

*Dreamspinner Press Presents*

# NAP-SIZE DREAMS



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## Part one

LIGHTNING streaked down from the sky in a fearsome vertical fork, bringing with it a resounding crack of thunder. Adjusting the weight of the deer across his lean shoulders, Nerom cursed as the wind whipped his shabby cloak into his face. The animal had seemed so scrawny when he'd shot it, but now it seemed to weigh as much as an ox. He squinted at the dark afternoon sky, at the thick, rolling clouds that choked out the sun, and sighed. He would never make it home before the rain started.

Nerom tucked his head against his chin and broke through the brush, emerging onto the path just as another great crash of thunder echoed through the forest. He'd barely set his boot on the dirt when something large and fast-moving flew by. Losing his balance, he ended up on his rump in the weeds, watching in shock as a horse pounded past. He had time to notice two things – the saddle and tack were expensively-made, and the rider was nowhere to be seen. After the horse disappeared, Nerom climbed to his feet only to hesitate, his eyes moving from the deer carcass, to the darkening sky, to further back down the path.

With a sigh, he reshouldered his kill and trudged down the path in the direction from which the horse had come. He was going to have to find a place to take shelter anyway. This direction was as promising as any.

The first fat drops of rain began falling as he made his way down the narrow path. The wind picked up to a furious pace. Branches sliced at his face like thrown daggers.

He'd not gone far before he spotted the rider, a still heap of green and red fabric half-hidden in the brush. Nerom swore softly to himself. In times like these, a smart man kept to his own business and paid no mind to that of others. A smart man would keep going, take shelter until the storm passed and then go about his way.

Nerom had never been accused of being smart.

He moved to the fallen figure, dropping to one knee and letting the carcass slide to the ground. Giving the man's shoulder a rough shake and getting no response, Nerom cautiously rolled him onto his back.

The injured man was no older than Nerom, perhaps twenty, with close-cropped dark hair and a neat, short beard. A bloody lump was rising on his forehead, just above his left eye. Nerom shook him again, patting his cheek for good measure. The man did not awaken.

A quick check of the man's limbs revealed a knee that was swollen and hot to the touch, even through his leggings. Nerom settled back on his haunches and cast his eyes around the surrounding forest. A few moments later he spotted a promising stand of tall shrubs and went to work, bending the branches and weaving them together to form a crude shelter. More leafy branches secured on top formed a mostly-waterproof roof.

He spent another few moments gathering fallen branches and stacking them in the shelter, and then he returned to the stranger, who was still out cold. Nerom caught him under his arms and tugged him a few feet at a time to the shelter. Once he'd arranged the man as comfortably as possible, Nerom went back for his deer. The rain was driving down in

sheets by the time he'd hung it from a nearby tree, carefully camouflaged in the brush.

Stripping off his cloak, he crawled into the shelter with the stranger. It was a tight fit, but there was room for a small fire. Nerom took his flint from a pouch on his belt and managed to coax a flame from the slightly-damp wood. He spread his cloak out to dry as best he could, then turned to the injured man.

Nerom knew very little about the healing arts. He checked the man for fever and found none, checked that the man was breathing steadily and that the lump on his head had stopped bleeding. With nothing else to do, he shoved his pack under the swollen knee and settled by the fire, feeding it the occasional twig to encourage it. Outside the wind howled, bending trees double and stripping them of their leaves. Nerom shivered in his damp clothes and hunched over the meager warmth as the afternoon passed into evening.

He awoke from a light doze, stretching his cramped shoulders and assessing the weather. The winds had let up and the rumble of thunder seemed more distant, but the rain continued to come down in a deluge. Beside him, the stranger shifted and moaned. Nerom moved to his side and reached for his water skin.

The man's eyes opened, looking gray or perhaps blue in the tiny sliver of moonlight edging through the clouds. His gaze took in the strange surroundings with mounting concern. "Be at ease, my lord," Nerom soothed. "You've had an accident, but you are safe. Take some water, it will help clear your head." He eased the man into a sitting position, propping him against the thickest tree trunk in their shelter, and handed him the water skin. "You fell from your horse," Nerom continued as the other man drank. "I found you and brought you here to wait out the storm."

The man drank and handed the skin back, wiping stray droplets from his beard. “Then you have my thanks.” He raised a hand to gingerly prod the wound on his forehead. “Fortunately it is only my head. As my father would point out, it is impervious to damage.”

Nerom grinned. “Alas, you have also injured your knee, though I don’t believe it is a serious hurt.”

The stranger reached forward and felt the joint in question, then glanced outside at the driving rain. “Well,” he sighed, settling his shoulders more comfortably against the tree, “it doesn’t appear I’m going anywhere for awhile anyway. My name is Janus, and you are?”

“Nerom, my lord.”

“What makes you think I’m a lord?” Janus asked, amusement clear in his tone.

“Your clothes. And your horse, both much finer than any I’ve ever seen.”

“Very observant. Tell me, friend Nerom, from where do you hail?”

“A village a few leagues to the east. We call it Erynlea.”

“I’ve not heard of it,” Janus admitted.

“I don’t know why you would have, my lord. It’s very small, no different from a hundred others.”

“Yet you stay.”

Nerom shrugged. “My parents live there. They are old and have no one else to care for them. Besides, where would I go? One place is as good as another.”

“Is it? These days, many men your age travel the land in search of adventure.” Janus’ gaze grew distant. “Had I my freedom, I might choose such a life.”

“Freedom, my lord? I don’t understand.” Nerom added a branch to the fire and checked his drying cloak. Settling back on his rear, he rested his arms on his bent knees and regarded the other man with interest. “You are wealthy, are you not? Cannot you simply do as you wish?”

Janus gave a short, bitter laugh. “If only that were so. In truth, I am as trapped as you, my friend, for the same reason. My father expects that I will follow in his footsteps, and he is not the sort of man one refuses.”

