence. When he regained his composure, he took in the richness of Erred's robe and the softly smiling face that looked down at him. "Does this mean that you want me?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

The embroidered robe ended up on the floor with Tharril's clothing as the two tumbled into Tharril's bed, kissing and touching with hands that knew no hurry. Neither one strived for mastery; Tharril seemed to assume that Erred would do as he had always done and take him, yet when the moment came Erred placed the oil into his hands and lay back among the rumpled cushions, parting his legs with an invitation that needed no words.

His passion momentarily blunted, Tharril looked from Erred to the phial and back again. "You're not my slave," he said. "I don't expect you to lie on your back for me."

Erred leaned in to kiss him, letting their mouths linger together for a moment before he answered. "No, I am not your slave, but I will not be your master either. This is a gift. In all the times we lay together in Tajhaan, I never gave myself to you."

With deft hands that still recalled everything he had learned in Dhabi's house, he helped Tharril prepare himself, stroking on the oil with quavering hands, but when it came time Tharril did not know what to do and was embarrassed. "I've never been inside a man before," he admitted. "Perhaps you should do this instead."

Instead, Erred shifted position, straddling Tharril's lap so they faced each other, and guided his lover into him. Tharril was so entranced by this new intimacy, by the sensation of being sheathed inside another that he had to be reminded to move. Erred began to rock upon him, yet when Tharril threw back his head and cried out, his own release became an afterthought to the shuddering amazement of the man in his arms.

When Tharril regained his breath, he broke down. "I'd begun to think you would never let me make love with you again."

Brushing aside his sweat-tangled hair, Erred kissed his temple. "I never meant for you to think that." His lips moved down to Tharril's earlobe, nuzzling it. "I dreamed of you many times in Tajhaan."

Tharril drew him close. "I hope they were good dreams."

"If I were a good liar I would tell you they were," said Erred. "Most of them were terrible, but there was one dream

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where you came to me in a lovely garden. You were dressed like a priest and you told me to wait for you."

Tharril buried his face in Erred's hair. "When I dreamed about you, I could never quite reach you. You told me that last time that you were going to die, so you kept fading into the mist, and I was terrified that you really were dead. During the day I told myself you were still alive. I felt somehow that you had to be. One time I saw you in a dream, you were so beautiful and sad, and I tried to tell you that we would see each other again one day, but you didn't believe me."

"When was this?"

"It was last summer, just after your brothers came to visit. I had a message that they were going to Tajhaan to find you."

Still holding Tharril close to him, Erred peered through the curtains of their bed to the shrine and its guardian image.

"Dreams are such curious things," he murmured.

* * * *

Summer saw a fleet of ships suddenly appear in the harbor. These were eastern biremes, with eyes painted upon their prows and scarlet sails that were visible for many miles out to sea. When the ships were permitted to dock, the crowd murmured at the sight of the richly dressed men who stepped ashore. Their skin was honey-colored and they spoke a strange tongue that mirrored their colorful, outlandish dress. Through their interpreter, they indicated to the port authorities that they were ambassadors from Tajhaan, sent to

request an audience with the ruler of Sirilon on behalf of their prince.

Accommodations were quickly arranged, but for men who were used to the gilded splendor of Tajhaan, Sirilon seemed a backwater. Still, the ambassadors smiled through their oiled beards and brought forth their gifts. Magnificent horses, bundles of ivory, and bolts of shimmering silk were presented to Prince Carancil, while five sturdy slaves were needed to bear the weight of silver and pearls the High Prince had sent to adorn the altar of the Lady of the Waters.

That the Tajhaani knew the Shivarian deities at all aroused much comment until the ambassadors explained that their prince's beloved companion had been a devotee of this goddess and that on more than one occasion the High Prince had witnessed the Lady's power with his own eyes.