Nerom scratched his head and mulled over this information. “I’d never considered that...”

“That having wealth does not make one happy? Did you truly believe that the rich have no responsibilities, no problems? I envy you, friend Nerom. I envy you the freedom of your simple life.”

“Do you truly?” Nerom felt anger stir in his breast. “Do you envy my empty belly? Do you envy the way I try to feed two aged parents on scrawny rabbits and blighted vegetables? I would trade with you in an instant, my lord. To be warm and fed and not have to worry about wolves and draught and winter’s cold? I would gladly sacrifice my ‘freedom’.” He sat back with a huff, still angry but a little embarrassed at his outburst.

Janus sat quietly for a moment, letting the sound of the rain fill the silence. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft. “I have offended you. I am sorry, it was not my intention.”

“I should not have lost my temper,” Nerom replied just as softly. “I apologize, my lord.”

“Not necessary.” Janus sighed wearily and slid back down to a prone position. “I think it is human nature,” he mused, “to want that which we do not have.” In the scant moonlight the noble’s eyes seemed to burn into Nerom, who found he could not look away. His heart picked up speed and warmth licked through his veins as his eyes moved over Janus’ lean form.

“You should rest, my lord,” he whispered into the night. “In the morning I will look for your horse.”

“He is probably back in the stable by now, warm and happy. We should all be so lucky.” The noble’s voice was a caress in the darkness. Nerom shivered as the words slid over him. “The night grows cold,” Janus continued. “I would keep you warm, friend, if you will return the favor.”

Nerom closed his eyes as all the heat in his body seemed to pool in his loins. This want, this craving, had been with him all the days of his adult life. He’d buried it deep knowing that the people of his village were simple and superstitious, and wouldn’t tolerate anyone different from themselves. But he was far from Erynlea, and Janus was from another world entirely. An attractive man who shared his strange desires, whom he’d probably never see again? After so many years of denial, Nerom just wasn’t that strong.

His breath coming fast and sounding as loud as a bellows, he lay down at Janus’ side, molding himself to the other man’s body. Slowly, hesitantly, he reached out and laid a trembling hand on Janus’ chest. Even though he felt as timid as a rabbit, even though his heart was pounding so hard he thought Janus might be able to hear it, Nerom couldn’t stop his fingers from exploring the lean body before him. All at once he was desperate to touch skin, fumbling to shove the expensive tunic out of the way. At the first touch to Janus’ bare, heated chest Nerom shuddered and nearly climaxed. The noble gave a soft, rumbling chuckle and raised his

torso just enough to slip his tunic over his head. He lay back again, stretched out like a buffet before Nerom's greedy eyes.

For his part, Nerom lost the last of his control and threw himself at his companion, all but attacking his flesh with his mouth and fingers. Janus was content to let him explore for a while, but when a hand cupped his genitals he quickly took the lead. It was no easy feat to strip out of damp breeches in the close confines of the shelter, but after a few frantic moments of fumbling they were both naked and scrambling for contact.

For Nerom, it was as if something missing had clicked into place. The moment another man's flesh touched his own, every one of his senses flared to breathtaking life. He gasped, overwhelmed by the rich scents of male musk and damp, loamy earth. The sound of Janus' rough breathing in his ear, the hot slide of his cock pushing against Nerom's own, the shivers that crawled over Nerom's skin everywhere Janus touched him –

Nerom shuddered and came, muffling a cry against Janus' shoulder as he convulsed. The other man continued moving, thrusting his hips and grunting softly, before stiffening and pouring hot seed into the space between their bodies.

They lay together for long moments, panting. Finally, Nerom caught his breath enough to ask, "Are you warm enough now, my lord?"

Janus snickered, sending a gust of breath over Nerom's shoulder. "Indeed. What if I get cold again in the night?"

Nerom sighed contentedly as his lover settled at his side. "I'm sure we'll think of something."

Janus did indeed get cold twice more during the night. They were both deeply asleep when the sun rose in a cloudless sky the next morning. Nerom jolted awake at the sound of distant voices.



“My people,” Janus explained, reaching for his clothing. Nerom did likewise, quietly disappointed to see the other man’s skin once again disappear behind fabric. They crawled out of the shelter, stretching and looking around. The voices seemed to be getting closer. Janus stuck two fingers in his mouth and gave a sharp whistle.

“Your knee seems better,” Nerom noticed.

“It’s a bit tender, but a day’s rest should set it right.” Janus turned to face him, a tender smile on his face. “Thank you for last night. The memory will keep me warm on cold nights to come.”

“It is I who am grateful,” Nerom replied, finding himself too shy to meet the other man’s gaze. “I will never forget you.”

Janus raised his hand, brushing the backs of his fingers over Nerom’s cheek. “Nor I you, friend Nerom.” He let his hand drop to his side as a party of riders entered the clearing, leading the runaway horse from last night.

“My prince, are you well? When your horse came back without you we feared the worst.”

Nerom felt his jaw drop. Prince?

“A few bumps and bruises, Avrin, nothing serious,” Janus said to the patrol leader, who bowed his head in respect. “This man found me and kept me safe through the storm.”

Avrin nodded to Nerom. “Then we are in your debt. Come, your highness, let us get you home.”

Janus limped to his horse and paused. Pulling an ornament from the bridle, he turned and offered it to Nerom. “This bears my emblem. Take it as a token of my gratitude. If I can ever repay the favor you have done me, you need only present this at the city gates.” He handed over the

tooled leather circle embossed with a stylized fox. “Oh, and Nerom? Don’t hunt in the king’s forest again. My father is not very forgiving of poachers.”

Still trying to absorb his lover’s identity, Nerom could only nod dumbly. Janus swung into the saddle. With one last smile, he turned his horse and led his troop down the path where they were quickly swallowed up by the forest.

Nerom stood rooted to the spot long after the sounds of their passage were gone. At long last he shook himself, fetched his pack and his deer, and headed back to his village. The scent of his prince’s release clung to him like a favorite blanket.

## Part 2

HIS Royal Highness, Crown Prince Janus the Third, pulled the golden circlet from his head and tossed it onto an overstuffed divan. It bounced and hit the floor, rolling across the regal red carpet and coming to a stop somewhere under the washstand. The Crown Prince made a face and waved a negligent hand. He'd have a page fish it out in the morning.

Today's council session had been endless and unbelievably dull. Janus had sat in the great hall for nine hours, his rump numb and his mind wandering, while the glass guild argued with the wine guild over the size and shape of bottles. More than once he'd considered asking the nearest guard to loan him his pike, whether to abruptly settle the argument or put himself out of his misery, he wasn't sure.

His father, the gods bless him, had been sitting through these benighted meetings for the last sixty years. Now that the king was too ill to attend, it had fallen to Janus to take his place. "When I am king," he declared to his valet, who had entered from the adjacent anteroom, "I will put an end to these eternal council meetings."

Arvis slid the prince's robe from his shoulders and hung it in the wardrobe. "I'm not sure the laws of the realm would allow that, my lord," he said with a fond smile.

"What use is it to be king if you can't ignore laws as you see fit? Why else would anyone agree to take the job?"

“Perhaps you can change the structure of the meetings, my lord? Make them less onerous?”

“Perhaps,” Janus mused as Arvis attacked the multitude of hooks and laces that trapped him in his formal attire. “Maybe a time limit for each speaker. Maybe frequent snack breaks...”

A knock sounded at the door and a member of Janus’ personal guard stepped inside. “My lord,” he intoned with a sharp bow. “Forgive me for disturbing you.”

“One is not yet in one’s underdrawers. So long as you are not here to discuss wine bottles, I am happy to converse with you.”

“My lord, this afternoon we arrested a man for poaching in the king’s forest.”

“Not unusual. Yet another poor soul thrown in prison for daring to kill the king’s bunnies?”

“This soul possessed a token with your emblem, my lord, and asked to be presented to you.”

Janus took the leather harness ornament and felt the memory flicker to life. Five years had passed since that night, but the taste and feel of the peasant flooded his senses as though it had been only yesterday.

The guard was too disciplined to show his impatience. “What shall we do with him, my lord?”

“Release him and bring him here.”

Even as the guard saluted and left, Arvis approached him with the hated formal robes. “You are in no fit state to hold audience, my prince.”

“Just bring me my dressing gown,” Janus said. “It’s late, and I’ve had enough of formality.”

Arvis did as he was bid, producing the lighter, more comfortable robe. Janus sank into a plush chair with a sigh, wiggling the toes of each foot as Arvis yanked off his boots. “Kindly send to the kitchens for a late meal. Some fruit and cheese, and some of that pheasant from dinner if there’s any left.”

“I’m sure there is, my lord. The cooks know of your evening kitchen raids and tend to make extra.”

“Slander! Our august personage would never engage in such a common activity. Oh, and send for some honey cakes, they hide them in the cupboard to the left of the stove.”

Arvis smirked and left to summon the food. Janus slipped his feet into satin slippers and poured two glasses of the sweet cordial he favored, letting his thoughts drift back to the rainy night when Nerom had entered his life. He was just beginning to feel the first stirrings of arousal when a knock jarred him out of his memories. “Enter.”

The man the guards escorted in was barely recognizable as his long-ago lover. The Nerom of his memory had been lean, but this man was painfully thin, all angles and jutting bones. His eyes were downcast and his hands were clasped before him, twisting nervously.

“Friend Nerom,” Janus called, approaching him. He dismissed the guards and took Nerom’s arm, guiding him to a velvet couch. “I would ask how you’ve been since our last meeting, but I’m afraid it’s rather obvious.”

Nerom kept his gaze on his restless hands and didn’t answer.

The prince found himself at a loss. “Did I not warn you about poaching?” he asked gently, pressing the glass of cordial into one unresisting hand.

“I had no choice,” Nerom murmured.

“Your parents,” Janus nodded in understanding.

“Passed away two years ago. They died within weeks of each other.”

“Yet you stayed in your village?”

“I have a wife.” Nerom finally lifted his eyes, and Janus caught his breath at the desperation he saw there. “She is with child. We lost our first babe before it was born last year. It nearly killed her – I fear she would not survive another dead child.”

Janus nudged his arm, encouraging him to drink. Nerom drained his glass and rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes before continuing.

“The wheat crop was blighted again this year. What few vegetables we’ve been able to grow are barely enough to keep us alive. The only game to be had is in the King’s forest.”

They were interrupted by the arrival of servants bearing plates of food. Nerom’s eyes widened in amazement at the simple spread that must have seemed a feast to him, and Janus felt a pang of shame at his life of excess and comfort. The peasant was practically salivating, but something held him back. Janus took a guess.

“Eat your fill, my friend. I will send you home with plenty more for you and your wife.”

He was proven correct when Nerom fell upon the food like a wolf in winter. Janus ate just enough to be polite and let the other man have his fill. When at last he sank back against the couch cushions, looking dazed and slightly pregnant, Janus refilled their glasses and proposed a toast. “I

am glad to see you again, friend Nerom, despite the circumstances that brought you here.”

Nerom raised his glass and drained the ruby liquid, his eyes again downcast.

“Why did you not come to me sooner?” Janus ventured. “You saved my life, it is my honor and my pleasure to repay the favor.”

“You owed me no favor. A man should do the right thing because it is right, not because he expects reward. I am ashamed that I needed to call upon you, my lord. I never intended to do so.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of. A man must use all means at his disposal to support his family, or he is not a man.”