Couched within the formalities and pageantry of their arrival, the Tajhaani made their errand known. The High Prince, interested in the potential of the western market, had sent them to inquire about the prices of wood and wheat in exchange for silks, spices, and gold. They were also to ascertain the general mood of the Shivarians toward future diplomatic relations.

Carancil conferred with his ministers and returned with the response that there would be no trade while Tajhaan hunted *hrill* and enslaved the Shivarian people. Through the interpreter, the ambassadors humbled themselves and explained that due to recent military activity near the Haban Pass laws had already been passed forbidding the capture or purchase of new Shivarian slaves. Additional laws had been

passed to regulate the hunting of *hrill*, though enforcing these was admittedly difficult.

When the High Prince's offering was dedicated it warranted a public ceremony, with the ambassadors going in procession from the palace to the House of the Water. On the broad steps before the temple, the *talevé* came out to receive the gifts in the Lady's name.

From his place behind Tharril, Erred saw the ambassadors speak to Carancil; whatever they said to him, the prince merely nodded. Tharril, standing in earshot with Madril and the other senior priests, later told Erred that they were quite taken with the *talevé*. Furthermore, they mentioned that the High Prince's *aktiri*, who had since returned to his native land, had been such a creature. None of them, it seemed, recognized Erred in his Shivarian dress among the other *talevé*, and Carancil had not replied.

In private, the prince was intrigued enough to make inquiries. Messages passed between the palace and the House of the Water. Carancil's tone indicated his displeasure at not being told that there was someone in his city who could provide the detailed information about Tajhaan's ruler that the ambassadors either would not or could not give. Two days later, a messenger was dispatched to the Blue House to command Erred's presence that same evening.

Erred was reluctant to appear before him. The required routine of festival processions were more than enough for him, too many when one considered how rarely the *talevé* of Altarme were seen outside the Blue House. While he did not

begrudge his brothers their due adulation, he was perfectly content to remain out of public view.

He started to explain to the messenger that he was not interested in a royal audience. Tharril, who stood at his elbow, unexpectedly dismissed the man with the reassurance that an answer would be delivered within the half-hour.

"My mind is not going to change," Erred said quietly. "I am not a diplomat. I do not want any part of this, and the prince has no authority to command me."

Tharril sat down beside him. "You know why the ambassadors are here."

Since that winter night more than a year ago, Erred had not mentioned Thanaj again and Tharril had not asked. "It is not my place to do this. *Talevé* are not supposed to become involved in such matters."

It took much cajoling before Tharril finally persuaded him to go. Carancil was courteous, but beyond the niceties he wanted information. Once he had seen to his guest's comfort, he wasted no time in asking if Erred had once attended the ruler of Tajhaan. A Tajhaani listener would have understood immediately what it meant to be a prince's companion, but Carancil never seemed to grasp that sexual relations had been involved, and Erred did not see fit to enlighten him.

Erred quietly explained that Thanaj ked Muhal Dharu was a man of sincere convictions who genuinely acknowledged the Lady's divinity, and would not have made diplomatic overtures under false pretenses.

While he spoke, Carancil listened, nodding once in a while to indicate his interest without hinting at his true thoughts.

Erred left near midnight, feeling he had not done much good by his words and was morose when Tharril questioned him about the interview.

A second royal summons came the next morning. Tharril did not wait for Erred to open it but broke the seal himself. The prince wanted Erred to be on hand when he met again with the ambassadors, though for what purpose he did not specify. Apprehensive at the prospect of being revealed to these men, Erred sent word back that he would not attend the prince unless the *shumadi* was present.

Before Tharril could ask why, he said, "I will not have this matter come between us."

That afternoon, he donned his robe of dark blue silk with the gold flowers and went with Tharril to greet the ambassadors in the atrium of the House of the Water.