Nerom gave himself a shake as though physically sloughing off his dark mood. “Forgive me, my lord, you have enough to concern you without listening to my problems. Word has reached us even in Erynlea of the king’s illness.”

“It is true,” Janus sighed, going along with the change of subject. “My father has been unwell for several years. He is now bedridden and unable to see to the needs of the country. I tell you, friend, I have always known the kingship would fall to me, but I thought I’d have more time.”

“I’m sure you’ll make a fine king.”

Janus made a face and slumped in his seat. “A good choice of words, for my first duty is indeed to make a king. I’m to marry and provide an heir right away.”

“That should be well within your abilities,” Nerom grinned.

“My future wife has been selected by committee. Her pedigree is beyond reproach. She knows every detail of proper court protocol and will no doubt make a fine queen.”

“But?”

“But, she is frigid and dreadfully boring.”

“Ah, you don’t like her?”

“Nor she me, I’d wager. She’s made it clear she finds my humor inappropriate in a monarch.”

“I am sorry for you, my lord. My wife and I have many hardships, but there is love there. Perhaps you and your queen, over time, may develop a fondness.”

“More likely, she shall bear me an heir and banish me from her bed. It seems to be the way of royals.” Janus had tilted his head back and studied the ceiling, and now sighed in depression. “I will marry the ice queen and breed little princes for the good of the realm. I tell you now, Nerom, should I have her as my wife for three score years, I will never again know passion such as we shared that night in our muddy shelter.”

Nerom gave a shy grin. “I, too, remember it fondly.”

“Nerom,” Janus began, picking at the ornate stitching on the sleeve of his robe. “There is no debt between us. You owe me nothing, nor I you. I would ask you a favor, as one friend to another.”

“I am your friend and your subject. You need only ask, my lord.”

Janus turned to meet Nerom’s gaze, impulsively seizing his hand. “Spend the night with me,” he implored. “Give me one more night, one more memory to hold close.”

Nerom bit his lip, hesitating.



“I am sorry,” the prince sighed. “I should not have asked. I would not have you dishonor your lady wife in such a fashion.”

Halting the other man’s words with a hand on his arm, Nerom smiled. “She knows of my...tendencies, my lord, and will not mind. However, I am not fit to share your bed. The hospitality of your prisons leaves much to be desired. I’m in desperate need of a bath.”

“My friend, I can marshal an army in less time than it will take you to return to your village. I believe I’m up to arranging a bath.” Janus practically skipped to the door and summoned Arvis, who arrived within moments and departed just as quickly.

It took some time for the servants to heat sufficient water to fill the great brass tub, but at last they were informed that all was ready. They adjourned to the bathing room, where Janus dismissed the waiting servants. Nerom hesitated when the prince reached for his clothing. “My lord, you don’t need to help me. It isn’t proper behavior for a prince.”

“Bugger proper behavior,” came the response. Janus grabbed his tunic and wrestled him out of it before he could protest further. “My motives are completely selfish,” the prince added as he continued disrobing his lover. “I want to touch you, to look at you, in all your beauty.”

“There is no beauty here, my lord,” Nerom mumbled, blushing.

“I happen to be an excellent judge of beauty, and you are a fine example. A bit underfed,” he noted as he surveyed the peasant’s clearly-visible ribs, “but we’ll soon see to that. In the tub with you.”

Janus took his time bathing his lover, washing the grime from his skin and lingering over the more interesting bits. By the time Nerom arose from the tub he was scrubbed pink and fully aroused.

“My lord,” he said as he was led to the prince’s bedchamber, “I am not quite the innocent I was when we met. I will require a bit more stimulation this time.”

Janus pulled him close and took his mouth, pouring all of his desire into that kiss. “What exactly do you require of me, friend?” he asked as they parted. He gasped when Nerom seized his hair and gave it a tug.

“I require you to kneel on that bed and stick that royal arse in the air,” Nerom whispered, every syllable going straight to the prince’s cock. Janus tore at his own clothes, allowing his eager cock to spring free. They kissed again, hard and dangerous, and then Nerom pushed him toward the bed. Janus went eagerly.

Afterwards, they lay together for long moments without speaking. Janus felt as though his bones had been turned to liquid. Even though his heart was pounding double-time, he was more relaxed and content than he could ever remember.

Nerom roused himself enough to slide off the prince’s prone body and curl up beside him. After his bold actions that night, the timid voice with which he now spoke was nothing short of comical. “My lord? Are you well?”

Janus snorted his laughter. “I am more than well, friend Nerom. You did not lie, you have learned a great deal since our last encounter.” The king sighed in contentment and pulled his lover closer. “In the morning I will send you home to your lady wife with provisions to carry you through the winter.”

Nerom looked somewhat affronted. “I require no payment, my lord,” he said stiffly.

“Tokens of my esteem,” Janus soothed. “Entirely selfish on my part. I will feel better knowing you will not be driven to poaching again.”

“Then you have my thanks,” Nerom murmured. His body went lax in Janus’ arms and his breathing grew deep and steady as he slipped into slumber.

Janus felt sleep tugging at him as well, and for the first time in months he thought he might actually get a good night’s rest. Just before he succumbed, he thought, *damn you, Nerom. You’ve ruined me. How am I to live without this?*

## Part Three

THE village of Erynlea was dying.

Sage burned in every home in a desperate effort to purge the air of sickness and death. With every step Nerom took, he heard the moans of the afflicted and the wails of family members freshly mourning. Children watched him pass with dead eyes staring out of wan faces, their parents dead or dying, their young souls numb to the loss.

Nerom was numb, too. He had seen too many die, too many widowed and orphaned, to feel the tragedy properly anymore. He could only put one foot in front of the other, trudging down the muddy path that wound through the center of the village, pulling the crude cart behind him. Anya walked silently at his side, one hand resting on the cart handle.

They had stopped burying their dead in single graves when sheer numbers made it impossible. Outside the village, mounds of earth marked mass graves filled with fever victims. The last one was yet uncovered, a pit lined with bodies barely covered with a shallow layer of dirt.

Nerom set the front end of the cart down and rubbed his hands together absently. One part of his mind noted Olen, his elderly neighbor, perched on a pile of dirt staring down into the grave. He'd been there for two days, refusing food and water. The man had lain his beloved wife to rest, and would no doubt join her soon. Nerom looked down at Anya's sober face and knew he didn't have that luxury.

They went to the back of the cart together. Nerom pulled aside the rough blanket and stared for a long moment at his wife's face, waxy and still in the weak afternoon sunlight. He straightened a lock of dark hair that lay against her forehead, allowing his fingers to slide one last time down the curve of her face. His hands moved of their own accord to settle the babe more snugly in her arms. Anya stood on tiptoe and kissed her mother's cheek and her brother's downy head. Nerom followed suit, and then there was no further excuse to delay. He wrapped the blanket around both bodies and lifted them in his arms. Stumbling a bit down the loose earth of the slope, he reached the bottom and gently laid his burden down, smoothing the blanket free of creases. He spent a long moment in silence, his fingers splayed across the coarse wool. Then he raised his head, stood and climbed out of the pit. He made quick work of covering the bodies with dirt, but he paused long enough to let Anya drop a shovelful as well. When all was done, he took his daughter's hand and began to lead her towards the village. He paused and looked over his shoulder. "Olen," he called, "Come back with us." But the old man was too far gone. He'd let go of life and would sit by the grave until his time came to fill it.

Nerom couldn't help him. He turned and walked away.

He returned to the village to find strangers in their midst. A small army of men moved in procession down the path, banners hanging limply from their poles in the still, fetid air. Nerom and his neighbors, grimy and exhausted, stared at the finery on display before them with dull incomprehension. Nerom pulled his daughter closer when one of the well-dressed strangers approached him.

The man was peering into his face and talking, but the words were a buzz in his ears. He pushed Anya behind him, backing up a step. When the voice penetrated the fog of misery and fatigue surrounding him, he realized the stranger was calling his name. Hands gripped his arms firmly

and he was guided to sit on a log. He forced his mind and his eyes to focus.

“My lord,” he muttered, for the face before him belonged to none other than his regent and occasional lover, Janus. There was an ornate circlet on his brow, and the first touches of gray had appeared in his beard though he could barely be thirty-five.

“Friend Nerom,” the king said, his voice lacking any hint of his usual teasing. “Are you ill?”

Nerom shook his head dumbly. Janus relaxed fractionally in relief and took his arm. “Come, you must leave this place, you and your child.”

Nerom blinked slowly, feeling Anya’s small hands twist into the back of his tunic. No one was taking her father anywhere without her. “Where would we go?”

“To the city,” Janus urged. “There’s no fever there, at least not yet. There is work waiting for you there, and a comfortable life, I will see to it.”

“I have just buried my wife and son,” Nerom whispered, meeting the king’s gaze at last. “Why would you do this for me, when you did nothing for them?”

Janus was flustered. “Had I but known—”

“You know about them!” Nerom shouted, leaping to his feet. He pointed at the other villagers, ground down to blank-eyed shadows of human beings. “What will you do to help them? They’re your subjects, and they’re dying!”

“I am here, am I not?” the king shouted back. Behind him, his soldiers and minions stirred angrily. “I came out to the countryside to see the situation for myself, against the wishes of my advisors.”

“And now you have seen. We have no clean water – the river is full of filth washed downstream from your precious city. We are starving, for what little food we grow is taken from us as taxes in your name! And you, in your fine clothes, ride through our village, you see our misery, and you do nothing! For years, you have seen and done nothing!”

Janus was stricken. “I did not know,” he whispered. “Nerom, I swear until now I did not know how bad it was.”

Nerom took his daughter’s hand. “Now you know,” he said quietly as they turned away. “What are you going to do about it, Your Highness?”

He didn’t know if his words had reached Janus or not, and he didn’t care. He left the king standing in the road, mud flecking the bottom of his rich cloak, and took his daughter home.

## Part 4

JANUS rocked back on the legs of his rickety campstool and stretched, feeling each bone in his back pop and crack. He reached a hand up to rub his stiff neck even as his eyes continued studying the map spread out before him. “Elwyn? Have we had no news from the north yet?”

A short, stout man with a dark beard and a corded scar on his forehead pushed through the tent flap. “Nothing, Sire. The last report we have is several days old, we have no way of knowing if the front has moved.”

“Oh, it has moved,” the king muttered, scratching his stubbled cheek thoughtfully. “But how much, and in what direction?”

“Fighting is fierce in that region, Sire,” Elywn noted. “I will be surprised if the scouts are able to make it out with any information.”

“We will have to send more scouts. Ask for volunteers, take only men without families. I regret the need, but if we do not get some intelligence on the enemy’s actions, we risk being caught in a pincer movement.”

“Sire,” Elywn intoned, bowing his head and leaving the tent.

Ah, the life of a king, Janus thought as he dropped his head to his folded arms. He was hungry and exhausted and couldn’t remember the last time he’d bathed. Even though he was indescribably weary his brain



refused to allow him rest, swimming as it was with troop movements, weather reports, provisions... Numbers of battalions. Numbers of horses. Numbers of dead. How many of his subjects had died on the battlefield? What was the number up to now? And he'd just ordered Elywn to pick out several others for a mission that was practically suicide. Janus wondered if he'd ever sleep again.

"Sire!" Elwyn burst into the tent. Janus bolted upright, a piece of parchment stuck to his cheek. "Sire, a scout from the north has just arrived in camp!"