Erred spoke to them in their own language, allowing the interpreter to translate for Carancil and Tharril, who had forgotten much of his Tajhaani. When he told them he was the same *ahiru* who had been their prince's companion, they were stunned, immediately heaping praise upon him and telling him how greatly his absence was mourned. Erred dismissed most of their comments as the exaggeration typical of Tajhaani courtiers and merchants. Between their words, he gleaned the truth and knew that Tharril had been right.

The thought that Thanaj still harbored enough sentiment for him to send a delegation to Sirilon was unsettling; he could see by the look in Tharril's eyes that his lover found it equally distressing. Reaching over, he took Tharril's hand and formally introduced him to the ambassadors as his

companion. It was done very civilly, without rancor, and the men dropped deep bows to the man who had been presented to them three days earlier as the most holy *shumadi*.

Already uncomfortable among the Tajhaani, Tharril seemed torn between embarrassed anger and pride as he returned the courtesies. He sat out the rest of the interview in uneasy silence.

* * * *

A similar delegation took the desert route to Altarme, but the reception they found in the court of Prince Aglahael was cold. The royal family was offended by the inquiries about the man who had been the High Prince's beloved *aktiri*, for this time there were those who understood exactly what the term meant and had no qualms about throwing their anger in the delegation's collective face. The ambassadors prostrated themselves in distress, insisting that this was a compliment and that no offense was meant, but two days later they left empty handed.

Sirilon proved more agreeable. After three weeks, the delegation departed for Akkil with a tentative trade agreement. Diplomatic relations would be feasible as long as Tajhaan abided by its newly passed laws.

Erred felt a certain sadness in watching the red ships leave. He knew that merchant ships would come in the spring and that it was not the last he would see of the Tajhaani. Without his prompting, and indeed, against his will, the ambassadors had vowed to bear tidings of him to the High

Prince; he fully expected that future visits would bring messages and gifts from Thanaj.

Seeing the ambassadors and speaking their language again had stirred memories both warm and haunting. It was for precisely this reason, as well as the desire to spare Tharril's feelings, that he had been reluctant to meet them. Since his arrival, he had gradually come to feel comfortable in Sirilon, yet there was a part of him that felt cut off from his own people and would, he knew, always continue to be so.

When Tharril came to collect him from the cliffside shrine where he had gone to watch the ships sail out of the harbor, Erred quietly accepted his hand and allowed Tharril to lead him away.

* * * *

A tingling in the hands prompted Erred to set down his stylus. He rubbed his fingers together, measuring the slight pressure his fingertips made before feeling his pulse, counting out the beats.

Like other *talevé* who were no longer in the spring of their youth, Erred had gradually become attuned to his other body, and at thirty-one he no longer suffered the seizures of earlier years. Such was his sensitivity that he could now sense the *ki'iri* spirit stirring days before he would actually have to go out.

Erred cleaned his stylus on a chamois cloth, put it in the drawer with the ink bottle, and neatly set aside the manuscript he had been copying before asking the supervising priest to excuse him. Dyas, the other *talevé* who

was working with him, gave him a questioning look that he answered with a smile. "It is all right," he said. "I have two or three days yet."

When the priest dismissed him, Erred returned to the Blue House and consulted the *ki'iri* master, who was just returning from a lesson with the younger *talevé*. Aglarin took his pulse and inspected the skin on his arms for any minute discolorations or changes in texture that would indicate a transformation was imminent. All appeared normal. Aglarin noted his findings in the ledger where he recorded all the *ki'iri* activity in the Blue House.

"Looking here, I see you have not gone out in the last two years," he said. Erred nodded quietly; he and Aglarin had already had a discussion about the dwindling frequency of Erred's transformations. Eventually he would cease to have them altogether. The eldest *talevé* no longer went out at all.

Aglarin made arrangements for him to bathe in the sea the next day, as an escort was not available at present. At this time, Erred made his usual request that Tharril be allowed to accompany him. Tharril's presence on the beach, his solid arms waiting to lift him out of the sea when he was spent, was reassuring. Erred regretted that they did not share the same gift, although it was rare that *talevé* were permitted to go out together for a transformation even when they did.