"Oh, thank the gods," the king breathed, rubbing his face wearily. "Send him directly here. Have food and wine brought, he must be exhausted." Sorting through the maps and missives on the low wooden table before him, he located the parchment he sought. His weariness lightened a touch at the promise of filling in some of those blank spaces.

A sound at the door had him gesturing to a chair without looking up, absorbed in his reading. "Sit, please. Food is being brought, you will be rewarded for your bravery, et cetera, et cetera. What news from the north?"

"Straight to business, my lord? Not even a kiss first?"

Janus' head shot up at the sound of that teasing voice. His jaw hung open in a most un-regal manner before he remembered himself. "Nerom, oh, my friend." The king crossed the tent and caught his old lover by the shoulders, studying his face. The man was weary and whiskered, caked with the filth of many days' hard travel, but he still looked leagues better than he had at their last meeting. His eyes had lost the hopeless quality that had haunted them. It seemed the passage of nearly fifteen years had helped to heal the wounds left by his loved ones' deaths. "You are well," Janus murmured, a smile touching his lips. "I have missed you, worried these many years."

“I am well,” Nerom agreed, grasping the king’s arm warmly. “We have much catching up to do, sire, but first let us speak of the enemy. The sooner you send reinforcements to the third brigade, the better.”

“Damn. They have moved that far to the east?”

Nerom dug out a scrap of parchment, covered over with neat, tiny pencil marks. “I have been watching their movements for weeks, my lord. I believe I know their intent.”

The two men were quickly joined by generals and advisors, and hunkered over the large map for several hours. Soldiers came and went, bringing food and wine, bearing away dispatches as Janus reorganized his troops in light of Nerom’s intelligence.

By the time they were done, Nerom weaved in his seat, eyes barely open. Janus dismissed his staff for the night and urged his friend to his feet. “Come, my friend, to bed.”

“Would I had the strength,” Nerom muttered, earning a laugh from his companion.

“Another time. Soon, hopefully. Tonight you must rest.” The king guided him, more asleep than awake, to the oversized cot appointed for the king’s use. He crouched to remove Nerom’s boots, wondering what his courtiers would say to see him so engaged. The barest touch to his shoulder tipped the exhausted scout onto the pillow. Janus hauled his legs up until he lay straight, then doffed his own boots and slid in beside him. Rumors would fly, no doubt, should any of his staff find them like this, but he would think of that tomorrow. Tonight he simply pressed close to Nerom’s warm body, closed his eyes and sank into peaceful sleep.

He awoke in the time of gray shadows just before sunrise. Outside the tent the world was just beginning to awaken as the sentries changed and the soldiers began to muster. Later that very day most of them would

be riding to the third battalion's aid, and many of them would never see their homes again. There would be more carnage, more grief and destruction, and for a moment Janus was content to hide from it all, to press his nose to the nape of Nerom's neck and listen to his deep, even breaths. So attuned was the king to that reassuring sound that he knew instantly when his lover awoke.

"I did not mean to wake you," he murmured.

"You were thinking too loudly," Nerom replied. He was smiling, though his eyes weren't yet open. "Of the coming battle?"

Janus nodded against his back.

"It is hard to remember a time when we weren't at war," Nerom said, his voice sleepy and low. "Yet in my bones I feel we near the end. I can scent peace in the air, like the coming of spring."

"I pray you are right. I would like to be home. I miss my wife and my children. And my bathtub."

Nerom snorted. "So the ice princess has thawed?"

"She is a good partner," the king admitted. "A great help to me in running this blasted kingdom. There will never be passion between us, but she has become a friend."

"And you have two fine sons," Nerom murmured, on the verge of falling back to sleep.

"Aye, the princes are well known, are they not? They're gaining quite a reputation as mischief-makers. But what of you? Tell me that your daughter is well."

"She is. She married a blacksmith and moved with him to Endbrook. Not three years ago, she gave me a grandson."

Janus leaned up on his elbow at that. “Ridiculous! You and I are of an age, and I am certainly not old enough to be a grandfather!”

“Only wait,” Nerom chuckled, “until you have bounced your child’s child on your knee. It is amazing, how one gap-toothed smile from that boy can lift the heaviest of burdens from my heart.”

“I am glad to hear it,” the king said sincerely. “When last I saw you, your burdens were very great indeed. In truth, I feared for your life.”

“I was in a bad way, no mistake. Had it not been for Anya, I would not have survived. For her sake I carried on.” Nerom sighed and turned over carefully in the cot until they were face to face. “I treated you poorly then, my lord. It was unfair, and unkind, to blame you for the fever.”

“Don’t apologize.” Janus said, stopping his friend with a finger to his lips. “Everything changed for me that day, Nerom. All my life I had seen the crown as a burden, an unavoidable destiny I would rather have passed to someone else. But that day in Erynlea, looking at the graves, at the faces of the survivors...Looking at the disgust in your eyes, I finally realized that safeguarding others is a sacred trust, one I was failing badly. I saw that I had the power to help people, and suddenly I wanted not just to be king, but to be a good king.”

“You are a good king,” Nerom assured. “We never did have famine again after your irrigation and seed sharing programs began. The engineers you sent from the city to dig wells and dam streams brought new life to our village and so many others.”

“I am glad. I have many other ideas to improve life for our people, if only this blasted war would end. Speaking of, how is it you come to scout for the army?”

“I have told you, I do not like being in your debt,” Nerom said with a grin.

“Debt?”

“Indeed, sire, for when you showed yourself to be such a fine king after all, I decided to repay service with service. That is the nature of the monarchy, is it not? You provide for our welfare, and the people in turn fight in defense of your kingdom?”

Janus looked surprised. “That is the way it’s supposed to work, yes,” he mused. “Though I’ve never noticed it to be quite so functional.”

Nerom laughed. “That is what happens when a king cares about his people. It earns him loyalty, and that cannot be bought with coin. Now, will you kindly close the royal mouth so we may yet sleep a bit more before the day begins?”

Janus could not resist leaning in to kiss those laughing lips, making a promise he knew their weary bodies could not yet keep. Soon, though...

As they snuggled closer in the cot, on the verge of dozing off, Janus remembered something. “You said your daughter lives in Endbrook?”

“Aye.”

“That’s on the very outskirts of the city.”

“Aye. I am relieved that the king knows his own kingdom so well.”

“Do not sass your king, Nerom, it is unseemly,” Janus teased, landing a swat on his lover’s rump. “I bring it up because it seems to me that your reasons for living in the countryside have dwindled.”

“It seems they have,” Nerom agreed, a smile barely touching his lips.

“Then, perhaps...I hardly dare hope...perhaps you would consider moving into the city, where I might see you more often? I tell you, friend, it would do my heart good to spend more time in your company.”

Nerom pushed his head underneath his king’s chin, pressing a kiss to his collarbone. “I have considered it. Providing I can find gainful employment –”

“You will!”

“And providing I actually survive the coming battle, I think I would like to try city life.”

Janus found he was grinning from ear to ear. “I shall not countenance your death. I hereby issue a royal decree that you are not permitted to get yourself killed.”

“I will do my best,” Nerom replied sleepily. The softest of snores vibrated against the king’s chest.

“Please do,” Janus whispered, pulling him closer. “Your very best.”

## Part 5

AMBASSADOR Khalel d'Abrezzah moved regally through the quiet hallways of the palace of His Royal Highness King Janus the Third. The whisper of his comfortable silk pants reminded him of how nice it was to be out of his stiff formal attire now that the tedious negotiations had ended for the day. The invitation to the king's quarters had been unexpected, and the wording – *Please join me for a late snack. Formal clothes are forbidden* – had intrigued his visitor. The king was an enigma, his mannerisms foreign to Khalel's people. Never in his home land would a monarch act so familiarly with underlings, employ humor so openly! It was certainly making the trade negotiations challenging. But Khalel had always loved a challenge, and King Janus was proving to be a very interesting mystery to unravel.

Khalel stopped before the king's door and waited patiently for the guards to announce his presence. A moment later the king stuck his crownless gray head out of the doorway, a genuine smile on his face. "My friend, please come in," he gestured. Khalel bowed his head in respect and followed him in. The door closed softly behind him.

In his time as a guest of the king, the ambassador had been treated with all the luxury that befitted his station. Every area of the palace he'd seen had been impeccably and richly appointed, including his own suite of rooms. This room, however...Khalel doubted such a room existed in all his emperor's many estates. Every flat surface was cluttered with a jumble

of random items ranging from children's toys to ornamental daggers. The furniture was so worn it was actually threadbare in places, and the carpet had seen better days as well. Another may have taken in these humble surroundings and thought them a disgrace, but Khalel had been studying the king, putting together the pieces of his personality. This was the room where the king became Janus, where he retreated from his responsibilities and titles and simply became a man.

At nearly seventy years of age, the king was still broad at the shoulders, though his waist was going to paunch. His face was wrinkled, but his blue eyes were sharp and lively. Dressed in breeches and a loose woven shirt, he sank onto a faded red sofa and gestured to a matching armchair. "Please make yourself comfortable. My assistant is bringing us a bite from the kitchens."

Khalel sat and nearly sighed as the chair seemed to mold to his body. The king leaned back in his own pile of cushions and chuckled. "Now you see why I haven't replaced this old furniture, despite my staff's repeated requests."

"Very comfortable, sire. I am honored to be invited this evening."

Janus groaned and let his head fall back dramatically. "No titles, please! Tonight may we not just be Janus and Khalel?"

The ambassador was somewhat thrown by such informality – in his homeland, addressing a monarch by his given name would be punishable by death – but recovered himself quickly. "As you wish...Janus."

"Thank you, Khalel my friend. I know you're wondering why you are here, in this most informal setting. The truth is, I have often found that men may accomplish over a bottle of wine what courts and dignitaries cannot."



The king looked up as the door opened. A servant, lean and slightly stooped with the beginnings of age, carried a tray into the room and set it on the low table between them. “Honey cakes?” the monarch asked hopefully.

“Of course,” the new arrival said fondly, pulling the stopper from a bottle of red liquid.

Janus reached around him to snag a cake, biting into it with a blissful expression. “You simply must try these, Khalel.”

The ambassador selected a pastry from the tray and took a small bite. It was a bit too sweet for his taste, but he made appreciative noises anyway.

“How rude of me,” the king said, wiping his mouth with a linen napkin. “Khalel, this is my dear friend Nerom. He has been with me for many years.”

The lean man finished pouring the wine. “An honor, Ambassador,” he intoned, bowing his head politely as he handed him a glass.

“Likewise,” Khalel said, watching as Nerom passed a glass to the king and then settled beside him on the sofa. “Forgive me if this seems...undiplomatic, but you are a servant here?”

The king smiled and rested a hand on Nerom’s knee. “He is many things to me. An advisor, a confidant, and so much more. In truth, friend Khalel, he is the keeper of my soul.”

Khalel had been chosen for his line of work partly because he was all but unflappable. He had seen any number of shocking things happen whilst visiting other realms, including one memorable time when a messenger had been beheaded during a tea service. Even then, he’d managed to hide his reaction. At Janus’ casual announcement, though,

Khalel inhaled a sip of wine into his lung, bringing on an embarrassing coughing fit. Janus was at his side, thumping him enthusiastically on the back with a concerned gaze.

“Thank you, sire,” the ambassador wheezed at last, dabbing a napkin over his face. “I am well. You merely surprised me.”