Once the examination was over, Erred left the *ki'iri* master's office and, with most of the afternoon still before him, went to sit in the garden and think. The manner in which Aglarin looked at him when he made his request had not been

lost on him. In certain matters, he knew that he relied far too much on Tharril.

This will not do, he thought. *The Lady did not bring us together for me to bind him with the chains of my own insecurity.*

His lover appeared to have weathered his ordeal far better than he had. While there were times when Tharril awoke trembling from a nightmare, he invariably answered Erred's queries with a little laugh and went about the day's business without another word. Erred, who found he could not so easily distance himself from his own occasional night terrors, struggled to understand how Tharril could do it. He decided that Tharril either had greater inborn resilience than he, or that because Tharril had died and been reborn he could more clearly delineate what had been and what was.

Tharril sent a message and gifts to his family, assuring them that he was alive and well situated; Erred did not know if he ever told them anything beyond the fact that he was in the service of the Lady. As for his own family, Erred continued to use his surname on those rare occasions when he was asked to greet the Tajhaani ambassadors who were now regular visitors to the city, but if anyone inquired if he was related to Altarme's royal house he gave no answer.

Messages and gifts sometimes came from Tajhaan to the Blue House of Sirilon. Erred asked the eunuchs to read him the letters. Thanaj sent news of his own family, particularly of his eldest son Hathil, who at sixteen had come to court and whose diligence in learning his princely duties gave his father much pride. His eldest daughter was betrothed to a Juvan

prince; he readily confessed his grief at having to send her away.

In his letters, Thanaj always took care to inquire after Tharril's health and well-being; lavish gifts arrived for him as well as for Erred. Through the eunuchs, Tharril occasionally replied as a courtesy, and there did not seem to be any enmity between the men.

He would never have confessed as much to Tharril, but there were times when Erred missed Tajhaan. Time had merged his memory of the city with the man who ruled it, splendid and terrible, a powerful body and a voice like polished mahogany that sent him into rapture. While Erred drew comfort from Tharril's quiet strength, sometimes what he truly wanted was for his lover to take him with fire and passion.

As for his other masters, Erred could no longer quite remember what they had looked or sounded like. At most, they were occasional shadows that painted the corners of his sleep, momentarily recalled and just as quickly banished.

In the late afternoon, Tharril returned from his priestly duties to find Erred reading in the slighting light of the garden. "I'm told you asked to be dismissed early," he said. "I thought perhaps you weren't feeling well."

"It is my gift." Erred closed the book and folded his hands in his lap. "I felt the signs, but there is no pressing need."

Tharril gently nudged him aside so he could sit on the bench. "Have you gone to see Aglarin?" When Erred nodded, he asked why he had not yet gone out. "You had enough time before. Were you waiting for me?"

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"I will go alone this time if you wish it," said Erred. "I should not impose on you."

Taking his hand, Tharril lifted it to his lips. "It's been so long since I've had the pleasure of watching you as a *hrrill*. I'm only sorry that I can't swim with you." Still holding Erred's hand, Tharril leaned in to kiss him. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't jealous of those lovers who share the same gift."

Erred murmured against his lips, "I have learned to be grateful for the joy the Lady has given me."

The bell announcing the sunset devotions interrupted their kiss. Tharril rose first, drawing Erred up beside him with an arm around his waist, and together they went in to the Blue House.

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About the Author

L.E. Bryce was born in Los Angeles, California and has never lived anywhere else. She has a Masters in English Literature from California State University, Northridge, and currently works as an English teacher. Her Jewish mother, two dogs and passel of cats help her keep her sanity. She is a regular contributor to *Forbidden Fruit Magazine*, and is the author of two books, *Snake Bite and Other Dark Homoerotic Fantasies* and *Those Pearls That Were His Eyes*. She maintains a blog at granamyr.livejournal.com.

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