“I apologize, friend. I asked you here so you could meet Nerom and understand how it is with us. I thought it might give us some common ground. I had heard such relationships were accepted in your country.”

Khalel set down his drink and the uneaten portion of his cake, moving slowly to give himself time to think. “It is not uncommon, for men to bond with each other,” he finally said. “I have traveled far in service to my emperor, and this is true in many countries.”

Janus had resumed his seat on the sofa, Nerom’s thigh pressed reassuringly against his. “And yet you seem concerned.”

Khalel weighed his words carefully. It would not do to offer insult, but it was a very important issue that could sway the course of diplomatic relations. “Many men have such relationships with each other, and none think poorly of them. But in my country, it is unthinkable to dishonor one’s wife in such a fashion.”

The frown cleared from Janus’ face, and he shared a smile with his lover. “I understand. One moment, please.” Rising, he moved to the door and spoke briefly with a guard before returning. “Forgive me, Khalel, and allow me to explain. As you surely know, my country is not nearly as accepting of love between men. For the sake of the stability of my country, I must be seen as a traditional leader, with a wife and children. Truly, it is no hardship, for the queen is a wonderful woman. I’ve asked her to join us at her convenience.” While they waited, Janus told his guest the story of how he and Nerom had met more than forty years ago, of the

painful long absences from each other and the obstacles they had overcome. Occasionally, Nerom would add details in a voice laden with gentle humor.

“Ah,” Janus exclaimed, setting down his glass, “here she is now.”

The men rose as Queen Lucretia glided into the room. She was still in her formal gown, dark hair streaked with gray piled intricately on top of her head. Well into her sixties, she remained a stately and beautiful woman. Khalel had been impressed by her strength and wisdom, and now bowed deeply to show his respect.

“Good evening, Ambassador Khalel,” she greeted in her low, musical voice.

“My lady,” he replied. “May I pour you some wine?”

“Thank you, no. I can stay but for a moment, then I must to my chambers and get out of this corset before I go mad.” The queen offered a wicked grin. It seemed she’d picked up a touch of her husband’s sense of humor over the years.

“My dear, Khalel is concerned that I have dishonored you by loving Nerom.”

Lucretia looked briefly surprised, then she turned an affectionate gaze to the men on the couch. “Your concern does you great credit, Ambassador,” she said sincerely. “But I would only feel dishonored if there were lies between us, if they treated it as a shameful secret. By sharing their love with me, they have honored me above all. Besides,” the queen quipped as she rose, “it would make me a dreadful hypocrite if I protested, considering who is waiting in my rooms to help me out of my corset.” The men rose with her, and Khalel noticed that Janus and Nerom were regarding her with identical looks of adoration. Whatever their

relationship with each other, both men were clearly smitten with the lovely Queen Lucretia.

The queen planted fond kisses on their cheeks and turned to Khalel, taking his hands in hers. “My dear ambassador, I do hope you don’t think badly of us for this unusual relationship. It may seem strange, but it is an arrangement that has worked for all of us for many years. I love my men dearly, and they love me, but the heart finds passion where it will. Is it not enough that we all know love, and passion, and fulfillment?”

“My lady, I would not presume to disagree with you. May the gods guard your sleep.” Khalel brought her hands to his lips for a courtly kiss. The Queen graced them with a smile, bid them good night, and left the room.

“She is an extraordinary woman, is she not?” Janus murmured.

“She is indeed.”

“When we were first betrothed, I was determined not to like her. I thought her distant and frigid.”

“Surely not,” protested Khalel.

“Oh yes, so she seemed. In actuality she was so much more mature than I. She had accepted her role and all that it entailed, whilst I was still kicking at the traces. I’m fortunate to have her by my side. I would not be half so good a king without her.”

Khalel had seen enough. “And I think you are a very good king indeed. Thank you for sharing this part of your life with me. We are not so different, our peoples.”

“I am glad to hear you say that, my friend. I want nothing more than to put the war behind us, once and for all.”

“My emperor desires the same. I think you will make an excellent trading partner.” Khalel finished his wine and bowed to the men. “Now, if you will excuse me, I will return to my rooms to rest. I believe we will have a very long, very productive day of talks tomorrow.”

“Gods grant you rest, my friend,” Janus said with a bow of his own.

“Good evening, Ambassador,” Nerom added, ducking his head.

Khalel made his way to the door, but looked back at the last moment. Janus and Nerom had moved closer and stood within each others’ arms. The king had tucked his face into his lover’s neck, breathing deeply of his scent. Nerom kissed his temple and held him tenderly.

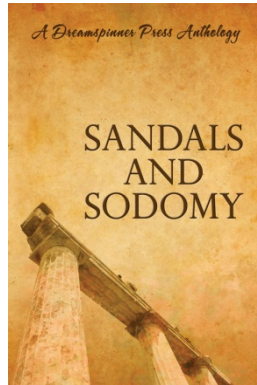
Khalel left the room, barely noticing the guards flanking the door. He still had much to think about, but he finally felt he’d fulfilled his emperor’s instructions. “Get to know them, Khalel,” he’d said as they walked in the royal gardens. “When you know their hearts, you will know if we can trust them.”

Walking through the corridors of Janus’ palace, dark and quiet at this late hour, Khalel knew he’d seen into the king’s heart. Surely a man capable of such deep and lasting love, who could inspire affection and loyalty in a queen whose passion lay elsewhere, who had the courage to allow a stranger from another land to see his most private self – surely such a man was worthy of trust.

And surely, such a man was a fine king, indeed.

D.G. Parker spends her days posing as a mild-mannered hospital administrator in upstate New York. Her alter ego has been reading and writing voraciously since childhood and dreams of one day publishing the Great American Novel. She's taken her pen name from the very quotable Dorothy Parker, who reminds us all that you can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think.

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